

Vocabulary in urban contexts using multimodality: A pedagogical proposal

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Abstract: This is the presentation of a new pedagogical tool. The tool is an alternative to the usual presentation of vocabulary focusing on some key concepts: multimodality, theory of space, and collaborative learning. Considering that the study of foreign languages has the difficulty of studying cultural elements that are usually not present in the life of the students, this paper will propose an activity to study vocabulary in a contextualized space. The objective is to understand social spaces through discovering lexical items in a natural environment, using the observation and description of urban photographs, which represents a change to the traditional way of presenting vocabulary. Through a collective and technology mediated process, the students create a multimodal artifact that can be shared with other students. The process of learning occurs, first, from the production of the artifact, and second, from the presentation and exchange of the artifacts produced among students.

Keywords: *language education; multimodality; vocabulary teaching; collaborative learning; technology mediated language learning*

1 Introduction

Since I started teaching Spanish, I have found vocabulary to be an essential element of the language that is difficult to present. Usually, we would talk in class about categories like *frutas y verduras* “fruits and vegetables” and then we would present *la manzana* “the apple”, *la pera* “the pear”, *el apio* “the celery”, *la lechuga* “the lettuce”, etc. But I wondered how many students remembered those words after that class, or if they could recall them when they needed them. My handouts usually presented a list of words in Spanish with a picture that would represent the concept expressed by the word, because it is one of the basic methods to teach vocabulary (Nation, 2022). This paper presents a pedagogical tool that constitutes an alternative to the above-described method of introducing vocabulary, focusing on some key concepts: multimodality, theory of space, and collaborative learning. In this activity, pairs of students each choose a photograph of an urban space using Flickr, then, from their observation of the image, identify physical elements present in it and find their Spanish translations. The students then use Canva to create multimodal (text, image, audio) digital lexical cards that represent these physical objects. Finally, they will present their tool justifying their choices in front of the class.

The study of foreign languages has the difficulty of teaching students who usually do not have access to cultural elements related to the language that they are studying. Thus, the curricular planning of foreign language teaching should pay special attention to contextual elements that

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influence the learning experience (outside the classroom): status of the foreign language in the country, presence of the speaking community in the country, contextual needs, etc.; and elements that correspond to the specific group of learners (inside the classroom): students' goals, motivations, attitudes, linguistic aptitudes, etc. (Sanz, 2016). At the moment, Spanish is the most commonly taught foreign language in Canada (Fernández Alonso et al, 2021), hence, the language has a recognized presence in formal education. Nevertheless, learners of Spanish do not have easy access to exposure to the language unless they know Spanish speakers and have a relationship that facilitates the practice of the language (Benson, 2021). Thus, Spanish students in Canada, if they do not have the access to travel, will not experience how social spaces are configured outside their country. Considering this idea, this paper proposes an activity to study vocabulary in a contextualized space. This activity will allow the students to access social spaces in Latin American contexts using photography and technology so that they will not have to travel or even leave their classrooms or homes.

The objective of this activity is not to develop communicative competence in students, because they will not be required to use the target language in pre-established contexts, as is done when applying a communicative approach in language teaching (Richards & Rodgers, 2001). If students decide to communicate with their partners in another language, it is fine. What characterizes this activity is the possibility that students can observe different images, identify vocabulary by themselves, and from there, start looking for translations and pronunciations. The aim is to create a reflective device that will permit students to understand lexical context from a naturalized view of language spatiality. This activity's aim is not for students to memorize words at once, nor for them to produce sentences using the words—in that sense, it is a non-conventional language activity. The main purpose is to understand social spaces through the discovery of lexical items in a natural environment. With that in mind, it may not be a regular language teaching activity to be used regularly in any language program, but it provides a valuable opportunity for experimenting with tools and approaches. The activity will produce an educational resource created by the students that can be shared with other Spanish students. Thus, the process of learning will occur, first, during the production of the artifact, and second, during the presentation and exchange of the artifacts produced between the students.

