

INTERVIEW:

Professor Paul Nation

On the four strands, extensive reading, and more

Hannah McCulloch's conversation with Professor Paul Nation covers a wide range of issues, from his early exposure to the tradition of vocabulary control and wordlists to the use of extensive reading programs as a valuable part of language learning, to his current work with a colleague on a book on extensive reading.

Hannah McCulloch: Tell us a little bit about how your interest in vocabulary began?

Paul Nation: I became interested in vocabulary because when I began teaching at university, my senior colleagues H.V. George and Helen Barnard, had worked in India and were strongly in the tradition of vocabulary control and wordlists. They were very well acquainted with the work of Michael West. So, very early on in my career, I became familiar with vocabulary counts, corpus linguistics, graded readers and other simplified material, and speed-reading.

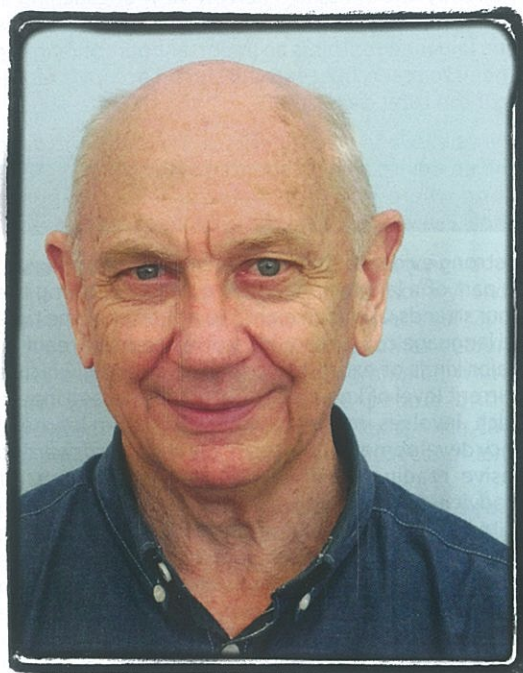
HM: You have taught in many countries around the world — Indonesia, Finland, Japan, the United States to name just a few. What are some of the major changes you have seen over the years with regards to vocabulary teaching?

PN: The major change that I have seen is the very substantial growth in published studies of research and thinking on vocabulary. When I wrote the second edition of my book *Learning Vocabulary in Another Language*, I worked out that of all the research on vocabulary that had appeared in the last hundred years, 30% of it had appeared in the last ten years. This trend continues.

Perhaps an aspect of growth rather than change is the growing interest in graded readers and extensive reading. The idea of using simplified material has been around for a long time, largely because of the efforts of people like Michael West and Harold Palmer in promoting graded readers and extensive reading. However, recently with the setting up of the Extensive Reading Foundation there has been a new impetus to extensive reading and the use of vocabulary-controlled material. There is now a considerable amount of research in this area and I hope that this research is translated into teachers setting up extensive reading programs.

HM: A question that often plays on teachers' minds is, "What vocabulary do I teach?", and in your work you have suggested good planning using the "four strands" technique. Could you tell us a bit more about this?

PN: The four strands is a guideline for syllabus design. It says that a well-balanced language course should consist of four equally sized strands — meaning-focused input, meaning-focused output, language-focused learning, and fluency development. The value of this principle is that it sees deliberate learning (represented by the language-focused learning strand) as making up no more than 25% of a language course. The other 75% of the course should be the other three communicative strands. In many language courses, there is too much teaching going on and we need to weight the balance back in favour of incidental learning through meaningful language use. Both deliberate learning and incidental learning should be part of a language course, but they have to be present in the right proportions. There is more about the four strands in the book that I most enjoyed writing, *What Should Every EFL Teacher Know?*



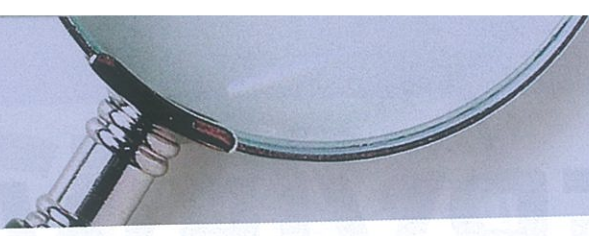
The four strands [technique] does not talk about which vocabulary to teach but is directed at how vocabulary can be learnt. The major principle guiding what vocabulary to learn is the frequency principle. This principle says that in general the most frequent vocabulary should be learnt before less frequent vocabulary. The justification for this principle is that the high frequency vocabulary of English, around 3 000 words, covers 80% to 90% of the running words in most spoken and written texts. It makes good sense to learn this useful, very high frequency vocabulary first.

If learners are learning English for special purposes, then they need to consider the vocabulary which is frequent within their special purposes area. An example of this is the survival vocabulary for foreign travel. This consists of 120 words and phrases which are really useful for people who are going to visit another country for a short time. We have had that vocabulary translated into several different languages, and these survival word lists are available from my website.

HM: Can vocabulary really be taught or is it all incidental learning?

PN: Vocabulary can be taught, but vocabulary teaching should make up a rather small proportion of a vocabulary-focused course. The most important job of the language teacher is to plan. One aspect of planning is making sure that there is a balance of opportunities to learn through the four strands. Another aspect is choosing the right vocabulary to focus on, and to do this a teacher needs to be aware of how many words the learners know and how well they know those words. Thus, another important job of the teacher is to test, in order to see how many and what words the learners know.

