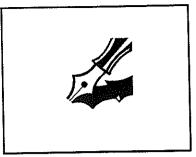# Articles

Best practice in vocabulary teaching and learning

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Vocabulary instruction is now seen as an essential component of language courses. Paul Nation shows how recent research can guide the development of vocabulary teaching methodology.

Introduction

Research on second language acquisition can be interpreted to show that a well-balanced language course should contain four major strands – meaning-focused input, meaning-focused output, fluency development and language-focused instruction. The inclusion of a language-focused instruction strand is not a reaction to communicative approaches but is the result of research findings that courses that contain such a strand are likely to achieve better results than courses which do not contain such a strand (Long 1988; Ellis 1990). For most second language learners language-focused vocabulary instruction is an **essential** part of a language course.

The aim of this article is to show how the vocabulary component of a language course fits into these four strands. The assumption is that vocabulary growth is such an important part of language acquisition that it deserves to be planned for, deliberately controlled and monitored. There is a growing body of theory and research findings that can guide us in doing this.

Vocabulary and meaning-focused input

Reading has long been seen as a major source of vocabulary growth. Research indicates that, for several reasons, there is a fragility to this kind of learning. Firstly, research with native speakers of English shows that the amount of vocabulary learning that occurs during the reading of a text is rather small (Nagy, Herman and Anderson 1985). It is necessary to use sensitive tests of vocabulary knowledge to show any learning at all. However, it is likely to be cumulative if

there are repeated opportunities to meet the partially-learned vocabulary again. This suggests that there will be a close relationship between vocabulary growth and the amount and variety of meaning-focused input.

Frequency counts show us that there is a very rapid drop-off in frequency of occurrence of vocabulary after the most frequent 2,000 to 3,000 high frequency words of the language. For example, in a diverse 1,000,000 running word corpus, words outside the most frequent 6,000 occur less than eight times. This drop-off is even more noted in texts belonging to the same genre (Sutarsyah, Nation and Kennedy 1994). One million running words is about 3,000 pages of text or the equivalent number of pages of 10 to 15 novels. Clearly, beyond the most frequent words of the language, considerable meaning-focused input is needed for vocabulary growth to continue at a reasonable pace.

The second reason why vocabulary learning through meaning-focused input is fragile is that it depends heavily on the quality of the learners' control of the reading skill. Chall (1987) argues that for native speakers there is little vocabulary growth through reading while learners gain control of the skill of reading. For native speakers of English this takes several years. Once this skill is developed, reading can then become a major means of vocabulary growth. Non-native speakers are in a different situation but with similar results. Adult learners of another language may already be fluent readers of their first language. One of the major barriers to reading in the second language is vocabulary size.

For this reason, Michael West and others saw the importance of providing series of graded readers with careful vocabulary control. These allow second language learners to draw on the reading skill developed in their first language to expand their vocabulary in the second language. These are an important resource for learners and a vital part of a language course. Their effective use for vocabulary growth, however, depends on learners' reading skill.

The third reason why vocabulary learning through meaning-focused input is fragile is that the type of reading that is done will strongly influence vocabulary learning. If learners read in familiar areas where they bring a lot of relevant background knowledge to their reading, they will easily cope with unknown words in context but they will probably not learn them. If they read in unfamiliar areas, there is greater chance of learning new vocabulary because they have to pay close attention to the language of the text to get the meaning.

Research in another area of meaning-focused input supports the value of giving attention to the language as system and not just as messages. Elley's (1987) studies

of vocabulary learning through listening to stories show that if the teacher briefly interrupts the story to comment on the meaning of a word, or to put it on the blackboard, the learning of those items increases significantly. This shows that deliberately drawing attention to language items as a part of the language system (language–focused instruction) makes learning more certain. Relying on meaning–focused input alone is leaving too much to chance.

This examination of the fragility of vocabulary learning through meaning–focused input is not intended to show that such learning is not worthwhile. Vocabulary learning through reading and listening is an essential strand of a language course. Best practice in vocabulary teaching and learning should aim to reduce this fragility by providing large quantities of suitably graded input, by providing it across a range of genres and topics, and by providing language–focused activities to support it. This will ensure that the learning condition of noticing will occur.

