

Learning Space

The Night Sky

Luke Meddings

How can the sky be a learning space? Here are some ideas you can use with your students, and which I hope they will start to use themselves. I've written them as if I was talking to students, but feel free to introduce them as you prefer.

Activities

1 STAR SHAPES (older children and upwards)

You'll need to refer to a star chart which shows the major constellations, like this one.

Look at a map of the major constellations. Some constellations have many stars, others few (Canis Minor only has two stars visible to the naked eye).

Constellations, or star shapes, remind me of word families. Word families start with an anchor word and can be developed in different directions; constellations also begin with one or more bright stars and are extended by association to include more, making a shape.

Word families can be based on form ('teach', 'teacher'), or on meaning ('teach', 'educate'). Building a word family can involve both - and you won't know how many words there are to add until you try it out.

Building word families is a great way to take ownership of your language learning, and there's no need for everyone to do it the same way. Can you develop a system for mapping your vocabulary?

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- Starting with a root word, research related forms and related meanings. You can do this by using a dictionary, or by speaking to someone - your teacher, or a learner friend.
- First, explore the form, building on the root word. Then see if you can find a synonym (same or very similar meaning) and an antonym (opposite meaning). There may be several synonyms, and perhaps more than one antonym.
- Now draw your star shape. Are there some patterns you can derive from the night sky that will help you make your word families? For example:

Hydra is a long line of connected stars

Cancer has three neat branches

Taurus is a spidery shape with several branches

And so on - there are many alternatives.

Perhaps you'll use different colours for synonyms and antonyms, or perhaps you'll vary the thickness of the lines.

Show the shapes you've made to your teacher and to your learner friends.

Tip

Come back to your word families from time to time. See if you can add any new words.

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2) HUNTERS AND HARES (younger children)

You'll need to look at a star chart which shows images overlaid on the constellations, like this one.

Have you ever seen a picture of the constellations that shows the images of the creatures they represent? For example, there's Orion the Hunter, and Lepus the Hare. Sometimes it's hard to see the resemblance, right? I guess people in the ancient world had a lot of imagination!

A lexical field is a range of words that are used in the same context, for example items of furniture or parts of the body. Instead of just writing lists, why not map lexical fields in pictogram form? For example, you can write words relating to football around the shape of a ball, or words relating to feelings in the shape of a heart. There's no right or wrong way to do this, so use your imagination!

Show what you do to your teacher and to your learner friends.

Tip

Come back to your word families from time to time. See if you can add any new words.

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3) STAR CULTURE (teenagers and adults)

Wikipedia is perfect for this activity, although an encyclopaedia of the night sky would be just as good. It doesn't have to be in English, as you will still be able to discuss what you find in English.

Many constellations (such as Ursa Major and Orion) have different names in different cultures. Choose one or more to explore - different members of a learning community can research different ones and compare notes.

- What are the different names for your chosen constellation(s)? Perhaps you can draw the different names on a map of the world.
- What do the names tell us about different cultures and traditions?
- Which names and stories do you like best for each constellation? Why?
- What do the constellations look like to you? How would you name them?

Enjoy reading some of the myths and legends surrounding the constellations in English.

Reflection and Discussion

As Geoff Gaherty writes at space.com, 'Observing the night sky can be done with no special equipment, although a sky map can be very useful, and a good beginner telescope or binoculars will enhance some experiences and bring some otherwise invisible objects into view.'

What is the equivalent of a sky map for language learning? What will enhance your learning experiences and bring some otherwise invisible language into view?