

Vocabulary Learning and Reading

To read unsimplified material a learner of English needs to know at least 3,600 word forms (with a far higher number of meanings), and even with this knowledge there will be a dozen or more unknown words on each page of the material. Vocabulary learning is thus of major importance in learning to read.

There are several problems associated with teaching vocabulary to learners who already know some English. R. W. Lynn (1973) has shown that learners who have studied from different coursebooks cannot be expected to know many words in common. An analysis of the results of vocabulary tests has confirmed this. Although the class average on a vocabulary test based on the 1,000 most frequent English words may be 89%, in fact only 40% of the words are known by every learner. If the teacher presents the remaining 60% of the words, at least half the learners will already know the words presented. As the following chart shows, the amount of common knowledge of vocabulary decreases as the word level increases.

Results of four 100 item multiple-choice vocabulary tests with teachers' training college students

	Average of scores	% of words known to all students	Range of scores
1st 1000	89%	40%	70-100%
2nd 1000	74%	20%	45-100%
3rd 1000	52%	8%	20-95%
4th 1000	38%	0%	0-75%

The 1000 word levels are based on Thorndike and Lorge (1944).

In the experiment reported below, even with a common coursebook, only 12% of the tested words were known by every learner. Every word tested was known by at least 30% of the learners. So, even with a common coursebook there is considerable variety in the nature (and size) of the vocabulary learned by different individuals.

These facts clearly indicate that if the best possible use is to be made of the time available for vocabulary learning, vocabulary teaching material must be individualized.

Individualized vocabulary learning can be approached in two main ways; (1) indirectly through extensive reading, (2) directly through suitable vocabulary exercises.

(1) Indirect vocabulary teaching

The following experiment¹ assesses the probable effectiveness of an indirect approach.

Extensive reading, particularly of simplified readers, is often recommended as a good way of increasing vocabulary. To see whether such learning takes place, it is necessary to test the vocabulary of the learners before and after the reading. There are however some difficulties involved in measuring such learning. First, different learners do not have the same vocabulary when they begin to read a simplified reader. Second, learning could occur as a result of the initial test, not as a result of the reading.

The novel A Clockwork Orange by Anthony Burgess provides a way around this problem. The novel contains many words, mainly of Russian origin, that are used as a kind of slang or hip-talk called nadsat. These words would be unknown to native speakers of English reading the novel for the first time. This sample is taken from the first page of the story.

Our pockets were full of deng, so there was no real need from the point of view of crasting any more pretty polly to tolchock some old veck in an alley and viddy him swim in his blood while we counted the takings and divided by four, nor to do the ultra-violent on some shivering starry grey-haired plitsa in a shop and go smecking off with the fill's guts. But, as they say, money isn't everything.

The book contains 241 different nadsat words. On the average these words are repeated 15 times each. The range of the repetitions is from 1 to 209 times. The book is approximately 60,000 words long. 90 of the nadsat words were put in a multiple-choice test with each item consisting of the nadsat word plus four English words as choices. For example:

veck	tolchock	watch
animal		do
star		borrow
name		hit
fellow		

¹ The experiment was performed by T. Saragi, I.K.I.P. Sanata Dharma, Indonesia as a part of the requirement for the M.A. degree.

The twenty subjects in the experiment were native speakers of English who were working on various educational projects in Indonesia. In this respect the subjects were a highly selected group. The subjects were given the novel to read (the glossary had previously been removed). To keep the real aim of the experiment hidden from them, they were told that they had finished reading they would be given a comprehension and literary criticism test. They were given a few questions based on the story to answer while they read, for example, "Could you justify 'Indovico's Technique' in treating delinquency? Why or why not?". They did not know that the nadsat vocabulary would be tested. They read the book at home in their own time, some in one sitting, others over a period of not more than three days. The vocabulary test was administered within a few days of their finishing the book.

The 49 words which occurred eighteen times or more were all tested. The remaining 41 words in the test were selected from the remaining low frequency words as is shown in the following chart. The test was thus heavily biased towards the high frequency words.

frequency of occurrence	number of word types	number of words tested	number of people answering each test item incorrectly
1	88	2	11/6
2	25	2	15/7
3	14	3	10/4/3
4	6	2	9/8
5	10	3	13/10/9
6	6	2	7/5
7	6	2	7/7
8	3	3	6/4/2
9	3	2	17/9
10	3	1	1
11	4	4	10/6/3/1
12	8	4	6/6/4/3
13	1	1	11
14	2	1	1
15	8	5	8/5/5/4/3
16	3	3	7/1/0
17	2	1	9
18	1	1	2

Frequency of occurrence

number of word types

number of words tested

number of people answering each test item incorrectly

19	1	1	1	1
20	2	2	2	9/11
21	1	1	1	5
22	1	1	1	0
23	3	3	3	7/5/4
24	1	1	1	1
26	1	1	1	6
27	2	2	2	1/0
28	2	2	2	14/0
29	2	2	2	4/2
36	1	1	1	0
39	1	1	1	1
41	1	1	1	2
42	4	4	4	12/3/1/0
44	2	2	2	8/5
46	1	1	1	5
47	1	1	1	0
49	1	1	1	7
54	1	1	1	2
55	1	1	1	6
61	2	2	2	5/1
63	1	1	1	1
64	1	1	1	1
67	1	1	1	3
68	1	1	1	1
69	1	1	1	2
70	1	1	1	0
71	1	1	1	2
77	1	1	1	2
81	1	1	1	1
84	1	1	1	0
93	1	1	1	0
96	1	1	1	6
100	1	1	1	12
				5

frequency of occurrence	number of word types	number of words tested	number of people answering each test item incorrectly
102	1	1	2
181	1	1	1
209	1	1	0

For example, 88 words occurred only once in the book. 2 of these 88 words were tested. 11 of the subjects failed to choose the correct meaning for one of these words, and 6 of the subjects failed to choose the correct meaning for the other. The figure 0 indicates that all of the subjects chose the correct meaning for that word in the test.

