

Indian Journal of Applied Linguistics

Indian Journal of Applied Linguistics – IJOAL, (started in 1975) is a peer-reviewed International Journal, from Bahri Publications, New Delhi that has been publishing original research papers devoted to Language and Linguistics, for more than past three decades. It is published in March and September every year.

It provides a forum for the discussion of language related problems faced by L1 and L2 learners, the various language teaching methodologies adopted, apart from dealing with the general linguistic theories, and the branches and sub branches of Linguistics.

It also attempts to place before its readers new theoretical and methodological ideas and research from the several disciplines engaged in Applied Linguistics. The Linguist, the Anthropologist, the Psychologist, the Applied Linguist, and the Language Teacher may find it a useful forum, for both descriptive and experimental studies.

Some of the key areas of focus are:

- ◆ First and Second Language Acquisition
- ◆ Modern Language Teaching Methods
- ◆ Communicative Competence
- ◆ Pedagogy
- ◆ Bilingualism
- ◆ Language Problems & Language Planning
- ◆ Computational Linguistics
- ◆ Sociolinguistics
- ◆ Ethnolinguistics
- ◆ Psycholinguistics
- ◆ Neurolinguistics
- ◆ Pragmatics
- ◆ Stylistics
- ◆ Natural Language Processing
- ◆ E. L. T, E. F. L. & E. S. L.
- ◆ Applied Literary Criticism

NOTE FOR CONTRIBUTORS

Authors can submit their manuscripts on the above related subjects to the Editors by e-mail: <bahrius@vsnl.com> in a WORD file according to the layout and style of the Journal, which can be made available on request.

Vocabulary Learning through Experience Tasks

PAUL NATION
LALS, Victoria University of Wellington

ABSTRACT

This article has a very practical goal. It looks at one major type of learning task – experience tasks – and shows how they are made and the role they play in learning and in particular vocabulary learning. It could be argued that experience tasks are the most important kinds of language learning tasks because they are essential for fluency development across the four skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing, and they are the most common means of learning from meaning-focused input and meaning-focused output.

LEXICAL KNOWLEDGE

Let us begin by looking at the classic example of an experience task that is involved in the experience approach to reading with young learners as described by Sylvia Ashton-Warner (1963) in relation to what was largely a first language learning environment.

The reading class begins with the young children each drawing a picture of something that happened to them during the weekend. As each learner completes their picture, they come to the teacher to describe what is happening in it. The teacher listens carefully to the learner's description and then, in clear teacherly handwriting, writes exactly what the learner said underneath the picture. This then becomes the learner's reading text for the day. The learner then takes the picture away and works on reading the written text. The learner reads it to herself, and then to other learners, and then to her parents and family. Day by day these illustrated highly meaningful texts are gathered together to make the child's personalized reading book.

This reading activity is an experience task because most of the knowledge needed to do the task is already within the learner's experience. The language needed to do the task comes from the learner (it is their story), the ideas in the reading text come from the learner, and the organization of the text comes from the learner. The only new,

partly unknown features in the task are the learning goals of the task. They are the recognition of the written form of the story and turning that written form into ideas by reading. This important learning goal of learning to read is brought within the learners' capability by the rest of the aspects of the task being well within their previous experience. Imagine the difficulties the beginning learner would face if the language, ideas, and text organization were all unfamiliar.

The essence of an experience task then is that most of the knowledge and skill needed to do the task is already within the learners' experience. When learners do experience tasks, to an outsider, they seem to perform quite fluently without any obvious support. What the outsider might not realize is that the support has occurred before the task is done.

MAKING EXPERIENCE TASKS

There are two major ways of making experience tasks – (1) by bringing the task to the learner, or (2) by bringing the learner to the task.

