PRACTICAL MEANS OF VOCABULARY LEARNING WITH A FOCUS ON THE FOUR SKILLS

Wesley Lockhart   Kanda Institute of Foreign Languages, Tokyo

wesleylockhart@yahoo.com

Abstract

There are various criteria to be considered by the teacher for vocabulary learning to occur. This paper will examine them. Students acquire vocabulary by different means of input, and to a lesser degree, output. The major source of input is reading, and it includes both 'guessing from context' and the use of graded readers. This paper will also consider other factors in vocabulary acquisition, such as: speaking, writing, listening, motivation, categories of vocabulary, vocabulary testing, types of tests, and actual word knowledge.

Keywords: guessing from context, graded readers, motivation

Introduction

The focus of this paper will be on the areas of reading, writing, speaking, and listening. It will present a range of aspects for vocabulary learning and teaching. The intention is to provide some of the strategies and theories associated with each that will prove useful for the second language teacher. Although the concepts in this paper can be utilized for any age or experience level, the focus is mainly on Japanese learners at the university level.

Four categories of vocabulary

It is quite possible to categorize vocabulary words into four principal types: high frequency, low frequency, academic, and technical.

High frequency words are a small group of words most used in everyday reading and writing. They cover 85% of the words likely to be encountered. High frequency words consist of the first 2000 words on the

General Service List. The General Service List is a catalog of the fundamental vocabulary of English in order of frequency. It was compiled by Michael West (1953a) in 1953 and has been amended several times since. Essentially, if learners do not know these first 2000 words, it is more or less futile to teach the rest as learners will not be able to read, write, or comprehend what is occurring in the classroom. The teacher should do everything possible in dedicated vocabulary classes, or other classes, to expose students to these high frequency words.

Low frequency words make up the greatest number of words in English, but may not be worth focusing time on, as there are simply too many and the cost benefit ratio is not worth it. The aim of the teacher is not to actually teach these words, unless they are part of a specific topic (work, vacation, fitness, etc.), but rather how to prepare learners how to deal with them as they are encountered. Nation (1990) determined that it is more efficient to spend class time teaching learning strategies such as guessing from context, deriving meaning from root words, or memorization techniques instead of spending too much class time on the actual words.

Technical words are those specialized words associated with a particular field (law, accounting, engineering, etc.). In relation to their relevant fields they are considered to be high frequency words, but in general, they are usually considered low frequency. These words should be incorporated into the subject matter of the course and can either be pre-taught or learned as they are encountered. Nation (2008) found that it is vital for the learning of technical vocabulary to take place as part of meaning focused input through listening and reading, in particular intensive reading related to the specific field.

Academic vocabulary comprises words that regularly occur across a wide range of academic subjects and fields. Coxhead (2000) compiled The Academic Word List which consists of 570 word families. A word family is based on the various forms a word can take. These words, in their different forms, are most likely to be encountered by those studying for academic purposes. Nation (2008, p.125) states that "the 570 word families make up around 10% of the running words in academic text, about 4% in newspapers and less than 2% of novels." Consequently, these words should be focused on intensively for those learners preparing for academic study, or who have specific academic objectives. Nation (2008) recommends that academic vocabulary be learned both receptively and productively through reading,

writing, speaking, and listening, including the deliberate teaching and study of the words. When teaching academic vocabulary, those words which are essential for the specific area of study should be the primary focus.

The Importance of Motivation

Sufficient motivation is essential because vocabulary learning is more or less limitless, and is a difficult process for many students. Thornbury (2002) determined that merely wanting to learn new words does not assure that these words will be committed to memory. Therefore students must be given exercises that require them to use the new vocabulary they have learned so as to further enhance reinforcement. Corson (1985) puts forth that motivation is basically the desire and opportunity to use a particular word. By focusing on subjects that students are interested in, such as sports, travel, music, future plans, etc., in conjunction with reading and speaking practice, we have found that this results in students being more receptive to learning as well as keeping their attention. Rivers (1983) contends that language teachers must arouse interest in words and a degree of personal excitement in the subject area.

The Importance of Reading

Incidental learning by means of guessing from context through intensive reading is considered by Nation (2001) as the most important source of all for vocabulary learning, although dedicated vocabulary books and other vocabulary- specific material generally focus on intentional vocabulary learning, and are also important for learning. Thornbury (2002), on the other hand, ascertains that extensive reading is the best method for learning to occur.

The distinction between these two types is as follows: intensive reading involves the close deliberate study of short texts averaging about 400 words. The goal is to understand the grammar, vocabulary and discourse of the text. Extensive reading consists of the reading of fairly long texts, thus providing necessary exposure to incidental learning. Extensive reading provides the opportunity to encounter words in their natural context, and also often provides essential repeated encounters with many of them. Research by Kachroo (1962), Salling (1959), and Crothers and Suppes (1967) suggests it takes from six to eight encounters with a word before learning takes place.

