

My ideal vocabulary teaching course

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This paper describes the principles and activities in what I consider to be a well designed vocabulary course. It is based around the four strands of meaning-focused input, meaning-focused output, language-focused learning, and fluency development. It attempts to reduce the role of the teacher as a teacher and gives more emphasis to the teacher's role in planning a course. This planning includes choosing the most appropriate vocabulary to focus on, and choosing and balancing effective activities. The paper describes a range of very practical activities and the research and principles justifying them.

This paper attempts to describe my ideal vocabulary teaching course. This description has several purposes. Firstly, it provides a way of reviewing the current state of research on vocabulary as it relates to designing a vocabulary course. Secondly, it forces me to put my money where my mouth is and come up with the best suggestions I can for describing a course. Thirdly, it provides a basis for others to comment on and criticise with a view to improving such a description. Finally, it may eventually act as a model or at least a comparison for designing and evaluating vocabulary courses.

In the following description I will try to follow a rough general pattern for each part, firstly describing what I think should be done, and then describing the research evidence for such a decision. The overall plan of the course is based around the four strands (Nation, 2007) of meaning-focused input, meaning-focused output, language-focused learning, and fluency development. Meaning-focused input involves learning through listening and reading at a level which is suitable for the learner. Meaning-focused output involves learning through speaking and writing at a level which is suitable for the learner. Language-focused learning involves the deliberate study of language, in this case, vocabulary. Fluency development does not involve the learning of any new items but involves becoming very proficient at using what is already known. Fluency development needs to occur separately for each of the four skills of listening, speaking, reading, and writing.

Vocabulary learning through meaning-focused input

A substantial extensive reading program

An essential part of any vocabulary course is a substantial extensive reading program making use of graded readers. Such an extensive reading program should actually fit into two strands of a course, the strand of meaning focused input when learners read material which is at the right level for them (Krashen (1985) would call this I+1), and the fluency development strand where learners read very easy graded readers, far below their usual meaning-focused input level, but read them very quickly. Extensive reading in the meaning-focused input strand should involve reading graded readers where around 2% of the running words are outside of the learners' present knowledge. This still means that there will be one unknown word in every five lines of the text, and between 4 to 6

unknown words per page on every page. This is still a heavy vocabulary load but is manageable. In such an extensive reading program, learners should be reading at least one graded reader every two weeks for the meaning-focused input strand (Nation & Wang, 1999). Initially such graded reading should be done quietly in class so the teacher can monitor that it is actually done and that the learners are truly engaged in reading English. After a month or two of such in-class reading, the graded reading can be increasingly assigned as homework. The hope is that by this time the learners will have discovered that they can be successful in such reading and that it is enjoyable (Takase, 2007).

During such reading learners may wish to use bilingual electronic dictionaries. This is perfectly acceptable as such dictionaries are rapidly improving in quality and some of them are now equal to if not better than some monolingual learners' dictionaries.

There is plenty of research which shows that vocabulary learning can occur from reading graded readers (Horst, Cobb & Meara, 1998; Horst, 2005; Pigada & Schmitt, 2006). The Waring and Takaki study (2003) looked at the learning from one graded reader and found useful amounts of learning at three different levels of vocabulary knowledge. The classic book flood study by Elley and Mangubhai (1981; Elley, 1991) showed that an extensive reading program can result in a very wide range of different kinds of learning, and that the learning benefits of such a program are greater than those which come from a program of direct teaching.

Learning through listening

Learners should also receive a large quantity of input at the right level for them through listening. There are three major ways in which this could be done. One way is to make most of the classroom management occur through the medium of English. That is, English is used to tell the learners what to do, to control their behaviour, to praise them for good work, to give them feedback on their performance, to explain why they are doing certain activities and what the benefit will be to them, and to generally motivate them. The success of this lies in the teacher's skill in finding comprehensible and consistent ways of doing these things through the medium of English. Ideally the language used for classroom management should come almost completely from the high-frequency words of the language.

A very engaging and useful technique for providing a reasonable quantity of listening is the activity called listening to stories. In this activity teacher chooses a very interesting story at the right level for the learners. A source of such texts could be the award-winning readers listed on the Extensive Reading Foundation website

(<http://www.erfoundation.org/index.html/>). This activity has been described in other places (Nation & Newton, 2009), and simply involves the teacher reading the story to the learners in a serial form. That is, the teacher begins reading the story repeating sentences where necessary and speaking at a slow enough speed for the learners to comprehend easily. After a few minutes of listening to the story, and the teacher then stops and tells the class that the story will be continued the next time they met. In this way, bit by bit, the learners hear the story, become engaged in it, and find it easy to listen to because of

their increasing familiarity with the characters and plot and the type of language used in the story. Where necessary, the teacher quickly writes up words on the blackboard to help the learners recognise them, and may give a quick explanation of the meaning if it is needed. This is an activity that learners look forward to, and its success depends on the quality of the story and the skill of the teacher in matching the speed and repetitions of the sentences to the level of the learners.