This paper comprises two parts: the first will present the theoretical framework supporting the curriculum design, and the second one will describe the proposed activity.

2 Literature review and tool theoretical framework

2.1 Teaching vocabulary

Dronjic (2019) provides some reflections and recommendations about how to work with vocabulary in the English language classroom, but his insights can be applied to any other language. Dronjic recognized that despite many years of research on the topic, teachers were not being taught about how to teach vocabulary and this results in some counterproductive practices, like neglecting vocabulary teaching. The author affirms that usually language teachers focus on teaching grammar instead of the lexical component, but vocabulary needs to be taught systematically and consistently to be developed in an additional language.

Particularly, in the case of vocabulary in Spanish teaching, Sánchez Rufat & Jiménez Calderón (2015) recognize the lack of updated materials, which leads teachers to support their teaching practices with their intuition or use the material available, which usually does not consider updated guidelines regarding vocabulary teaching. Cruz Piñol (2015) presents diverse

technological resources that can be used for vocabulary teaching in Spanish, but she does not delve into the potential of using technology to establish the word-object relation because it has been present since the beginning of the internet. I want to argue that, while it is true that the use of technology to present meaning through images has already been done extensively, nevertheless presenting the *word-object* relation using technology to contextualize vocabulary can be an innovative and creative way to introduce lexical items through multimodal means.

The use of translation between first language (L1) and target language (L2) is the most effective method to introduce new words and establish concept-word relations, even though this method is often challenged by the notion that the L1 should not be present in the language class (Dronjic, 2019; Nation, 2022). In the context of this pedagogical tool, the use of translation aims to reinforce the connection between concepts and words. Research suggests that vocabulary should be presented using a thematic approach instead of using categories, e.g., *el hotel* “the hotel”: *la recepción* “the reception desk”, *el equipaje* “the baggage”, *la reserva* “the reservation”, *la habitación* “the room”, etc., rather than, e.g., *frutas y verduras* “fruits and vegetables” as sketched in Section 1 (Dronjic, 2019; Sánchez Rufat & Jiménez Calderón, 2015). Following this recommendation, the activity will work with vocabulary in action, in a natural environment like city streets, where objects and people interact, rather than in semantic categories. For example, in the same picture we can find a dog, a baby, a garbage can, a bus stop, etc., word-objects that usually would not be presented at the same time in the language classroom, but that interact and are in the same spaces in real contexts.

It is important to remember that the link between a concept and a word is the beginning of learning vocabulary (Dronjic, 2019) and that this activity does not pretend to assume that students will “know” the words immediately and forever, but that they will observe spaces and create the primal link between object and word. The activity does not present lexical items, instead the students discover them from attempting to label what the image portrays. This may not be recommended as a deliberate vocabulary teaching strategy, because ideally teachers should focus on essential words that the student will need for a determined goal (Nation, 2022; Dronjic, 2019), but the purpose of this activity is not only vocabulary development, but also the consideration of culturally inflected space in the interaction of objects in the real world, and to present the students with unfamiliar contexts through an artistic product like street photography.

Finally, Nation (2021) recognizes the effectiveness of the use of flashcards to study and memorize vocabulary. This activity will represent an experimental approach that can use the photograph as a starting point to discover the vocabulary present and then create digital flashcards that will reinforce the word-object relation using multimodal means. Each digital card will bear the lexical component (presenting the word through text, image, and sound), but will be at the same time, embedded in a natural context, as depicted in the photograph.

