

# Making Grammar and Vocabulary Learning Stick by Weaving a Critical Thinking Web

If you, as many teachers, think that critical thinking can only come after all the language-learning basics are mastered, then this interactive session will set that idea on its head.

Unlike babies learning their mother tongue, our learners have complex minds. Lists of definitions and rules fail to engage that complexity, and so most of them are forgotten. Critical thinking learning activities engage more of their brain's interconnections. As a result, new words and grammatical patterns stick and become more available for productive language.

This webinar will show some ways to weave our grammar and vocabulary objectives into that interconnected web.



U.S. DEPARTMENT OF STATE



# Richard Kahn



Before Richard ever went to university, he sought to educate himself. He traveled through South America and Africa where he learned how to learn languages and cultures from everyone from children to elders. These experiences informed his later teaching in a U.S. prison and three universities, and then in Central Asia, North Africa, and South America.

He was an U.S. Department of State English Language Fellow in Algeria and Morocco, and a Specialist in Bolivia. His workshop topics range from “energizing academic writing” to “harnessing the richness of large, multi-level class diversity.” Whatever the subject, he taps into the renewable resource that is available in all teachers and all students: the capacity for critical thinking.



U.S. DEPARTMENT OF STATE



# What our web will reach today:



- Where Critical Thinking fits in English language teaching.
- Critical Thinking for vocabulary: some practical activities.
- Critical Thinking for grammar: some practical activities.

For teachers, hierarchies



seem natural as mountains

# Our Very Logical Reasoning



Basic skills before higher level thinking

# Question

What level of English skills do learners need  
**before** they are ready to use  
**critical thinking?**

**It's not a hierarchy...**



**It's a cycle**

Critical Thinking allows us  
to link the **familiar** with **new knowledge**.



It helps us to reflect  
and see more clearly **what we know**  
and **what we need to know**.

We may worry our students aren't learning and remembering enough vocabulary.



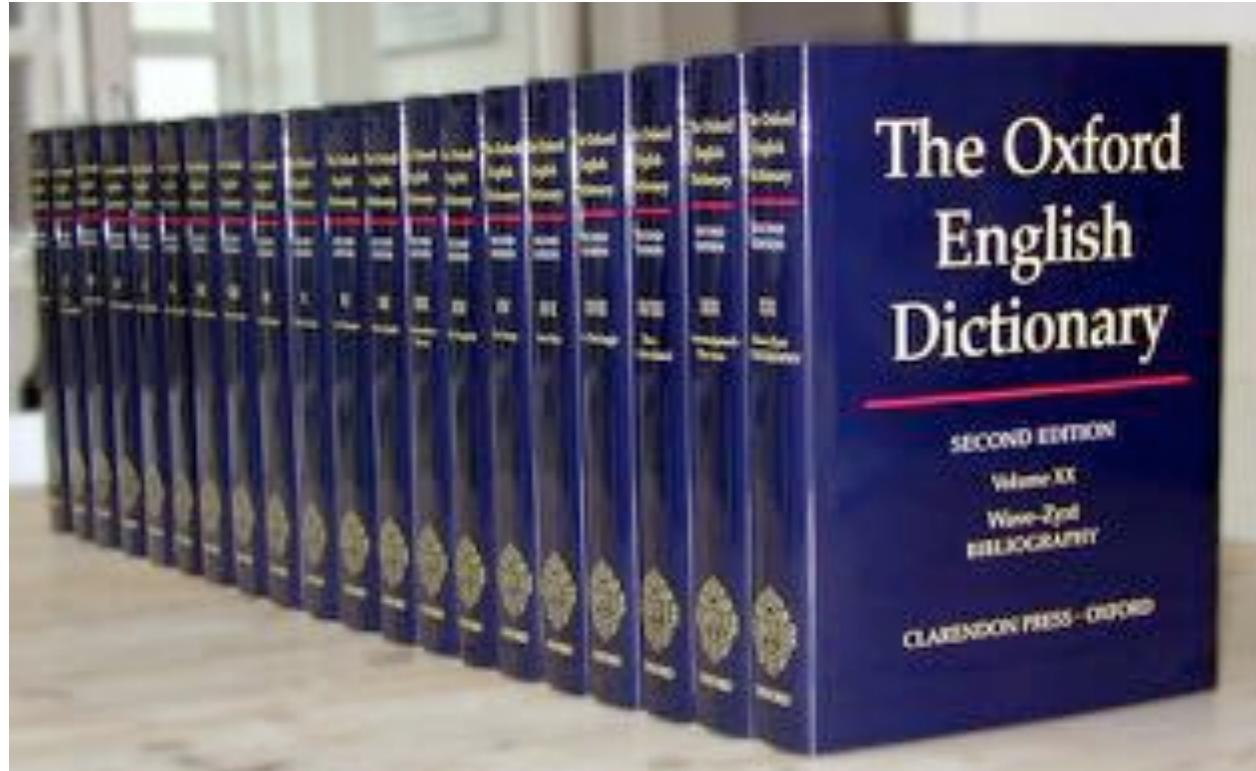
**How many words do they need to learn?**