Research by Elley (1989) found that quickly giving attention to some of the words in the story increased learning by around 30%. Because graded readers use high-frequency words, they will be met very often and good conditions will be set up for learning them (Nation & Wang, 1999). Unpublished studies of graded readers show that new words at each level tend to re-occur in a variety of contexts that provide a rich range of associations that will help them stick in memory.

The third possibility for extensive listening is listening to the CDs that come with many graded readers. There are now computer programs available which can speed up or slow down a digital recording without altering the pitch, so that it still sounds natural. It is worth looking at these programs to see how well they can work with such CDs and whether they are helpful in developing the learners' listening skills. Extensive listening is not likely to be as big a source of vocabulary learning as extensive reading will be for learners of English as a foreign language. However it is still a very important source of vocabulary learning and needs to play a substantial role in the meaning-focused input section of a language course.

Learning through meaning-focused output

From a vocabulary perspective, one of the most effective ways of providing both meaning-focused input and meaning-focused output is by having a content-based instruction focus in the course. Content-based instruction involves learning content matter while learning the language. In some countries where English is a foreign language, such as Malaysia, some of the school subjects such as mathematics and technology are taught through the medium of English. This has the dual goals of learning the subject and learning the language. Content-based instruction is used in some pre-university language courses by having themes that run through parts of the program.

At a more individual level, content-based instruction can occur when each learner has the opportunity to choose a topic that they will specialise in during the course. They then read a lot on that topic, gather information from a variety of sources about it, and report on this information gathering each week to a small group of fellow students. Eventually they will write a report on their data gathering and give an oral report to the whole class. It is important that there is work done on this topic every week so that learners gradually build up a substantial amount of knowledge about it, gain control of the vocabulary used in that topic area, and are able to talk, read, listen, and write about that topic with a reasonable degree of fluency.

Content-based instruction is particularly suited to vocabulary development for several reasons (Nation & Gu, 2007).

- 1 It reduces the vocabulary load which is created when learners jump from one topic to another during the course (Sutarsyah, Nation & Kennedy, 1994).
- 2 It results in vocabulary occurring which is thematically rather than semantically related to each other (Tinkham, 1997), and this makes vocabulary learning much easier in that the vocabulary items do not interfere with each other.
- 3 It provides good opportunities for vocabulary learning through linked skill activities, where learners deal with the same content material through a range of different skills. For example, they may read a text, then talk about it, and then write about it. The four skills of listening, speaking, reading, and writing can be combined in a very large variety of ways to provide many linked skill activities. When the same vocabulary occurs through each one of the three activities across the skills, there is a very high chance that it will be learnt.
- 4 Content-based instruction provides many opportunities for understanding ideas, applying the ideas, critiquing the ideas, and relating the ideas to various other kinds of knowledge. All of these types of activities encourage generative use of the vocabulary involved. Generative use involves meeting or using words in contexts which are different from those where they have been met before (Joe, 1998). Generative use has a very strong positive effect on vocabulary learning.
- 5 As learners engage in content-based instruction they develop substantial background knowledge of the material that they are working with. This background knowledge greatly increases the opportunity for guessing new words from context.
- 6 Speaking and writing activities in content-based instruction can readily draw on written input to the task. This allows the teacher to design vocabulary learning into the speaking task, by making sure that target vocabulary occurs in the written input to the task (Joe, Nation, & Newton, 1996; Newton, 1995).

The major problem in implementing content-based instruction where English is learnt as a foreign language is deciding on the content matter of such instruction. Most typically, topics like conservation, global warming, and current affairs are chosen. Topics need to be interesting for the students and to some degree familiar to the teachers.

Vocabulary learning through language-focused learning

The language-focused learning strand of a course involves deliberate attention to vocabulary and other language features. A central activity in this strand is the deliberate learning of vocabulary using bilingual word cards.

Vocabulary learning using word cards

Word cards are small cards which have a second language word or phrase on one side and its translation in the first language on the other. They are worked through whenever a learner has some free time. A reasonable goal for such learning is around 50 words a

week, although this is about twice the learning rate found in language courses in Europe (Milton, 2009). In total this takes about two hours including the time to make the cards.

This is a very effective learning procedure that is well supported by over 100 years of research (Griffin & Harley, 1996; Nation, 2001). There is now evidence that this learning directly contributes to implicit knowledge as well as explicit knowledge of vocabulary (Elgort, 2011 in press). This means that the kind of knowledge that is created by such learning is the kind of knowledge which is needed for normal language use. There are several computer programs which can be used for such learning, and the best ones are those which can be used on a cell phone or an iPod so that the learner has flexibility in choosing when to do the learning. This kind of learning does not, of course, result in complete knowledge of the words, but results in an extremely important step forward in vocabulary knowledge. It needs to be supplemented by the other three strands of a course.

