# Building on your book: Vocabulary activities to enhance your textbook

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When teaching vocabulary, teachers and textbooks tend to focus on just one aspect of word knowledge: meaning. Yet vocabulary researchers have long argued that knowing a word means learning much more than just its meaning, with the word's form, associations, collocations, and grammatical patterns among other things also needing to be acquired. Researchers have thus called for a more rounded approach to vocabulary in the classroom, and this paper aims to help teachers achieve that. The paper presents a number of activities that deal with other aspects of vocabulary knowledge besides meaning, thus helping teachers build on their textbook. The activities work with almost any group of words, can be used repeatedly and require little or no preparation. These activities give teachers the means to extend the range of vocabulary knowledge dealt with, the ultimate aim being to give learners a deeper and more secure knowledge of vocabulary.

語彙について、教師や教科書は 語彙知識 の一面だけに集中します。それは意味です。 しかし、語彙の研究者は長い間 語彙知識 は意味だけではなくて、 語形、連想、コロケーション、文法的機能など、数ある中でも学ぶことが必要です。研究者は語彙の教育は大局的見地から考えなくてはいけません。ここで、教師を支えるために語彙の教育活動を発表します。この活動は意味以外に語彙知識 の一面に集中します。それで、教師は教科書に基づいて事を進めます。この活動はどんな単語でも使えるし、何回も使えるし、準備をほとんど必要としません。この活動は教室でより広い 語彙知識を取り扱います。それで、学習者に語彙の深い知識を与えます。

THE MOTIVATION for this paper and the activities it presents is the idea that knowing a word means much more than knowing its meaning. Nation's (2001) inventory (see Table 1), which built on the work of Richards (1976) and his own earlier work (Nation, 1990), is perhaps the best known expression of this idea. It lists three broader areas and nine different aspects of vocabulary knowledge, each of which has a receptive element and a productive element.

Vocabulary researchers have suggested that language teaching has a very narrow view of vocabulary; in Singleton's (1999) words "much of what has passed for vocabulary teaching… addresses only the tip of the lexical iceberg" (p. 272). Classroom research focusing on vocabulary teaching is limited, but supports this claim. Swain and Carroll (1987), Sanaoui (1996) and Horst, Collins and Cardoso (2009) all conducted classroom observation studies in a variety of educational contexts and in each case found that teaching was focused on meaning, with other

Table 1. Nation's inventory of aspects of vocabulary knowledge (from Nation, 2001, p. 27)

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| Form | Spoken | R | What does the word sound like? |
| | | P | How is the word pronounced? |
| | Written | R | What does the word look like? |
| | | P | How is the word written and spelled? |
| | Word parts | R | What parts are recognizable in this word? |
| | | P | What word parts are needed to express the meaning? |
| Meaning | Form and meaning | R | What meaning does this word form signal? |
| | | P | What word form can be used to express this meaning? |
| | Concept and referents | R | What is included in this concept? |
| | | P | What items can the concept refer to? |
| | Associations | R | What other words does this make us think of? |
| | | P | What other words could we use instead of this one? |
| Use | Grammatical functions | R | In what patterns does the word occur? |
| | | P | In what patterns must we use this word? |
| | Collocations | R | What words or types of words occur with this one? |
| | | P | What words or types of words must we use with this one? |
| | Constraints on use (register, frequency . . .) | R | Where, when, and how often would we expect to meet this word? |
| | | P | Where, when, and how often can we use this word? |

*Note.* R = receptive knowledge, P = productive knowledge.

aspects of word knowledge largely ignored. Likewise in Brown (in press), I report on my research into the aspects of vocabulary knowledge in Nation's 2001 framework that textbooks give attention to, which made a similar finding. In an analysis of almost 900 activities in nine General English coursebooks, I found that more than half of the activities involved form and meaning. Grammatical functions and spoken form received some attention, while the other six aspects received very limited amounts of attention and were not found at all in some of the coursebooks. I thus suggest that materials writers need to take a broader view of vocabulary, and that in the meantime teachers need to take responsibility for looking at other aspects of word knowledge in the classroom. In this paper I provide some practical ideas to help teachers to do this.