# Question

*Give your best guess:*

How many words  
are in the English language?

The *Oxford English Dictionary* has



**600,000!**



Don't panic!

No one can or needs to know that many.



By the way, if you want to estimate the size  
your own vocabulary, test it on this site:

<http://testyourvocab.com>

(no, not now)

# Math for English Teachers:

5,000

divided by

the number of weeks of school

= words per week.

Multiply by 2

equals.....?





The question is **not**:

**Can** we use critical thinking to teach vocabulary?

The question **is**:

**How** can we teach enough vocabulary without it?



**Critical  
Thinking  
for  
Vocabulary  
Learning**

DOG



LION



COW



GOAT



GIRAFFE



SHEEP



WOLF



CAT



Ask yourself:  
**Which words belong together?**

Make two lists of the words that fit together.

**Which words are in one of your two lists?**

Share them with us.

DOG



LION



COW



GOAT



GIRAFFE



SHEEP



WOLF



CAT



Same 8 words:

**Now make  
two different lists.**

Find a new way that the  
words fit together.

**Which words  
are in one  
of your new  
word lists?**

LION



CAT



DOG



WOLF



Choose one:  
Was your  
first or second  
try better?

For example:

If you put these words in one list,  
you had an idea of what brings them  
together.

The other cards,  
(giraffe, goat, sheep and cow)  
share a different idea.

LION



We work with the learners to provide a name for their idea:

- sharp-toothed
- carnivore
- meat eater

CAT



Learners express their ideas through pointing, miming, or asking the question “What is the English word for...?”

DOG



WOLF



GIRAFFE



LION



WOLF



A different group of learners made a pile of these words.

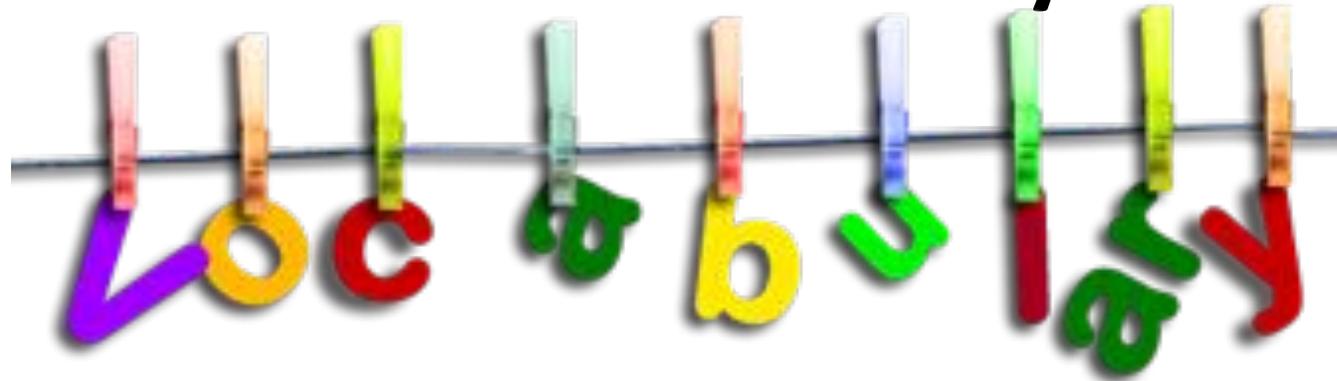
**What brings these word cards together?**

