

Teaching Vocabulary

Paul Nation

Victoria University of Wellington, New Zealand

Biography:

Paul Nation teaches in the School of Linguistics and Applied Language Studies at Victoria University of Wellington, New Zealand. He has taught in Indonesia, Thailand, the United States, Finland, and Japan. His specialist interests are language teaching methodology and vocabulary learning.

Introduction:

Deliberately teaching vocabulary is one of the least efficient ways of developing learners' vocabulary knowledge but nonetheless it is an important part of a well-balanced vocabulary programme.

The main problem with vocabulary teaching is that only a few words and a small part of what is required to know a word can be dealt with at any one time. This limitation also applies to incidental learning from listening or reading, but it is much easier to arrange for large amounts of independent listening and reading than it is to arrange for large amounts of teaching. Teaching can effectively deal with only a small amount of information about a word at a time. The more complex the information is, the more likely the learners are to misinterpret it.

Table 1: Ways of quickly giving attention to words

1	Quickly give the meaning by (a) using an L1 translation, (b) using a known L2 synonym or a simple definition in the L2, (c) showing an object or picture, (d) giving quick demonstration, (e) drawing a simple picture or diagram, (f) breaking the word into parts and giving the meaning of the parts and the whole word (the word part strategy), (g) giving several example sentences with the word in context to show the meaning, (h) commenting on the underlying meaning of the word and other referents.
2	Draw attention to the form of the word by (a) showing how the spelling of the word is like the spelling of known words, (b) giving the stress pattern of the word and its pronunciation, (c) showing the prefix, stem and suffix that make up the word, (d) getting the learners to repeat the pronunciation of the word, (e) writing the word on the board, (f) pointing out any spelling irregularity in the word.
3	Draw attention to the use of the word by (a) quickly showing the grammatical pattern the word fits into (countable/uncountable, transitive/intransitive, etc), (b) giving a

few similar collocates, (c) mentioning any restrictions on the use of the word (formal, colloquial, impolite, only used in the United States, only used with children, old fashioned, technical, infrequent), (d) giving a well known opposite, or a well known word describing the group or lexical set it fits into.

Principles

- 1 Keep the teaching simple and clear. Don't give complicated explanations.
- 2 Relate the present teaching to past knowledge by showing a pattern or analogies.
- 3 Use both oral and written presentation - write it on the blackboard as well as explaining.
- 4 Give most attention to words that are already partly known.
- 5 Tell the learners if it is a high frequency word that is worth noting for future attention.
- 5 Don't bring in other unknown or poorly known related words like near synonyms, opposites, or members of the same lexical set.

We need to see learning any particular word as being a cumulative process where knowledge is built up over a series of varied meetings with the word. At best, teaching can provide only one or two of these meetings. The others involve deliberate study, meeting through meaning-focused input and output, and fluency development activities.

The positive effects of vocabulary teaching are that it can provide help when learners feel it is most needed. This is particularly true for vocabulary teaching that occurs in the context of message-focused activities involving listening, speaking, reading and writing, and where the teaching deals with items that learners see as being very relevant for the activity. Table 1 lists ways of quickly dealing with words. The small amount of research on such teaching indicates that it has a strong effect on vocabulary learning.

The first decision to make when teaching a word is to decide whether the word is worth spending time on or not. If the word is a low frequency word and is not a useful technical word and not one that is particularly useful for the learners, it should be dealt with as quickly as possible. Usually when words come up in the context of a reading or listening text, or of learners need a word or phrase when speaking or writing, they need quick help which does not interrupt the activity too much.

Sometimes however a teacher may want to spend time on a word. In general, time should be spent on high frequency words or words that fill a language need that the learners have. When deciding how to spend time on a word, it is useful to consider the learning burden of the word.

What is involved in knowing a word?

Part of effective vocabulary teaching involves working out what needs to be taught about a word. This is called the learning burden of a word and differs from word to word according to the ways in which the word relates to first language knowledge and already existing knowledge of the second language and or other known languages.

Table 2 Discovering learning burden

Meaning	Form and meaning Concept and referents Associations	Is the word a loan word in the L1? Is there an L1 word with roughly the same meaning? Does the word fit into the same sets as an L1 word of similar meaning?
Form	Spoken form Written form Word parts	Can the learners repeat the word accurately if they hear it? Can the learners write the word correctly if they hear it? Can the learners identify known affixes in the word?
Use	Grammatical functions Collocation Constraints on use	Does the word fit into predictable grammar patterns? Does the word have the same collocations as an L1 word of similar meaning? Does the word have the same restrictions on its use as an L1 word of similar meaning?

The way to work out the learning burden systematically is to consider each aspect of what is involved in knowing a word. Table 2 lists the kinds of questions that can be asked to discover the learning burden of a word. When asking the questions it is necessary to have a particular L1 in mind. If the teacher has a class of learners with a variety of L1s or if the teacher has no knowledge of the learners= L1 then the best that can be done is to think if the word fits into regular patterns in the L2. For example, is it regularly spelled? Does it fit into the same grammatical patterns as other L2 words of similar meaning? Does it have a narrow range of senses with a clear underlying core meaning?

