

# Using Communicative Tasks to Teach Vocabulary

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How can vocabulary teaching be fitted into a communicative approach to teaching and learning, especially into speaking activities where the learners work together in groups without much spoken involvement by the teacher? This article tries to answer this question. It shows that by designing short simple activities which focus on particular words, learners can develop their speaking skills and increase their knowledge of vocabulary.

Here is a sample reading text and some speaking tasks based on it. The teacher reads the text to the students and then checks the pronunciation of the target words. The learners then read the text by themselves. The learners read the text and do two or three of the tasks. In the example, there are eight tasks to show the range of possibilities, but teachers need only provide two or three.

## Sample text and tasks

### Beating the odds

Thirty-seven year old LC is a New Zealand **registered** nurse. So are more than 40,000 other New Zealanders. But few nurses have **struggled** through a three-year nursing course with English as a second language and given birth to two children in that time. All this makes LC a particularly special nurse.

LC and her husband left Cambodia 14 years ago to escape the horrors which killed many of their family members. The first part of their journey involved time in a **refugee** camp in Thailand where LC started learning English.

When LC and her husband arrived in New Zealand, they were **sponsored** by a family in Plimmerton and by their church. LC worked hard to learn about New Zealand and to learn English. Later, while she trained

to become a nurse, and before **registration** as a nurse, she had two children. During this time, the **sponsorship** provided her with much needed support.

(Adapted from "Beating the odds" New Voices, July 1997)

After reading the story learners do some of the following tasks. Tasks 1 and 5 are ranking tasks. Task 2 is a finding causes task. Tasks 3 and 7 are classifying tasks and tasks 4, 6 and 8 involve analysing.

1. Below is a list of common reasons why people become refugees. Rank them from the most common reason to the least common.

- \_\_\_ They become refugees because there is a war in their country
- \_\_\_ They become refugees because there is serious flooding in their country
- \_\_\_ They become refugees because their religion is not accepted in their country
- \_\_\_ They become refugees because they are opposed to the government in their country
- \_\_\_ They become refugees because there is a shortage of food in their country

2. Why do you think LC became a refugee? List as many causes as you can.

3. Group these jobs into those that you think require registration (like nursing) and those that do not.

teacher   doctor   shop assistant  
lawyer   plumber   bus driver  
cleaner   engineer   computer programmer

4. Using the text and your own experience, describe what must be done to be a registered nurse in New Zealand. Which aspects of being registered do you think LC would find most difficult?

5. LC had to struggle to become a nurse. Rank the reasons that made it a struggle for her from the greatest (5) to the least (1).

- \_\_\_ struggle with English as a second language
- \_\_\_ the demands on her time e.g. church activities
- \_\_\_ having two young children
- \_\_\_ struggle with studying after having left school a long time ago
- \_\_\_ struggle with New Zealand customs

6. LC struggled through her nursing course. What was her greatest struggle?

7. Group these sports into those that should receive sponsorship from the government and those that should not. Say how you could sponsor each group.

tennis   cricket   basketball  
darts   ice hockey   athletics  
yachting   swimming   rugby

8. You know a family who need to leave their country because of war within the country. You want to sponsor them to come to New Zealand. What will you have to do as their sponsor? How will you prepare for their arrival?

## Making the tasks

The tasks listed above ask the learners to do the following things - rank items, list causes, classify items, and analyse a complex situation. Note that some tasks focus on the text and others focus on a quite different situation.

The tasks are made to put the following three vocabulary learning principles into practice.

### *1. Vocabulary learning is helped by giving deliberate attention to vocabulary.*

Vocabulary learning can occur incidentally, that is, when learners' main focus is on doing the task such as solving a problem or reading for comprehension. It is possible to design activities that encourage such

incidental learning (Nation, 2001). However, where learners' attention is deliberately focused on vocabulary, learning is usually greater. In the sample activities, this deliberate focus is encouraged by a) telling the learners that one of the aims of the activities is to learn vocabulary, b) highlighting the words in the text to be learned, c) making each speaking task focus on aspects of the meaning of the target words.

## 2. Vocabulary learning is helped when learners negotiate the meaning of words with other learners.

Research shows that when learners explain the meanings of words to each other during a speaking activity, vocabulary learning is more likely to occur than if they just hear the new word being used (Joe, Nation and Newton, 1996). Here is an example of negotiation that occurred when Task 3 was being done.

### Transcript from one use of Task 3

- S12 bus driver? I don't think so  
 S10 bus driver because it is ..  
 S9 if you don't have a licence how can you drive a bus, the police will catch me(The others agree)  
 S11 I see so we need **registration**  
 S12 ... so bus driver also need **reg...registration** because of competence so at first I think teacher, doctor, and lawyer is a very specific occupation so um it um at first they have to go to the university and polytech so they need require **registration** so ah in my opinion er I bus driver ... if we want to be bus driver only we have ah licence and then we can ah get as a driver so I don't forget **registration** so I mistaked ah Japanese guess  
 S10 maybe it is not **registration**, maybe it is not **registration**, I think maybe it is only bus driver licence ...  
 ... maybe **registration** is just like a list where you can find some name like doctor.