You just

- ✓ **Analyzed**
- ✓ **Perceived patterns**
- ✓ **Engaged in problem solving**
- ✓ **Engaged in cooperation and negotiation**
- ✓ **Evaluated when asking which was better**

**Could your beginning students do this activity?**

New words need to be used  
**between 6 to 10 times**  
**and in different ways.**



If not, the words don't go into the learner's  
long-term memory.

# Concept categories provide a way to order words:

Meat-eaters / Sharp-toothed / Carnivores

contrasted to

Flat-toothed / Grass-eaters / Herbivores / Ruminants

Tame / Domesticated / Farm Animals

contrasted to

Wild / Savage / Dangerous



**With critical thinking vocabulary activities,  
new words are learned in the way our brains are wired.**

Having **multiple** correct answers  
**frees students from the fear of having the wrong answer.**



Fear of mistakes leaves many students afraid to speak up  
and prevents them from using the language they are learning.

# These activities are best with small groups

- ✓ Group interaction generates more new ideas and insight
  - ✓ Groups ensure discussion
- ✓ Group behavior cultivates individual learning strategies

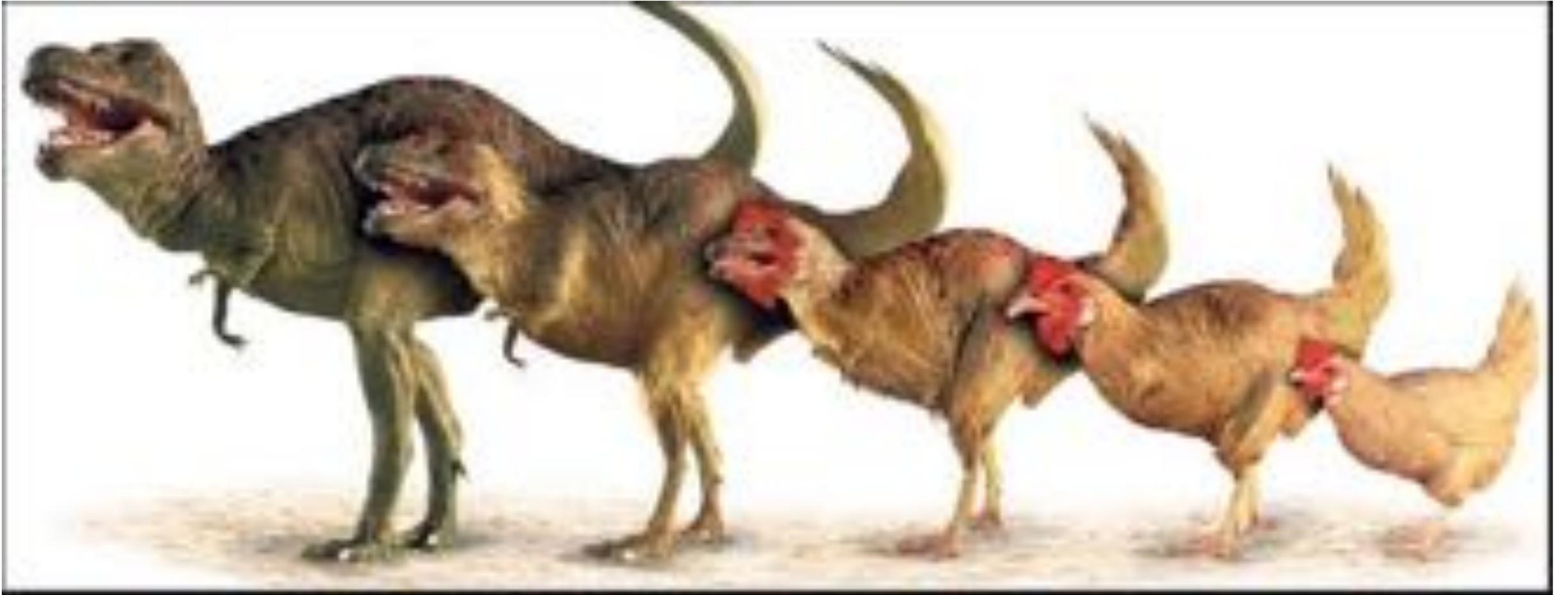
Small groups work great in very large classes  
if you break activities into small steps with short, clear  
instructions.