## About the activities

My aim is to provide a range of activities involving the other eight aspects of vocabulary knowledge besides form and meaning. These are not all original ideas (though some, I believe, are); however, my intention is to draw together a range of activities that will encourage and enable teachers to take a broader view of vocabulary. In selecting and creating activities, I sought the following features:

1. *Activities that require little or no preparation.* Many of these activities require no preparation whatsoever and indeed can be used in class on the spur of the moment. Where preparation is required, it is not time consuming.
2. *Activities that can be used with almost any set of words.* Many vocabulary activities in resource books are intended for a specific set of words or for a specific type of vocabulary. I sought activities that can be used with whatever vocabulary items the teacher wishes to review, with only occasional restrictions. This also means that each activity can be used again and again with different groups of words.
3. *Activities that help the teacher build on their textbook.* These activities are intended to complement textbooks. I am assuming that the textbook has introduced a set of words to the students, and now the teacher wants to revisit those words and extend the students' knowledge of them. This feature has an important consequence: Many of the activities assume that students are working with a limited and defined set of words. If used with no specific set of words in mind, the activities can be very difficult and can become frustrating.

The activities are divided into three categories based partly on Nation's (2001) description of three psychological processes that encourage vocabulary learning. Noticing means giving attention to an item, that is, decontextualising it so that one thinks of it as an item rather than as part of a message. Retrieval is described as recalling the form of an item to express a meaning or encountering a form and recalling its meaning. Creative or generative use means meeting or using items in different contexts to that originally encountered. Nation suggests this prompts learners to reconsider their understanding of an item. These three processes partly inspired my categories of recall activities, analysis activities and creative/generative activities.

The recall category is based on the idea of retrieval: all of the activities involve recalling the form of the items, though in a variety of ways. The analysis category has some links to the idea of noticing, though all the activities presented in this paper should encourage this process, with the analysis activities being particularly intended to help learners think more deeply about the words. Finally, my creative/generative category is very much about activities that push students to use the words in different ways. The order of the three categories does not follow that of the processes, being based on classroom factors, with the recall activities being short, fast-paced activities, the analysis

activities generally more involved, and the creative/generative activities more so.

When using more than one activity in a class, I would recommend choosing activities from different categories. Recall activities are ideal immediately after introducing a group of words to a class. I would then suggest following up with either an analysis and/or a creative/generative activity. When going back to the words in a subsequent class, I would suggest beginning with an analysis activity, which will give the students a chance to get reacquainted with the words. A recall activity can then follow. Recall activities thrive on success, so starting a subsequent class with a recall activity can be difficult if the students struggle to remember the words. I would then move on to a creative/generative activity.

## Recall activities

In these activities learners must recall the form of the items from some kind of stimulus. Establishing the form of an item is increasingly viewed as a vital first step in the acquisition of words (Schmitt, 2008), with the form acting as a stable platform on which other types of word knowledge can be built. These activities are meant to test students' memory of the items immediately after their first encounter with a set of words; typically I would ask the students to close their books and then do one of these activities. They are all very much teacher-led activities, and lend themselves to game formats with points awarded and so on. However, after the initial testing phase, students can be put in pairs or groups to test each other.

### *Spoken form 1*

Show the syllable pattern for each word represented by circles (e.g. the word *syllable* is Ooo; *pattern* is Oo) and ask the students to call out the words. If two (or more) of the words have the same syllable pattern, ask for both (all) the words.

### *Spoken form 2*

Say a word that rhymes with one of the target words and have students call out the word. Students find this difficult at first, but once they get the idea of rhymes, it becomes easier. This works especially well with shorter words, for which it is easier to think of rhymes. Online rhyming dictionaries (e.g. www.rhymezone.com) provide lists of rhymes for a given word and are very useful. (Acknowledgement: This was inspired by an activity in Morgan & Rinvolucri, 2004, p. 156.)

### *Spoken form 3*

Make sure that all the students can see you easily, then mouth a word silently and ask them to identify it. You will probably have to repeat each word a few times until someone gets it. Have the students try this in pairs, as it really helps them notice how the sounds are formed. (Acknowledgement: This was inspired by an activity in Helgesen, 2003, p. 7.)

