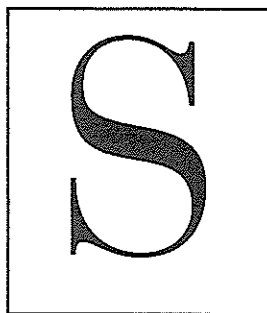


Vocabulary Learning and Speaking Activities



Speaking tasks such as mini-lectures, ranking activities, split information tasks, roleplay, and problem solving discussion are not usually thought of as having vocabulary learning goals. One of the reasons for this is that it seems difficult to plan vocabulary learning as a part of a syllabus using activities that are largely productive, unpredictable, and subject to the whims of the people who happen to be in the discussion group.

This article shows that such activities are in fact a very useful means of vocabulary learning. Drawing on recent research, it shows how a vocabulary learning goal can be effectively designed into many speaking activities; and it shows how it is possible to plan what vocabulary is likely to be learned in particular activities. Although this article focuses on vocabulary learning, this may be an incidental goal in speaking activities. Speaking activities can achieve a range of goals, and several may be achieved in the same activity.

An example:

Here is part of the transcript of a problem solving discussion by three learners (S1, S2, S3) about redesigning a zoo. The task comes from Ur (1981).

- S3 ...All enclosures should be filled
 S2 Enclosures should be filled...*enclosure*, do you know?
 S1 What means *enclosure*? Do you know?
 S3 *Close* ah...should be filled
 S2 No I don't know *enclose*...*enclosed*
 S1 *Filled*...what means *fill*? Oh oh *all enclosed*, I think that *all enclosed* that means *enclosed*
 S2 Fill
 S3 Filled, filled
 S2 Ohh
 S1 Every every area, yes, should be filled...
 S2 Should be filled
 S3 Should be put...put something inside
 S1 Yes, because...yes, yes, because you know two? the-
 S2 I see. No empty rooms, ahh
 S3 No empty rooms, yeah
 S2 Two is the empty. I see
 S1 Yeah, empty...so we must fill it O.K.

The word *enclosures* comes from the type-written handout that the learners are looking

at. One of the points of information on this handout states, "All the enclosures should be filled." The learners S3 and S2 repeat the sentence from the handout, and then S1 asks "What means enclosure?" This starts a discussion about the word. Notice that the form *enclosed* is also spoken although this does not appear on the handout at all.

What is clear from this example is that what is written on the handout has an effect on what is said during the discussion. In the example given above, it is also clear that the discussion involves the learners in explaining the vocabulary to each other. The written input to the activity can play a major role in determining what is learned if it includes vocabulary that is important for the speaking activity.

There are three important issues to consider in learning from the written input.

1. Where do the new vocabulary items and the information about them come from?
2. How are they learned?
3. How can the activity and in particular the worksheet be designed to maximise the chances of the wanted vocabulary being learned?

Source of vocabulary and information about the vocabulary

The sources for information about the words, mainly the words' meanings, can come from the textual context provided on the worksheet, and from the learners in the group who already know something about the words. Newton's (1993) study found that when learners discussed the meanings of words from the worksheet with each other, by far the majority of words discussed resulted in useful and accurate information being provided about the words. This is not surprising. Vocabulary tests of learners who have roughly the same proficiency level usually show a remarkable diversity of knowledge. All learners usually know the higher frequency words, and one or two learners know many of the other words appropriate to their level of proficiency. Newton, for example, found that in his pretest to the tasks, 35% of the 111 tested words were known by all learners, 54% by one or more learners but not everyone, and 11% were not known by anyone. It was the 54% that were known by at least one person that could most usefully be discussed by the learners. In addition the learners could use the context clues to work out meanings of the words that nobody knew before the activity.

Knowledge of the meanings of unknown words could thus come from the learners in the group or from context clues on the worksheet.

How can words be learned from textual input?

Getting the meaning of an unknown word is not the same as remembering that meaning. Although the learner may discover the meaning through the written context, through hearing it used, or through the explanation of other members of the group, this is no guarantee that the word and its meaning will be remembered.