Table 3 Useful vocabulary learning exercises that require little or no preparation

Word meaning	
Find the core meaning.	The learners look at dictionary entries and find the shared meaning in the various senses of the word.
Word card testing	The learners work in pairs. Each learner gives their pack of cards to their partner who tests them on their recall of the meaning by saying the word and getting them to give the translation. This can also be done by giving the translation and getting them to give the word form.

Using the dictionary: When a useful word occurs in a reading text, the teacher trains learners in the strategy of using a dictionary.

Guessing from context. Whenever a guessable word occurs in a reading text the teacher trains the learners in the guessing from context strategy.

Word form

Spelling dictation The teacher says words or phrases and the learners write them.

Pronunciation The teacher writes words on the board and the learners pronounce them getting feedback from the teacher. Each learner picks what word to say.

Word parts The teacher writes words on the board and the learners cut them into parts and give the meanings of the parts.

Word use

Suggest collocates The learners work together in pairs or small groups to list collocates for a given word.

Word detectives A learner reports on a word he or she has found in their reading. They talk about the meaning, spelling, pronunciation, word parts, etymology, collocates and grammar of the word.

Choosing the words

- 1 As words come up in class, one learner (the class secretary) has the job of noting them for future attention.
- 2 The teacher chooses words that have appeared in work in the last week or two.
- 3 The teacher chooses words that the learners need to know.

Let us look at two examples to see how learning burden can be worked out. The purpose of working out learning burden is to find what aspects will be difficult when learning a particular word and thus where the teacher can give useful help.

Let us take the word *friend* as an example. We will look at it from the point of view of a native speaker of Thai. *Friend* has a few pronunciation difficulties for a Thai, namely the /r/ sound and the two consonant clusters /fr/ and /nd/, but they may not be so much of a problem by the time this word is learned. The spelling of the word is not wholly predictable. If the learners heard the word they would want to write it as *frend*, so the *ie* part needs some attention (*ie* representing /e/ is an irregular spelling in English). It does not have any prefixes or suffixes, but it may be worth giving attention to *friendly*. *Friend* is not a loan word in Thai, so learning is needed here. Thai has a word that is roughly similar in meaning to *friend* (puean). Thais however use other words for *friend* too, but this need not be a concern at this point. *Friend* has the collocates *good* (*a good friend*), *close* (*a close friend*), *old* (*an old friend*), *family* (*He=s a friend of the family*). *Friend* is a regular countable noun. It cannot be used as a verb. It has no restrictions on its use. That is, it is not a rude word or a formal word, and is not restricted to a particular dialect of English. Thus we can see the learning burden of *friend* lies largely in its spelling, the form-meaning connection (Thais have to learn that *friend* means Apuean@), and in its collocations.

Table 4 Useful prepared exercises for vocabulary learning

<p>Meaning Word and meaning matching Labelling Sentence completion Crossword puzzles Semantic analysis Completing lexical sets</p> <p>Form Following spelling rules Recognising word parts Building word family tables</p> <p>Use Sentence completion Collocation matching Collocation tables Interpreting dictionary entries</p>
<p>Criteria A good vocabulary exercise</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1 focuses on useful words, preferably high frequency words that have already been met before. 2 focuses on a useful aspect of learning burden. It has a useful learning goal. 3 gets learners to meet or use the word in ways that establish new mental connections for the word. It sets up useful learning conditions involving generative use. 4 involves the learners in actively searching for and evaluating the target words in the exercise. 5 does not bring related unknown or partly known words together. It avoids interference.

Let us take the adjective *free* as a second example. The form aspects - sound, spelling and word parts - do not need particular attention. *Free* is a loan word in Thai but only has the meaning 'does not need to be paid for' (free of charge). Its most common meaning in English however is 'not restricted, not tied down' (free to do something) and this is probably best treated as a different word. For this meaning, learning is needed and the teacher should give attention to the various related uses of *free* drawing attention to their shared meaning - 'Are you free at six o'clock? They were set free. Free speech. The free world. Free can also be a verb but this use could be left until later. Free-s collocates include *world, trade, time*, and these deserve some attention. So the learning burden of *free* lies largely in the area of meaning with this reflected in the collocations.

Working out the learning burden of a word helps a teacher make the second important decision about teaching words, namely, what aspects of the word should I spend time on?

As well as providing direct teaching on those aspects of the word that require attention, the teacher can also set the learners to work on some of these aspects. Table 3 lists a range of vocabulary activities that require very little preparation by the teacher. Note that these activities have been organised according to the aspects of what is involved in knowing a word. Many of these activities involve learners working together in pairs or small groups.

Prepared vocabulary exercises

Some vocabulary exercises need to be carefully prepared in advance. These may be part of a course book and may be planned to systematically cover a certain area of vocabulary. Table 4 lists the most useful of these. The major values of prepared exercises are that they can be made to systematically cover an area of vocabulary, and learners can do them independently of the teacher. Most published books of prepared vocabulary exercises use the *Teach, test, and mark* format. That is, some aspects of the words are taught, and then the learners do labelling, completion, rewording, classifying, correcting or matching activities which they later mark using an answer key (see for example McCarthy and Dell, 1994). If such exercises are done in pairs or small groups, then there is the added opportunity for learners to learn from each other.

