

# Getting vocabulary from reception to production

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Students often have little trouble memorizing vocabulary to pass exams, but when it comes to using it appropriately for meaning and grammar they have trouble. To address this problem, the Intensive English Program (IEP) at the University of Washington (UW) decided that students ought to be able to use vocabulary productively. For UW IEP teachers this means reexamining approaches to vocabulary teaching and testing. It means exposing students to words in a variety of contexts (written, spoken, heard, and read) and moving them through reception to production: providing opportunities for students to explore meaning and grammatical usage through lexical chunks in authentic situations and simultaneously providing opportunities for students to use the vocabulary.

**T**eachers and students look for whatever shortcuts they can find in language learning. Learning a first language takes time – our parents repeat words and phrases to us, we are allowed to listen for up to two years before anyone expects us to produce, and we are allowed to produce phrases and simple sentences, correct or not, without pressure for several years. Over time, our sentences and vocabulary in our first language become increasingly complex. While we endure little pressure to produce our first language perfectly, we face a lot of pressure, some that we impose on ourselves and some that others impose on us, to learn a second language quickly and perfectly. Somehow the notion that acquiring a second language should be easy and quick has pervaded our thinking.

## History

I began working in English Language Programs at the University of Washington in 1999 and have mostly taught in our 5 level Intensive English Program (level 5 is the highest). Teachers in the IEP meet their mostly

Asian students daily for 50 minute classes over a 10 week term.

When I first began teaching in the program, most teachers approached vocabulary the same way: they assigned vocabulary journals to their students. In the journals, students were to select 10 words a week from the readings and enter these words with parts of speech, definitions, source sentences, paraphrases of the source sentences, student-created sentences, and other word forms into their journals. The rationale was that students were more likely to learn words they had chosen. I quickly became frustrated with the assignment because my students showed little improvement. I kept tweaking the assignment, but as I never knew which class I would be assigned each quarter, I never addressed the issue.

Three years ago, we began rewriting our IEP curriculum. The curriculum committee identified skills students should be able to do at each of the five levels of our program, and in each course and skill sequence. Throughout the preliminary curriculum documentation was the phrase “incorporate lexis and grammar.” I was selected to write curriculum for the reading and writing courses for levels two (beginning) through four (high intermediate) with a partner. Besides receiving one quarter to write, each curriculum writer was given four quarters to pilot the courses. Finally I had the time – and the mandate – to experiment with teaching and testing vocabulary. Over that year, I came to the conclusion that getting vocabulary from reception to production takes time (in class and out), effort, and exposure.

### My first experiment: The lexical notebook

One of my first tasks as a curriculum writer for an intermediate reading course was to find a new textbook. Based on feedback from my students and my own experience, I selected a textbook, *Strategic Reading 2*, with sixteen units, each had one topic with three readings from authentic sources (Richards and Eckstut-Didier 2003). I had the students choose nine of the ten units we would study (I chose the first) because I thought they would be more motivated if they were readings about topics that interested them. Next, I selected ten words from each unit; I consulted the General Service List and various corpora to check frequency because I wanted to teach the students the words that they were most likely to encounter in and out of class (Skehan 1996, 54-59; Nation 1990, 11).

The first quarter of the pilot period, each student took responsibility for making lexical pages for two to three words, and including the word, definition, part of speech, other forms, source and sample sentences, translations, and anything else that might help them remember the words. And instead of using exam books to record vocabulary, I had the students buy three-ring notebooks in the smallest size available with the idea that students could rearrange words, insert new ones, and take old ones out as needed. Students were to hand in their completed pages, so I could copy and distribute them and everybody would have a full set. The lexical notebook worked better than the vocabulary journal, but the system was still imperfect. I realized that, on their own, students did not have the facility with English to select the most appropriate definition. And somehow, every week no matter how careful I was, someone was always missing a page.

