Reaction Paper

Dr. Averil Coxhead's Seminar

Acquiring academic vocabulary is a goal many EFL students constantly try to accomplish. Attaining such vocabulary is beneficial as it facilitates all four skills (i.e., reading, listening, speaking, and writing). However, acquiring such vocabulary requires time and effort not to demotivate students with an excessive amount of vocabulary input or not enough vocabulary to prevent students from performing at an optimal level in their academic courses and English proficiency exams such as the TOEIC, TOEFL, and others.

One challenge some teachers face when teaching vocabulary is knowing what type of vocabulary students are exposed in their coursebooks. Often this vocabulary might use a vocabulary list chosen by the publisher. However, this list is not regularly shared. The problem with not knowing the type of vocabulary these publishers use in their textbooks is that it makes a difference for students studying in a second language.

If a teacher knows these lists, the teacher can more appropriately adjust vocabulary lessons equivalent to the English proficiency of their students. For example, various kinds of word lists are used in Coxhead's Academic Word List (AWL), Gardner and Davies Academic Vocabulary List, Dang, Coxhead, and Webb's Academic Spoken Words List (AWSL) many others.

In the case of the AWL list, it is compiled from a corpus of 3.5 million running words and organized into 570-word families. The list is divided into 10 manageable sub-lists that make implementing vocabulary lessons easier for teachers. As their names might suggest, each of these lists has an intentional focus and thus is not developed the same.

Once a teacher has identified an appropriate vocabulary list, Coxhead recommended that teachers determine the student's vocabulary size and vocabulary level. This recommendation makes sense, as blindly applying a list to all students without consulting their initial English vocabulary proficiency would make it difficult to progress or stagnate.

However, the next challenge is determining how to implement vocabulary and incorporate it in an English course. It might be easy for the teacher to rely on past experiences of learning vocabulary words using word cards as a tool. Nevertheless, this perspective is minimal as it fails to incorporate other previously researched advantages and attests to the way they work.

I learned through this seminar that it is possible to teach vocabulary using a vocabulary learning framework. The advantage of using a framework, such as Paul Nation's Four Strands, is an organized system for deliberate vocabulary learning. The advantage of learning vocabulary deliberately is that learners can acquire more vocabulary than by learning incidentally.

The Four Strands consists of teaching vocabulary through, as the name implies, four strands (i.e., the meaning-focused input strand, the meaning-focused output strand, the language-focused learning strand, and the fluency-development strand. In the meaning-focused input strand, vocabulary is learned through receptive language activities such as listening and reading. Some of the requirements for this strand consist of knowing 95-98% of the running words and receiving a lot of input. The input sources noted can consist of several activities such as listening to each other read, watching movies or TV, or taking part in an extensive reading program.

The meaning-focused output strand suggests learning vocabulary through productive language activities. Therefore, activities such as speaking or writing fit well with this strand. These activities are not limited to conversations, telling a story, keeping a diary, or writing letters. Nation suggested that students use familiar vocabulary, with only a tiny portion of it

unfamiliar. He also suggested using any language that they deem necessary to bridge communication gaps (i.e., dictionary use) and to participate in plenty of speaking and writing opportunities.

The meaning-focused learning strand involves the deliberate teaching and learning of different language features. This strand is what I was most familiar with, as I often observe students engaged in using flashcards, which can be used to satisfy the meaning-focused learning strand. One feature of using flashcards to deliberate learning vocabulary words is that students are exposed to multiple opportunities. Nation suggested that this repeated attention should be simple and not dependent on nonexistent learner developmental knowledge.

Through the meaning-focuses learning strand, I learned how to implement a flashcard strategy. This strategy required a plan shoe box compartmentalized in five or so sections. The purpose of these compartments was to move words to different areas as students learned these words. If the words are not learned, the card goes back to one compartment. The beauty of this process is that repeated exposure and an organized way of learning unknown words have the potential of motivating students not to equate it to a tiresome task. The readings about this system even mentioned students taking the box home. I considered this a good problem to have.

Finally, the fluency-development strand also can use all four skills. In this strand, the goal is to maximize what the student already knows. One of the elements to develop fluency is a time pressure element that pushes learners to improve their vocabulary production. Among the fluency activities that I think could apply to my students is the 4-3-2 speaking activity. This activity consists of repeating the same task in shrinking time conditions, and as an example, students can memorize a paragraph and tell it to different classmates.

Overall, learning about how vocabulary lists are created, how vocabulary is acquired, and how it can be implemented using an organized framework was what I liked most about the seminar. Learning how vocabulary lists were created was also very interesting to know. It now makes me question the vocabulary lists I might find online that don't tell you how they were created or organized.