The Academic Word List and The Four Strands: A Vocabulary Learning Course Design

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Introduction

Implementing a vocabulary learning curriculum may lead teachers and learners towards unfruitful directions if the word list does not correspond to learners' goals or if attention to some sort of organization framework is not followed at the beginning of an English for Specific Purposes (ESP) program. This paper will, therefore, describe how I would implement a vocabulary learning course using the Academic Word List (Coxhead, 2000), how to determine how much vocabulary EFL learners already know using Vocabulary Levels Tests and Vocabulary Size Tests, and how to implement vocabulary learning activities using the Four Strands framework (Nation, 2007). The learning course design is intended for Japanese university students with a beginning English proficiency level studying at an English for Academic Purposes (EAP) program, focusing on reading academic texts.

The Academic Word List

There are different word lists designed for the academic field, such as Coxhead's (2000) Academic Word List (AWL), Gardner and Davies' (2014) Academic Vocabulary List (AVL), Dang, Coxhead, Webb's (2017) Academic Spoken Word List (ASWL), and others. Coxhead (2000) intended for the AWL to satisfy EFL/ESL's needs and eventually compiled it from a corpus of 3.5 million running words and organized it into 570-word families. Although the high-frequency words might be considered as "too big a step" (Nation, 2016; p. 11) for EFL learners as the list assumes learners to have a reasonable level of English, the benefit of the AWL is that it is divided into 10 manageable sub-lists (nine sub-lists using 60 families each and one sub-list using 30-word families) (Coxhead, 2000). The combination of a small word family size, list manageability, and academic text focus makes the AWL the ideal choice. After deciding to use the AWL for the vocabulary course, the next step is determining the number of vocabulary items learners already know.

Determining Vocabulary Size and Vocabulary Level

Determining how much vocabulary learners know before starting a vocabulary learning program can give the instructor an indication of how much work learners need to perform to learn the 570-word families in the AWL and how well the AWL frequency levels are known.

Therefore, a vocabulary size test (VST) can be implemented for the former and a vocabulary levels test (VLT) for the latter (Nation, 2016).

A teacher might use samples from a dictionary to determine a student's vocabulary level. However, the problem with this approach is that since high-frequency words occupy a larger area than low-frequency words in a dictionary, teachers using this method risk making the tests easier, which could produce inflated results (Nation, 2016). An alternative and more accepted test construction method is using VSTs and VLTs made from a corpus. The benefit of using a corpus when constructing a word list is that each word's range and frequency data can be used to categorize them in frequency lists, making it easy when teachers want to start their vocabulary teaching program (Nation, 2016). Once the instructor is aware of a learners' vocabulary size and level, the instructor can track learners' progress by implementing a vocabulary learning course.

Vocabulary Learning Frameworks

Two well-known frameworks teachers can use to implement a vocabulary learning course are The Four Strands (Nation, 2007) and the Involvement Load Hypothesis (Hulstijn & Laufer, 2001). The Involvement Load Hypothesis (ILH) follows an incidental vocabulary learning strategy involving *need*, *search*, and *evaluation* as the three basic components (Hulstijn & Laufer, 2001). In the Hulstijn & Laufer (2001) study, the implementation of ILH was beneficial. Participants exhibited higher vocabulary retention in higher involvement-load activities (i.e., composition task) than lower-load activities (i.e., reading and reading plus fill-in tasks). However, the Four Strands offers an organized approach for deliberate vocabulary learning. Compared with incidental learning, the incidental learning gains are "small and are dependent on large quantities of input to gain sufficient repetition" (Nation, 2007; p. 4). Therefore, this vocabulary learning course will use Nation's (2007) Four Strands as a framework for its organized nature and reliance on fewer input quantities.

