

# VOCABULARY SKILLS ACTIVITIES

Because it tends to deal with history and culture unfamiliar to language-learners, special-occasion material is rich in new vocabulary. Although some of the “difficult” words and phrases may seem topic-specific or too infrequent for focused attention, readers and listeners usually want to know more about them. Because of the engaging content of the material and the visuals, holiday vocabulary is often fun to learn, easy to remember, and “productive” in further vocabulary acquisition. Here is information about *Vocabulary-Skills* Activities.

## Vocabulary Learning in Context

In language courses, vocabulary is learned mostly “in context.” In reading lessons, dictionary use is discouraged: readers are supposed to disregard non-essential words and phrases and make educated guesses at the unfamiliar items they need to understand. Generally, the method works well in getting main ideas and in increasing reading comprehension, fluency, and speed. Even so, less-proficient learners may need help in using it to their own advantage. They may need the meaning clues of specially-adapted materials, the coaching of teachers, and/or related instructions and exercises that focus on meaning in context. Also useful is attention to parts of speech, the functions of items in phrases and sentences, and associated words. With aids of this kind, language-learners can better guess meaning from context. They can also learn how to make use of newly-seen or newly-heard vocabulary in their own speech or writing.

The specially-designed reproducible reading materials and exercises on pages 48 to 51 provide this kind of help. Here are suggestions for ways to take advantage of these or comparable material. Correct and suggested answers are in the *Vocabulary Answer Key* at the end of this section on page 54.

**Figure Out Meaning from Context.** If they are not already marked, readers can identify difficult vocabulary items by circling them in a reading. To figure out the approximate meaning of each item, they should look for “context clues.” The following kinds of clues appear not only in the reading *SAMHAIN, THE FIRST “HALLOWEEN”* on page 48 but in most other adapted material:

- the position, function, and part of speech of the new word or the main word in the new phrase
- an explanation or simple definition of the item in the same or a nearby sentence—especially after a form of the verb *be* or punctuation like a common (,) or a dash (—) or between parentheses ( ).
- a word or phrase of approximately the same or the opposite meaning (a synonym or antonym)
- examples of the item, or the name of the category to which it belongs as an example
- the topic of the paragraph and the general sense of the phrase or sentence where the item appears.

**Check Guesses at Meaning.** Using context clues and logic, readers try to figure out or guess at the approximate meaning of new vocabulary. To “test” a constructed definition or explanation, they can substitute it for the unfamiliar word or phrase. Do the sentence and paragraph still make sense? If so, then the guess is likely to be correct—at least in a general sense. If not, then learners should try again, improving their reasoning by describing and discussing it aloud.

EXAMPLES: *Centuries before the birth of Christ = Many hundreds of years before the birth of Christ*  
*Halloween is a descendant of Samhain. = Halloween comes from its ancestor, Samhain.*

To help themselves and others, intermediate-and-above learners should tell the context reasons for their guesses: *the position, function, and part of speech of the new item; approximate synonyms or opposites from other sentences; explanations in the text itself, examples, and so on.* Less proficient or less confident students may need or benefit from a pre-prepared matching exercise with the vocabulary from the selection. An example of such a vocabulary-learning aid appears on page 49.

**Fill-In-the-Blanks.** Learners that can successfully figure out the definition or near-meaning of vocabulary from context can usually fill in the blanks of meaningful reading material, especially information they are already familiar with. Even if they don’t happen to know the *exact* words and phrases missing from the original selection, they can probably think of approximate synonyms or explanatory phrases. Beginners and less-proficient students may need lists of items in order or in random order to choose from. Intermediate-and-above students will benefit more they try to fill in the blanks with words and phrases (they think) they already know. They can work together; they can check their guesses as described above—by reading aloud their choices in context to see if they “sound right” and are grammatically correct. They may also check the meanings and uses of their guesses in a dictionary.

