



Prifysgol Cymru
Y Drindod Dewi Sant
University of Wales
Trinity Saint David

Action Research Project

*Vocabulary Scaffolding in Post-16
Education: Using Key Terminology on
Lecture Slides to Enhance Learning.*

Module: ECPT6009

Total Word Count: 4023 words

Submitted on 27/03/2026

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Professional Graduate Certificate in Education (PCET) – 2025/2026

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1. Introduction

Language, as one of the primary means of communication, plays a fundamental role in the learning process (Myhill, Watson and Newman, 2020). In post-16 education, proficiency in both verbal and written communication is essential for students' success, not only within the classroom but also in their future professional careers. As academic disciplines continue to evolve, students are increasingly expected to engage with complex concepts and specialised terminology. To develop the necessary knowledge and understanding, learners must follow explanations, participate in discussions, and complete assignments. However, unfamiliar terminology and language barriers may obstruct comprehension of the learning topic, particularly when new concepts are introduced rapidly during teaching sessions (Zlatev and Blomberg, 2015). Consequently, learners may struggle to fully engage with the subject matter, undermining their confidence and participation in the classroom.

The introduction of specific vocabulary and subject-related terminology — key words — at the beginning of a lecture can play an important role in the teaching process. Presenting key terminology before exploring complex ideas may help create a shared starting point for learners by establishing the entry behaviour required to engage with the learning topic. This approach can help learners understand new concepts and reduce potential barriers to participation during the session.

Educational theory also highlights the importance of language as a tool for learning. For example, Vygotsky's theory of cognitive development emphasises the close relationship between language, social interaction, and learning (Shabani, Khatib and Ebadi, 2010). According to this theory, knowledge develops through guided support within the learner's Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), where structured assistance enables learners to understand concepts that may initially be beyond their independent capability (McLeod, 2025). Such support, often described as scaffolding, can help learners develop knowledge and comprehend complex ideas. Within classroom practice, the explicit presentation of key terminology may therefore function as a practical form of scaffolding that supports comprehension during lectures.

At the University of Wales Trinity Saint David (UWTSD), learners often come from diverse educational and linguistic backgrounds. As a result, familiarity with academic language and subject-specific terminology may vary considerably across learners, depending on their prior experiences and knowledge. Strategies that support vocabulary development benefit all learners, not only those for whom English is not the first language. Presenting key vocabulary on lecture slides before explaining complex concepts may help learners develop a clearer understanding of the material and serve as a reference point throughout the session. This approach also aligns with inclusive teaching practices, which aim to create learning environments that are accessible and supportive for a wide range of learners.

This small-scale action research project, therefore, investigates the use of key vocabulary embedded in lecture slides as a strategy to support learning in post-16 education. The intention of this research is not to propose radical changes to existing teaching practices at UWTSD, but rather to explore a practical, cost-effective pedagogical strategy that may enhance learners' understanding and engagement. By introducing structured vocabulary support at the beginning of lectures, the study aims to examine whether this approach can improve learners'

comprehension of subject-specific concepts and support their participation in the learning process.

Therefore, the research aim is:

To investigate how embedding key vocabulary in lecture slides can support learner understanding, engagement, and academic language development in post-16 education.

The research objective is:

1. *To explore how the inclusion of key terminology in lecture slides influences learners' understanding of subject-specific concepts.*

The research questions are:

1. *How does embedding key vocabulary in lecture slides influence learners' understanding of subject-specific concepts in post-16 education?*
2. *How do learners perceive the usefulness of key vocabulary presented during lectures?*
3. *Does the inclusion of key vocabulary in lecture slides support learner engagement during teaching sessions?*

2. Literature Review

2.1 Language as a Foundation for Learning

The development of knowledge and understanding within educational contexts is impossible without strong language skills (Gelman et al., 2000). Keefer and Haj-Broussard (2020) state that learning does not occur solely through exposure to information but also through learners' ability to interpret and discuss concepts using appropriate language. Similarly, Renzl (2007) emphasises the role of language, describing it as a vehicle for knowledge and as the paramount instrument for constructing knowledge and developing student competencies.

According to Lev Vygotsky, cognitive development is strongly influenced by social interaction and linguistic mediation (Vygotsky, 1986, pp. 20–147). Moreover, Vygotsky argued that language is a primary tool through which learners construct meaning and engage with complex ideas. Learning occurs most effectively within the ZPD, where students can perform tasks with appropriate guidance and support (Vygotsky, 1978, pp. 79–105). Vygotsky asserts that guidance and support often take the form of structured teaching strategies that help learners understand unfamiliar material.