Vocabulary and meaning–focused output

It may seem a little strange to see meaning–focused speaking and writing as ways of expanding learners' vocabulary, but the most exciting findings of recent research on vocabulary learning have revealed how spoken production of vocabulary items helps learning and how teachers and course designers can influence this spoken production. The research is reported in Newton (1995), Joe (1995) and Joe, Nation and Newton (1996). The main findings of this research into spoken communicative activities are as follows:

- the written input to a communicative task has a major effect on what vocabulary is used and negotiated during the task. Newton (1995) found that all of the vocabulary negotiated in the ranking and problem–solving tasks he investigated was in the written task sheet handed out to the learners. Joe (1995) found that in a retelling task vocabulary from the written text was produced even when the written text could not be consulted while the retelling was going on and even though some of the vocabulary items were previously unknown.

- negotiation of the meaning of unknown vocabulary meant that words had a greater chance of being learned. However, because much more previously unknown vocabulary was used and not negotiated, quantitatively more vocabulary was learned through being used productively or receptively.

- the quality of learning depends on the quality of use of the previously

unknown vocabulary during the communicative task (Joe 1995). The more the vocabulary is observed or used in contexts which differ from its occurrence in the written input, the better it is learned.

- learners are able to provide useful information to each other on most of the vocabulary in a typical communicative task. That is, if someone in a group does not know a particular word there is likely to be someone else in the group who knows something useful about it and who can communicate this information effectively.

- learners who actively negotiate the meaning of unknown words do not seem to learn more than learners who observe the negotiation

- only a small amount of the negotiation in a communicative task (about six per cent in Newton's study) is negotiation of word meaning. The other kinds of negotiation include negotiation of procedure, negotiation of comprehension, negotiation of mishearing and so on.

  Research on learning from negotiation needs to be careful about distinguishing what is negotiated.

The significance of these findings for vocabulary learning is that by carefully designing and monitoring the use of the handout sheets for spoken tasks teachers can have a major influence on determining what vocabulary could be learned from such tasks, and how well it is learned.

There is no research on how tasks involving written production can result in vocabulary learning. It is not difficult to imagine that writing requiring the synthesis of information from several related sources could provide very favourable conditions for learning from input and strengthening this learning through generative use in written output.

Developing fluency with vocabulary

Here, 'fluency' means making the best use of what you already know, and fluency development tasks have the characteristics of involving no new language items, dealing with largely familiar content and discourse types, including some kinds of preparation or repetition so that speed and smoothness of delivery can improve, and involving some kind of encouragement to perform at a faster than normal level of use. Fluency tasks are typically meaning–focused tasks.

Surprisingly, given its effect on vocabulary knowledge, fluency development is still largely an unexplored area.

There are some vocabulary items that need to be learned to a very high degree of fluency as quickly as possible. These include numbers, polite formulas, items for controlling language use (for example, to ask someone to repeat, speak more slowly and so on), times and periods of time and quantities. In addition to this, it is important that all high frequency vocabulary is learned to a reasonable degree of fluency so that it can be readily accessed when it is needed.

The following learning conditions favour the development of fluency:

● the demands of the task are largely within the experience of the learners. That is, the learners are working with known language items, familiar ideas and familiar tasks. Fluency activities should not involve unfamiliar vocabulary

● the learners' focus is on the message

● the learners are encouraged to reach a higher than usual level of performance, through the use of repetition, time pressure, and planning and preparation.

Repetition and focus on the message may work against each other – the more something is repeated, the less likely it will continue to be seen as a message-focused activity. The teaching methodology solution to this is to balance the ease provided by the repetition against a challenge provided by new but similar material, reducing time, a new audience, and increasing complexity. Initially, activities such as number dictation, prepared talks, interviews and questionnaires would be most suitable. Later activities could include retelling tasks such as 4/3/2, Read and retell, Headlines, and Say it!

Vocabulary and language-focused instruction

Language-focused instruction occurs when learners direct their attention to language items not for producing or comprehending a particular message, but for gaining knowledge about the item as a part of the language system. Language-focused instruction thus includes focusing on the pronunciation and spelling of words, deliberately learning the meanings of a word, memorizing collocations, phrases and sentences containing a word, and being corrected for incorrect use of a word.