Which word does not belong?

CHICKEN / DINOSAUR / BAT



Why?



**Birds evolved from dinosaurs!**

Which word does not belong?

WHALE / DINOSAUR / BAT



Why?

We have only grouped nouns by their definitions,

*but*

these activities can be used to help learners notice:

- Parts of speech
- Number of syllables
- Register (formal/informal/scientific)
  - Any dimension of language

I never  
thought of  
that!



## *At first*

group activities take a bit more time,  
but they are actually very time efficient:



- ✓ Students soon organize quickly
  - ✓ Less vocabulary is forgotten
- ✓ Concept categories and learning strategies help students become independent learners

Make this sorting and resorting of words **a regular activity.**

**Students will develop the habit**  
of looking with their critical minds,  
of weaving webs with each new word they encounter  
both in your class and in other classes,  
both in school or out, whenever they encounter new words  
in texts or films or advertisements or songs.

**With activated minds, learners become collaborators**  
**in their and their peers' learning.**



**Critical  
Thinking  
for  
Grammar  
Learning**



Critical thinking uses the human brain's natural genius for recognizing and creating patterns.

## On one side:

The mind notices expected patterns.

Examples:

The **eye** only scans to read common words.

The **ear** only needs to hear a bit of common phrases

*How are you?* automatically answers with *Fine, thank you.*

## On the other side:

The mind notices anomalies.

Examples:

Unnatural word order

- *The white big dog*
- *She lunch ate.*

# Question

What do **you feel**  
when your students  
make grammatical mistakes?

Grammar rules are descriptions of patterns.

When **we** hear our students break the pattern, we notice.

**However, if instead of teaching rules,  
we teach our students to listen for the pattern,  
they will start to self-correct.**

# Question

Do you do **dictation** activities  
in your classes?  
For what purpose?

# Dictogloss

A kind of dictation that surprises learners into **discovering new grammatical features.**

A dictogloss helps learners realize that **grammar is a meaning-making pattern.**

# Dictogloss for Learning the Simple Present

1. Arrange students in small groups.
2. Ask everyone to carefully listen.
3. Read a short paragraph that uses the simple future.
4. Read it clearly a second time.
5. Ask each group to choose a 'scribe'.
6. Ask the groups to write the entire paragraph as exactly as they can.

I would slowly and clearly read the following twice:

“I will have a busy day today. First, I’ll eat breakfast at home. Then I’ll walk to school. At school, I will go to class all morning, and then I’ll eat lunch. After lunch, we will have some time outside.”

But, when you walk around the class, you will see this:

“I have a busy day today. First, I eat breakfast at home. Then I walk to school. At school, I go to class all morning, and then I eat lunch. After lunch, we have some time outside.”

There may not be single mistake!

Working together, they avoid most mistakes  
**that they are aware of,**  
**but they miss every “will” and “-1l.”**

**The patterns they know are all they have heard!**

**The web of the human brain is also a net.  
It lets everything pass through that it doesn't think is important.**

**Here, that net caught the big fish ("eat lunch," "go to class")  
but let little, quiet "will" and even quieter "-ll"  
slip through like invisible water.**

**Our work is to reweave the net  
so it catches the grammar**



Now, here's the *really, really* hard part:

We, the knowledgeable teachers, need to say

**NOTHING**

(yet)

Simply write exactly what you dictated  
on the board or hand the text out on strips of paper

“I will have a busy day today. First, I’ll eat breakfast at home.  
Then I’ll walk to school. At school, I will go to class all morning  
and then I’ll eat lunch. After lunch, we will have some time  
outside.”