2.2 The image as educational resource in language teaching

Image is one of the basic methods to present vocabulary in an additional language (Nation, 2022). This intuitive teaching practice finds its theoretical root in the “dual-coding theory” (DCT), which argues that we process information through two codes: verbal and nonverbal. In this sense, the use of images (nonverbal elements) in the process of learning enhances memorization and recall of words (verbal elements) (Sadoski, 2006; Paivio & Sadoski, 2011). Research has also shown the efficacy of using direct instructional techniques that use imagery (Sadoski, 2011). The use of images is more effective in the learning of concrete concepts because they have a stronger perceptual component (e.g., *tree* vs *true*) (Sadoski, 2011). Considering this cognitive theory, the

proposed tool produces digital cards with both verbal (audio and text) and nonverbal (iconic images) components, but even before that, the verbal component emerges from the visual exploration of a photograph, so it is possible to say that the word-object association occurs twice:

1. Object in the photograph (nonverbal) \Rightarrow Digital card (verbal/nonverbal)
2. Image of the concept added to the digital card (nonverbal) \Leftrightarrow Written word and its translations on the digital card (verbal)

Through the photograph, the students can see an instance of the meaning of the word, and through the image presented in the digital card, the students will reinforce the relation between the object and word.

Besides the multimodal component, photography allows students to access unfamiliar spaces, allowing them to observe social practices and places. Photography can be especially productive in the context of foreign languages because it enhances involvement and closeness to the target culture (Barrallo Busto & Gómez Bedoya, 2009). Thanks to the internet, photography is widely available, it can be used in all proficiency levels, and it develops students' audiovisual literacies (Madej, 2014). Finally, photography is also an opportunity for students to recognize and appreciate different forms of the art in the local contexts of unfamiliar landscapes, such as Latin American cities. Specifically, I decided to use street photography in this activity because it is a cultural product that aims to portray real spaces and deliver a subjective impression of everyday social life in a city (Hostetler, 2014).

2.3 Multimodality

Research has shown that the inclusion of different modes in pedagogical practices may enhance language learning (Madej, 2014). Multimodality, for example, can significantly enrich Computer-Assisted Language Learning (CALL) environments (Guichon & Cohen, 2015). This activity focuses on the possibility of learning new vocabulary through the presentation of different modes: the word, its translation in learners' L1, an image that represents the concept, and an audio clip that provides the pronunciation of the word. In addition to that, the word is situated in a real environment through photographs, so students can recognize the words within a space where they would usually appear.

The attention to multimodality is also the result of taking advantage of the affordances of the use of technology in language teaching. Lightbown & Spada (2013) note the importance of students' different learning styles in the language classroom. This consideration is addressed in the proposed activity using multimodality, that is, presenting the same concept through a lexical, visual, and aural component.

2.4 Objects and spaces

Benson (2021) proposes an environmental or objects-as-space conception of language. This means that "language is never an object apart from the world, it is always embedded in some specific physical and social environment where it is bound up with a multiplicity of objects other than itself" (p. 73). This concept of language suggests that space is crucial to the study of languages. What we usually do while teaching is describe abstract codes, outside of real spaces, which separates the phenomena from their natural production contexts. I argue that while reference, or the relation between the word and its meaning, is used in language teaching every time we see an image of, for example, a plane beside the word '*avión*' in a textbook, we do not adequately consider the social spaces where word-objects appear in the real world. Unlike the static pages of textbooks, the urban spaces where many of us live and learn are spaces of "mobility,

flow and everyday practices” (Amin & Thrift, 2002, p. 7). These spaces where people use languages when they interact and refer to physical entities, are “contingently stable environments in which there is a constant coming and going of language bearing assemblages” (Benson, 2021, p. 80), hence, they are understood as dynamic and non-stable. In this regard, photography allows us to capture a piece of space and time, to observe it and describe how space is built from social relations and interactions with and between objects. By including photography, this activity allows students to observe the relationships that occur in unfamiliar contexts. They can ask, for example, *Is a market in La Paz like a market in Buenos Aires or Asunción? What people/objects are present in those spaces? How do these elements interact in the picture?* These questions can guide the students to observe other pairs’ photos and reflect on the spaces and cultures presented.