### *Written form 1*

Show the students just the first letter of the word: Can they recall it? As a variation or if the first letter alone proves too challenging, show both the first and last letters. Be aware, however, that showing the last letter is only really helpful when it corresponds with the final sound (this also applies to the first letter, though it is less often a problem there). For example, showing "e" for a word like *aware* does not usually prompt it. This activity was inspired by what Aitchison (1994) calls the bathtub effect: people remember the beginnings and ends of words better than the middles, like a person lying in the bathtub with their head and feet sticking out of the water at each end.

### Written form 2

Draw the physical shape of a word and ask the students to recall it. E.g. For the word *shape* draw:

For *word* draw:

### Written form 3

Write a word in the air with your finger: Can the students recognise it? Be careful not to show them a mirror-image of the word. To make it easier, stand with your back to the class and write the word in the air above your head. Students especially enjoy trying this activity themselves.

### Word parts

Show only the prefixes and suffixes used in the words: Can the students recall them? This activity obviously depends on having a suitable set of words – it will not work, for example, if you are looking at adjectives ending in *–ed* (e.g. *bored*, *interested*, *delighted*). Ideally you want a range of affixes that allow you to review at least five or six of the words. Recently, for example, I showed the affixes *–ment*, *-ing*, *-ing*, *-al*, *inter-*, *-tion* while reviewing this set of words: *assignment*, *vague*, *grade*, *pleasing*, *outgoing*, *traditional*, *intercultural*, *communication*, *conflict*.

### Associations

Give associations for a word until a student can identify it. It is easier and more interesting if you do not restrict yourself to a narrow sense of associations, but simply give any that the target word brings to mind including your own personal associations. For example, some of my associations for the word *division* are the division symbol (÷), maths classes at school, cutting up a cake at a friend's birthday party, and separating students into groups in class. This is another activity students enjoy trying themselves, especially asking each other about some of the stranger associations they come up with.

### Grammatical functions

Show the grammatical pattern of an item and ask the students to recall the item. For example, for the word *ask* I might show ____ *somebody to do something* or ____ *somebody something* or ____ *somebody about something*. I would usually show only the pattern that was used when the word was introduced rather than several patterns.

### Collocations

Show a set of collocates for an item and ask the students to recall it. Three or four is usually enough. For example, for *presentation*, you might give *formal*, *business*, *make a* and *give a*. Choose collocates that you are fairly confident the students will know the meaning of or the activity will get bogged down. A variation on this is to show one collocate at a time and see how many need to be shown before the word is guessed. (Acknowledgement: This is based on ideas in Lewis, 1993.)

### Analysis activities

These activities are more reflective, encouraging students to think about the words in some way, and hopefully helping the students to discover something about them. They are also much more student-centred and most work better with the students working in pairs or small groups. They work well immediately following a recall activity, or in a subsequent class as a means of returning to the words.

## Associations 1

Ask pairs to choose one of the words (or assign a word to each pair) and get them to think of words that are connected to it beginning with its letters. It is not necessary for them to think of an association for each and every letter of the word (unlike my example) – look for students to come up with four or five for one word. For this reason, longer words are easier than shorter ones as there are more letters to play with.

For example, *rescue*:

**r** ed
**e** scape
**s** ave
**c** are
**u** rgent
**e** mergency

Have students share ideas in groups, explaining the connections between the words and the target word. Note that this activity also gives explicit attention to written form.

## Associations 2

Ask the students for the opposites of some simple words such as *hot*, *sad* and *go*. Then choose a word from your set with no obvious opposite and ask them to think of an opposite for it. If they struggle to come up with one, give one or two yourself, explaining the basis for them if need be. What, for example, is the opposite of *a novel*? One answer could be *a nursery rhyme* because while both are fictional stories, one is typically long, the other very short. Or it may be *ink*, because one is produced by a writer, the other consumed by a writer. Or perhaps *a sword*, from the saying *The pen is mightier than the sword*. Ask pairs to think of an opposite for all of the words you are reviewing. Then, have pairs compare ideas. (Acknowledgement: This is from Morgan and Rinvolucri, 2004, p. 107.)

## Associations 3

Ask pairs to classify the words in one of the following ways: living or non-living; male or female; very English words or not very English words; new words or old words; me-connected words or separate-from-me words; high words or low words; past words or future words. Whichever of these you choose, the aim is to produce answers that are not obvious or clearcut so that there is room for discussion and debate. Do not, for example, choose high words or low words when looking at prepositions of place. The idea is always to choose something that has no relation to your items and just see what the students make of it. When pairs have finished, have them compare ideas. (Acknowledgement: These ideas for classification come from Nation, 2001, p. 104; and Morgan and Rinvolucri, 2004, p. 150.)