Jerome Bruner further developed this concept through the theory of discovery and scaffolding. Scaffolding refers to the temporary support that educators provide, enabling learners to develop new skills and knowledge until they can perform independently (Gonulal and Loewen, 2018). Also, Bruner's Three Models of Learning, particularly applicable to the post-16 sector, the Symbolic Mode — based on language and concepts — enables learners to categorise information and manipulate ideas through an understanding of terminology and subject-specific language (Main, 2023).

While Vygotsky established that learning is a socially mediated process, Bruner operationalised this concept through instructional scaffolding. Bruner argued that by providing temporary, adjustable supports — the explicit modelling of key terminology on lecture slides — educators can bridge the gap between a learner's current ability and their potential achievement (Wood, Bruner and Ross, 1976).

Therefore, the importance of language in learning is particularly evident in subjects that require engagement with specialised terminology, such as Business, IT, Art and Design, and many others. When learners encounter unfamiliar vocabulary, their ability to follow explanations and participate in discussions may be limited. As a result, language can become a barrier to learning if appropriate support is not provided. This highlights the importance of instructional strategies that help learners access and understand the language associated with academic subjects.

2.2 Academic Vocabulary and Subject-Specific Understanding

Research in language education has shown a strong relationship between vocabulary knowledge and comprehension (Nation, 1993, pp. 35–227). According to Paul Nation, vocabulary knowledge is one of the predictors of learners' ability to understand spoken and written academic content. Moreover, Nation emphasises that effective vocabulary learning requires both repeated exposure and explicit instruction, particularly when learners encounter specialised or academic terminology. Without sufficient vocabulary, learners may struggle to

access the meaning of the subject content, even when they understand the overall structure of a lesson or text.

A framework for understanding vocabulary in educational contexts is the Three-tier Vocabulary model developed by Isabel Beck, Margaret McKeown, and Linda Kucan (Beck, McKeown, and Kucan, 2013, pp. 32–180). This model categorises vocabulary according to frequency and level of specialisation. Starkie (2022) elaborates that Tier 1 vocabulary consists of everyday words commonly used in daily communication and typically acquired naturally through language exposure — a colloquial language. Tier 2 vocabulary includes high-utility academic words such as analyse, evaluate, and interpret, which appear across multiple subjects but may not be commonly used in everyday conversation. Tier 3 vocabulary, however, refers to highly specialised terminology associated with specific disciplines.

Similarly, Sumpter (2022) states that while Tier 1 vocabulary typically requires minimal detailed instruction, Tier 2 and Tier 3 vocabulary often need to be deliberately taught in educational settings. Tier 2 vocabulary is particularly important because it helps learners interpret academic texts and express analytical ideas across disciplines. Tier 3 vocabulary, in contrast, represents the specialised language required to understand specific academic subjects. Therefore, without familiarity with this terminology, learners may struggle to grasp the core concepts, leading to misunderstandings, misconceptions, and a failure to apply them in the required context.

It is worth mentioning that the importance of vocabulary development extends beyond comprehension alone (Stanovich, 1986). However, a strong vocabulary enables learners from diverse backgrounds and levels of pre-existing knowledge to communicate ideas more clearly and participate more actively in discussions and academic tasks (Quigley, 2018, pp. 20–33). Professional eloquence and rich Tier 3 vocabulary can help learners express their thoughts with greater precision, interpret information more effectively, and engage more confidently in both spoken and written communication, both inside and outside the classroom. In contrast, a limited vocabulary, as part of a verbal persuasion technique, may lead to reduced confidence and difficulty engaging in in-class activities (Bandura, 1997, pp. 79–113).

Webb and Nation (2017, pp. 35–100) further emphasise that effective vocabulary instruction should involve both explicit teaching and contextualised use of vocabulary within planned learning activities, such as vocabulary-focused comprehension questions, task-focused spoken interactions, and incidental and deliberate vocabulary learning. Moreover, learners with English as a first language (EFL) and those with English as an additional language (EAL) benefit when new terms are clearly introduced, explained in context, and revisited through discussion or practical application. This approach enables learners to gradually integrate new vocabulary into their developing conceptual understanding while strengthening their ability to use language accurately in academic contexts.

This strategy is highly applicable in UWTSD, where teaching often introduces complex theoretical concepts, and learners may encounter multiple unfamiliar terms in a single lecture. Without meaningful support, this linguistic complexity may increase cognitive load and make it difficult for learners to focus on the topic's conceptual aspects. Conversely, providing structured vocabulary support can therefore help reduce this barrier to learning.