Bringing the task to the learner

In the example given above, the task is largely brought within the learner's present knowledge. That is, the reading task uses language that the learner already knows, uses ideas the learner already knows and uses a text structure the learner already knows. In second or foreign language learning the most obvious experience task of this type is the use of graded readers for extensive reading. Graded reader series like Oxford Bookworms, Cambridge English Readers, Penguin Readers, Foundations Reading Library from Thomson ELT, and the Heinemann English Readers are made up of books especially written within a controlled vocabulary and a controlled set of grammatical structures. This means that learners can choose books to read that contain vocabulary and grammatical structures that are completely or largely within their previous experience. They can then focus on the learning goal of reading more fluently or of picking up the few vocabulary and grammatical items that are outside their experience. The availability of graded readers at a variety of proficiency levels means that learners can read largely within their previous language experience at most levels of proficiency. This is very important in a language course for several reasons. Firstly it is through such experience tasks that most of the kind of learning needed for normal language use occurs. This learning adds to implicit knowledge which is the knowledge needed for unmonitored

use of the language (Ellis 2005). Secondly, learners can engage in authentic receptive language use with such texts. They can experience the same kinds of understanding, feelings and reactions that a native speaker would have while reading. These include comprehension, enjoyment (or boredom if it is not a good story), and some kind of evaluative reaction to the story. That is, they can have an authentic reading experience. Thirdly, reading at the right level of difficulty can result in successful reading and can result in the strong motivation that can come from success. Finally, reading at the right levels and near a native speaker's reading speed can result in large quantities of language input. The greater the language input, the greater the possible language learning.

There are several ways of bringing the level of the task to the learners' present level of proficiency. One way is to use the learners' output as a source of input. This is the method used in Sylvia Ashton-Warner's experience approach to reading. It is also possible to use other learners' output as a source of input for others. This happens when learners read other learners' stories. Another way is for the teacher or course designer to deliberately control the level of the task as in graded readers. This can also be done through the careful selection and sequencing of material (Ghadirian 2002).

Bringing the learner to the task

The second major way of setting up an experience task is to bring the learner to the task. That is, to provide the learner with knowledge and experience *before* the task so that the task will then be within their experience. There are two ways of doing this, through pre-teaching or some form of pre-teaching, and through reminding the learners of the relevant ideas that they already know and helping them organize these in a useful way as in semantic mapping.

When using experience tasks for language teaching, it is useful to have a way of checking to see what parts of the task are within the learners' experience and what part of the task is being focussed on as the learning goal. There can be four sets of goals for a language course - Language item goals; Idea or content goals; Skill goals; and Text or discourse goals. The mnemonic LIST can be used to remember these goals. Skill goals can include the skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing; strategy development, and fluency and accuracy. A useful guideline to follow is that any experience task should have only one of these goals and the other three should already be within the learners' experience. So, if the teacher wants the learners to master the ideas or

content of a text, then the language items (vocabulary, grammar, language functions), the language skills and the text or discourse knowledge should all be within the learners' experience. Similarly, if the learners have the goal of increasing their reading speed (a part of the reading skill), then the reading speed passages should be written in simple language, should deal with largely familiar ideas, and should be written with a familiar type of organisation, that is, as a simple narrative or a regular step by step description.

So, when checking an experience task, it is useful to ask these two questions:

1. What is the learning goal of the task?
2. Are the three other aspects of the task within the learners' experience?

Table 1 shows how various aspects of a reading task can be brought within the learners' experience, either through control, which brings the task to the learner, or through recall and pre-teaching which brings the learner to the task. Table 1 summarises the ways of making experience tasks with a focus on reading. The same table can be made for the skills of listening, speaking and writing.

In Table 1 the suggestions are organised under the aspects of Language, Ideas, Skills and Text. The suggestions in the section on control all deal with ways in which the text can be written and adapted. The suggestions in the other two sections, recall and pre-teaching, describe how the learners can be prepared for the text. All of the suggested activities occur *before* the learners read the text, so that the actual reading of the text will become an experience task.