## Associations 4

Ask pairs to place each word on a selection of the following scales:

| | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| valuable | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | worthless |
| shallow | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | deep |
| slow | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | fast |
| active | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | passive |
| small | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | large |
| clean | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | dirty |
| weak | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | strong |
| relaxed | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | tense |
| cold | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | hot |

Choose three or four of these scales each time you use the activity. Again, you should aim to select ones that will not produce uniform answers. Have pairs compare ideas. (Acknowledgement: This is from Morgan and Rinvolucri, 2004, p. 152.)

### Associations 5

Ask pairs to take a blank sheet of paper, choose a word and write it somewhere on the paper. Then ask them to choose a second word and write it down somewhere on the paper, with the distance between the two words showing how closely or distantly connected they are. They then pick a third word and add it, deciding on its position in relation to the first two words, and continue through the whole list of words in the same way. Stress that any type of connection between words is fine. Have pairs compare and explain why they felt words were or were not connected.

### Collocations

Ask pairs to translate a word into Japanese. Then have them think about the Japanese word (they should forget about the English word for a minute) and list collocations for it. They should then translate each Japanese collocation into English and decide if the collocation works in English. You will often have to give guidance at this stage.

For example, *take* is 取る (*toru*) in Japanese. Some collocations with 取るare 出前を取る (*demae o toru*), 休みを取る (*yasumi o toru*) and ランチを取る (*ranchi o toru*). These literally translate as *take a delivery*, *take a break/rest* and *take lunch*, which I would consider to be marginally acceptable (*receive a delivery* or *get something delivered* seem better generally), acceptable and unacceptable respectively.

### Constraints on use 1

Ask pairs to decide which of the words would most likely be used by different people. Select three people/situations as appropriate to the set of words concerned. I have found the following useful: a professor giving a lecture; a newscaster on TV; an executive at a business meeting; a salesperson in a shop; a pop singer in an interview; your parents talking to a neighbour; work colleagues talking by the coffee machine; two high school girls talking on a train; and you talking to a good friend. Have pairs compare and explain their ideas. For example, for the words *drift*, *mosque*, *strike*, *devastated*, *drowned*, *destroyed*, *sudden*, *immediate*, *probable*, *frequent*, *close* and *eventual*, I chose a professor giving a lecture, an executive at a business meeting and work colleagues talking by the coffee machine.

### Constraints on use 2

Ask pairs to think of a specific situation in which each word could be used. They need to say who uses the word, to whom, where, and about what (e.g., for the item *attitude*, a teacher talking to a student after class about his behavior). You can also have them draw a picture of the scene as they imagine it. Have pairs compare and explain their ideas.

### Constraints on use 3

Show the students the following list of sections in a newspaper: News, Sport, Entertainment, the Arts, Business, Health, Fashion, Travel, Technology, Environment, and Jobs. Depending on the words you are reviewing, either ask pairs to (a) decide which section each individual word would most likely appear in; or (b) decide which section the whole set of words would most likely appear in. Have pairs compare and explain their ideas. (Acknowledgement: This was inspired by an idea in Zimmerman, 2009, p. 105.)

## Creative/generative activities

These activities ask students to be more creative with the words. Most require the students first to use the words, and then

prompt them to think about how they have used them. Some of the activities thus take some time. Again, many of the activities are best done in pairs.

## Word parts

Ask pairs to write a sentence using the word, but in a different part of speech. So if the word is a verb, ask them to use the noun form in their sentence (e.g. *reduction* rather than *reduce*). Have pairs swap sentences and check whether the word (in its other form) is spelt correctly, whether it is used correctly and whether the sentence is good, that is, whether it actually says something.