2.5 Affordances of Canva and Flickr

The concept of an affordance, defined in pedagogical contexts by Haines (2015) as “the potential that teachers perceive in a particular technology tool that will support learning and teaching activities in their educational contexts” (p. 166) provided the criteria that helped me choose the technological tools that will be used in this activity: Canva and Flickr.

Canva is a graphic design tool available through its website or app. In this tool, it is possible to create presentations, videos, posters, infographics, and many more types of design products. It is user friendly, and it provides access to a large bank of images, templates, as well as audio, and video content. For this activity, the most important affordance of Canva is its versatility. The students will create a presentation by adding the photograph chosen from Flickr (discussed below). Then they will be able to create the digital cards, using text and images (provided by Canva), as well as the pronunciation audio clip which they will record themselves on the same platform. The students will not need to use one tool for the presentation, another for the audio, and another one for video, because Canva has all those elements integrated on its platform. After the digital cards are created, the students will create links that tie the object in the photograph to its digital card. Another affordance of this online platform is the possibility of online collaboration, so different students can work on the same document at the same time regardless of their physical location (Domínguez González, 2020, p. 30). Finally, the third affordance detected in Canva is the possibility to edit the presentation even after sharing the presentation link, so the students can have the possibility to correct or modify their artifacts even after their class presentation, considering feedback from their peers and instructor.

To select the photograph, students will use Flickr. This is an online platform where people can share photos of any kind. It is known for providing a platform where amateur photographers can share their works and create communities, which facilitates the use of photography as an art form that portrays the mundane elements of everyday life (Murray, 2008). The website also provides the possibility to geotag the shared images on a world map, so viewers can explore the world through photography and access important locations and events around the world using tags (Kennedy et al, 2007). An important affordance of Flickr is the access to photographs published by their owners, so students will have access to the authorship and, where titles or captions are provided, they will also have some insight into the viewpoint that the photographer is trying to convey. It is important to note that students should only use images that are under appropriate Creative Commons licenses, such as CC0, which allows the download and use of the image without restrictions, CC BY which only requires the person reusing the image to give the appropriate credit, and CC BY-NC which only allows for non-commercial use and requires

attribution.² This element will also help students learn about copyright issues, because it is common to use any image or media from the internet without giving credit to its authors or considering the purpose of the image decided by its author. Finally, another affordance of the tool is the presence of a search bar that can help the class to find the image of the place that they have chosen. It will be enough to type “Bogotá” or “Lima” to have access to many street photographs of those cities.

Considering all of these theoretical elements, this pedagogical tool comes to represent an alternative way to teach vocabulary to our students. First, because teachers will not present the vocabulary, and students will instead be the ones discovering lexical items through photography observation—each pair may potentially see different items in the same image. Secondly, the multimedia component addresses the digital literacy component while facilitating different mediums for different learning styles. Finally, the use of urban photography highlights the works of photographers, and provides a glimpse of the Latin American context, which our students cannot usually see with their own eyes.

3 Curriculum design

3.1 Description of the activity

The activity consists of the collaborative creation of an educational artifact by the students. The artifact will consist of a Canva presentation that will include a photo of an urban context where social interactions are present, and a series of digital cards. The photo will have tags that will link the object present on the photo to its respective digital card. Each card will contain the word in Spanish first, and then the translation of the word in the L1 of the students of the group,³ plus an image of the concept of the word, and an audio clip with the pronunciation of the word in Spanish. The activity will be developed in pairs so the product will be a collaborative creation that can be shared onwards. The work in pairs will provide different perspectives and can constitute an opportunity to scaffold learning among peers (Martín Peris, 2008). The artifact’s production provides the initial learning process, then the presentation, which can be used as a source of lexical units in a natural context, offers an additional learning process. The production format can be in person, online, or hybrid.

For the process of developing the artifact, it is important that teachers are familiar with and comfortable using Canva, so they can help and guide the students during the process. Canva is a very intuitive tool, so it should work well with young students, even if they are using it for the first time. In the case of adult or senior students, I suggest dedicating some time to training them to use the platform before developing the activity.

