Vocabulary Learning and Intensive Reading

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This article considers ten different ways of dealing with words met in intensive reading. It describes each of these ways showing the principles which should be used to help decide what way is the most appropriate for a particular word. These principles include giving most attention to high frequency words, focusing on strategy development for low frequency words, giving attention to a range of aspects that are involved in knowing a word, and making sure that teaching considers the future rather than present value of a particular item.

Intensive reading involves the detailed reading of texts with the two goals of understanding the text and learning language features through a deliberate focus on these items. Typically the text chosen for intensive reading is one that the learners would have difficulty in reading unassisted. This could be because of the unfamiliar subject matter, unfamiliar discourse features, or unfamiliar grammar and vocabulary items. The aim of this article is to show that decisions about how to deal with each unknown word can be made in a principled way, and these principles can be the basis of a well-planned vocabulary programme.

Let us first look at the options for dealing with words in intensive reading (Table 1) and then see what research tells us about when and how they should be applied.

Table 1: Dealing with vocabulary in intensive reading

Ways of dealing with a word	Explanation
Preteach	Before the learners read the text the teacher spends some time explaining the meaning of some of the words and focusing on their form, meaning and use.
Replace it in the text before giving the text to the learners	The text is simplified by replacing some of the unknown words with known synonyms or removing part of the text.

Table 1: Dealing with vocabulary in intensive reading (*Continued*)

Ways of dealing with a word	Explanation
Put it in a glossary	Some unknown words are listed with their meaning given in the L1 or the L2.
Put it in an exercise after the text	Some unknown words are put in cloze, word building or other types of exercises after the text.
Quickly give the meaning	The teacher gives a quick L1 translation or L2 explanation of the meaning of a word.
Do nothing about it	The teacher passes over the word without saying anything about it.
Help the learners use context to guess	The teacher guides the learners through a guessing strategy to work out the meaning of a word.
Help the learners use a dictionary	The teacher guides the learners in using the dictionary to look up and learn about a word.
Break it into parts and explain	The teacher helps the learners practise a word analysis strategy relating the word's parts to the word's meaning.
Spend time looking at its range of meanings and collocations etc	The teacher interrupts the reading to spend time explaining the meaning of a word and aspects of its form, meaning, and use.

Preteaching

The aim of preteaching is to get some vocabulary problems out of the way before the learners meet them in the text. Preteaching can have positive effects on vocabulary learning and text comprehension, but it needs to involve what is called *rich* instruction if it is to have these effects. Rich instruction involves spending a minimum of four or five minutes on each word looking at at least three or four aspects of what is involved in knowing a word. Table 2 lists these aspects. Typically the teacher would give some attention to meaning, to some aspect of form such as pronunciation, spelling or word parts, and to how the word is used.

Table 2: What is involved in knowing a word (Nation, 2001: 27)

Form			
	spoken	R	What does the word sound like?
		P	How is the word pronounced?
	written	R	What does the word look like?
		P	How is the word written and spelled?
	word parts	R	What parts are recognizable in this word?
		P	What word parts are needed to express the meaning?
Meaning	form and meaning	R	What meaning does this word form signal?
		P	What word form can be used to express this meaning?
	concept and referents	R	What is included in the concept?
		P	What items can the concept refer to?
	associations	R	What other words does this make us think of?
		P	What other words could we use instead of this one?
Use	grammatical functions	R	In what patterns does the word occur?
		P	In what patterns must we use this word?
	collocations	R	What words or types of words occur with this one?
		P	What words or types of words must we use with this one?
	constraints on use (register, frequency ...)	R	Where, when, and how often would we expect to meet this word?
		P	Where, when, and how often can we use this word?

In column 3, R = receptive knowledge, P = productive knowledge.

Because preteaching uses valuable classroom time, it should only be done with high frequency words and those that are important for the message of the text. English has around 2,000 high frequency words. They deserve classroom time because they are a relatively small group, they cover a large proportion of many different kinds of

spoken and written text, and each word occurs frequently. The time spent on them is well repaid by later opportunities to meet and use them.

Preteaching is best limited to a few words and should probably be used as a way of stimulating background knowledge about the text as well as providing vocabulary knowledge. In this way teaching has a double effect.

Simplifying

Sometimes a text contains too many unknown words and contains words that are unlikely to be of value to a learner in the near future. In these cases it may be more efficient to rewrite parts of the text, replacing some of the least useful unknown words with known words or more useful words. Simplification can be a time-consuming process but if the text will be used with many different classes and contains very interesting and useful information, then simplification is a sensible option.