There are three important processes that may lead to a word being remembered. These processes can be viewed as three steps with the later steps including the earlier steps. The first process encouraging learning is attention. This means that learners need to *notice* the word—to be aware of it as a useful language item (see Ellis 1991, McLaughlin 1990, Schmidt 1990 for discussions of *noticing*). This noticing may be affected by several factors, including:

1) the salience of the word in the textual input or in the discussion of the text; 2) previous contact that the learners have had with the word; and 3) the learners' realization that the word fills a gap in their knowledge of the language (Schmidt and Frota 1986, Ellis 1990).

Newton (1993) found that all the instances of negotiation of meaning in the four tasks he studied involved negotiating items in the textual input. No vocabulary items that were introduced during the discussion and not derived from the textual input were negotiated. Negotiation of word meaning indicates that an item is noticed and that the learner has a gap in his or her knowledge. Items which were negotiated or used had a greater chance of being learned than items in the textual input which were not used.

It was not necessary to be the negotiator in order to learn. Learners learned equally well by observing negotiation.

Teachers can have a direct influence on noticing by giving thought to the placement of desired vocabulary items in the written input, and by some form of preteaching or "conscious-raising" of wanted items before the activity.

The second process that may lead to a word being remembered is *retrieval* (Baddeley 1990:156). A word may be noticed and its meaning comprehended in the textual input to the task, and if that word is subsequently retrieved either receptively or productively during a task, then the memory of that word will be strengthened. Receptive retrieval involves perceiving the form and having to retrieve its meaning when the word is met in listening or reading. Productive retrieval involves wishing to communicate the meaning of the word and having to retrieve its spoken or written form as in speaking or writing. Retrieval does not occur if the form and its meaning are presented simultaneously to the learner. Baddeley (1990) suggests that each retrieval of a word strengthens the path linking the form and meaning.

Teachers can design retrieval into speaking activities by making it necessary for the learners to reuse the words that occurred in the textual input. This can be done by: 1) making the task involve retelling of the textual input; 2) by making the task involve a procedure whereby the same material has to be discussed or presented several times through a change in group membership as in the pyramid procedure (Jordan 1990); or 3) making the

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solution to the task involve considerable discussion of the information provided in the textual input as in a problem solving discussion.

In a strip story activity (Gibson 1975) the learners are each given a sentence to memorize from a paragraph. They then must tell their sentences to each other and decide whose sentence is first, second, and so on. No writing is allowed. Because the learners must memorize their sentences, they then have to retrieve them each time they relay them to the rest of the group. Memorisation thus ensures a form of retrieval.

The third process that may lead to a word being remembered is *generation*. Generation, or generative processing, can also be receptive or productive. In its productive form, it involves producing new ways of using the wanted vocabulary in new contexts (Witrock 1974, 1991). This means that a word is used generatively if it is used in speaking in a way which is different from its use in the textual input. Receptive generative use involves meeting the word in new contexts.

There are degrees of generation. Generation occurs at a low degree if the linguistic context for the generated word is only slightly different from the textual input:

Chronic pain becomes very chronic pain.

Generation is high if the word is used in a substantially different way, perhaps indicating that the word has begun to be integrated into the learner's language system:

Chronic pain becomes chronic backache or chronic illness.

Joe (1994) found that degree of generation was closely related to amount of learning in retelling tasks. Newton (1993) found that negotiation of the meaning of a word increased its chances of being learned. Negotiation of a word's meaning will usually involve generative use of that word during the negotiation. The most striking receptive generative uses of vocabulary are those where meeting the word in a new context forces the learner to reconceptualise the meaning that they previously had for that word. Having learned the Japanese word *moshi-moshi* simply as a greeting on the telephone, it was surprising to hear a man on the train use it as a way of offering to take care of the parcels that a woman friend was carrying. This forced a rethink of the meaning of this word.

Teachers can encourage generative use by:

- 1) requiring retelling of the written input from a different focus; 2) distributing the information in a way that encourages negotiation; and 3) requiring learners to reconstruct what was in the text rather than repeat it.

Activities for learning vocabulary through speaking

We have looked at the processes that can help the learning of vocabulary through speaking. In this section we look at the design of activities that provide conditions that encourage these processes to occur. In the description of each activity we will comment on these conditions. The aim of the comments is to alert teachers to what is important in the activity and also to make teachers realise that the same conditions could be designed into other activities. Teachers could then adapt various activities to achieve vocabulary learning goals.