3.2 Objectives of the activity

The objectives of the activity are as follows:

1. To develop students’ vocabulary in Spanish through multimodal means;
2. To reflect on the composition of spaces through the objects that we can find in them;
3. To promote collaboration among students through a technology-mediated activity.

² To explore these and more types of Creative Commons licences, visit: <https://creativecommons.org/about/ccllicenses/>. Additional sample photos licensed under creative commons licenses are also available for reuse in the Appendix.

³ For the sample (see Figure 1), I chose to present the Spanish word followed by its English and French translations, because they are common in Canada, but depending on the classroom context these languages can be different.

3.3 Process of production

As a class, the students will decide which Latin American city they are going to work with at the end of the prior week's learning session. For the next week, as homework, each pair will look for a picture of the city on the platform Flickr, using its search bar or world map. The picture will have to portray a social space, in other words, a space where people interact (e.g., a bus stop/station, the market, a downtown street, a store, etc.) so they can observe cultural patterns. The picture will need to present at least ten concrete objects so the students will be able to identify ten common nouns. The authorship of the picture will be recognized and present on the artifact. The next learning session (1.5 hours) will be entirely dedicated to the production of the artifact in three steps as outlined below.

3.3.1 "Tagging" the picture

The students will identify at least ten objects present in the image. The objects must be simple and recognizable, e.g., a bicycle, tree, dog, child, car, bus stop, etc. The purpose of this activity is to create a repertoire of lexical units that the students can clearly recall. Thus, these units must be concrete, common nouns adequate for a beginner-early intermediate level of Spanish.

3.3.2 Preparation and production of digital cards

The students will look for the Spanish words for the objects they have identified and create a list with the Spanish words and the words in any other language that they speak as an L1. The purpose of including their L1 is to build a link between the languages through concepts, so that it will be easier to recall the unfamiliar word in the future. The students will have access to online dictionaries and translators that can help them. After the list of words is created, the students will look for illustrations of those concepts to further reinforce the word-object link. The students will investigate how to pronounce that word in Spanish, and they will then record the pronunciation of the word in the digital card. To find the right pronunciation, the students can use Spanish pronunciation guides and/or Google Translate.

Thus, compiled, the digital cards will provide a multimodal way to represent each word. Each card will include the word in Spanish, its translation to the students' L1, an image that represents the concept of the word, and an audio clip with the pronunciation. Canva facilitates the integration of this multimodality while allowing students to work collaboratively. Once the cards are compiled, the students will create a presentation, using the aforementioned online platform, which will include: the chosen picture with tags (each tag will have a link that will take the person to the digital card), and the digital cards, one per word, which include the word, its translation(s), the image, and the pronunciation in Spanish in audio as depicted in Figure 1.

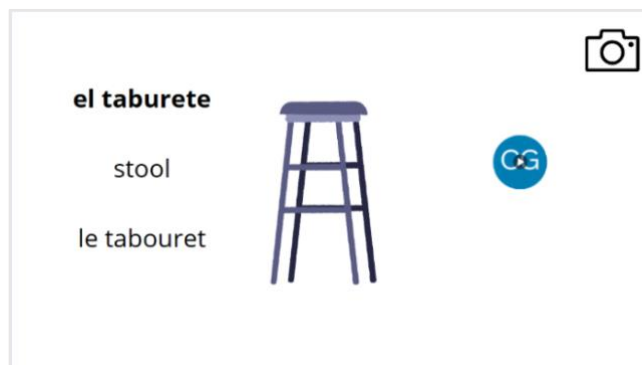


Figure 1. a sample digital card (word/translation, image, and sound)

A sample of the artifact is depicted in Figures 2 and 3.



Figure 2. First slide of the presentation (tagged image with credits)



















<p>el mate mate le maté</p>   	<p>la sombrilla beach umbrella le parasol</p>   
<p>el vestido dress la robe</p>   	<p>la vitrina / el escaparate shop window la vitrine</p>   
<p>la uva grape le raisin</p>   	<p>la pera pear la poire</p>   

Figure 3. Following linked slides with translations, image and sound.