Because simplification takes away the opportunity to meet particular vocabulary items, it should be used with low frequency words and perhaps with very low frequency uses of high frequency words. English has around 2,000 high frequency words. The remaining words, of which there are well over 100,000 word families, are low frequency words. Some of these words are moderately useful but not useful enough to be considered as high frequency words. These include words like *legacy, ankle, navigate*. Most of the low frequency words occur very infrequently and months or years may pass between one meeting and the next. These include words like *gibbous, pterodactyl, obfuscate*. Because low frequency words are such a large group (and so it is not possible to teach them all), occur infrequently, and cover such a small proportion of the text, they do not deserve classroom time. Instead of focusing on such words, teachers should focus on the most useful strategies that learners can use to deal with these words. We will look at these strategies later in this article. Learners need to learn low frequency words once they know the high frequency words, but teachers should not deliberately teach them.

It does not matter if the low frequency words are important for the message of the text or not. If they can easily be replaced and are unlikely to be of immediate value for the learners they should be replaced. If replacing them would make the text much more difficult to read, then they can be left in.

Adding a glossary

Glossaries consist of words and a brief L1 or L2 meaning. Glossaries can have two major functions and before making a glossary it is important to decide what function it will perform. One function is to help words be learned. If this is the glossary's function,

then the words included in a glossary should be high frequency words. Learners prefer the gloss to occur next to or near the line of text containing the glossed word.

radical = extreme   A few weeks ago, I speculated on the possibility that we may be in the middle of a radical change in our society. This was not just a casual comment.

Glossaries draw considerable attention to words and they also take quite a bit of effort to make. Research shows that glossaries help vocabulary learning and so this first function of glossaries is an important one. The second function of a glossary can be to deal with words that the teacher does not want to deal with. That is, the glossary makes the text a bit more self-contained by reducing the need for teacher explanation or dictionary use. If this is the function of a glossary it can then focus on low frequency words. Glossaries have been used in this way in extensive reading texts. If they are used like this for intensive reading they are a useful alternative to simplification. They allow time to be spent on other words.

Putting words in an exercise after the text
There are many kinds of exercises that can follow a text. They include word and meaning matching, word part analysis, cloze type exercises, and collocation activities. These exercises take quite a lot of time to make and to do. Thus they are best suited to high frequency words. High frequency words can include technical words that are part of the learners' area of specialisation if they are using English for special purposes. Ideally, such exercises should expand on the knowledge of the word that the text provides. Table 2 in this article indicates aspects of knowledge that could be the focus of such activities. Words with useful word parts are also well suited to such exercises. Activities take time and effort to make and they use valuable classroom time. This time and effort should be directed towards words that deserve such attention. Words deserve such attention through their usefulness which is reflected in their high frequency.

Quickly giving the meaning
An efficient way of dealing with unknown words is for the teacher to quickly give an L1 meaning for the word, or to quickly draw a diagram illustrating the word on the board, or to quickly give a demonstration or L2 definition. This has the effect of satisfying the learners while not interrupting the reading too much. Quickly giving the meaning can have a positive effect on learning. In a study of listening to stories, Elley (1989) found that vocabulary learning was increased by about 40% by such attention. Similarly, Dobinson (2001) found positive effects on learning for some words that had received only brief attention during a lesson.

This way of dealing with words is most suited to low frequency words which are important for the message of the text. Because of their salience in the text they need attention, but because they are low frequency words they do not deserve a lot of attention. It can also be a useful way of giving some attention to high frequency words when there is not enough time to do rich instruction.

Doing nothing about the word
Low frequency words that are not important for the message of the text may be passed over without any comment. This can be a favoured way of dealing (or not dealing) with the word if it is easily guessed from context or if it is a loan word and is thus very similar to a first language word. Like guessing the meaning, this is most suited to low frequency words.

Helping learners use the context to guess the meaning of the word
When a word appears in a context that provides a lot of clues to its meaning, this is a good opportunity to practise the most important of all vocabulary learning strategies, guessing from context. Guessing from context is such a widely applicable and effective strategy that any time spent learning and perfecting it is time well spent. If the strategy is used on low frequency words, the teacher's goal is to help learners practice the strategy. If it is used on high frequency or technical words, then there is a bonus. Not only is a useful strategy being practised but a useful word is being given detailed attention. Technical words are sometimes defined in the text and thus provide good opportunities for guessing. There are several ways of approaching guessing from context (see Nation 2001: 256-259 for one approach), but whatever one is used, it should be practised until the learners become fluent and skilled in its use. The justifications for spending time on the strategy are that it can be used to cope with thousands of words, it can result in some vocabulary learning (Nagy, Herman and Anderson, 1985), it can eventually be used with little disruption to the reading process, and it is a prerequisite for effective dictionary use. Because the strategy is so valuable, it does not matter whether it is used on words that are important for the text or not.