It is agreed that extensive reading should be for pleasure, rather than for information. Students should be allowed to choose their own reading

material, preferably from graded readers approved by the teacher. Teacher approval is necessary as students may choose readers either too easy or difficult for their particular reading level. A balance of the two types of reading should be considered for a well designed vocabulary program, with intensive reading focused on developing strategy and language, and extensive reading focused on reading skills and incidental vocabulary learning.

Guessing from Context

Nation (1990, p.130) states that guessing from context "is undoubtedly the most important vocabulary learning strategy. Its aim is for learners to be able to make a well-informed guess at the meaning of an unknown word in context without interrupting the reading too much." This is the skill which will enable learners to not only improve their vocabulary independently, but their reading ability as well. The learners use their reading skills to infer the meanings of unknown words. Guessing from context is the most important strategy for learning low frequency words. Learners should be doing this from very early on, as they would need two to three thousand words for this strategy to be effective. In theory, the learner can find enough clues in a passage to guess about 80% of unknown words. The benefits from guessing from context are that it gives learners a greater sense of independence if there is no teacher or dictionary to rely on, and as mentioned previously, is an important strategy for developing fluency in reading. The steps for guessing from context based on Nation (2008) are as follows:

1. What part of speech is it? Noun, verb, adjective, adverb, etc.
2. What type of clause or sentence is the word in?

    If it is a noun, what adjectives describe it, and what verbs are near it.

    If it is a verb, what nouns go with it, and whether it is modified by an adverb.

    If it is an adjective, what noun goes with it.

    If it is an adverb, what verb it is modifying.

3. Looking at the wider context, how do the surrounding clauses, sentences, and paragraphs relate? Seventy to eighty % of clues will be in the immediate and preceding text.
4. Guessing meaning. The learner uses the knowledge from the steps above to guess intuitively.

5. Check the guess. Replace the unknown word with the guess. If it makes sense it's probably right. Although nouns and verbs are relatively easy to guess, adjectives are much more difficult.

6. The last step would be to look the word up in a dictionary or ask the teacher (if either are accessible) to verify the guess.

Needless to say, the degree of difficulty or ease in accomplishing these steps will depend on the learner's age, motivation, interest (in the subject material), language level, education, and life experience. Daneman and Greene (1986) note that learners' success in guessing from context will vary according to the size of their working memory. Working memory can be generally defined as the vocabulary a learner already knows and can use. The amount of time spent practicing guessing from context will depend on the type of class and frequency of class meetings. For a 90 minute class meeting once a week, 10 to 15 minutes should be sufficient. Any longer and the students will most likely become bored or stressed and lose interest.

Graded Readers

The best source for extensive reading is considered to be graded readers. They are graded in terms of ability levels, vocabulary load, and grammatical complexity. They are either complete or condensed books which are simplified, most often novels, but sometimes other types such as travel, nature, history or even cartoons. They can include well known works from literature or works written specifically for the series. Graded readers based on current or well known movies are very popular with students. All have been carefully written to stay within certain vocabulary limits. Graded readers from Cambridge, Oxford, Penguin, and Hinemann among others contain different levels. A typical scale of six levels would consist of: Level I Beginner - 300 words, Level 2 Elementary - 600 words, Level 3 Pre-Intermediate - 1200 words, Level 4 Intermediate - 1700 words, Level 5 Upper-Intermediate - 2300 words, Level 6 Advanced - 3000 words.

It can be assumed a learner with a vocabulary of 600 words should be able to read all the books at Level 2. Nation and Wang (1999) suggest that learners should read as many books as possible to learn high frequency words. They recommend one graded reader every one or two weeks. Practically speaking, even though students are choosing books which are of interest to themselves, experience shows that two books per semester may be more realistic. This depends of course of the amount of time allowed or

required for each book by the teacher.

For students to write brief reports or fill in forms about their reading is very beneficial. The first and foremost reason is to check if the student has actually read the book, but also to reinforce some of the vocabulary they have learned. These should not be actual book reports but rather short forms including the title of the book, its level, how long it took to read, and a few brief comments. For example: did you like this book, why or why not, would you recommend it to others, what did you especially like about it, and what are ten new words you learned. The teacher can then either grade, write comments, or discuss the reports with the students. Nation and Wang (1999) concluded that grading reading is generally intended to reinforce previously learned vocabulary. If students know they will be graded or questioned it will give them the incentive to further study the vocabulary they list.

