

What vocabulary should a teacher focus on?

The most important decision when planning a vocabulary programme is determining what vocabulary to focus on. This decision is important because:

- 1 different levels of vocabulary require different kinds of treatment by the teacher
- 2 learners need to be aware of what vocabulary to learn so that they can take some responsibility for their own learning
- 3 appropriate material can be chosen for listening, speaking, reading, and writing activities.

* High frequency words

The high frequency words of the language are an essential foundation of all vocabulary knowledge and language use. Because these words are, relatively speaking, a rather small group of around 3000 word families, it is reasonably easy to test learners to see how well they know these high frequency words. The first choice of a test for these words would be a bilingual test where the learners have to match first language translations with the second language words. This kind of test is easy to do, does not make the learners deal with complicated second language definitions, and can be sat in a short time. Here is a sample item for learners whose first language is Chinese.

- 1 kill
- 2 reply _____ 前进
- 3 advance _____ 回答
- 4 appoint _____ 杀死
- 5 divide
- 6 receive

Bilingual 1000- and 2000-level tests are available at <http://www.>

victoria.ac.nz/lals/staff/paul-nation.aspx. If the learners are from a variety of language backgrounds, then a monolingual test can be used, for example, the Updated Vocabulary Levels Test (Webb, Sasao & Ballance 2017). An electronic version is available at (https://vuw.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_6Wrb5aUvXjIAs6h?Q_JFE=qdg).

* **Academic words**

If learners score well on the 2000 level of the Updated Vocabulary Levels Test and they have to study through the medium of English, then the next vocabulary to consider is the Academic Word List. This list is relevant to learners at secondary schools and universities. This vocabulary makes up around 10% of the running words in academic texts, meaning that on average there is one word from the 570-word Academic Word List in every line of an academic text. The New Vocabulary Levels Test (McLean & Kramer 2015) has an academic word list section.

* **Technical words**

Each subject area, like mathematics, general science, history and accounting, has its own technical vocabulary. Testing knowledge of the words is not straightforward because testing knowledge of these words is like testing knowledge of the subject. Probably the best way to assess knowledge of technical vocabulary is to get the learners to do tasks on subject content or to choose technical words for direct testing.

* **Mid-frequency words**

In some subject areas many of the technical words are also mid-frequency words. However, there are 6000 mid-frequency words and learners need to keep learning them in roughly the order of their frequency. There are lists of the headwords of the first 10,000

words of English in groups of 1000 on Paul Nation's website. The mid-frequency words are those in the fourth to ninth 1000 words inclusive. If learners know the high frequency and academic words, it is useful to have some idea how much mid-frequency vocabulary they know. This is because learners need at least a 5000-word to 6000-word vocabulary to deal with unsimplified or uncontrolled text and, for graduate study at university, probably a 9000-word to 10,000-word vocabulary. The Updated Vocabulary Levels Test includes the 4th 1000 and the 5th 1000 levels, which are the first two lists in the mid-frequency words. The Vocabulary Size Test measures an advanced learner's vocabulary size, and can be used with learners who already know a lot of words.

* Low frequency words

This level of vocabulary is by far the largest. There are thousands of low frequency words, ranging from words of moderate frequency to those used only once every five or so years, if at all. They are best left to be learned incidentally through listening and reading. The Vocabulary Size Test tests those words as well as the high and mid-frequency words.

Task 3.1

Look at the Updated Vocabulary Levels Test and answer these questions.

- *How many words are tested at each level?*
- *What number of words do these tested words represent?*
- *How many levels are there in the test?*
- *What levels represent the high frequency words?*
- *What levels represent some of the mid-frequency words?*

The four strands

A well-balanced language course spends approximately one quarter

of the total course time on each of the following four strands (Nation 2013b): meaning-focused input, meaning-focused output, language-focused learning and fluency development.

* **Meaning-focused input**

Meaning-focused input involves learning through listening and reading where the learners' attention is on understanding and hopefully enjoying what they are listening to or reading. Learners should already know around 98% of the running words in the input material and they can learn the remaining 2% or one word in fifty from context. An extensive reading programme is an essential part of the meaning-focused input strand.