The correlation between the number of times each word occurred in the book and the number of people who chose the correct meaning in the test was 0.34 (significant at the 0.005 level). This confirms that repetition affects learning but the relationship is considerably complicated by other factors like the meaningfulness of the context, and similarity to words in the mother-tongue. The chart suggests that the minimum number of repetitions for words to be learned in a reader should be somewhere around ten.

The lowest score in the 90 item test was 50%, the highest 96%. The average score was 76%. The median was 77%. It seems then that a considerable number of repeated words can be learned incidentally through extensive reading, by meeting them in context without reference to a dictionary.

(2) Direct vocabulary teaching

There are several exercises for introducing and practising vocabulary which are suitable for individualized learning (Nation, 1975; Nation, forthcoming). The exercises allow the learners to pass quickly over words that are already well-known to them and to spend more time and effort on those words that need it. The exercises are set within a certain word level. It does not matter where the learner begins in that level as long as most of the exercises are eventually done. Each exercise can be put in a thin plastic bag and sealed. In this way a vocabulary box, similar to a reading box, can be made.

Here is an example of one of the exercises:

Find the missing sentence from each group. Write the number of the missing sentence and write the correct word next to it.

A boat is usually made of wood or iron.

People can travel in a boat.

A boat goes on the sea.

A car can carry four or five people.

A car has seats.

A car goes on the road.

Ice is made of water.

Ice is cold and hard.

The colour of ice is like glass.

We do not like our enemy.

Our enemy usually does not like us.

Soldiers fight the enemy.

Electricity can kill people.

A light shines because there is electricity.

Electricity goes through a wire.

The missing sentences:

1. People put it in drinks.
2. He is hot our friend.
3. It has four wheels.
4. Sometimes a stove, or a machine uses it.
5. Sometimes the wind moves it.

When the learners do this exercise they must try to guess the meaning of the new word by looking at the context. It is good for individual work.

When adjectives, verbs, or adverbs are taught, the missing sentence has an empty space where the new word should be.

Every year many people drown in the sea.

He fell into the water and drowned.

When a person drowns he dies because he is under water and cannot breathe.

The missing sentence:

If you can swim well, you will not _____.

Conclusion

Because different learners have followed different courses and because different learners do not learn all the same vocabulary from the same course, material for vocabulary

learning needs to be individualized. The experiment reported above shows that extensive reading results in a substantial amount of vocabulary learning. Vocabulary teaching exercises can also be individualized to avoid wasting learners' time. Individualized material has the following characteristics. (i) Each learner can choose material that is suitable to his own level of proficiency. (ii) Each learner can work through the material at his own speed giving extra attention to parts that require it and going quickly over known parts. (iii) The progress of each learner is not determined by the teacher or other learners but by his own capabilities.

DTEC Language Institute
Krung Kasem Road
Bangkok, Thailand

REFERENCES

- Burgess, Anthony, A Clockwork Orange, Penguin, Middlesex (1972)
- Lynn, Robert W., Lexis without Nexus, unpublished material (1973)
- Nation, I. S. P., "Teaching Vocabulary in Difficult Circumstances", English Language Teaching xxx, 1, (1975), 21-24
- Nation, I. S. P., Language Teaching Techniques, Cambridge University Press (forthcoming)
- Thorndike, Edward L. and Lorge, Irving, The Teachers' Word Book of 30,000 Words, Columbia University, New York (1944)

Noemi Messora and Barbara Sherill

A New 'Role' for Audio-Visual Aids: A Slide - Sequence of Strategies and Protocols

Implementation of the learner's freedom of expression within the necessary selected framework is still perhaps the overriding unresolved problem facing teachers of second languages. The most recent reports of psycho-linguistic research claim a faster rate of progress and higher incidence of retention in students allowed a greater portion of verbal freedom.

Traditionally, in regards to second language learning, emphasis is placed on the memorization and reproduction of correctly structured grammatical sentences. The schools of language teaching methodology of the fifties and sixties presented students with grammatical structures and then created dialogues tailored to fit those grammatical patterns.

A first indication of a departure from older theories in an attempt to resolve some of the shortcomings of the audio/oral structural mechanical method (i.e., the presentation of language patterns outside their functional values) came from what has been called the notional/functional approach. This new approach, however, still falls short of giving primary consideration to the subject of contextualized competence. In an effort to resolve this problem, recent research in the U.S.A. is outlining new approaches for language teaching. Linguists R.J. Di Pietro and F. Bosco of Georgetown University and L.A. Jakobovits of University of Hawaii are mapping the strategic use of language codes in specific social situations. They are improving upon the sociolinguistic analyses of sociologists Garfinkel, Schegloff and Sacks,¹ and of linguists Halliday and Sinclair.

These analyses have indicated that conversational interactions are governed by their own organizational structures, some of which still need adequate description. Therefore, emphasis is being placed on the semantics of the grammatical structure which varies according to its context. This research is being supplemented by recent attempts to use discourse analysis as a methodology for the study of language acquisition. In a yet unpublished article, Evelyn Hatch suggests that the interactions taking place within discourse

¹ See Jakobovits L.A. and Gordon B., "Pattern Practice: A New Rationale for an Old Habit", The Context of Foreign Language Teaching, p.62 and the bibliographies of Di Pietro's and Bosco's works quoted in this article.