Best Practice in Vocabulary Teaching and Learning

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Vocabulary can be learned in a variety of ways. The most common of these is incidental learning through listening and reading using context clues to work out the meaning. Vocabulary knowledge can also be enriched through having to produce vocabulary (Joe, Nation, and Newton, 1996) in spoken or written form. The quality and thoughtfulness of the production influences the quality of storage of the word.

In this paper, the focus is on a less fashionable way of learning vocabulary - through the direct conscious study of words, both in and out of context.

The best form focused vocabulary instruction involves looking at a word as part of a system rather than as part of a message. This means giving attention to the underlying concept of formally related words (head of the school, head of a bed, head of a match, ...), giving attention to word building devices, giving attention to the range and types of collocations of a word, and giving attention to the range of clues to the word's meaning provided by context. It is also useful to focus on form by looking at words isolated from context and as individual items. There is substantial research in this area and it shows how learners can take the first steps in quickly learning a large vocabulary (Nation, 1982).

THE VALUE OF FORM FOCUSED VOCABULARY LEARNING

Form focused vocabulary learning has four main values. It speeds up vocabulary learning. It allows large amounts of vocabulary to be available in explicit knowledge for meaning focused use and thus enter implicit knowledge. It raises awareness of the systematic features of vocabulary. It may contribute directly to implicit knowledge. Let us look at each of these.

1   Larsen-Freeman and Long (1993) see one of the clearest findings from research on instructed second language acquisition as being that instruction can speed up the rate of learning. This finding is certainly true for second language vocabulary development (Nation, 1982). This research has focused on the initial learning of vocabulary and on the quantity of items learned. There has been very little research on the effect of form focused instruction on the quality of vocabulary knowledge.

2   Most form focused vocabulary learning probably results initially in explicit knowledge. This vocabulary is available for meaning focused use if the time pressure and processing load on the user is not too great. Thus it is likely that form focused learning techniques like the keyword technique, learning from word part analysis, or rote learning from cards do not directly result in the build up of implicit knowledge. The `depth' of the form focused learning will determine how available the vocabulary is for meaning focused use.

The quality of the meaning focused use will determine if the word becomes a part of implicit knowledge or remains only in explicit knowledge. When learning survival Spanish, I learned the phrase "pare aqui" (Stop here!) to use with taxi drivers. It happened that I was in a taxi with colleagues and we were looking for the building we

were going to. Suddenly I recognised it, and I was able to retrieve "pare aqui" to stop the taxi. While other parts of my learning of Spanish have disappeared, that is one of the parts that has remained. If the input from explicit knowledge is to enter implicit knowledge, learners must have plenty of opportunities for memorable meaning focused use. The great value of form focused vocabulary learning is that it allows a store of knowledge to be available for such use and hopefully add to the development of implicit knowledge.

3   Just as the grammar of the language contains systematic features, so does the vocabulary. Form focused attention to these features will speed up the development of explicit knowledge and will also make learners more aware of them when they are met in language use. This awareness will make them more likely to be noticed and thus more likely to be acquired.

4   This discussion of form focused vocabulary learning sees no difference between the learning of grammar and the learning of vocabulary. The same model of learning applies to both. If the model is correct, it would be interesting to look at the direct effect of form focused instruction on implicit knowledge. Vocabulary is less likely than grammar to be affected by developmental sequences, and so there may be more opportunity for form focused instruction to contribute directly to implicit knowledge. What kinds of form focused learning are most likely to add directly to implicit knowledge? What are the equivalents of developmental sequences in vocabulary learning? - lexical sets? semantic features? collocations?

THE REQUIREMENTS OF FORM FOCUSED VOCABULARY INSTRUCTION

1   Vocabulary instruction should focus on useful items. We have more frequency information about vocabulary than any other part of the language. What this information shows is that it is essential for learners to have good control over the relatively small number of high frequency words. This group of 2,000 to 3,000 word families makes up such a large proportion of both spoken and written use that it is difficult to use the language effectively without a good knowledge of them. These words can be found in the General Service List of English Words (West, 1953) and the University Word List (Nation, 1990).

    For learners who have a good knowledge of the high frequency words, the focus of instruction should be on learning and coping strategies, including using context clues for inferring meaning, and using word parts and other mnemonic procedures for learning new low frequency words.