If learners are to have meaning-focused input at all levels of their proficiency development, graded readers are an essential component of the course because they can provide the needed 98% coverage. In this strand of the course they can be used for extensive reading and extensive listening. Extensive listening can include individual listening to taped versions of graded readers, and the class listening to the teacher who read a graded reader aloud chapter by chapter over several days.

Meaning-focused input also occurs when learners work on the same topic for several lessons. Although the first lesson or two may not be meaning-focused input, when the learners gain some knowledge of the ideas and language, then the later lessons become meaning-focused input.

* **Meaning-focused output**

Meaning-focused output involves learning through speaking and writing where the learners' attention is on communicating messages to other people. The same kinds of vocabulary conditions apply as

for meaning-focused input. Meaning-focused output occurs when the learners speak and write about what they have just heard or read. Activities that fit into this strand include presenting or writing book reports, discussing a graded reader they have just read, discussing a topic they are studying and writing up the results of a discussion, pair conversation and problem-solving discussion.

Pair conversation involves two learners talking on familiar topics such as talking about their families, the music they like, their friends, a movie they have seen, or a recent holiday. It can also involve the kind of talking involved in shopping, going to the bank, using public transport, getting directions, buying takeaway food and going to a restaurant. For low proficiency learners, a useful beginning point is learning the survival vocabulary (Nation & Crabbe 1991). This is available in English and several other languages on Paul Nation's website, and involves around 120 words and phrases. When learners know the survival vocabulary and can use it fluently, they can practise memorized dialogues on more topics, and eventually move to freer conversations.

Problem-solving discussion (Nation 1991) involves learners working in small groups using English to solve a problem. Here are some example problems.

Dear Joan,

My son will soon be old enough to get a driving licence. He has been asking me to teach him how to drive. I am very worried about this because I know that most traffic accidents are caused by young men. I have been trying to encourage him to wait for a few years and then I will teach him, but he wants to learn now. If I teach him to drive now, he may kill himself and others. What can I do?

Worried parent.

Your cousins have come to visit your family. While your parents go out with them, you have been given the job of entertaining their eight-year-old son. You have twenty dollars and have to entertain him for five hours in or near your town. You can do anything that is in your town.

Working together as a group, suggest as many possible ways as you can of entertaining the child. Then choose a suitable number of them to fill the required time and to meet the other requirements and restrictions.

- a. The films which are now showing are *Star Wars*, *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* and *Fright Night*. Admission is \$10 for adults and \$6.50 for children under 15 years old.
- b. The swimming pool is open all day. The entry fee is \$3 each.
- c. Your town has a fun park with slides, swings, a maze and an adventure trail. Entry is free.
- d. Your relative comes from a very small town.

Nation (1991) provides lots of suggestions for making these discussion activities and for including role play.

* **Language-focused learning**

Language-focused learning gives deliberate attention to language features. It can involve pronunciation practice, studying new vocabulary and collocations, learning grammatical features, and deliberately giving attention to discourse features (Ellis 2005). Subject content texts and lessons can be a source of new words to deliberately learn. They can also be used for intensive reading where the teacher and the learners work together through a reasonably short piece of text to come to a full understanding of the text by dealing with its various language features. Language-focused learning also includes deliberately learning strategies for vocabulary learning as well as deliberately studying new vocabulary using word cards and dictionaries.

*** Fluency development**

Activities that develop fluency make the best use of what is already known and involve very easy material. They should not contain any unknown vocabulary, grammatical features, or discourse features and the content of the activities should be largely familiar.

Fluency development activities need to occur in each of the four skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing. In reading, there are three major kinds of fluency development activities:

Speed reading practice

This is where learners read a short text of around 300 to 1000 words as fast as they can and then answer questions based on it. Their speed in words per minute is timed for each text and is recorded on a graph. Their comprehension score is also recorded on a graph. A very large collection of free speed reading courses can be found on Sonia Millett's website. They include courses at the 500 word level, 1000 word level, 2000 word level, 2000 plus Academic Word List level, and 3000 word level.