Table 1. *Experience tasks involving reading*

Ways of bringing the task within the learners' experience	Typical procedures for reading activities
<i>Bringing the task to the learner:</i> Control through selection or simplification	L A reading text is written within a controlled vocabulary and a controlled list of structures
	I Learners describe their experience to the teacher who writes it to become the learners' reading texts
	S The learners read texts which are closely based on the texts they read in their first language

	T	The teacher writes informative science texts as stories or personal accounts
<i>Bringing the learner to the task:</i> Recall or sharing of personal experience	L	The learners work together to label diagrams and pictures based on the text they will read
	I	The learners are asked to predict what will occur in a text after they know the topic of the text
	S	The learners discuss how they take notes and summarise when they read in their first language
	T	The learners share their predictions of which kinds of information will occur in what order in the text
<i>Bringing the learner to the task:</i> Pre-teaching	L	The teacher explains vocabulary that will occur in the reading text
	I	The learners collect and display pictures and articles relating to the topic of the text
	S	The learners do guided exercises or first language reading activities to develop the needed reading skills
	T	The learners are helped with the discourse analysis of a text of the same topic type as the text they will read

Table 2. *Experience tasks involving speaking*

Ways of bringing the task within the learners' experience	Typical procedures for speaking activities
Control through selection or simplification	L A topic is chosen that allows the learners to use vocabulary and structures they already know
	I A topic is chosen that the learners know a lot about from first language experience
	S The learners are not put under time pressure during the talk
	T The task involves kinds of speaking, such as telling stories, that are already familiar from first language use
Recall or sharing of personal experience	L The teacher helps the learners build up a semantic map around the topic, based on useful vocabulary and phrases
	I The learners work in groups to list all the things they know about the topic

	S	The learners recall relevant sentences and collocations they have used before
	T	The learners work in groups to order the points they will talk about
Pre-teaching	L	The learners write about the topic before they talk about it. The teacher provides needed vocabulary for the writing
	I	The learners go on a visit to some place related to the topic they will talk about
	S	The learners do a 4/3/2 activity on the topic with the 2 minute talk being the experience task, and the 4 and 3 minute talks are a kind of pre-teaching
	T	The learners practice supporting main points with examples

Table 2 shows how a production task, speaking, can be brought within the experience of the learners. Although the suggestions in Table 2 are organised under control, recall and pre-teaching, it is possible to combine suggestions from different categories. For example, the teacher can choose a topic that the learners know a lot about from first language experience, such as how weddings are celebrated in their country. Then the class builds up a semantic map of the relevant second language vocabulary. Finally they perform a 4/3/2 activity in pairs on the topic. The two minute talk is the experience task. All the rest, the semantic mapping (a shared task), and the four minute and three minute speaking (shared tasks) are preparation for the two minute experience task.

EXPERIENCE TASKS AND COURSE DESIGN

There are three other kinds of tasks besides experience tasks. These are shared, guided and independent tasks (Nation 1990). Shared tasks involve learners working together in pairs or groups to do a task. Guided tasks involve learners doing exercises that the teacher or course designer has prepared involving completion, transformation, ordering, copying or similar actions. These guided tasks support the learner during the task by limiting what the learner has to do. Independent tasks involve learners working through a task without any special preparation or support. Most tasks involve a mixture of two or more of these types of tasks, but to keep things simple we will treat them as distinct kinds of tasks.

Let us now look at how experience tasks fit into the four strands of a course. I have argued (Nation 2007) that a well-balanced language course consists of four strands – meaning-focused input, meaning-

focused output, language-focused learning, and fluency development. In a well-balanced course approximately equal amounts of time are given to each strand. The language-focused learning strand of a course involves deliberate attention to language features, for example through the direct teaching of vocabulary, through learners deliberately studying vocabulary, through intensive reading involving dictionary use and teacher explanation, and through the deliberate learning of strategies. There are elements of experience tasks in such activities (they should not be too far beyond the learners' previous experience), but they are mainly guided tasks and occasionally shared tasks.