Indeed, one practical and cost-effective strategy for supporting vocabulary development is to introduce key terminology in lecture materials. Presenting key vocabulary at the beginning of a lecture can provide learners with a conceptual framework that supports understanding of the subject content. Therefore, by identifying and explaining important terms before exploring complex ideas, the lecturer may help learners focus on the meaning of concepts rather than becoming overwhelmed by unfamiliar language. In this way, embedding key vocabulary in dedicated lecture slides may support comprehension, promote engagement, and facilitate the development of academic language in post-16 learning environments.

2.3 Inclusive Teaching in Post-16 Education

Inclusive teaching has become a central principle within the UK education system, particularly in the post-16 sector, where learners often come from diverse educational, linguistic, and socio-economic backgrounds (UK Parliament, 2025). Inclusive practice refers to pedagogy and teaching approaches that recognise learner diversity and ensure that all students can access course content, participate fully in learning activities, and demonstrate their knowledge and abilities through assessment (Florian and Black-Hawkins, 2011).

Educational policy increasingly emphasises the importance of ensuring that all learners have equal opportunities to access education, develop their skills, and participate fully in learning environments (Equality Challenge Unit, 2023). Welsh Government (2025) highlights that equality, diversity, and inclusion are fundamental priorities within the education system, aiming to ensure that educational opportunities are accessible to all learners regardless of background or personal characteristics.

Recent policy developments further reinforce the importance of inclusivity in education. The UK Government's Post-16 Education and Skills outline a vision for a more flexible and accessible education system that equips learners with the knowledge and skills needed to succeed in employment and wider society (HM Government, 2025). The policy emphasises improving access to high-quality education and addressing barriers that may limit learner progression within post-16 pathways.

Inclusive teaching is also closely connected to professional standards within the post-16 education sector (Educators Wales, 2023). These standards encourage practitioners to use research-informed teaching methods and continuously reflect on their professional practice to improve learning outcomes.

Language diversity is another important consideration within inclusive education. According to The Bell Foundation (2024), many learners in UK educational settings speak English as an additional language, meaning they have been exposed to a language other than English in their home environment. These learners represent a diverse group with varying levels of English proficiency and educational experience. As a result, their learning needs may differ significantly depending on their previous exposure to English and academic study.

Education Policy Institute (2026) highlights that learners using EAL are not a homogeneous group and may require differentiated teaching approaches that support language development alongside subject learning. Moreover, effective teaching for these learners involves ensuring that academic content remains accessible while supporting the development of language skills needed for participation in classroom activities.

Therefore, inclusive teaching practices involve strategies that help reduce potential barriers to learning for all students, including, but not limited to, clear explanations of subject terminology, the use of visual and contextual supports, and ensuring learners have access to the language needed to understand academic content.

From a pragmatic, practical teaching perspective, providing structured vocabulary support in lectures can be a simple yet effective inclusive strategy. By introducing key terminology at the beginning of a session, the lecturer can ensure that learners share a common understanding of important concepts before engaging with more complex material. This approach, described by Nation (2022, pp. 64–96), may support learners unfamiliar with academic terminology while also benefiting those who require additional clarification of subject-specific language. In this way, embedding key vocabulary within lecture slides may help create a more inclusive learning environment in post-16 education, reducing linguistic barriers, supporting comprehension, and thereby improving learners' confidence, engagement, and participation during teaching sessions.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This action research uses a qualitative case study methodology, as explained by Turner (2019), to explore the potential impact of embedding key vocabulary in lecture slides as a teaching strategy to support learning at UWTSD.

Mcateer (2013, pp. 28–41) suggests that case study research is commonly used in educational contexts to investigate specific teaching practices in real-world settings. This methodology enables the researcher to examine how a particular pedagogical approach operates within Level 4, CertHE, and Level 7 MBA students and to reflect on its implications for teaching practice.

3.2 Research Context

The research focuses on a small-scale case study based on the researcher's own teaching context within post-16 education at UWTSD. The study examines the use of key vocabulary embedded within lecture slides during teaching sessions and evaluates how this approach may support learner comprehension, engagement, and participation. As the aim of the research is to explore a practical teaching strategy rather than to produce generalisable findings, the case study approach provides an appropriate, fit-for-purpose framework for analysing teaching practice within a specific educational setting — the CertHE and MBA student cohort.