## Concept and referents 1

Show the students two sentences containing each word: one from your textbook showing the word as it was originally introduced and one other (the example sentences from learner's dictionaries are very helpful). For instance, for the word *overwhelmed*, the textbook *Cover to Cover 2* (Oxford University Press, 2008) provides "The feeling of being overwhelmed by stress often occurs when several stresses combine," (p. 2) and the *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary* (OALD; 2005) gives us "We were overwhelmed by requests for information." This second sentence should usually contain a more-or-less similar use, as in the examples with *overwhelmed* above, but sometimes a different use of the word (e.g. "The army was overwhelmed by the rebels", OALD, 2005). If you are reviewing ten words, for eight of the words have pairs of sentences featuring more-or-less similar uses and just two pairs with different uses. Ask pairs to decide if the word is used in the same sense in both sentences or if there is a difference between them. (Acknowledgement: This is based on an idea in Nation, 2001, p. 102.)

## Concept and referents 2

This activity is best done over two classes. In the first simply ask the pairs to write a sentence for each word, with each sentence on a separate slip of paper. Collect the slips and remove any with errors in meaning/usage; do not worry about grammatical errors. The sentences you remove will often be very revealing of the students' understanding of the words, but will not be used further in this activity. In the second class give each pair four or five sentences featuring a single word. Then ask the pairs to translate each sentence into Japanese: Do they think the word should be translated in the same way each time? How are the uses of the word different?

## Grammatical functions

Introduce the idea of a random sentence generator either by showing one if you can (e.g. http://www.users.globalnet.co.uk/~pennck/random.htm) or by showing some examples of what one produces. Explain that they work by choosing words at random to fill a simple grammatical pattern such as: *The* [noun] [verb] *the* [adj] [noun]. Have pairs list the words by part of speech and then choose words at random to fill the pattern given above. After they have produced several sentences in this way, ask them to choose the best one – leave it vague as to what exactly 'best' means. Then have pairs compare their creations and explain why they chose that sentence as the best.

## Collocations

Have pairs list the words under the headings: nouns, verbs and adjectives. Ask the pairs to write sentences for the nouns using the frame *It's hard to* _____ [noun]; for the verbs using _____ *like to* [verb] _____; and for the adjectives *It is a/an* [adjective] _____. For example, the word *clarify* is a verb and so putting it

into its frame produces: _____ *like to clarify* _____. The students' challenge is to fill the noun slots appropriately, my example being *I would like to clarify a couple of points*. Providing an example or two first helps students get the idea and demonstrates that they may have to (and should feel free to) add other words at times (e.g. a determiner prior to the noun). Have pairs exchange sentences and check each other's collocations using intuition, dictionaries and you as a resource. (Acknowledgement: This was inspired by an idea in Morgan & Rinvolucri, 2004, p. 107.)

## Constraints on use

First ask the pairs to simply write a sentence for each word. Then have pairs exchange sentences. Ask the pairs to think of a specific situation in which each sentence could be used. They need to say who says the sentence, to whom, where and about what. Have pairs tell each other their ideas for the sentences.

## Conclusion

If students are to learn the vocabulary we present to them, they need to see the words many times and they need to know much more than just the meanings. Regularly using the activities presented here helps with both of these things. Students get to see the words many times and focus their attention on different aspects of word knowledge.

It is, however, important to clarify two things. First, I am not suggesting that Nation's (2001) inventory of aspects of vocabulary knowledge is the definitive description of what it means to know a word. It is not in fact a psycholinguistic description of our knowledge of words at all (as Nation himself says). However, it is a useful framework to help us think about different ways we can approach vocabulary in the classroom and to encourage us to expand our view of what vocabulary learning entails. Secondly, I am not suggesting that students need to learn all nine aspects for each and every word. Words vary in their importance to the language and in their centrality in the mind and the number of words that any of us have full and complete knowledge of is most likely relatively small.

What I am very much suggesting is that if you as a teacher choose to follow your textbook and introduce a group of words to your students, you should build on your book and make use of some of the activities. The key issue is not whether to use additional activities, but whether or not to introduce a set of words. This decision depends on whether the vocabulary is worth learning. That is, does the benefit of learning the words outweigh the cost in terms of the time and energy required to learn them? This is something that only you can decide. It is important to consider the frequency and range of the items, and even more important to consider who your students are and what their learning goals are. If the benefit does outweigh the cost, you simply must do more than just introduce the words in order to give the learners any genuine chance of learning them. If it does not, do not introduce them at all. Doing so is a waste of time and effort for both you and your students.

## Bio data

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