Retelling. As we shall see, retelling activities can take many forms. What is common to all of them is that the learners read a text (usually about 100 to 200 words long), and retell it. From a vocabulary learning point of view, the text provides new vocabulary and a context to help understand the new words. The retelling gives learners the chance to productively retrieve the vocabulary and ideally make generative use of it. Research by Joe (1994) indicates that the absence of the text during the retelling encourages generative use, but having it present during the retelling ensures that more of the target vocabulary is used. But since having the text present during retelling provides poor conditions for retrieval (the form which should be retrieved is already present in the text that the learner can look at), until further research is done on this technique, it is probably best not to have the text present during the retelling.

Other forms of retelling include 4/3/2 (Maurice 1983, Arevart and Nation 1991) and *Read and retell* (Simcock 1993). 4/3/2 involves giving the same talk to three different listeners one after the other, but with four minutes to give the first delivery of the talk, three minutes for the delivery of the same talk to the second listener, and two minutes for the third. The talk can be a retelling of a previously studied text. The repetition would not be expected to increase the range of generative use, but would provide an opportunity for more fluent retrieval.

The *Read and retell* activity involves re-

telling a written text, but the listener has a set of guiding questions to ask the reteller so that it seems like an interview. The design of the questions can encourage use of target vocabulary from the written text and ensure that all the important parts of the text are retold. Both the listener and the reteller study the text and questions before the retelling, and they can rehearse the retelling to perform before others.

When observing retelling activities, the teacher looks for the use of the wanted vocabulary, particularly to see if it was in a salient enough position in the text to encourage its use in retelling, and to see if it is being used generatively in the retelling.

Roleplay. Roleplay activities can involve a written text on which the roleplay is based. It may involve written instructions to the roleplayers. The *Say it!* activity combines these features and serves as a simple introduction to role play. In the *Say it!* activity the learners

read a short text such as a newspaper report containing the target vocabulary. They can read the article and discuss it together if they wish. Then they look at a grid containing short tasks to perform. The columns in the grid are labeled with letters and the rows are numbered. The first learner in the group names a square—for example, B2—and the second learner in the group has to perform the task contained in that square. After that, the second learner names another square, and the third learner has to perform that task. This continues around the group. The same task may be performed more than once by different learners in the group.

Here is the newspaper report on which the following *Say it!* is based. The learners need to read the report carefully and discuss it before doing the *Say it!* activity.

Notice that the tasks in each square are designed to encourage use of the target vocab-

GASTAWAYS SURVIVED ON SHARK'S BLOOD

Three fishermen who drifted on the Pacific for four months told yesterday how they drank shark's blood to survive.

The fishermen from Kiribati told their story through an interpreter in the American Samoa capital of Pago Pago after being rescued by the ship Sakaria.

Kautea Teaitoa, Veaieta Toanuea, and Tebwai Aretana drifted 400 kilometers from home after their outboard motor failed on February 8.

They said four ships had refused to help them during their ordeal.

When they were picked up on June 4 they had eaten the last of a one-metre shark four days before and drunk all of its blood.

"I have not prayed so much in all my life," Mr. Aretana said.

	A	B	C
1	You are Kautea. Say what helped you survive.	You are Tebwai Aretana. How did you feel when the ships refused to help you?	You are a sailor on the Sakaria. What did you do to help the fishermen?
2	You are Tebwai. Explain why you were in the boat and what happened after it broke down.	You are Kautea. How did you feel when you caught the shark?	You are the captain. Explain why you stopped?
3	You are Veaieta. Explain what caused the problem.	You are the interpreter. Describe the feelings and appearance of the three men.	The journey was called an ordeal. Why was it an ordeal?

ulary and that they require the learners to reshape what was in the text to suit the viewpoint of the task. If the text is read, discussed, understood, and then put away before doing the *Say it!* activity, then retrieval is encouraged. The roleplay nature of the tasks encourages generative use of the vocabulary.

Larger problem solving roleplay activities can involve substantial written input that needs to be processed in a similar way (Nation 1991). Learners need to read about the background to the problem, the problem itself, the constraints on the solution, and their own roles.

