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## Conference Review

# What are the Ten Most Effective Vocabulary Teaching Activities?

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On April 14, 2013 Paul Nation gave a presentation on teaching vocabulary which was held at Hokkai Gakuen University, Toyohira Campus, Sapporo and was sponsored by the CUE Special Interest Group and the Hokkaido JALT chapter. The first time I heard Paul Nation was coming to Sapporo to give a talk was during the Hokkaido JALT Christmas party. We were all very excited to have such a prestigious speaker scheduled for one of our events. On the day of the event, 85 JALT members turned up and were treated to an excellent presentation that changed the way I look at language teaching.

My overall impression was that Nation's four-hour talk was extremely practical and of great benefit to all language teachers. He started off his presentation by describing his criteria for good vocabulary teaching activities, and then he presented a list of the ten most effective activities. The remainder of his talk described characteristics of well-designed language courses, but, not surprisingly, he always brought the discussion back to vocabulary. Specifically, he described the *four strands* (Nation, 2007; Nation & Yamamoto, 2012) and the most significant changes that teachers can make to an EFL program (Nation, 2013). I left the presentation with ideas for Monday's classes and also with general guidelines for how to design a better overall course.

From the beginning of the presentation, I was impressed by how Nation supported his proposals by referencing previous studies, such as Joe (1998), Nation and Yamamoto (2012), and Nation (2007). In addition, I was encouraged

by how easy it would be for a teacher to implement these recommendations. This latter point is seen in the criteria he used to identify the best vocabulary teaching activities. He stated that these activities are most certain to result in useful learning, do not require a lot of work from the teacher, provide balance in a well-designed program, are simple and efficient, and can be used over and over again. I was both surprised and relieved to have someone of Nation's stature suggest an approach which does not require a great deal of preparation or creativity. I kept thinking of the saying "less is more" during his talk. I often feel pressure to continually come up with original activity ideas that often require a great deal of class time to explain to the students. I now believe it is better to use these criteria and attempt to spend our limited class time in the most efficient way possible.

The most anticipated section of the presentation, at least in my opinion, was the part where he described the actual vocabulary activities. The ten activities are as follows:

- Extensive reading from suitable texts – The students read large quantities of material at a level slightly below their own. The material should be easy to understand and of high interest to the student.
- Listening to stories – The teacher reads a story to the class one chapter at a time. The students just listen and enjoy.
- Learning from word cards – The students write new vocabulary words on cards with definitions, example sentences, and/or translations. The students review these cards at regular intervals.
- Intensive reading of suitable texts – The students study relatively difficult written texts above their current level. The focus is on acquiring new grammatical structures and unknown vocabulary.
- Quick explanations by the teacher – The teacher, when an unknown word comes up in class, gives a brief explanation, so the students will understand the new word.
- A speed reading course – The students read one or two passages each week. The goal is to improve reading speed, so the students are encouraged to read faster and record the amount of time it took to complete the passage.
- 4/3/2 – A student speaks on one topic for four minutes. The student

then changes partners and repeats the same exercise, giving the same information. However, the student must finish in only three minutes. The student changes partners again for the two-minute stage.

- Group speaking activities – The students discuss a topic based upon previously introduced material.
- Linked skill activities – The students use more than one of their English skills for these activities. For example, a student reads a passage about a topic, then discusses the topic in groups and then writes about the topic for homework.
- 10-minute writing – The students write about a topic for ten minutes. The goal is to improve writing speed, so accuracy is not important for this exercise.

Some of these activities were familiar to me, and some I had never thought of as being vocabulary activities at all. For a detailed description of the actual activities, please refer to his book: *What Should Every EFL Teacher Know?* (Nation, 2013). He spent some time describing each activity, and it became clear how each one was related to vocabulary. I often thought of vocabulary activities as simply being rote-learning exercises focused on unknown words. While these types of activities are important, I now understand the need to balance this with vocabulary activities focusing on output and fluency.

This idea of balance was further emphasized during Paul Nation's description of the four strands. He said a well-designed course should have equal parts: meaning-focused input (learning through listening and reading), meaning-focused output (learning through speaking and writing), language-focused learning (deliberate study), and fluency development (in listening, speaking, reading and writing). While he used the four strands to describe a well-designed program, he brought the discussion back to vocabulary by having us choose one strand for each of the ten activities listed above. There was some confusion regarding the difference between meaning-focused output and fluency development. Nation differentiated the two strands by explaining that meaning-focused output had unknown grammar and/or vocabulary, whereas fluency development was making the best use of what you already know. He proceeded

to explain that fluency development activities should be easy, have a pressure to go faster, provide a large quantity of practice, and be message focused. This matching exercise helped me understand how easy it would be to achieve balance within my language classes.

The final part of the presentation focused on EFL programs in general. Nation strongly recommended that EFL programs add extensive reading at the appropriate levels for input and fluency development, a fluency development program, peer listening and speaking, linked skills activities, and vocabulary size testing to their current curriculum. I was excited by the potential benefit these changes might have on my students. I also feel that taking these steps to improve my classes is easily doable by using the activities listed above and Nation's Vocabulary Size Test, which can be found at [my.vocabularysize.com](http://my.vocabularysize.com).

I left the presentation excited and intrigued. It was amazing at how quickly the four hours had passed. By giving us specific activities that could be used immediately in our classes and by proposing significant changes to our overall programs, he managed to help everyone in attendance regardless of their experience or teaching situation. Overall, I thought this was an excellent learning experience. I would strongly recommend anyone who has the chance to attend a future presentation by Nation.

## References

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