Most teachers feel that their number one job should be teaching. I think this is a misdirected view. The teacher's main jobs, in order of importance, should be to plan, to organise, to train, to assess, and then to teach. Applying the four strands principle and the frequency principle is a useful kind of planning for vocabulary learning. Organising the learners to do extensive reading, extensive listening,



message-focused speaking and writing, and deliberate learning draws on the teacher's skills at organising. Training involves showing learners how to do deliberate learning, how to seek opportunities for language use, how to plan their learning time to get a good balance across the four strands, and how to reflect on their learning and improve on it. Assessing involves providing feedback, monitoring learners' vocabulary growth, and observing their skill at using what they already know. I take a narrow view of teaching in that I see teaching involving the teacher standing in front of the class and imparting knowledge. This is an important part of learning and teachers do need to teach, but teaching should occupy a rather small proportion of the total class time.

HM: Many teachers believe in the benefits of reading to expand vocabulary and often advise their students to do this outside of class, but in a world where (young) people are reading less and skimming more, how can we best deal with this and adapt?

PN: There is very strong evidence that an extensive reading program is a very valuable part of a language-learning course. Following the principle of the four strands, about an eighth to a quarter of the time in a well-balanced language course should involve extensive reading. There are two major kinds of extensive reading — reading which is at the learners' current level of knowledge (meaning-focused input), and reading which involves material well within the learners' knowledge (fluency development). It is relatively straightforward to set up an extensive reading program and there are plenty of guidebooks and advice on how to do this. The Extensive Reading Foundation website is a very useful source of information. There are now electronic reading resources such as Xreading where for a rather modest sum of money learners can have unlimited access to large numbers of graded readers. A web-based program like Xreading does most of the management of extensive reading for the teacher, and is very easy to use. The single most important improvement that a teacher could make to a language-learning program is to set up an extensive reading program.

“The evidence for the benefits of extensive reading is so strong that teachers are not doing their professional duty if they do not set up an extensive reading program as a part of their course.”

HM: What would you say to teachers who don't have time to do extensive reading in class with their students?

PN: If learners have time to do homework, then they have time to do extensive reading. If learners read for as little as 20 minutes per school day, over the period of the school year they can read as much as 500 000 words, which is a lot of reading. Extensive reading should be a monitored and assessed part of a language course to make sure that the learners do it. Initially, extensive reading is best carried out within the class so that the learners can learn what to do, and can experience the feeling of success of being able to read a book from beginning to the end and gain enjoyment from doing so. Learners should not be invited to do extensive reading but should be strongly pushed to do it. It is hard to learn another language if you do not have sufficient input to get the repetitions that you need for learning. The evidence for the benefits of extensive reading is so strong that teachers are not doing their professional duty if they do not set up an extensive reading program as a part of their course.

HM: What can teachers do to help our students become more autonomous when learning vocabulary?

PN: Learners need to take control of their own learning but they can only do this if they get some guidance and training in how to take control. On my website there is a free book, *What Do You Need To Know To Learn A Foreign Language?* The book is largely intended for learners, but it contains useful information for teachers who wish to help learners become autonomous in their language learning. Becoming autonomous requires knowledge, motivation and skill, and teachers need to help learners develop in these three areas.

HM: In your opinion, what effect has technology had on vocabulary teaching and learning? Are the days of the traditional paper dictionary and word lists over?

PN: Technology has had enormous benefits for language learning, particularly in the realm of vocabulary learning. We now have flashcard learning programs that are based on well-established learning principles. We have electronic dictionaries, which can be easily accessed while learners read electronic texts. We have electronic dictionaries that include learning aids, such as flashcard programs, which link dictionary look-up to later opportunities for deliberate learning. We have audiovisual listening material, which can be linked to concordances, which help to gain more knowledge of unfamiliar words. I am sure that the age of hardcopy dictionaries is largely over. However, their electronic replacements are by no means a step backwards.

HM: What would you like to see happen in future with regards to the teaching and learning of vocabulary?

PN: I would like to see extensive reading programs become the accepted norm in language courses. At present, they tend to occur only in exceptional courses. I would also like to see extensive listening get the attention that it deserves. Now, with the ability to control the speed of delivery of spoken material without distorting sound quality, I would hope to see innovative extensive listening programs become common in language courses. I would also like to see teachers providing more opportunities for learning to take place, than to feel that they need to teach in order for such learning to take place. Most learning occurs without teaching.

I would also like to see much more exemplary research on the teaching and learning of vocabulary. There is now a large quantity of research, but we now need to look very critically at this research and its design, and we need to design research which takes account of the weaknesses of previous research and builds on its strengths. There is evidence that this is already happening, but it needs to happen much more.

HM: You have contributed so much to this field over the years and continue to do so. My final question is, what are you working on at the moment?

PN: At present I am working with a colleague on a book on extensive reading. This book is strongly research-based but it is primarily aimed at giving advice to teachers. I am also working on examining the conditions for successful vocabulary learning. In a recent book, *How vocabulary Is Learned*, Stuart Webb and I examined a wide range of language learning techniques to see what conditions they set up for vocabulary learning, and to see how teachers could optimise these conditions. I am now trying to deepen this work by looking at what is essential for vocabulary learning.

I have now retired from teaching and supervision, but I still continue to research and write on teaching methodology and vocabulary learning. I have always enjoyed doing that and will continue to do it as long as the enjoyment occurs.

Paul Nation is Emeritus Professor in Applied Linguistics at the School of Linguistics and Applied Language Studies (LALS) at Victoria University of Wellington, New Zealand. His specialist interests are the teaching and learning of vocabulary and language teaching methodology.