Strategy training

Another very important part of language focused learning is training in the strategies of guessing from context, learning using word cards, using word parts to help remember words, and using dictionaries to help vocabulary learning.

Such strategy training requires sustained attention to the strategies in class, so that learners gain guided practice in using the strategies correctly and eventually find it as easy to use strategies as to not use them. The dictionary use strategy and the word part strategy have not been the focus of very much research. There is however substantial research on learning from word cards and on guessing from context (Nation, 2001).

Multiword units

There is value in giving attention to the analysis and memorisation of multiword units. These are important in helping learners gain early fluency and accuracy in the language. It is important to realise however that most multiword units are not arbitrary combinations but follow normal grammar rules and the semantic constraints of the words that make them up. Giving deliberate attention to them however does provide a shortcut to early language use.

Boers and his colleagues (2006, 2007) have shown the effectiveness of giving deliberate attention to multiword figuratives. Research by Shin (Shin & Nation 2009) has also provided a useful list of multiword units.

Intensive reading

Intensive reading, of which the grammar translation method is a variant, is a useful way of giving deliberate attention to a range of language features within the context of language use. However, because it involves a lot of deliberate attention to language features, it is classified as part of the language-focused learning strand rather than the meaning-focused input strand. It involves the teacher and the learners working through a reading text giving attention to useful and generalisable features of the language (Nation, 2009b, Chapter 3).

Fluency development

Fluency development activities involve helping the learners make the best use of what they already know. Because of this, this strand of the course should not involve any new vocabulary or grammatical features, and should make use of texts and topics that are largely familiar to the learners. It is most effective to have separate fluency development for each of the four skills of listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Fluency development activities have the characteristics of being message focused, involving very easy material, involving some pressure to perform at a faster than usual speed, and involve reasonably large quantities of language use. Perhaps the strongest argument for having a substantial fluency development strand in the course is that learners' knowledge is not much use to them if it is not readily available when they want to use it.

Listening fluency

The listening to stories activity described above begins by being a meaning-focused input activity, but by the time the learners are part of the way through listening to the story, it has probably changed to become a fluency development activity because of the learners' familiarity with the story, the characters, and the language used in the story.

Listening to CDs of an easy graded reader either with or without the text is also a fluency development activity for listening.

Speaking fluency

One of my favourite speaking fluency activities is the 4/3/2 activity. In this activity the learners work in pairs. Learner A in each pair talks to learner B about a very easy topic for four minutes. Learner B listens carefully, shows interest but does not interrupt the talk at all. After four minutes is up, the teacher tells the learners to change partners, and learner A now delivers exactly the same talk to a new partner. After three minutes they change partners again and learner A now delivers the talk for the third time to a new partner for two minutes. The decreasing timeframe encourages learner A to speed up the delivery of the talk.

Research on this activity comparing the four-minute and the two-minute talks (Nation, 1989; Arevart & Nation, 1991) shows that this activity not only brings about increases in speed of delivery, but also a reduction of hesitations, and an increase in grammatical accuracy and grammatical complexity.

Reading speed

Probably the most effective way of increasing reading speed is to have a focused speed reading course. Such a course involves the learners reading easy texts, recording their time, and answering comprehension questions on the texts. Their speed and accuracy of comprehension is recorded on graphs.

Such courses typically bring about an increase of between 50% and 100% in learners' reading speed for a small investment of class time (Chung & Nation, 2006). Another activity that can contribute to reading fluency is reading very easy graded readers. When

learners read the very easy graded readers, they try to read as many as possible and as quickly as possible.

Writing fluency

Ten minute writing is a focused writing fluency development activity. In this activity two or three times a week the learners write for a strictly measured period of time of 10 minutes on very easy topics. The teacher does not comment on the grammatical accuracy or the organisation of the pieces of writing, but simply gives small amounts of feedback on the content, encouraging the learners to write more about that topic. The learners count the number of words that they have written in each piece of writing and record this on a graph.

This activity is under-researched. It is likely that the topic has a strong effect on the number of words written. It seems likely that increases in writing fluency will also be accompanied by increases in accuracy and complexity even though no specific attention is given to these features. This would be a good focus for future research.

Linked skills

Linked skills activities involve working on exactly the same topic using a succession of three of the language skills of listening, speaking, reading, and writing. For example, the learners may read about a topic, and then they talk to others about it, and finally they write about it. By the time they get to the final activity in the set of three, they are well in control of the language and content involved in the activity. They can thus perform the last of the three tasks at a fluent level. There are many possible combinations of the skills, and thus there are many possible linked skills activities. It is likely that the first of the activities in a linked skills series is meaning-focused input or output perhaps with elements of language-focused learning. The second activity would be clearly meaning-focused input or output, and the last activity in the series would be a fluency development activity. Such activities require only a little teacher preparation and keep the learners usefully busy for a good period of time.