## My second experiment: The lexical pages

In the second quarter, I abandoned the notebook. Instead I distributed lexical pages on which I included the words, parts of speech, definitions, sample sentences, and other forms (all cut and pasted from the Cambridge Online Advanced Learner's Dictionary) in a column on the left (<http://dictionary.cambridge.org/>). I chose the definitions because I was better able to select the most appropriate meanings based on the context (Nation 1990, 57-62). I intentionally left the right column blank because I intended for students to write source sentences, more sample sentences, and translations as well as draw illustrations. I had students include translations because it is a quick, easy way for students to get a basic understanding of a word or phrase and for students to compare English with their L1 (Nation 1990, 62). I collected these worksheets weekly.

In class, I emphasized collocations because word meanings change with context (Lewis 1993, 80-2, 96, 115-6). Teaching collocations allowed me to address the two things the curriculum committee wanted: lexis and grammar (Lewis 1993, 92-93). Lewis (1990) says language consists of grammaticalized lexis; my teaching the grammar of the lexis exemplified just that (vi). I encouraged the students to continually add information to their lexical pages as well (Lewis 1993, 117).

## The third experiment: Increasing exposure

My third experiment was to increase students' exposure to the words and phrases I had chosen (Nation 1990, 31-2; Skehan 1996, 59). For practice outside of class, I instructed

students to visit my web site, click on the .mp3 files, and listen to me read each passage (recorded with Audacity, <http://audacity.sourceforge.net/>). In class, I distributed the pages and then wrote the vocabulary on the board and had the students repeat it after me. Next, I had them read along silently and circle the words as I read aloud, followed by them reading aloud in their groups. When everyone had finished reading, the students either dictated the source sentences (sentences containing the words) to me as I wrote them on the board or the students wrote the sentences on the board. Following that, we would discuss each word, noticing together the collocations and the usage. I would add information about the formality and anything else that was appropriate and make sure that the students were taking notes on their lexical pages. We spent part of class over three days doing this, in addition to other reading and discussion skills, and on the third day I made sure there was time for additional questions in preparation for the quiz on the fourth day (Scrivener 1996, 83-83).

## The evolution of the vocabulary quiz: Part one

Every week, I set the students a vocabulary quiz. I had tried a variety of formats (matching, a fill-in-the-blank sentence for each word, filling in definitions and parts of speech among other things) with little success. Then a blind student walked in. Most of those other formats did not come across in Braille well. I chose a fill-in-the-blank format.

I wrote one or two sentences for each word and I manipulated the word list and the sentences so that students would have to pay attention to the meaning and the grammar. I wanted to test their ability to identify the grammaticalized

lexis (Lewis 1990, vi). The students found the quizzes too difficult. I realized it was because I was changing context for every word and because I was using grammatical structures that were too difficult (Nation 1990, 3).

### The evolution of the vocabulary quiz: Part two

I liked the idea of the fill-in-the-blank quiz because I could test grammar and lexis, but I needed to find a different way to test the words. One day, I had an epiphany: I would write a fill-in-the-blank conversation and limit myself to the grammar structures that are taught in the level below my class because I knew that I could hold them all responsible for knowing those structures. I did not want students to fail the quiz because the grammar was too difficult (Nation 1990, 3). Besides restricting my grammatical structures, the other stipulation I set for myself was that I would write a conversation on the same topic as the unit because the students already had the schema for that topic. Again, I used different word forms in the body of the quiz and in the word list to test the lexis and the grammar (Lewis 1990, vi). I also recycled words on the quizzes as much as possible. Limiting the grammatical structures and using a familiar context increased the students' success on these quizzes.

### Conclusion

As the quarter progressed, being aware of the grammatical structures that I used in the quizzes and working the vocabulary as much as possible into what I said in class had very positive results: by the seventh week of the quarter, my students were using some of the words, typically the

ones they had been exposed to most, quite naturally in conversation with each other.