Getting repeated attention to vocabulary

Useful vocabulary needs to be met again and again to ensure it is learned. In the early stages of learning the meetings need to be reasonably close together, preferably within a few days, so that too much forgetting does not occur. Later meetings can be very widely spaced with several weeks between each meeting.

Table 5 Ways of helping learners remember previously met words

- | | |
|---|---|
| 1 | Spend time on a word by dealing with two or three aspects of the word, such as its spelling, its pronunciation, its parts, related derived forms, its meaning, its collocations, its grammar, or restrictions on its use. |
| 2 | Get learners to do graded reading and listening to stories at the appropriate level. |
| 3 | Get learners to do speaking and writing activities based on written input that contains the words. |
| 4 | Get learners to do prepared activities that involve testing and teaching vocabulary, such as <i>Same or different?</i> , <i>Find the difference</i> , <i>Word and picture matching</i> . |
| 5 | Set aside a time each week for word by word revision of the vocabulary that occurred previously. List the words on the board and do the following activities.
a) go round the class getting each learner to say one of the words.
b) break the words into parts and label the meanings of the parts.
c) suggest collocations for the words.
d) recall the sentence where the word occurred and suggest another context.
e) look at derived forms of the words. |

High frequency vocabulary needs to be met across all four strands of a course - meaning-focused input, meaning-focused output, language-focused learning, and fluency development. Some low frequency vocabulary may not need to become part of the learners' output and so it is not important for it to be part of the meaning-focused output strand. Table 5 lists various ways of getting learners to meet the same vocabulary again and again.

The direct teaching approach suggested in this article is based on the following guidelines.

- 1 If the word is a high frequency word or one that will be of continuing importance for the learners, a) give it attention, preferably focussing on its learning burden, b) make sure the learners will come back to it again. If the word is a low frequency word, pass over it without comment or give some brief attention to it focussing on what is needed in that instance.
- 2 Direct teaching should be clear and simple. Rely on repeated meetings to develop an understanding of the complexities of a word. Don't try to deal with the complexities by intensive teaching.

The deliberate teaching of vocabulary is only one part of the language -focused learning strand of a course. The amount of time spent on it needs to be balanced against the other types of language-focused learning such as intensive reading, deliberate learning, and strategy training, and needs to be balanced against the other three strands of meaning-focused input, meaning-focused output, and fluency development. Table 6 tries to show this wider perspective, indicating the small amount of time that should be given to vocabulary teaching.

Table 6. The proportion of time in a course that should be given to vocabulary teaching

Meaning-focused input		
Meaning-focused output		
Language-focused learning	pronunciation vocabulary	strategy development intensive reading word card learning vocabulary teaching
	grammar discourse	
Fluency development		

Vocabulary learning, both within and outside the domain of reading has been a key part of English education in many Asian contexts where it has been traditionally stressed. There is a need for more student centered approaches that improve both the retention and usage in a

progressive fashion that goes beyond rote memorization. The analysis here is supportive to this end.

References

Atkins, B.T.S. and Varantola, K. (1997). Monitoring dictionary use. *International Journal of Lexicography* 10, 1: 1-45.

Baxter, J. (1980). The dictionary and vocabulary behaviour: a single word or a handful? *TESOL Quarterly* 14, 3: 325-336.

Daulton, F.E. (1998). Japanese loanword cognates and the acquisition of English vocabulary. *The Language Teacher* 22, 1: 17-25.

Knight, T. (1996). Learning vocabulary through shared speaking tasks. *The Language Teacher* 20, 1: 24-29.

Lado, R., Baldwin, B. and Lobo, F. (1967). *Massive vocabulary expansion in a foreign language beyond the basic course: the effects of stimuli, timing and order of presentation*. U.S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, Washington, D.C.: 5-1095.

Lameta-Tufuga, E. (1994). *Using the Samoan Language for Academic Learning Tasks*. Unpublished MA thesis, Victoria University of Wellington, New Zealand.

Laufer, B. and Kimmel, M. (1997). Bilingualised dictionaries: How learners really use them. *System* 25, 3: 361-369.

Laufer, B. and Shmueli, K. (1997). Memorizing new words: Does teaching have anything to do with it? *RELC Journal* 28, 1: 89-108.

McKeown, M.G. (1993). Creating effective definitions for young word learners. *Reading Research Quarterly* 28, 1: 17-31.

Mishima, T. (1967). An experiment comparing five modalities of conveying meaning for the teaching of foreign language vocabulary. *Dissertation Abstracts* 27: 3030-3031A.

Nation, I.S.P. (2001). *Learning Vocabulary in Another Language*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Nation, I.S.P. (1997). L1 and L2 use in the classroom: a systematic approach. *TESL Reporter* 30, 2: 19-27.

Nation, I.S.P. (1978). Translation and the teaching of meaning: some techniques. *ELT Journal* 32, 3: 171-175.

Ringbom, H. (1987). *The Role of the First Language in Foreign Language Learning*.

Clevedon: Multilingual Matters.