2   Vocabulary instruction should involve thoughtful processing so that the words are remembered. This means that the words will at least be available for monitored use. Teachers should evaluate the procedures they use and the procedures their learners use to see their effectiveness. One way of doing this is to look at them from a `levels of processing' viewpoint (Craik and Tulving, 1975; Baddeley, 1990: 160-173), to see how thoughtful the learners have to be when they use a particular procedure. Evaluating a procedure from this point of view can involve asking questions like these.

Are the learners giving attention to more than one aspect of the word? For example, meaning, form, use.

Are the learners being original and creative in the way they look at the word?

Are the learners relating the word to previous knowledge?

3   Vocabulary instruction should avoid grouping words that will interfere with each other. Research on the form and meaning relationships between words shows that near synonyms, opposites, free associates, and members of a lexical set such as names of fruit or items of clothing interfere with each other and make learning more difficult if they are learned together (Higa, 1963; Tinkham, 1993). This means that if fat and thin are both new items for a learner, and if they are learned at the same time, the learner will have difficulty in learning which is which and not mixing them up. Unfortunately most course designers are not aware of this research and deliberately group words in this way.

4   Vocabulary instruction should take account of the flexibility and creativity involved in normal vocabulary use by drawing attention to the systematic features of vocabulary. This means giving attention to affixes, the underlying meaning of words, and the way they collocate with other words.

5   Vocabulary instruction should make sure that there are opportunities for the words to enter implicit knowledge, and thus be readily accessible for meaning focused use. form focused instruction is a means to an end and that end is not reached unless learners can easily find the words they need when they are using the language. It is therefore important to make sure that words that are learned have plenty of opportunity to be used.

TECHNIQUES AND PROCEDURES

The following description of techniques and procedures has been arranged according to proficiency level - beginner, intermediate, and advanced. The description of word parts is based on Bauer and Nation (1993) which describes a series of levels of affixes, with the inflectional affixes at Level 2, and levels 3 to 6 consisting of derivational affixes which can be attached to free morphemes.

Beginners

For adult beginners, it is useful to have a rapid expansion of vocabulary through direct vocabulary learning. An effective way of doing this is to make use of Vocabulary cards. These are small cards (about 4cm x 3cm) with the second language word on one side and the first language translation on the other. Particularly at the beginning level, it is useful to have a phrase containing the new word along with the word. Learners use these cards in their own time, looking at them frequently for a short time. It is good to change the order of the cards as they are looked at to avoid a serial effect in learning. The use of such cards should be combined with mnemonic techniques such as the keyword technique, or word part analysis, or simply creating a mental picture of the word or a situation where it is used. Nation (1982) reviews the considerable amount of research on this rote learning procedure.

Even at an early stage of language learning, it is worth looking at word building devices. The inflectional suffixes of English are a good start as they are all frequently used.

Because the guessing from context strategy is so useful, it is worth practising it as early as possible. At this stage many of the context clues will come from the situational context rather than the linguistic context. Use of a guided guessing procedure will add some depth of processing to the learning of new words. At this level, direct teaching of vocabulary is useful. The techniques used can include the use of first language definitions, synonyms, pictures, or demonstration. Some items, particularly numbers, greetings and polite phrases should be practised to high level of fluency. The teacher can suggest mnemonics for the words, but this should be regarded more as training in getting learners to create their own mnemonics, because research indicates that mnemonic tricks created by each learner result in better retention than those provided by others. Here are some examples for learning languages other than English.

Nana (meaning "seven" in Japanese) is easy to learn because the shape of the figure 7 is like the shape of a (ba)nana.

Khâw (meaning "rice" in Thai) sounds like cow in English. The learner can think of an image of a cow eating rice, or a cow made of rice.

Kaiki (meaning "all of it" in Finnish) sounds a little bit like cake in English, so think of an image of someone buying all the cakes in a shop.

Intermediate

An important focus at the intermediate level is expanding the uses that can be made of known words. This means drawing attention to the underlying meaning of a word by seeing its use in a variety of contexts. Exploring the meanings of words like head, fork, or agree can be a useful activity. This type of activity can be done inductively with the learners going in to the underlying meaning through the analysis of many examples, or deductively by going out from a meaning to examples.

The guessing from context strategy should continue to be practised with attention being given mainly to clues in the linguistic context (see Nation, 1990, for various ways of doing this).