Ask each group to look at your text very carefully.

Compare it with their own work and find every **difference between what they had written and what you had spoken.**

Groups mark all the differences  
between what they had written

“I have a busy day today. First, I eat breakfast at home. Then I walk to school. At school, I go to class all morning, and then I eat lunch. After lunch, we have some time outside.”

and what you had spoken.

“I will have a busy day today. First, I’ll eat breakfast at home. Then I’ll walk to school. At school, I will go to class all morning and then I’ll eat lunch. After lunch, we will have some time outside.”

Ask each group to select a spokesperson  
(someone different from their scribe).

Ask each group to answer two questions:

1. What are the differences between what they wrote and what you spoke?
2. Why do those differences make a difference?

Prepare the spokesperson to present your answers to the class.

When trying to figure out the second question,

“Why do those differences make a difference?”

they might propose different reasons,

**but** someone will ask the question,

**“When** did these things happen?”

Asking **“when”** is the first understanding of verb tense and leads to a theory of how tenses are formed.

The groups present their answers to the two questions.

Let them hypothesize;

let their peers challenge and perfect the hypotheses.

The groups present their answers to the two questions.

Let them hypothesize;

let their peers challenge and perfect the hypotheses.

The teacher will write their ideas on the board  
gently helping them formulate a clear conclusion:

**“This is how the simple future tense works.”**

The groups present their answers to the two questions.

Let them hypothesize;

let their peers challenge and perfect the hypotheses.

The teacher will write their ideas on the board  
gently helping them formulate a clear conclusion:

**“This is how the simple future tense works.”**

**Your learners must feel that this is their discovery.**



## **A dictogloss opens a learner's eyes.**

They notice what they had not seen,  
wonder about why it is so,  
and begin to see a pattern in what had been ignored.

The invisible water is now visible  
and available to make meaning.



What's the hardest thing  
about activating critical thinking skills?

## **Trusting learners**

as thinkers trying to make sense of the world.

**Making sense, making anything, is a creative process,  
the peak of Bloom's taxonomy.**



We need to keep quiet  
while this creation of sense is happening.



Letting students think, speak, and make their own mistakes does not mean that we are failing to do our job.

It means that we re-define our job.



Instead of pouring the concrete of knowledge into their heads...



we become architects of learning.

Teachers design situations where deep learning can take place.

If we are architects of learning  
we can't spend out precious teaching time  
making concrete harden in their heads.



**We help them weave the flexible nets  
that they can use to catch deeper understanding.**

# **Critical Thinking**

**makes everyone a better learner.**

- **It helps us notice what we had missed,**
  - **to ask better questions,**
- **to make better guesses and check them**
  - **to see how things fit together**
  - **and perceive bigger patterns**

**in the vibrant and ever growing English language.**

# **One Last Question: The Biggest One**

**Do you feel ready  
to use critical thinking activities  
in your class?**

# Thank you!

Email: [americanenglishwebinars@elprograms.org](mailto:americanenglishwebinars@elprograms.org)

AE Live - Ning Community of Practice: [americanenglishwebinars.com](http://americanenglishwebinars.com)

AE for Educators Facebook page: [facebook.com/AmericanEnglishforEducators](https://facebook.com/AmericanEnglishforEducators)

AE website: [americanenglish.state.gov](http://americanenglish.state.gov)

AE YouTube channel: [youtube.com/StateAmericanEnglish](https://youtube.com/StateAmericanEnglish)

AE Facebook page: [facebook.com/AmericanEnglishatState](https://facebook.com/AmericanEnglishatState)



**AMERICAN ENGLISH**