Ranking. Newton (1995) found that shared tasks where learners all had equal access to the same information resulted in more negotiation of word meaning than split tasks where each learner had different information. Split tasks had more negotiation overall but most of this was not negotiation of word meaning. Vocabulary which is placed in the list of items to rank is most likely to be used in the activity, particularly if the items are difficult ones for the learners to agree upon. Words occurring in the background description and in the instructions are less likely to be used and learned. Clearly the places where words occur on the worksheet have a major effect on whether they will be learned. Although Newton found that negotiation was an important contributor to learning, most words learned were used in the task but were not negotiated for word meaning. Very few words were learned by simply seeing them in the written input and not using them or hearing them used in the task.

Other activities. There are numerous other speaking activities which make use of written input. These include *split information tasks* (Nation 1977), *interview activities*, and *information transfer activities* (Palmer 1982). Thoughtful design of the worksheets and careful observation of their use can maximise the opportunities for the incidental learning of useful vocabulary while the learners are involved in a meaning-focused speaking task.

Designing the worksheets

Let us look at a task to see how it can be re-designed to create favourable opportunities for vocabulary learning.

The learners work in groups to solve the following problem.

You have just seen one of your friends steal-

ing things from a local shop. What will you do?

1. Inform the shop owner immediately.
2. Tell your friend to put it back.
3. Discuss it with your friend later to discourage him from doing it in the future.
4. Just ignore it.
5. Discuss it with your parents.

The following words in the written input are unknown to many of the learners: *local, inform, discourage, ignore*. *Inform* and *ignore* are important ideas in the text and the likelihood of them being noticed, discussed and used in the activity is quite high. *Local* and *discourage* may not get the same attention.

There are several important ways in which the activity could be improved for vocabulary learning. First, the numbers in front of the choices should be removed. If they are left there, then the learners will say things like "I think 4 is the best choice" instead of saying "I would just ignore it" which makes use of the target word *ignore*.

Second, the written input is quite short and does not contain a lot of useful new vocabulary. The written input thus needs to be increased in quantity and additional useful words to learn should be included. This can be done in several ways, by increasing the amount of description about each choice, by giving more description of the background to the task (more information about the friend and what was stolen, for example), or by adding more choices. Probably the most effective way will be to turn the activity into a roleplay. This would involve providing each player with a role card describing their role and goals, and adding descriptions of constraints to the activity (your friend's parents punish him severely for bad behavior) (Nation 1991).

Third, some changes could insure that the target vocabulary will be used. The activity could be made into a ranking activity rather than a choosing activity. This might produce discussion that is more evenly spread among the choices. Each learner in the group could be given responsibility for a different choice. They should make themselves very familiar with that choice, and while it does not have to be their first choice, they have to ensure that it gets sufficient discussion and consideration during the activity. It may be more effective to get them to memorise their option and then remove the written input.

Fourth, some changes could be made to

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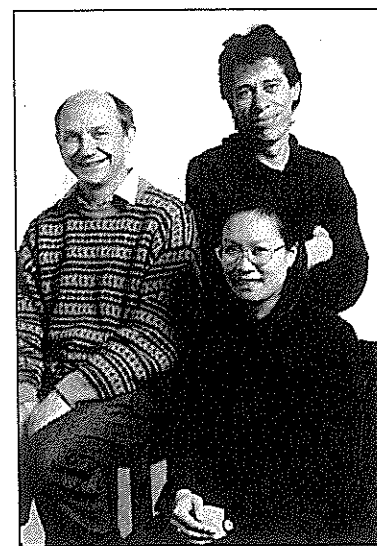
give the target vocabulary a greater chance of being used often during the activity. These could include getting learners to report back to other groups on their decision and the reasons for that decision, and moving through a pyramid procedure from pairs to fours to the whole class.

The aim of all these changes to the activity is to increase the opportunities for vocabulary learning. Their effectiveness may be seen by testing the vocabulary learning directly coming from the activity, or more informally by observing whether the learners are negotiating and using the wanted vocabulary during the activity.

The main theme of this article has been to suggest that teachers who are serious about planning vocabulary learning should give careful attention to the design of speaking activities. Without compromising the communicative nature of spoken activities it is easily possible to increase the opportunity for planned vocabulary learning.

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