

How Good is Your Vocabulary Program?

BY PAUL NATION

Some language courses have a special vocabulary section while others deal with vocabulary as a part of listening, speaking, reading and writing. In both these approaches to vocabulary there are important guidelines that should be put into practice and used to plan and monitor the learning of vocabulary in a language course. In order to help teachers check their own courses, these guidelines are presented as questions.

What vocabulary do your learners know and need to know?

It is very important to know where your learners are in their vocabulary growth. One major reason for knowing this is because the teacher needs to take a very different approach to teaching high frequency vocabulary from low frequency vocabulary. If learners do not know enough high frequency, it is also impor-

tant to know what high frequency vocabulary to focus on. Fortunately two versions of a very useful test, the Vocabulary Levels Test, have been developed and trialled to help teachers find this information. Copies of the test are available in Schmitt (2000) and Nation (2001). Here is the introduction to this test:

This is a vocabulary test. You must choose the right word to go with each meaning. Write the number of that word next to its meaning. Here is an example:

1. *business*
 2. *clock*
 3. *horse*
 4. *pencil*
 5. *shoe*
 6. *wall*
- *part of a house*
 — *animal with four legs*
 — *something used for writing*

You answer it in the following way:

1. *business*
 2. *clock*
 3. *horse*
 4. *pencil*
 5. *shoe*
 6. *wall*
- 6 *part of a house*
3 *animal with four legs*
4 *something used for writing*

Some words are in the test to make it more difficult. You do not have to find a meaning for these words. In the example above, these words are business, clock, shoe.

Note that the test is designed to be easy in the sense that the distractors are not distracting. This means that if the learners know a little about a word, they should be able to choose the correct answer. The test is thus designed to let learners show what they know so that the vocabulary program can enrich and build on that.

The Vocabulary Levels Test is divided into five levels, each separate from the others and each sampling from 1,000

words:

- ▶ 2,000 Word Level (the second 1,000 high frequency words)
- ▶ 3,000 Word Level (low frequency words)
- ▶ 5,000 Word Level (low frequency words)
- ▶ Academic Word List (high frequency words for academic purposes)
- ▶ 10,000 Word Level (low frequency words)

The first 1,000 words are not tested because it is not possible to give the meanings of these words in simpler language. If learners do not know the most frequent 2,000 words, then these should be their first goal. These words cover about 80% of academic text and newspapers, about 87% of the words in novels, and over 90% of the running words in informal conversation. They are very useful, essential words in all uses of English (West, 1953).

The Academic Word List (Coxhead, 2000) contains 570 word families that are very useful for learners who will study in English in senior high school or university. It contains words like *theory, compile, demonstrate, minimum*. These words cover about 10% of the running words in academic articles and text books, about 4% of the words in newspapers, and less than 2% of the words in novels and conversation, so it is clearly a specialized vocabulary. Academic vocabulary is a very important learning goal for learners who are going to do academic study in English. One way of seeing the importance of this vocabulary is to look at the difference it makes to the density of unknown words in academic text. A vocabulary of 2,000 high frequency words provides 80% text coverage and a density of unknown words of 1 in 5. A vocabulary of 2,570 that includes high frequency words plus academic words provides 90% text coverage and a density of unknown words of 1 in 10. In other words, learning the academic words doubles the amount of comprehensible context available.



Is the vocabulary being dealt with in the best way?

Because the 2,000 high frequency words and the 570 academic words are so useful, each word deserves to be focused on. They need to be met in listening, speaking, reading and writing and also need to be directly studied. The thousands of remaining low frequency words are not so useful. Learners need to learn them gradually after they know the high frequency words, but teachers should not spend valuable class time focusing on individual words. There are too many of them and the time spent on them is not repaid by opportunities to meet and use them. The teacher's focus needs to be on the strategies for coping with and remembering low frequency words. There are four major strategies and, in order of importance, they are as follows:

1. Guessing from context—using clues in written or spoken text to infer the meaning or part of the meaning of previously unknown words. To do this successfully, learners need to already know 95%-98% of the running words in a text.

2. Using word cards—deliberately studying words and their translations on small word cards, with the word on one side and its translation on the other. This is a very unfashionable activity but there is overwhelming research evidence to show that it is a very efficient and effective learning strategy (Nation, 2001: Chapter 8).

3. Using word part analysis—breaking complex words into prefix, root and suffix and using the meaning of the parts to help remember the meaning of the whole word. Over 60% of the low frequency words in English come from French, Latin or Greek, which make use of word parts. A small number of very useful prefixes and suffixes occur in many English words.

4. Using a dictionary—using a dictionary to find the meaning of words and to gain other information about them. This strategy gives the learner independence from the teacher.

When the learners meet a low frequency word in class, the teacher can use this opportunity to practice one of the four vocabulary strategies.

Is the vocabulary being met across the four strands of the course?

One way of deciding whether a language

course is well-balanced or not is to see if there are roughly equal opportunities for the following:

1. Learning through meaning-focused input—listening and reading where 98% of the running words are already known,
2. Learning through meaning-focused output—speaking and writing,
3. Learning through language-focused study and teaching,
4. Developing fluency in listening, speaking, reading and writing where 100% of the vocabulary is already known.

Vocabulary development needs to occur across these four strands with each high frequency word being met repeatedly in listening, speaking, reading and writing, deliberately studied, and met in easy texts with some pressure to process them faster than usual. Here are ways in which each of these four strands can be put into practice with a vocabulary focus.