This methodological approach is reflective and practice-based, in which the researcher analyses the use of vocabulary scaffolding in lecture presentations and considers how this strategy aligns with established educational theories discussed in the literature review, including vocabulary development, scaffolding strategies, and inclusive teaching practices. The analysis focuses on how introducing key terminology at the beginning of lectures may help learners grasp complex subject concepts and engage more effectively with the learning material.

3.3 Data Sources

Given the research subject, objectives, and scale, this research will use data from reflective observations of teaching practice and evaluations of lecture materials, primarily PowerPoint presentation slides that incorporate or do not key vocabulary. These teaching materials can provide evidence of how vocabulary support is embedded within teaching sessions and allow the researcher to evaluate the potential pedagogical value of this approach. The study, therefore, relies on qualitative reflection and critical analysis rather than the collection of primary data from learners.

3.4 Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations are an important aspect of academic or educational research, as researchers have a legal and moral responsibility to protect participants' personal data, ensuring confidentiality and anonymity while maintaining the integrity and credibility of the research findings (British Educational Research Association, 2024).

However, because this study does not collect identifiable data from students through surveys, interviews, or other means, the ethical risks associated with the research are minimal. This action research focuses solely on the researcher's teaching practice and the analysis of teaching materials, ensuring that learner confidentiality and privacy are fully protected. Additionally,

this study is conducted in accordance with UWTSD's guidelines for responsible research practice, outlined in the Research Ethics & Integrity Code of Practice 2025/26 (UWTSD, 2026a) and the most recent Code of Practice for Research Degrees 2025/26 (UWTSD, 2026b).

To conclude, this methodological approach is academically and practically suitable for this action research, as it critically examines a practical aspect of the proposed teaching strategy within the context of UWTSD, seeking to provide insights into how small, cost-effective, incremental pedagogical adjustments can improve learner comprehension and improve existing inclusive teaching practices.

4. Discussion

4.1 Implementation of Vocabulary and Observed Impact

This study examined the use of key vocabulary in lecture slides as a structured pedagogical intervention to support learning in a post-16 educational context at UWTSD. The approach involved introducing subject-specific terminology after the learning objectives slide, presenting key terms with concise definitions. While effective in this context, educators should consider class size and resource availability when implementing this strategy. The comparison with prior sessions that did not include vocabulary highlights its potential benefits, but further research is needed to explore its scalability and adaptability across different teaching environments.

The comparison revealed a clear difference in learner behaviour and engagement. In sessions without explicit vocabulary support, learners were required to interpret unfamiliar terminology while simultaneously engaging with new theoretical content. This additional processing demand created an observable disruption in the learning flow for the L4 and L7 cohorts. Notably, learners with EAL experienced difficulty independently searching for definitions, particularly when unfamiliar with the spelling of the needed terms. At the same time, EFL learners often demonstrated temporary disengagement from the lecture as they searched for meaning, fragmenting their attention.

These interruptions suggest that the absence of structured vocabulary support increases students' cognitive load, as learners must divide their attention between language decoding and conceptual understanding. Consequently, the teaching session becomes reactive, with the lecturer needing to provide ad hoc clarification, rather than maintaining a coherent progression of ideas.

In contrast, sessions that incorporated key vocabulary at the very beginning of the slides demonstrated a more stable, continuous learning dynamic, which directly supports improved comprehension and engagement. The early introduction of terminology established a shared linguistic framework, enabling learners to engage with the explanations more confidently and with fewer interruptions. The presence of clearly defined terminology reduced the need for clarification and allowed the session to progress with greater fluency. This suggests that providing a foundational lexicon before engaging with complex material enhances cognitive processing and overall learner engagement.

While these observations are limited to a specific teaching context, including Level 4 and Level 7 CertHE and MBA students, they demonstrate that small instructional adjustments can significantly influence learner behaviour. Embedding vocabulary at the beginning of lecture slides can be a practical, low-cost strategy that makes educators feel effective and innovative. Such adjustments may improve clarity, reduce disruption, and support sustained engagement across diverse learner groups, reinforcing the value of thoughtful instructional design.

4.2 Vocabulary and Conceptual Understanding

The observed differences in learner engagement can be better understood by examining the relationship between vocabulary knowledge and conceptual access. In sessions where vocabulary was not explicitly introduced, learners' difficulties extended beyond momentary confusion; unfamiliar terminology appeared to act as a gatekeeping mechanism that restricted access to core concepts. Even when learners possessed the cognitive ability to understand the material, limited familiarity with key terms impeded their ability to interpret explanations in real time.