Experience tasks and meaning-focused input and output

Meaning-focused input, learning through meaning focused listening and reading, involves the following conditions:

1. The learners' attention is on the message. That is, they want to understand the meaning of what they are reading or listening to.
2. There is a small amount of the task which is outside the learners' experience, but this can be handled by guessing from context, ignoring it, or negotiation. From a vocabulary perspective, the learner should have at least 98% coverage of the running words in the text (Hu and Nation 2000). That is, the unknown words in the text should not occur at a density greater than 1 unknown word in every 50 running words. In a reading text this is about 1 unknown word in every 5 lines. When listening this is about 2 or 3 unknown words per minute.
3. There is a large quantity of input. This is because the learning from meaning-focused input tends to be small but with quantity of input these small bits of learning accumulate.

The conditions for meaning-focused output are similar to those of meaning-focused input.

Experience tasks are important in meaning-focused input and meaning-focused output because they set up the important conditions of having only a small amount of the task outside the learners' experience. In addition, because the support and preparation for experience tasks occur before the task is done, the task itself can be done in much the same way as a native-speaker would listen or read for comprehension, or speak or write to communicate a message, and thus there can be a reasonable quantity of input.

Experience tasks and fluency

Fluency development tasks require the following conditions.

1. They must be performed with a focus on the message of the task rather than on the language features.
2. They should involve only familiar language features because the aim of such tasks is to make known features readily accessible.
3. They should require the learner to perform at a faster than usual speed.
4. They should involve large quantities of practice.

Because fluency tasks should involve only familiar language features, most fluency development tasks are experience tasks. They are experience tasks where the language required to do the task is already within the experience of the learner.

Let us now look at research on experience tasks and vocabulary learning.

VOCABULARY CONTROL

The very small amount of research on vocabulary density for second language learners (Hu and Nation 2000) and first language learners (Carver 1994) suggests that in order for learners to gain adequate comprehension of a text, no more than 1% to 2% of the running words (tokens) in a text should be outside their present knowledge. This assumes that proper nouns are considered as known items or at least items that do not require much or any previous knowledge. This is an unknown word density of around one unknown word in every fifty running words and fits with Michael West's (1955: 21) suggestion based on experience of writing and using graded readers for learners of English.

One unknown word in fifty still means that there is one unknown word in every five 10 word lines and six unknown words on every 300 word page. Thus even with the vocabulary control typical of graded readers, there can still be a substantial unknown vocabulary load (Nation and Wang 1999).

It has been suggested that using books written for young native speakers of English could reduce the unknown vocabulary load. Elley and Mangubhai (1981), for example, used children's books written for native speakers in their book flood in rural Fiji. Cho and Krashen (1993) recommend the Sweet Valley series, written for young native

speakers, as texts for extensive reading programmes for non-native speakers.

Vocabulary analysis of children's texts does not support this. Young native speakers beginning school have a vocabulary of several thousand words and the books written for them make use of a correspondingly rich vocabulary (Nation, 1997). The attractive presentation of such books and their interesting stories may help sustain interest and motivation and encourage the effort to read, but the amount non-native learners could read must be greatly reduced by the vocabulary load of such difficult texts.

The ideal for non-native speaking learners of English is that there are attractive, engaging texts written in a controlled vocabulary that takes account of their initially low levels of vocabulary knowledge when they begin reading. There are many books like these, and with initiatives to encourage the production of high quality texts, such as the Extensive Reading Foundation awards, the number should grow.

For learners of English with a vocabulary size over 2,000 words, the careful sequencing of texts written for native speakers may be a feasible way of making listening and reading become experience tasks.

The major resource however for learners of English at elementary and intermediate levels has to be text written within a controlled vocabulary. Without this, there can be few if any experience tasks in a foreign language programme.

PRE-TEACHING VOCABULARY

The research on pre-teaching vocabulary shows that for pre-teaching to have an effect on comprehension, each pre-taught word has to get substantial attention (Graves 1986), what some call "rich instruction". Rich instruction involves spending several minutes teaching a word, drawing attention to several aspects of what is involved in knowing a word (its spoken and written forms, its word parts, its meanings, its grammar and its collocations). This is time-consuming and in effect only a few words can get this kind of attention before learners read a text. Nonetheless, for some important topic related words, pre-teaching may be a useful option.