General issues

The above description of the four strands of the course includes the activities that I think are the most useful for vocabulary development and language learning. Note that three of the four strands are meaning focused, and one is language focused. The principle of the four strands is that in a well-balanced course roughly equal time is given to each strand.

What is not in the course?

A notable feature of the activities in the course is that only a small proportion of them involve a focus on the teacher. As a general principle, learners rather than teachers should be doing most of the work in a class. It is therefore always useful to make sure that the teacher is not working too hard fronting activities.

Table 1 contains a list of the activities mentioned in this paper. They are classified according to whether they involve a focus on the teacher, individual work, or group work.

Table 1: The top activities and their work focus

Activity	Focus on the teacher	Individual work	Group work
Extensive reading		√	
Classroom management	√		
Listening to stories	√		
Listening to CDs		√	
Content-based instruction	√	√	√
Using word cards		√	
Strategy training	√		
Intensive reading	√		
4/3/2			√
Speed reading		√	
10 minute writing		√	
Linked skill activities	√	√	√

Table 1 shows that a reasonable number of the activities are still teacher focused, but they do not make up the majority of the activities in the course. Learners must eventually take responsibility for their own vocabulary learning, and individual work and group work provide good preparation for this responsibility.

Do we need a course book?

A course book is a very useful part of a course but it is not an essential part. A course book is fine if it uses good principles of vocabulary selection, and if the teacher ensures that there is a balance of the four strands. Even with a very prescribed course, it is possible to balance the strands. There are several vocabulary exercise books available for teaching the high-frequency words of English (Nation, 2009a) as well as words from the Academic Word List (Schmitt & Schmitt, 2005). These could be useful as individual work or home work activities.

What vocabulary?

So far we have looked at how vocabulary can be taught and learnt. However a very important part of the vocabulary planning for a course involves making sure that the right vocabulary is being focused on. An essential part of good course planning involves testing the learners to find out their vocabulary size. There are several tests available to do this. The Vocabulary Levels Test (Schmitt, Schmitt & Clapham, 2001) and the Vocabulary Size Test (Nation & Beglar, 2007; Beglar, 2010) are both available free from <http://www.victoria.ac.nz/lals/staff/paul-nation.aspx>. They allow teachers to find out whether the learners need to be focusing on high-frequency words, academic words or low-frequency words (Nation, 2001).

High-frequency words need to be met across the four strands of a course. They deserve attention during class time. Low-frequency words on the other hand make up a large group of words which occur so infrequently that they do not deserve deliberate attention from the teacher during a lesson. Learners however need to learn these words once they know the high-frequency words of the language, and the teacher's focus should be on training the learners in the strategies needed to learn them. These strategies include, in order of priority, guessing from context, learning using word cards, using word parts as mnemonic devices, and dictionary use (Nation, 2008).

Principles

The design of this vocabulary course is based on several principles. The two most influential in the design of the course are the principle of the four strands, and the frequency principle. The principle of the four strands is a format and presentation principle. It ensures that there is a good balance of learning opportunities throughout the course.

Four strands: A well-balanced language course has four equal strands of meaning-focused input, meaning-focused output, language-focused learning, and fluency development.

Each of these strands can also be stated as a principle.

Comprehensible input: Learners should have the opportunity to learn through message-focused listening and reading (meaning-focused input) where around 98% of the vocabulary is already familiar to them.

Output: Learners should be pushed to produce language through speaking and writing.

Fluency: Learners should become fluent in using what they already know in each of the four skills of listening, speaking, reading, and writing.

The principle guiding what vocabulary to learn is the frequency principle. This is a needs analysis and a content and sequencing principle, because it strongly affects what is learnt and in what order it is learnt.

Frequency: High-frequency items should be learnt before lower frequency items.

This principle needs to be accommodated to the interference principle.

Interference: The items in a language course should be sequenced so that items which are learned together have a positive effect on each other for learning and so that interference effects are avoided.

In this article we have looked at the importance of the learners working hard without the teacher doing too much work. This is more than one principle, because it includes the strategies and autonomy principle and the time on task principle.

Strategies and autonomy: Learners should be encouraged to develop the skill and motivation to take responsibility for their own learning.

Time on task: Learners should spend as much time as possible listening, speaking, reading, and writing.

The principles listed above are some of those that I consider most important in my ideal vocabulary course. There are of course other principles (see Nation and Macalister (2009) pages 38-39) and incorporating these in a course will improve its effectiveness.

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