Negotiation of vocabulary is also a kind of language-focused instruction if it involves discussing the word's spelling or pronunciation, or giving an explanation of its meaning.

Language-focused instruction can affect implicit knowledge of a language in several ways. If knowing the word is not dependent on a developmental sequence of knowledge, then language-focused instruction on each word can add directly to both implicit knowledge and explicit knowledge. Some concepts – for example, family relationships – are probably acquired developmentally and language-focused instruction may have no effect if the learners are not at an appropriate stage of conceptual development. It is not known what other learning conditions apply for language-focused instruction on vocabulary to directly affect implicit knowledge, but it seems likely that only some learning of vocabulary items that are not affected by a developmental sequence directly enters implicit knowledge.

A second effect of language-focused instruction is that it can raise learners' consciousness or awareness of particular items so that they are then more readily noticed when they occur in meaning-focused input. The causal chain is (1) language-focused instruction, (2) explicit knowledge about a word, (3) increased awareness of the word, (4) noticing of the word in meaning-focused input, (5) implicit knowledge of the word. The quality of the language-focused instruction will determine how readily a word is noticed, and what aspects of the word are noticed.

A third effect of language-focused instruction is similarly indirect: (1) language-focused instruction, (2) explicit knowledge, (3) output constructed from the explicit knowledge (that is, the word is used in a consciously-constructed sentence), (4) the output acting as meaning-focused input to the same learner, (5) implicit knowledge of the word.

What kinds of language-focused vocabulary instruction are likely to be of benefit? The following list is ranked in order of importance. Each suggestion is matched with its likely effect on implicit knowledge.

1. Guessing unknown words from context

Although this may seem to be a meaning-focused activity, at least in the early stages of the development of the guessing skill it involves learners consciously focusing on unknown words, interrupting their normal reading, and systematically drawing on the available clues to work out the unknown word's meaning.

Guessing from context focuses on the particular reference of a word as determined by the context rather than on its underlying meaning. It is likely that this knowledge will directly enter implicit memory as it will be less complicated than the concept of the word. Guessing may also serve to raise consciousness of the word.

There are various of guessing procedures. Their main effect should be to raise learners' confidence in guessing from context, to make them sensitive to the range of clues available, and to help them avoid strategies, such as focusing too quickly on the form of the word, that will reduce their chances of guessing accurately.

2. Learning the meanings of unknown words

There is an assumption in much that is written about vocabulary learning that all vocabulary learning should be in context. This assumption is not supported by research and by what successful learners do. There is considerable research which shows that:

- explicit, decontextualized study of vocabulary is an effective way of rapidly increasing learners' vocabulary size

- the learning achieved in this way can last for a very long time

- this knowledge can be made available for meaning-focused use of the language

- there are ways that considerably increase the efficiency of language-focused learning and learners benefit from being able to make use of these. They include the use of mnemonic techniques, using vocabulary cards which encourage retrieval, the spacing and organizing of learning, and the deliberate avoidance of interference among items.

The deliberate learning of vocabulary may contribute directly to implicit knowledge if the words learned are not complicated and if the learning is meaningful. At the very least the results of deliberate learning will be available for language-focused use which may then indirectly contribute to implicit knowledge through production or through making meaning-focused input meaningful. There is a lack of research on the effect of deliberate vocabulary learning on meaning-focused use.

3. Study of word parts and mnemonic devices

The majority of words in English come from French, Latin or Greek and the majority of these have word parts, particularly prefixes and suffixes, which occur in many words. Knowledge of these word parts can be used to improve the learning of many words through relating unknown word forms and meanings to known word parts. This is similar to the effect of mnemonic devices on vocabulary learning, the most well researched of which is the keyword technique.

The effect of such learning is probably to add to explicit knowledge. This will contribute to implicit knowledge receptively because it is a very strong form of consciousness raising, and productively through the deliberate production of meaning-focused output.

A well thought-out vocabulary component of a course would be largely indistinguishable from the listening, speaking, reading and writing parts of the language program. The main differences would lie in the language-focused learning and in the deliberate planning and manipulation of the written input to listening, speaking, reading and writing activities to provide optimal conditions for vocabulary growth.

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