Helping the learners use a dictionary
Dictionary use, like guessing from context, is a useful vocabulary learning strategy. When it is used on high frequency or technical words, it has the double benefits of helping develop a useful strategy and giving attention to useful words. When it is used on low frequency words, the main goal is not the learning of the low frequency word, but the development of skill in using the strategy.

Good dictionaries provide a wealth of information about words and good dictionary use involves using them to find the common underlying meaning of the word, to relate it to already known words, to help fix its form in memory, and to gain some wider knowledge of its use. It is worthwhile looking again at Table 2 in this article to see what aspects of knowing a word can be developed by good dictionary use. It is worth looking up words that are easy to guess after they have been guessed as this is a useful way of confirming the guess.

Using word parts to help a word be remembered

Breaking words into prefix, stem and suffix is another vocabulary learning strategy. This strategy involves breaking the word into parts and then relating the meaning of the parts to the meaning of the word. So, if the low frequency word *explication* is met in a text, its meaning " a detailed explanation" can be related to its parts by pointing out that *ex-* means "out" (a prefix that learners must know), that *plic-* means "to fold", and that *-ation* indicates that the word is a noun. "An explication involves the unfolding or opening out of the parts of a principle or process". The essential feature of the word part strategy is that the meaning of the word parts are related to the overall meaning of the word. The strategy can also be used with high frequency words like *complicated* (*com-* + *-plic-* + *-ate* + *-ed*) or *rank* which shares the same stem as *arrange* (*ad-* + *rank*) "to put in order".

Like all the vocabulary learning strategies, this one can be used with both high and low frequency words. It is of course more suited to words that contain useful word parts. Note that word part analysis is a rather risky way of guessing the meaning of unknown words and is best regarded as a mnemonic trick for helping remember words that have already been understood.

Spending time on explaining a word

The last option for dealing with words in intensive reading that we will examine here is the equivalent of preteaching except that it is done during the reading of the text, not before reading. A rough rule of thumb is that in such teaching, at least three aspects of what it means to know a word should be focused on (Table 2). Typically one of these will be the meaning of the word (item 4, form and meaning in Table 2), and attention can also be given to the spelling and pronunciation of the word, its word parts, its grammar and collocations, and restrictions on its use if there are any, such as if it is a formal word, a very colloquial word, a rude word, a word mainly used in a particular country, or an old fashioned word.

Clearly this detailed time-consuming attention should only be given to high frequency words or words such as technical words that are going to be of frequent repeated value to the learners.

CONCLUSION

Table 3 summarises the focuses of each of the ten options we have looked at in this article.

Table 3: Reasons for choosing a particular vocabulary option in intensive reading

Ways of dealing with words	Reasons			
Preteach	1, 2, 3	4, 5	6, 7, 8	
Replace it in the text before giving the text to the learners	1	3	4, 5	
Put it in a glossary a) to teach vocabulary b) to make the text more self-contained	1, 2	3	4, 5	
Put it in an exercise after the text	1, 2	3	4, 5	6
Quickly give the meaning	1, 2, 3	4	5	
Do nothing about it	3	5	7, 8	
Help the learners use context to guess	1, 2, 3	4, 5	7	
Help the learners use a dictionary	1, 2, 3	4, 5	7	
Break it into parts and explain	1, 2, 3	4, 5	6	
Spend time looking at its range of meanings and collocations	1, 2	4, 5	6	

Reasons

1 It is a high frequency word or will occur in other texts
2 It is a useful technical word
3 It is a low frequency word
4 It is important for the message of the text
5 It is not important for the message of the text
6 It has useful parts
7 It is easy to guess from context
8 It is like a first language word

As Table 3 shows, there are three major sets of reasons. Reasons 1, 2 and 3 consider word frequency and apply the principle that words should earn attention through the frequency of their use. High frequency words deserve attention in their own right. The various focuses of attention can be based on what is involved in knowing a word (Table 2). When low frequency words need attention this is done by using the opportunity to practise one of the important vocabulary learning strategies of guessing from context, using word part analysis, and dictionary use. Reasons 4 and 5 consider the comprehension demands of the text. Words that are important for the message of the text may require some attention but this attention needs to be weighed against the wider value of the word. A good guide is to ask the question "Will this word be useful in comprehending tomorrow's text?". If the answer is no, it should not get a lot of attention. Reasons 6, 7, and 8 consider the nature of the word itself, because the learning burden of a word should have some effect on how it is dealt with.

The goal of this article has been to show that the ways teachers deal with words in intensive reading should be guided by principles that reflect the nature of vocabulary and vocabulary learning. To put it another way, if a teacher is asked "Why did you skip quickly over that word?" or "Why did you spend so much time helping learners guess the meaning of that word?", a teacher should be able to indicate the goal of such attention and to give sensible informed reasons for choosing a particular option. Vocabulary teaching and learning should not be a random, ad hoc process, but should be guided by well supported principles.

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