Besides reinforcing previously known vocabulary and encountering new items, graded readers play an important role in the development of reading skills, particularly that of reading fluency. They are also a good source of incidental vocabulary learning, particularly because of the opportunities for receptive repetition.

Vocabulary and Listening

The acquisition of vocabulary through listening will only be focused on briefly here as a means of vocabulary learning. Practically speaking, listening for new words and trying to deduce meaning from context is simply too difficult, especially for lower to intermediate level students. Hu and Nation (2000) contend that students would need at least a 98% knowledge of the vocabulary of the input (listening) for reasonable comprehension, and to have any practical success at guessing from context. This is roughly one unknown word in every 50, or two to three unknown words per minute. In the majority of Japanese university EFL classrooms this is simply not realistic. Although some very conscientious students do keep a vocabulary notebook, write down the unfamiliar words they encounter, and later look them up in a dictionary, this is not the typical case.

Vocabulary Listening Activities

Short stories and graded readers can be used for listening activities provided that the teacher takes care to read slowly and clearly so the listeners

are able to follow the story. Activities could include listening to graded readers and short stories while either reading along with the text, or without following the text. It is also useful to do listening to dictation in conjunction with cloze exercises. Whatever type of vocabulary listening activity is chosen, the most important factor is student interest. Elley (1989) explained that students need to be interested in what they are listening to. Not only should teachers select topics of interest, but this material should be presented in as a dramatic or stimulating manner as well.

Vocabulary and Speaking

The learning of vocabulary is aided by speaking in the sense that it allows learners to produce and reinforce new vocabulary they have learned, usually from incidental or intentional reading. In most speaking books or integrated skills books, this typically takes the form of speaking exercises focusing on the target vocabulary of a particular topic. Vocabulary speaking exercises range from highly controlled repetition drills to open ended discussion questions. Nation (2001) says that learners should become fluent with what vocabulary they have learned since the beginning of a course through continual reinforcement. Most speaking books, dedicated vocabulary books, and reading books will do this to varying degrees.

In deciding and planning vocabulary components for a class, the teacher should give serious thought to the design of the speaking activities so they do not compromise the communicative nature of the activity while still providing ample opportunity for the practice of new vocabulary. It is noteworthy to point out that before the actual speaking activity, a brief discussion period in the students' native language can prove beneficial for the understanding of new words (as well as activity instructions). Knight (1996) found that although students were using the target language a great deal, they were actually discussing the new words among themselves in their native language.

Learners should be allowed to control some of the topic agenda. This would include asking additional questions using: who, where, when, what, what kind of, why, how much, how many, etc. Three or four questions pertaining to the topic using any of these would be sufficient. It is also important to ensure that vocabulary demands in such exercises do not create too much of a burden on the learners so as to impede meaning- focused attention and fluency development.

Vocabulary and Writing

Practically speaking, writing doesn't play a significant role in vocabulary acquisition. It is more of an indicator of how proficient the writer is in the target language. However, writing is very important as a means of production and reinforcement, and a certain amount of learning does take place, particularly with highly motivated students. Nation (2008, p. 85) states "Learning to use a word productively in writing involves considerable learning that is not needed in listening or reading or in speaking. This learning includes spelling, the use of words in sentences, and using vocabulary to signal the organization of written text."

Writing should ideally be included as the final component of a vocabulary exercise, the first being the intentional learning of the words, the second being reinforcement through speaking exercises, an the third, a writing exercise using the target vocabulary. This writing can take the form of writing simple sentences, paragraphs, or compositions. If done in class, the teacher can check and make corrections or suggestions on an ongoing basis. If the work is to be handed in and marked later, the teacher can write appropriate comments or suggestions. Praise for the correct use of new vocabulary is essential for student confidence building. Many teachers require a second or final draft of the written work incorporating the suggestions or corrections.

How much time spent on a word group depends on the students' requirements. Academic, technical, or relevant low-frequency words should be given more time if the student will actually have a greater use for them in the future. Low-frequency words and non-topic specific words may not need as much time.

Actually 'Knowing' Words

Considering whether a learner actually understands or 'knows' a word involves several points. These include a knowledge of meaning, pronunciation, grammar, collocations, idioms, connotation, and register. It is worthwhile to take a brief look at each in turn.

Meaning not only includes the literal definition as found in a dictionary (denotation), but also its meaning in context or relation to the words or sentences around it. In actuality, the learner should know both the actual meaning of the word and the context of how it is being used in that instance. According to Higa (1965) words should be used in a meaningful context thus contributing significantly to actual learning.