Whenever students grumble that their vocabulary, or English, has not improved as much as they would like, I ask them how long it took to learn their native languages. Then I ask them to be more forgiving with themselves as they learn a second language. I realize that I have to fight my students' perceptions of how long it takes to learn a language, and against any other cultural perceptions of language learning they might have. Asking students that question helps them understand why I teach and test vocabulary the way I do: understanding vocabulary receptively and using it productively takes a lot of time, effort, and exposure.

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### Appendix 1. A quiz that worked well for my students.

Fill in the Blanks. Complete each of the sentences below with the most appropriate word(s) from the list below. You may have to change the word form. There are more words than blanks. \* TIP: Pay attention to the meaning first. Then focus on the form. (1 point each = 11 points)

List of words: courtesy, manners, offend, thoughtful, rude, unwilling, block, operate, vibrate, break up, court, love, romantic, sweat, part, regain, be crazy about sb/sth, head over heels, be made for sb/each other, delay

George Clooney: Hi Brad! What's wrong? You look really confused.

Brad Pitt: I am. I have a terrible problem and I don't know what to do. My wife's birthday is tonight and I have to prepare a romantic dinner for her.

GC: That's very (1 thoughtful) of you. You always do nice

things for your wife. You are such a kind husband! So, what's the problem?

BP: Well, I'm (2 head) heels in love with someone else. I should probably (3 break up) with my wife.

GC: You shouldn't break up with her on her birthday. That's (4 rude). So, who are you (5 crazy) about?

BP: I don't want to tell you because it might (6 offend) you. I don't want you to be mad at me.

GC: It's bad (7 manners) to not tell your best friend who you're crazy about. Maybe you just have a crush on this person. Hey, what's that funny noise?

BP: Oh, I think it's my cell phone. It often makes that funny noise.

GC: Well, it's probably on (8 vibrate) mode. That sound means you have a phone call. Don't you know how to (9 operate) your cell phone?

BP: No, it's new and I haven't read the directions yet. So, what should I do about my wife?

GC: I don't know. You shouldn't ask me about women because I've never been married. I've just had lots of girlfriends. You should ask Julia Roberts.

BP: You're such a serial (10 romantic). Well, Julia is a woman and she's married, but she has two babies. Maybe she will be too busy to help me.

GC: You shouldn't (11 delay) anymore. Call Julia now!

## Appendix 2. A quiz that didn't work well because the grammar was too difficult and the topics, were new to the students, kept shifting.

Fill in the Blanks. Complete each of the sentences below with the most appropriate word(s) from the list below. You may have to change the word form. There are more words than blanks. \* TIP: Pay attention to the meaning first. Then focus on the form. (1 point each = 10 points)

List of words: work out, strength, break the ice, festive, ultimate, melody, prejudiced, misconceived, given, overcome, pastimes, appeal, reward, interact, competitive, anonymous, margin, captivate, market, choice

Wow! You have really (1 strengthened) your muscles a lot. The last time I saw you, you could barely lift 5 pounds and now you can lift 10. When did you start (2 working out)?

I used to be afraid to dance in public, but I (3 overcame) my fear by taking dancing lessons for 12 weeks. I have more confidence now and I always dance at dance parties.

I used to play violin in my high school orchestra. First violins always get to play the (4 melody), but second violins don't. I didn't like playing second violin, but I loved playing first violin because the first violin part was more (5 appealing) to me. It was prettier.

Okay everyone, before we start dancing, let's (6 break the ice) and get to know each other. Introduce yourself to your partner!

A lot of people share the (7 misconception) that ballet dancing isn't as difficult as sports, but it is. Dancers usually spend more time than athletes exercising and practicing.

I hope you will join the graduation (8 festivities). It's a lot of fun – there's food and a slide show, and every student who comes will get a present. (9 Ultimately) students have to decide whether to go for themselves. All the teachers have to go.

(10 Given) that it's raining, I think you should bring an umbrella and wear a raincoat.