The quotation is only a small part of what happened when the learners did the task. The word *registration* occurred twenty times in the discussion when that group of learners did the task.

## 3. Vocabulary learning is helped when learners use the word or hear the word being used in ways that stretch and enrich the knowledge that learners have about the word.

For many learners, the first knowledge they have about the word is its occurrence in the text and the description of the task. Teachers can observe learners' use of the word during the speaking activity and see if their use of the word is just a straight repetition of what is in the text or if it is a change of what was in the text. Here is a four point scale that can be used to judge how elaborative particular uses of a word are.

### Levels of elaboration

Levels 1 and 2 draw largely on knowledge from within the text. Levels 3 and 4 move beyond the text.

- 0 No change - repeating what is in the text
- 1 Low change - small grammatical or inflectional changes
- 2 Reasonable change - used with some new collocations or substantial grammatical change
- 3 High change - elaborating the meaning, new collocations which stretch meaning, derivational affixes

If we apply this scale to the use of *registration* in the example above, we can see that the uses of *registration* are rather different from its use in the text "before registration as a nurse" and in the introduction to the task "require registration". On the scale these would be ranked at 2 (reasonable change). The higher up this scale, the happier the teacher should be, because the greater the change or elaboration, the greater the learning.

## Another set of examples

The steps in making vocabulary focused activities involve 1) finding a short interesting text, 2) choosing about four or five useful words that the learners are not all familiar with, 3) simplifying the vocabulary in the other parts of the text, and 4) looking at each word to design a suitable task involving classifying, ranking, choosing, analysing, or finding causes or effects. Here is another text with some vocabulary focused communicative tasks.

A study has found that school children are carrying very heavy **weights** every day, and these might be hurting them. These weights are up to twice the level which is allowed for **adults**. Their school bags are filled with heavy books, **sports equipment**, drinking water, musical equipment, and sometimes a computer.

The study looked at a large number of school children in junior and senior high school and found that three quarters of them had pain in their upper bodies. They believed that this pain came from the heavy **weight** that they had to carry.

Forty-four **per cent** had neck pain, 58 **per cent** had shoulder pain, 35 **per cent** said they had pain in their upper backs and 35 **per cent** in their lower back. The pain could be a sign that **lasting** damage to the body was occurring. Adults who regularly carry **weights** in their work should not carry more than four to six kilograms at any one time.

1. Which of the following things are sports equipment?

- |                |                  |              |
|----------------|------------------|--------------|
| a sports field | knee guards      | a football   |
| the players    | a sports uniform | a goal       |
| a bat          | a score book     | sports boots |

2. At what age does a child become an adult? How important is age in deciding when someone is an adult?

3. Think of five causes of lasting damage to your body, and for each say what that lasting damage might be.

- List five items that students carry in their school bags and rank them according to their weight from the heaviest to the lightest.
- Decide for an average student what per cent of each twenty-four-hour week day is spent sleeping, studying, playing sport, watching TV or playing on the computer, and doing other things.

## Observing the tasks

Designing the tasks is one skill a teacher needs. An equally important skill is carefully observing the tasks being used, judging how successful they were, and redesigning them if necessary.

To see if the tasks are working well, look for:

- whether the target words are being used*
- whether the meanings of the words are being explored*
- whether they are being used in ways that stretch learners' knowledge of the words*
- whether negotiation of the target words is occurring*
- whether the negotiation of the target words is successful*
- whether the task is successfully completed*
- whether the learners are involved in the task.*

The tasks described in this article are very easy to make and they involve the learners in activities that improve their skill at speaking and increase their vocabulary as well. They also provide an opportunity

for teachers to observe their learners and use this observation to reflect on and improve the design of their activities.

## Reading List

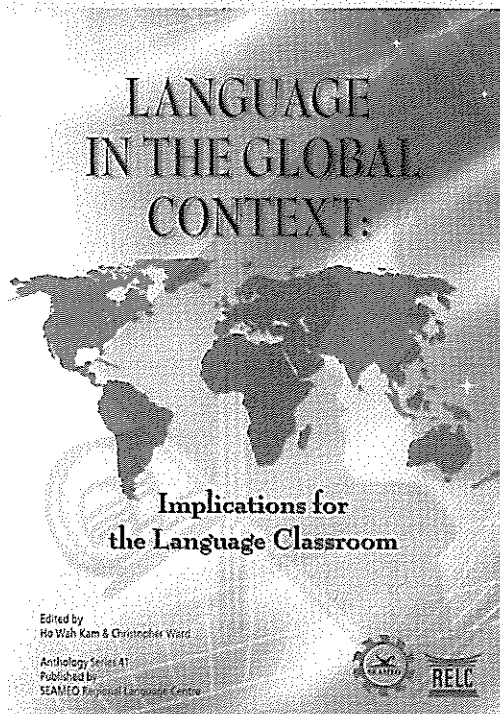
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- Nation, I.S.P. 2001. *Learning Vocabulary in another Language*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.



*Paul Nation's specialist interest is in vocabulary teaching and learning and his book Learning Vocabulary in Another Language will be published by Cambridge in February 2001.*



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