**Complete or Make a “Vocabulary-from-Context” Chart.** After participants learn new or difficult words or phrases in context, a vocabulary chart for them to complete provides an effective follow-up exercise or assessment tool. As in the reproducible sample on page 51, the most likely headings on its columns are: *VOCABULARY ITEM; PART OF SPEECH—(N)OUN, (V)ERB, (ADJ)ECTIVE, or (ADV)erb; DEFINITION* (an phrase explanation of its meaning that does *not* include the item itself); *EXAMPLE OF USE IN CONTEXT* (a phrase or sentence with the item in it that illustrates its meaning). Here is how part of such a chart might look filled in. The “given” info is in bold type; what learners might supply is in “handwriting.”

Vocabulary-from-Context Chart			
VOCABULARY ITEM (WORD OR PHRASE)	PART OF SPEECH	DEFINITION (EXPLANATION OF THE MEANING)	SENTENCE EXAMPLE OF USE OF THE ITEM IN CONTEXT (WITH THE MEANING FROM COLUMN 2)
<b>centuries</b>	<b>N (plural)</b>	<i>periods of hundreds of years</i>	<b>Halloween began many centuries ago.</b>
<b>ancient</b>	<b>ADJ</b>	<i>from times long past</i>	<i>The <u>ancient</u> Celts were the first celebrants.</i>
<b>observed</b>	<i>V (past)</i>	<i>celebrated</i>	<b>They <u>observed</u> the occasion on October 31.</b>
<i>orally</i>	<b>ADV</b>	<i>in a spoken way; not in written form</i>	<i>Priests passed on their traditions <u>orally</u>.</i>

Intermediate and advanced learners may want to make their own charts without having data supplied. They can choose items from the reading or related words. If items are listed *as used in the context*, their parts of speech, definitions, and examples should correspond appropriately. They might even create charts (their own exercises) with blanks for classmates to fill in.

**Learn Vocabulary with a Dictionary.** The instructions for a “*Vocabulary-from-Context*” Chart on the previous page and the sample on page 52 are designed mainly for more experienced and more able readers, who can look up vocabulary items after trying to figure out their meanings in a reading selection. They locate the dictionary entry that is the same part of speech as the word or phrase *in the context in which it appears*. Within that entry, they find the meaning of the appropriate part of speech that fits the sense of the sentence and paragraph. If the chosen definition (shortened and adapted) can be substituted for the item in its context—and if the sentence is still correct and meaningful, they probably have the right meaning. Then they can learn more about the item—its other definitions and uses, words related to it, and so on.

But what if new readers or language learners don’t know how to use a dictionary to maximum advantage? Then recognizing and practicing the use of its features can be a profitable way to spend class time. In vocabulary lessons related to content material, these are the most important things learners can find out about a new or a difficult or an interesting word or phrase from a dictionary:

• its part(s) of speech, along with related words	• the various meanings of the item
• its pronunciation and spelling of its forms	• how to use it in each meaning appropriately

An effective, fun way to practice dictionary use within a holiday or special-occasion context is to “play cards” with a specially-prepared *Dictionary-Skills Card Deck*. Here are reduced-sized samples of two “quartets” (sets of four “matching cards”) in a 52-card-deck of 13 sets. They can be used for competitive card games as well as for preparation or follow-up vocabulary lessons, such as making “*Vocabulary-from-Context Charts*” from the info on the cards.

<p><b>N</b>OUN, PLURAL</p>  <p><b>BELIEFS</b></p>	<p><b>P</b>RONUNCIATION</p> <p>bi<sup>y</sup> li<sup>y</sup>fs</p> 	<p><b>D</b>EFINITION</p> <p>what people believe; ideas accepted as true</p>	<p><b>E</b>XAMPLE</p> <p>Halloween had its origin in the _____ of the Celtic peoples about death and ghosts.</p>
<p><b>N</b>OUN, SINGULAR</p>  <p><b>A CELEBRATION</b></p>	<p><b>P</b>RONUNCIATION</p> <p>ˌelɪsˈeɪʃən</p> 	<p><b>D</b>EFINITION</p> <p>an observance of a special occasion with festivities</p>	<p><b>E</b>XAMPLE</p> <p>What kind of _____ is a Halloween party? What do the guests do there?</p>