Extensive reading of graded readers

The second type of reading fluency practice is extensive reading of graded readers that are well below the learners' normal reading level. That is, if their level of reading for meaning-focused input is at level four in the Oxford Bookworms series, then for fluency development they should be reading graded readers at levels one, two or three, and reading them as quickly as they can. Graded readers can also have a role to play in fluency development in listening. For listening the teacher can read stories to the class from very easy graded readers. The teacher reads aloud at a reasonably quick speed getting faster as learners get familiar with the story.

Linked skills

The third kind of reading fluency activity involves linked skills. The learners read and study a topic, talk about it, solve problems and write about it. Finally they read an easy text on that topic. This reading is developing fluency because by now the topic and associated language are very easy for the learners.

Task 3.2 Which of the four strands do the following activities fit into?

- *reading with a dictionary*
- *watching TV*
- *using word cards*
- *listening to classmates giving talks in English*
- *learning to guess from context*
- *read and retell*
- *writing a summary*
- *reading the newspaper*
- *writing about familiar topics*
- *listening to the teacher to explain something*

Planning for high frequency words

There are some well-established principles for planning a programme to increase learners' control of the high frequency words of the language.

- 1 *Where possible, work with material that uses very little vocabulary outside the high frequency words.* This makes sure that the high frequency words are given attention and that teachers and learners are not distracted by low frequency words that are well outside the learners' present level. It also makes sure that the learners have a chance of being able to listen to and read material with a reasonable level of comprehension.

- 2 *Do deliberate teaching of the high frequency words when they occur in lessons.* The other side of this principle is do not do deliberate teaching of mid- and low frequency words. The deliberate teaching of high frequency words needs not be systematic but needs to be persistent. The goals of such teaching are to make learners aware of the high frequency words they don't know, to take knowledge of each word forward at least a small step, and to increase understanding of the material the learners are working on.
- 3 *Give learners opportunities to use high frequency vocabulary both receptively in listening and reading, and productively in speaking and writing.* High frequency vocabulary needs to be available for productive use as well as receptive use. One of the most effective ways of providing opportunities for productive use is to use linked skills activities where learners listen to or read material that then becomes the basis for speaking and writing. There needs to be plenty of receptive use before pushing the learners to use it productively, but teachers should see productive use of high frequency vocabulary as an important vocabulary learning goal.
- 4 *Encourage and train learners to deliberately learn vocabulary and to reflect on their vocabulary learning.* Deliberate learning includes these strategies:
 - guessing from context
 - using small bilingual word cards
 - learning useful prefixes, suffixes and stems to do word part analysis
 - using visualisation techniques
 - learning to use a dictionary well.

There are effective ways to get learners to reflect on their vocabulary learning. A useful task is to get learners to use a word counting programme like the Frequency programme (available from www.lex Tutor.ca/freq/) to turn a text into a word list with frequency figures.

When using this with learners, it may be more effective if they use part of one of their texts as the input. About 500 running words would be enough. Get the learners to consider the following questions:

- How many words are needed to cover 25%, 50%, 75% of the text?
- What kinds of words are the most frequent words in the text?
- If you saw only the most frequent 20 words in the list, could you guess what kind of text they came from?
- Is there a connection between the length of words and their frequency?
- What proportion of the different words occurs only once?
- What percentage of the running words is covered by the words that only occur once?
- What conclusions about learning vocabulary can you make from these observations?

Another way of getting learners to reflect on their learning is to get them to make a set of 30 or 40 word cards and keep a careful record of their learning over ten separate learning sessions. They could use a table like Table 3.2.

As well as this, there could be some questions to guide their reflection on their learning, such as:

- What words were difficult? Why?
- Did you use any tricks to help you remember some words?
- What words were the easiest? Why?

Get learners to report on their learning to others in the class or in a small group.