STIMULATING PREVIOUS KNOWLEDGE

There has been very interesting research on first language readers by Stahl and his colleagues to see the relative effects on comprehension of vocabulary knowledge and learners' background knowledge of the topic

of the text (Stahl, Hare, Sinatra and Gregory 1991; Stahl, Jacobson, Davis and Davis 1989). Their findings have been that vocabulary knowledge and topic knowledge have different effects. Vocabulary knowledge increases the comprehension of sentence and proposition level detail (the microstructure), while topic knowledge affects global comprehension of the text (the macrostructure) including seeing an organization behind the facts in the text.

Because vocabulary knowledge and topic knowledge have different effects, one is not a satisfactory compensation for lack of the other. This is supported by Laufer's (1992) findings with foreign language learners.

For learners of English as a second or foreign language, vocabulary knowledge is clearly a dominating factor in determining whether a task will be an experience task or not. Background knowledge cannot substitute for lack of vocabulary knowledge, and pre-teaching is limited in the number of words that can be satisfactorily covered in a reasonable amount of time. It is thus essential to make use of controlled material if a course is to have a suitable number of the experience tasks that are needed for developing proficiency through meaning-focused input, meaning-focused output and fluency development.

REFERENCES

- Ashton-Warner, S. 1963. *Teacher*. New York: Simon and Schuster.
- Carver, R. P. 1994. Percentage of unknown vocabulary words in text as a function of the relative difficulty of the text: Implications for instruction. *Journal of Reading Behavior*, 26/4, 413-437.
- Cho, K. S. and Krashen, S. 1993. Acquisition of vocabulary from the Sweet Valley High Kids series: Adult ESL acquisition. *Journal of Reading*, 32, 662-667.
- Elley, W. B. and Mangubhai, F. 1981. *The Impact of a Book Flood in Fiji Primary Schools*. Wellington: New Zealand Council for Educational Research.
- Ellis, R. 2005. Principles of instructed language learning. *System*, 33, 209-224.
- Ghadirian, S. 2002. Providing controlled exposure to target vocabulary through the screening and arranging of texts. *Language Learning and Technology* 6/1, 147-164.
- Graves, M. F. 1986. Vocabulary learning and instruction. *Review of Research in Education*, 13, 49-89.
- Hu, M., and Nation, I. S. P. 2000. Vocabulary density and reading comprehension. *Reading in a Foreign Language*, 13, 1, 403-430.
- Laufer, B. 1992. Reading in a foreign language: How does L2 lexical knowledge interact with the reader's general academic ability? *Journal of Research in Reading*, 15/2, 95-103.
- Nation, I. S. P. 1990. A system of tasks for language learning. In Sarinnee Anivan (Ed.), *Language Teaching Methodology for the Nineties*, RELC Anthology Series No 24, 51-63.
- . 1997. The language learning benefits of extensive reading. *The Language Teacher*, 21/5, 13-16.
- . 2007. The four strands. *Innovation in Language Learning and Teaching*, 1/1, 1-12.
- Stahl, S. A., Hare, V. C., Sinatra, R. and Gregory, J. F. 1991. Defining the role of prior knowledge and vocabulary in reading comprehension: The retiring of number 41. *Journal of Reading Behavior*, 23/4, 487-508.
- , Jacobson, M. G., Davis, C. E. and Davis, R. L. 1989. Prior knowledge and difficult vocabulary in the comprehension of unfamiliar text. *Reading Research Quarterly*, 24/1, 27-43.
- West, M. 1955. *Learning to Read a Foreign Language*. 2nd ed. London: Longman.

PAUL NATION
 PROFESSOR IN APPLIED LINGUISTICS
 VICTORIA UNIVERSITY OF WELLINGTON,
 NEW ZEALAND
 E-MAIL: <PAUL.NATION@VUW.AC.NZ>