Usually, the correct pronunciation of a word is essential for effective communication to occur. However, in a dialog, the teacher does not want to interrupt the flow of the conversation by stopping to correct pronunciation, so subsequent modeling of the word by the teacher will accomplish this. A further consideration in relation to pronunciation is the teacher's own receptiveness to students' poor pronunciation. The experienced teacher is so used to being exposed to improper English pronunciation that they can usually readily understand it. What many students say when visiting an English speaking country for the first time is that they could often not be understood. Therefore, teachers should not become too complacent about accepting poor pronunciation.

Another important factor in both speaking and especially writing is grammar. It encompasses the correct forms and derivatives of a word and how it is used in relation to the surrounding text or dialog. Students should know what part of speech a word is, and the correct usage of its derivatives; for example: know, knowing, knew, knowledge. The teacher should determine how much attention will be given to grammatical explanations depending on the learning situation. Grammar correction for writing is essential as it allows the student to actually see the correct form and thus have a better chance of retaining it. Grammar correction during speaking is also beneficial, but students may not always retain this knowledge unless they take notes. As stated above, the teacher does not want to interrupt the flow of the conversation by constantly stopping to correct grammar. Subsequent modeling of the correct grammatical form by the teacher will hopefully accomplish this.

Words that often occur together are called collocations. For example: let's go, open up, and pay off. Some collocations are very logical while others are more idiomatic. The more idiomatic kind can only be memorized while the more logical ones can be either be explained by the teacher or reasoned out by the learner. Pawley and Syder (1983) propose that the reason native speakers can speak with such fluency is that they have such a large volume of these memorized sequences on hand and can instantly call upon them without having to think about their construction.

According to Grant and Bauer (2004), idioms are those multi-word units that cannot be understood by a second language learner merely by understanding the meaning of their components. They must be memorized

as whole units. The teacher should make an effort to expose learners to the more common idioms likely to be encountered in everyday listening and reading.

The idea or impression that is implied by a word (rather than its actual meaning), is called connotation. For example the word 'great' could imply a negative connotation as opposed to its literal definition of something very good. Another example would be the differences between 'smell' and 'stink'. The learner should be mindful of the attitude and sentiment of the speakers intent. It is up to the teacher to explain these nuances as the learners come across them.

The degree of formality or politeness of words or phrases is called register. This is determined by the relationship of the speakers. Students often tend to speak, particularly to the teacher while using the second language, in a manner they would never do so in their first language. Teachers should explain students' misuse of words they do not fully comprehend and wrongly use in a classroom situation.

The Purpose of Testing

As far as testing for vocabulary learning goes, it could reasonably be said that the reason for testing is to reliably determine the degree to which learning has taken place. Testing provides feedback to both students and teachers on the effectiveness of a class, program, or course. Nation, (1982), said that vocabulary learning should be measured for both recognition as well as recall. Thornbury (2002) contends that vocabulary testing has a useful 'backwash effect.' Namely, that if students know they will be tested, they will be motivated to study harder thus increasing the possibility of word retention. Most vocabulary tests are aimed at only one or two aspects of word knowledge, usually 'meaning' and / or 'correct grammatical form.' How often to test vocabulary is a choice best made by the teacher and should take into consideration, the amount, type of vocabulary, the need of the actual items, and student ability.

Different Types of tests

Generally speaking, vocabulary tests can either be receptive (listening and reading) or productive (speaking and writing). Some examples of common receptive tests would include cloze tests with an accompanying word list, multiple choice tests, matching word to definition tests, and

matching meaning in context tests. Examples of common productive tests would include cloze tests without an accompanying word list, writing sentences or paragraphs from pre-taught vocabulary, and speaking tests where students must converse using pre-taught vocabulary. According to Nation (2001, p.373), the following are considerations for choosing the type of test to be administered:

1. In order to find out where learners are experiencing difficulty so that something can be done about it (diagnostic tests).

2. To see whether a recently studied group of words has been learned (short-term achievement tests).

3. To see whether a course has been successful in teaching particular words (long-term achievement tests).

4. To see how much vocabulary learners know (proficiency tests).

Anyone interested in an in-depth analysis of vocabulary testing would benefit from Read's (2000) *Assessing Vocabulary.*

Conclusion

In order for the teacher to be most effective in ensuring that beneficial vocabulary learning occurs, a thorough knowledge of vocabulary learning and teaching techniques in the four skills is essential . The main focus should be centered on the various types of reading. The teacher should emphasize to students to use the presented words as often as possible in the discussion and writing portions of the class to contribute towards learning. The target vocabulary should be elicited as often as is considered appropriate. It cannot be stressed enough that student interest in the subject matter is of the utmost importance for learning to take place. According to Higa (1965) words are best used in a meaningful context thus contributing significantly to actual learning.

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