

Book Review

Teaching Vocabulary: Strategies and Techniques

I. S. P. Nation.
Boston, MA: Heinle. 2009. (pp.xiii+222)
ISBN: 978-1-4240-0565-9

Reviewed by Kayo Ozawa
Kyoritsu Women's University

English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers instinctively know that students' acquisition of vocabulary is fundamental to mastery of a foreign language. However, many of us find ourselves in the rut of creating unimaginative vocabulary quizzes without really thinking about vocabulary acquisition theory and usage. Paul Nation, whose interests range from learning vocabulary through speaking to word part relationships between high and low frequency words, has written a book on vocabulary teaching that offers something for all language teachers.

Nation's book not only gives practical teaching techniques, but is based on solid research and suggests ideas to connect the task of vocabulary instruction to the four skills. Nation surprises the reader by stating that among the least important of a teacher's job is the deliberate teaching of vocabulary. His reasons are that first, there are many words that learners need to know and teaching could only deal with a small proportion of these; second, learning a word is based on accumulation and relies a lot on deliberate study and dictionary use in addition to teaching; third, research shows that a lot of information about a word

tends to be confused or not get taken in; and finally, knowing a word well involves knowing a range of aspects of the word, including its meaning, form and use, so it is time-consuming (Nation, p. 5).

The teacher's four most important jobs are: planning, strategy-training, testing, and teaching vocabulary. The most important is planning. In planning, learning time should be divided equally between the four strands of (1) meaning-focused input, where learners learn new vocabulary and enrich and establish previously met vocabulary through activities such as extensive reading and listening to lectures; (2) meaning-focused output, where learners enrich and establish their knowledge of vocabulary through speaking and writing (including prepared talks, role play, and split-information activities); (3) language-focused learning, where learners are trained in the four important vocabulary strategies of guessing from context, using word cards, using word parts, and dictionary use; and finally, (4) fluency development, including activities such as speed reading, extensive reading, ten-minute writing, and the 4/3/2 activity. In this last activity, the learners work in pairs. One person prepares a short talk on an assigned topic and presents to another learner for four minutes. Then his partner paraphrases the short talk into three minutes, the speaker is alternated and then the talk is summarized into two minutes. Due to the repetition, the pace of the talk accelerates and there is less faltering in speech (Nation, 2009, p.56).

Another point that challenges our common sense as teachers is Nation's point that it is all right for the teacher and the learner to do nothing about low-frequency words (p.63).

One of the strengths of this book is that it contains a wealth of hands-on exercises like the ones mentioned above for the teacher to walk into the classroom with. Even in the area of deliberate teaching, which he considers as secondary to planning, Nation suggests unique ways to teach. For example in the Keyword technique, the unknown and the known are combined in a memorable image, such as a person balancing the core of an apple on his or her nose for a Korean learner

for the English word “core”, since “ko” means nose in Korean (p.123).

In the area of testing Nation suggests individualized testing (p.147), where students are asked to present the words they have been working on, and give collocates of each word and write two derived forms of the word in addition to creating sentences and writing definitions. Such activities lead to student autonomy. Another strong aspect of the book is the six appendices, including the General Service List, the Vocabulary Levels Test, a Vocabulary Size Test, and the Productive Vocabulary Levels Test, which are very useful resources.

One criticism of Nation’s argument is the intangible connection between fluency and the acquisition of vocabulary. Nation states that setting up an extensive reading program can contribute to proficiency development through vocabulary growth (p.69). However the research basis of this connection is unclear. As Maruyama’s (2009) recent research suggests, vocabulary level tests constructed from the word frequency lists may not correspond directly to the graded readers’ level, especially for higher levels. Reading skills involve more than vocabulary acquisition, and the weakness of the book, if any, is Nation’s limited focus.

All in all, Nation’s recent book enables the teacher to connect the research behind planning and teaching vocabulary, in relation to the four skills, and is highly recommended.

References

- Maruyama, Y. (2009). Graded readers: Selecting an appropriate level for University EFL students. *OnCUE Journal*, 3(1), 26-47.
- Nation, I. S. P. (1990). *Teaching and learning vocabulary*. Boston, MA: Heinle & Heinle.
- Victoria University of Wellington School of Linguistics and Applied Language Studies Paul Nation Homepage. (2009). Retrieved from <http://www.victoria.ac.nz/lals/staff/paul-nation.aspx>