Learning through meaning-focused input. Where English is taught as a second language, it would be hoped that most incidental vocabulary learning would occur through listening as learners receive spoken input that contains only a small proportion of unknown words (preferably 2%, which equals one unknown word in 50 running words). This input can be in the form of conversation, classroom speaking activities, listening to carefully chosen or adapted stories, and note-taking and information transfer activities, in which learners change verbally presented information into a table or diagram. It is not easy, however, to get spoken input at the right level.

Where English is a foreign language, the main source of input should be a substantial extensive reading program that makes use of some of the hundreds of graded readers available in English. An extensive reading program is also very important where English is learned as a second language. A substantial program involves each learner reading one graded reader at an appropriate level (where 95%-98% of the words are already known) every one or two weeks and reading a total of about 20 per year. For advice on setting up a graded reader program see Day and Bamford (1998).

Learning through meaning-focused output. Having to produce language (speaking and writing) results in some different kinds of learning from having to receive language (listening and reading). As learners do speaking activities, the

All Words Are Not Created Equal!

This article about vocabulary has been turned into a frequency list. The article is 1906 running words long and contains 532 different word types (only the top and bottom items in the list are given here). The word *the* occurs 100 times in this article. Notice the following things:

1. A small number of words cover a lot of the text. The top 10 cover 27% of the running words in the text.
2. There are a lot of words that occur only once (307 words) or twice (80 words).
3. The frequency of the words drops quite quickly.
4. These types of figures are typical of even very long texts and have implications for learning and teaching.

The	100
Of	74
To	58
And	56
Words	46
A	41
In	39
Vocabulary	38
Is	30
Are	25
Learners	25
Word	25
Wide	1
Will	1
Without	1
Work	1
Working	1
Write	1
Yet	1
You	1
Young	1
Yourself	1

Fluency Activity

A typical fluency activity is 4/3/2 where the learners deliver a talk to a partner for four minutes on a topic they are very familiar with. After four minutes the teacher says stop, the learners change partners. The same learners give the same talk to their new partner, but they have only three minutes to do it in. After changing partners again they give the same talk to this third partner but in only two minutes. Then the half of the class who were listeners now become speakers and go through the same sequence delivering their talks.

teacher should check that they know the language needed to negotiate the meaning of words that they do not know or that others might not know. This involves seeking clarification and confirmation, requesting repetition, and explaining the meaning or spelling of a word. With a little practice, teachers can quickly design activities that encourage vocabulary learning (Joe, Nation and Newton, 1996; Nation and Hamilton-Jenkins, 2000). Other spoken activities include retelling with vocabulary cues and role play based on written input. Retelling or reporting are also useful written activities.

Language-focused learning. The direct deliberate study of vocabulary involves learning vocabulary strategies, doing vocabulary activities like studying collocations (words that typically occur together), word parts, spelling, pronunciation, and word meanings, and learning words and their translations using packs of word cards. Research on deliberate learning shows that it is much more efficient than incidental learning, is effective in learning a wide range of aspects of word knowledge, and can have positive effects on meaning-focused use of the language. There are criticisms of this largely decontextualized learning but these criticisms are contradicted by research. It is important to see this kind of learning as only one of the four strands of the course with the other three strands all being strongly message-focused.

When using cards for learning new vocabulary, learners should write the word on one side and its first language translation on the other, should try to retrieve the meaning rather than just flipping over the card without thinking, should keep changing the order of the cards, should increasingly space the learning sessions, and should avoid putting words of related meanings (synonyms, opposites, lexical sets) in the same pack of cards (Nation, 2000).

Fluency development. Vocabulary not only needs to be known, it needs to be readily available for fluent use. Activities with a fluency goal should take up about 25% of the time in a language course. They have the following characteristics:

- They involve only language that is already known to the learners;
- They involve large quantities of language use;
- They are focused on communicating meaning;
- They push the learners to perform faster than they usually do.

Fluency development needs to occur

across all the four skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing. Typical activities include speed reading, repeated reading, extensive reading using easy graded readers, ten-minute writing (where learners write as much as they can in ten minutes), listening to the same text several times, listening to what has been already read, 4/3/2 (where learners give the same talk to three different learners with decreasing time to do it), and making the best recording of a text by recording then listening to it and trying to improve it by rerecording it. In fluency development activities, 100% of the vocabulary used must already be known by the learners.

Are the learners making progress in their control of vocabulary?

By conservative estimates, native speakers increase their vocabulary by over 1,000 words per year, at least up to their twenties. Most learners of English as a foreign language are lucky to achieve one quarter of this rate. Young learners of English as a second language can match native-speaker rates but struggle to close the gap that existed at the beginning of their learning.

Teachers need to help learners see their progress in vocabulary growth and feel excited about it. There are several ways of doing this:

- By recording progress through the levels of a graded reader series,
- By having regular vocabulary tests which sample from the different vocabulary frequency levels of the language,
- By getting learners to keep records of the words they learn from word cards,
- By using text books that work systematically through various vocabulary levels.


Learners see vocabulary as a very important part of language learning and often use it to measure their progress or lack of

progress. By taking an informed, balanced and systematic approach to vocabulary teaching, teachers can help learners achieve better results and feel happy about their progress.

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