

Lesson Plan: Semantic Prosody

For C1+ Business and Exam English students

Level: C1-C2

Time: 50-60 minutes

Focus: Vocabulary, connotation

Exam link: Cambridge CAE / CPE, IELTS Writing

Learning objective

By the end of the lesson, students can identify the hidden positive or negative charge (semantic prosody) of common C1+ vocabulary, and use a corpus tool to check unfamiliar words before using them in high-stakes writing or speaking.

1. Warmer (5 minutes)

Write on the board: *"The new policy caused a lot of excitement among staff."* Ask: does this sound natural? Most students won't immediately know why, but many will sense something's off. Elicit: "cause" almost always precedes something bad. Introduce the term semantic prosody: the hidden charge a word carries from the company it usually keeps.

2. Presentation (10 minutes)

Present the following pairs, discussing why one sounds natural and one doesn't:

cause a problem / cause a celebration — negative charge; "cause" rarely precedes something good

notorious criminal / notorious philanthropist — negative charge; use "renowned" or "acclaimed" for positive fame

set in doubt / set in success — negative charge; "set in" precedes unwelcome, gradual states

provide support / provide a threat — positive charge; "provide" clashes with negative nouns

Note the exception worth flagging: "utterly" leans negative (utterly devastating, utterly ridiculous) but not exclusively (utterly brilliant). Semantic prosody is a strong statistical tendency, not an absolute rule, students should check, not assume.

3. Controlled practice (10 minutes)

Handout: for each word, students guess whether it carries a positive, negative, or neutral charge, then check using a corpus tool (Cambridge English Corpus search, or Google plus "example sentences"). Answer key on the last page.

1. widespread (as in "widespread ____")
2. commit (as in "commit to ____")
3. bask (as in "bask in ____")
4. spate (as in "a spate of ____")
5. boost (as in "boost ____")

4. Freer practice (15 minutes)

In pairs: students write three sentences about a real or invented work situation (a project update, a difficult client, a success story), deliberately using at least two words from the lesson with correct semantic prosody. Partner checks: does the charge of the word match the situation being described?

5. Exam-style practice (10 minutes)

IELTS/CAE Writing style: students rewrite three sentences that currently use a semantically "clashing" word (e.g. "The merger caused significant growth") with a better-fitting alternative ("The merger drove significant growth"), keeping the meaning intact.

6. Wrap-up: building the habit (5 minutes)

Discuss: this isn't something to memorise as a list, it's a checking habit. Before using an unfamiliar or high-stakes word in an email, report, or speaking exam, a ten-second corpus check catches errors that no grammar checker will ever flag.

Answer key (controlled practice)

1. *widespread* — negative (*widespread damage, widespread concern, widespread poverty*)
2. *commit* — positive/neutral (*commit to a goal, commit to improving*), though "commit a crime" is a fixed negative exception
3. *bask* — positive (*bask in glory, bask in success, bask in sunshine*)
4. *spate* — negative (*a spate of accidents, a spate of complaints*)
5. *boost* — positive (*boost morale, boost sales, boost confidence*)