3.3.3 Presentation

After students finish putting together their digital cards on Canva, each pair will present their final product to the class and the instructor. If there is not enough time to present in that session, the presentation can be conducted in the next session. In addition to presenting the vocabulary, in the presentation, students will also have to justify the use of the picture considering questions like: *Why and how was the picture chosen? Does the picture represent a social space? How do the objects interact in the picture? Why are those objects there?*

The students can ask and answer questions amongst themselves using Spanish, English, or a mixture of the two languages. The class will observe the picture and discuss what can be said about the space portrayed through the presence and interaction of the objects. For example, in the sample provided, an adult man is sitting outside a store with an insulated water bottle and a maté. Questions that can be asked in response to this image include, *Is it possible to get a sense of the temperature from peoples' clothing? Do people drink hot drinks all year round in Paraguay? How is the weather in Ciudad del Este?* etc. These kinds of observations and questions will give the instructor the opportunity to understand the configuration of spaces from students' perspective, while also giving students the opportunity to explore cultural aspects depicted in the images.

3.4 Recommendations

This activity can be done using different tools, like Google Earth or Virtual Field Trips, depending on the context of the class. In this case, I chose Flickr to bring together photography as art and Latin American cities, but eventually the students could take their own pictures or pick an image from elsewhere and do the same activity.

The role of the teacher is to guide and monitor the process, advising students with choosing the photograph (because it must portray social interactions and have a certain number of concrete objects), choosing the vocabulary (because the activity will only work with concrete common nouns), and the use of digital tools if needed, as well as checking students' pronunciation of the words before recording them, and helping students find the most appropriate word for the object that they are labelling. For example, if they find an object in the picture that in English can be named as "hat", the Spanish translation may say *sombrero*, when the more appropriate word would be *gorro* or *gorra* (see Figure 4).

ENGLISH		E S P A Ñ O L
HAT		
	GORRO	
	SOMBRERO	
	GORRA	

Figure 4. Semantic table

Thus, it is important that the teacher check the students' word-object pairs in Spanish, to ensure they have the right reference. In the translations into their own L1s, students will be responsible for using the resources available or asking for advice from other speakers if it is possible.

Again, all these recommendations should be implemented paying attention to the educational context. If the teacher wants to give more autonomy to the students and not monitor them in each step of the process, that is also possible, especially considering that Canva permits editing documents even after the links have been shared, so correction can take place before or after the class presentation.

4 Conclusion

The purpose of this paper was the presentation of an experimental tool that does not fit within the traditional ways of presenting and working with vocabulary in language teaching and learning. This tool understands the process of vocabulary learning as a practice that cannot be separated from the spaces where the language is used and recreated. Using photography, students can have a small glimpse of how certain Latin American spaces are constructed and appreciate the word-object relationships from a realistic perspective. Objects that maybe would not appear in the same picture together in one place, can be routinely combined in shared space in another urban context. It is important to recognize that this activity does not include memorization of words, and that it might be considered inefficient to focus on a few words for a couple of classes. That is why this proposal's suitability, as any other, must consider contextual factors and instructors' ability to include cultural elements in the classroom. Finally, it is my desire that by sharing this idea, my language teacher colleagues can implement it and communicate how it works in different contexts, languages, and approaches, in order to apply that feedback in the development of this and other potential language learning tools.

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Appendix: Examples of pictures



Quito, Ecuador © Pedro Szekely
<https://www.flickr.com/photos/pedrosz/49339229843/>



Montevideo, Uruguay © Jimmy Baikovicus
<https://www.flickr.com/photos/jikatu/40294503843/>

VOCABULARY IN URBAN CONTEXTS USING MULTIMODALITY.



Medellín, Colombia. © Eric Wienke

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