In contrast, the pre-teaching of vocabulary appeared to shift the cognitive focus from decoding language to engaging with meaning. By encountering key terminology before its application in the lecture, learners were able to allocate more cognitive resources to conceptual processing than to linguistic interpretation. This supports Paul Nation's argument, which emphasises that vocabulary knowledge is a prerequisite for comprehension rather than a by-product of it. From this perspective, understanding terminology is not supplementary to learning but foundational to it.

This relationship is reinforced by the Tier 2 and Tier 3 vocabulary framework, which underscores the importance of both general academic language and discipline-specific terminology in education. Much of the vocabulary introduced in lectures falls into these categories, making it unlikely to be learned through casual exposure. Without structured instruction, such terms remain inaccessible, especially for learners with limited experience with academic language. Therefore, the structured introduction of vocabulary within lecture slides functions as a key mechanism for making disciplinary language visible and accessible.

Importantly, the impact of vocabulary support extends beyond individual comprehension to the overall coherence of the learning process. When learners share a common understanding of key terminology, explanations can be delivered with greater precision, and the progression of ideas becomes more fluid. This reduces the need for repetitive clarification and enables more efficient exploration of complex concepts.

Overall, these findings suggest that vocabulary is not merely supportive of learning but integral to it. Embedding key terminology at the beginning of lectures, after the main objectives slide, can help learners feel more confident and capable. This approach enables learners to access, interpret, and engage with subject content more effectively, scaffolding knowledge and building their confidence.

4.3 Vocabulary as Scaffolding and Inclusive Teaching Strategy

The literature review revealed that the use of key vocabulary in lecture slides can also be understood as a form of instructional scaffolding that supports students' learning. Provided guided support in the lectures with integrated key terminology fully aligns with Lev Vygotsky's ZPD concept, where learners can progress with appropriate assistance. Therefore, introducing vocabulary at the beginning of lectures provided this initial support and guidance, enabling learners to engage more effectively and confidently with new learning topics.

Also, the observations confirmed the validity of Jerome Bruner's role of structured support in helping learners develop understanding before gradually achieving independence. Therefore, providing learners with essential linguistic tools when introducing topic-related terminology at the beginning of the slides can be seen as a preparatory stage of learning.

Importantly, this approach also aligns with inclusive teaching principles. As discussed in Section 2.3, learners in post-16 education come from diverse educational and linguistic backgrounds, with varying levels of familiarity with academic language and English. The observations also confirmed that providing explicit vocabulary support helps reduce linguistic barriers, especially for EAL students and creates a more equitable learning environment. By ensuring that all learners have equal access to the terminology needed to understand the subject, this strategy supports participation, confidence, and engagement across the group.

All in all, the reviewed literature and observations conducted during the teaching sessions confirmed that embedding key vocabulary in lecture slides is a simple yet effective pedagogical

strategy that supports both scaffolding and inclusive teaching. Creating a supportive environment for EAL and AFL learners using this simple but effective strategy can reduce cognitive load and improve access to academic language, enhancing learners' ability to engage with the lecture topic confidently and to develop deeper conceptual knowledge.

5. Conclusion

To recapitulate, this action research project examined the impact of embedding key vocabulary at the beginning of lecture slides as a teaching strategy to support EAL and EFL learners at UWTSD.

The findings from both the literature review and reflective observations indicate that introducing key terminology at the beginning of lectures improves learners' ability to engage with complex material. Research highlights that vocabulary knowledge underpins comprehension, with Paul Nation identifying it as a prerequisite for understanding academic content. In addition, the work of Lev Vygotsky and Jerome Bruner reinforces the value of structured support, positioning vocabulary as an effective tool for scaffolding. The Tier 2 and Tier 3 frameworks developed by Isabel Beck, Margaret McKeown, and Linda Kucan further underscore the need for explicit instruction in academic and discipline-specific terminology.

The discussion demonstrated that embedding vocabulary creates a more coherent, inclusive and supportive learning environment, reducing disruption and enabling learners to follow the progression of ideas more effectively. Evidently, it was particularly beneficial for EAL learners and also supported EFL learners by improving clarity and reducing ambiguity.

From a teaching practice perspective, the research findings suggest that lecturers should adopt a more deliberate approach to vocabulary instruction when planning sessions, rather than treating terminology as incidental. A practical recommendation is to include a dedicated "key vocabulary" slide immediately after learning objectives, where essential terms are clearly defined and briefly contextualised before introducing complex content.

Embedding key vocabulary within lecture slides is a simple, cost-effective strategy that improves access to academic language and supports more inclusive, effective teaching.

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