Word parts should be used to help remember the meanings of new words. These should include affixes from levels 3 and 4 of Bauer and Nation (1993) which include

> Level 3
> -able, -er, -ish, -less, -ly, -ness, -th, -y, non-, un-, all with restricted uses.
>
> Level 4
> -al, -ation, -ess, -ful, -ism, -ist, -ity, -ize, -ment, -ous, in-, all with restricted uses.

Examples of the **keyword strategy** have been given above with nana, Khâw and kaiki. It is worth formalising the strategy at this stage. The keyword strategy links the form of an unknown word to its meaning by using a keyword usually taken from the first language.

Here is an example. Let us imagine a Spanish speaking learner of English wants to learn the English word car. She then thinks of a Spanish word that sounds like car, for example caro (which means "expensive". The learner then has to think of the meanings "car" and "expensive" acting together in an image, for example, a very expensive car. The keyword caro thus provides a form and meaning link for the meaning of car.

The keyword procedure can be broken into these steps.

1   Look at the second language word and think of a first language word that sounds like it or sounds like its beginning. This first language word is the keyword.

2   Think of the meaning of the second language word and the meaning of the first language word joined together in some way. This is where imagination is needed.

3   Make a mental picture of these two meanings joined together.

There are many techniques that can be used at this level to help learning vocabulary.

It's my word (Mhone, 1988) involves a learner reporting on a word that was learned out of class recently. The reporting can follow a pattern involving saying where the word was met, what it means, how it is used, and how it can be easily remembered.

Each week the teacher can provide a time for revising the vocabulary worked on previously. One person in the class can be given the job of keeping a note of words to be revised as they occur. During the revision time the words can be dictated in sentences to the learners. They can be written on the blackboard for the learners to pronounce or break into parts. They can be used in collocation activities where learners work in groups to put them into a variety of linguistic contexts.

The activities at the beginning and intermediate levels should focus on the essential general service vocabulary of English of approximately 2,000 words.

Advanced

At the advanced level, learners who intend to study in English at senior high school or university need to focus on the academic vocabulary of English. This vocabulary can be found in the University Word List (Nation, 1990). All learners at this level need to refine the strategies they need for dealing with the large number of low frequency words that they will meet. These strategies include, in order of importance, guessing unknown words from context, using word parts to remember the meanings of words, and using mnemonic techniques. At this level, there is little value in direct teaching of vocabulary although learners should be doing substantial amounts of direct learning. The main focus of teaching should be on strategy development.

MONITORING VOCABULARY GROWTH

When observing communication tasks with a vocabulary learning goal, teachers should look for the following things.

1   The wanted vocabulary is being used in the task. This can be observed by tape-recording the learners performing the task or by setting up groups so that one learner in the group does not participate in the discussion, but is an observer who keeps a record of the use of particular words. Here is a sample observation sheet.

An observation task
Look at the text or input for the activity and choose no more than 10 words that might be new to your learners and that might occur in the activity. Write them in a list in the table below. While the learners do the activity record how often they use each word by putting a mark next to each word in your list as you hear it used. If the learners use the word in a different phrase or sentence from which it was used in the text, make a note of the new phrase or sentence.

Words	Number occurrences	New uses

2   The wanted vocabulary is being used in new contexts that the learner has created. The observation sheet above has a section for noting this. Let us look at an example. On the instruction sheet for a ranking activity, the following phrase occurs which contains the unknown word appearance - "health and appearance suggestions". During the discussion a learner used this word in the following context which had not been modelled for the learner - "People are interested in their appearance." The reason for observing this is that research on learning shows that "generative" (personally created) use of an item is more likely to result in learning than copied use (Hall, 1991; Stahl and Clark, 1987).

3   As far as vocabulary learning is concerned, a teacher should not be too worried if learners are not participating equally in an activity. Research shows that in most group activities the work load and amount of participation is rarely equally shared and there is strong evidence for vicarious learning. However, for the development of fluency and accuracy skills, active participation is necessary and so it is worth observing if some learners are consistently avoiding participation.

A good vocabulary component of a course ensures that there is a roughly equal balance of learning through listening and reading, producing through speaking and writing, direct formal study of vocabulary, and activities that get learners working fluently with known vocabulary. This paper has attempted to show what could be in the formal study part of the vocabulary component.

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