The Four Strands

Nation (2007) recommended using The Four Strands to provide a balanced vocabulary learning opportunity by applying 25% of the course time to each strand. The Four Strands are meaning-focused input, meaning-focused output, language-focused learning, and fluency development activities (Coxhead, 2018) such as extensive reading (Beglar & Hunt, 2014). The Four Strands' (Nation, 2007) associated activities incorporated into the vocabulary program will be discussed below.

The meaning-focused input strand

The meaning-focused input strand can be achieved through receptive language activities such as listening and reading (Nation, 2007). To achieve the purposes of this strand, Nation (2007) listed certain prerequisite conditions such as familiarity and interest with the listening or reading contents, knowledge of 95–98% of the running words, a lot of input, and the possibility for learners to gain knowledge from the unknown vocabulary items. Several activities can fulfill the input requirements of this strand; for example, learners can take part in listening to each other read, watching movies or TV, and taking part in an extensive reading program.

Graded readers. Graded readers can be used in an extensive reading program to satisfy the meaning-focused input strand (Nation, 2007). Graded readers are books that have been modified for English learners, and besides being used to gain reading skills and fluency (Beglar & Hunt, 2014), they are also used to gain new grammar and vocabulary (Nation & Wang, 1999). Nation and Wang (1999) found that reading one graded reader was necessary to achieve vocabulary growth every two weeks. Therefore, following the suggestions of Nation and Wang (1999) of adding grader readers at the same frequency as he described in his study in an extensive reading program would help learners in the vocabulary program expand their vocabulary.

The meaning-focused output strand

The meaning-focused output strand can be achieved through productive language activities such as speaking and writing; therefore, activities such as conversations, telling a story, keeping a diary, or writing a letter can all be used to realize the goals of this strand (Nation, 2007). Nation (2007) stated that similar conditions that apply to meaning-focused input also apply to meaning-focused output. These include familiarity with what learners write and talk about with only a small portion of unfamiliar language, the possibility for learners to use any strategies they deem necessary to bridge any communication gaps (e.g., dictionary use), and plenty of speaking and writing opportunities.

Speaking Activity. One of the advantages of this strand is the possibility of mixing meaning-focused input and meaning-focused output activities. One such activity is having learners take turns talking about the readings completed in the extensive reading program. The benefit of this type of activity is that “one person’s output can be another person’s input” (Nation, 2007; p. 4). Using such mutually beneficial strategies can be used to make efficient use of class time.

The language-focused learning strand

The language-focused learning strand involves the deliberate teaching and learning of different language features. Some of the activities that can be applied are learning vocabulary from word cards, dictionary use, or pronunciation practice (Nation, 2007). The conditions for language-focused learning entails learners giving language features deliberate attention. The language features should be processed in deep and thoughtful ways. Opportunities for spaced and repeated attention should be simple, not dependent on nonexistent learner developmental knowledge, and often occur in the other strands (Nation, 2007).

Word Cards. Learning vocabulary from word cards is one of the activities used for effective deliberate vocabulary learning (Nation, 2016). Nation (2016) suggested focusing on high-frequency items and using word cards in reasonable small groupings (i.e., between 50 and 60 words), fewer for beginners, so Coxhead's (2000) AWL makes an ideal choice for this strand as the AWL's subsists fit the range suggested by Nation (2016). In this activity, learners can write the words the English word they want to learn on one side and the Japanese translation on the other side, and after the learner completes 30 or 40 cards, they can place them in a shoebox like the one used in Mondria and Mondria-de Vries (1994).

Mondria and Mondria-de Vries (1994) used a deck of cards and a shoebox to help memorize a set of word cards. The system implemented a repetition system based on distributed practice and retrieval practice which can be similarly implemented in the language-focused learning strand. The shoebox for this strand can equally be divided into five different sections of increasing size, and the learner can place the cards they want to study in the first compartment. After the word card is learned, it is moved to the second compartment. Once all the word cards in the first compartment have been learned and moved to the second compartment, the learner will review the second compartment and move unknown words back to the previous compartment and known cards to the next compartment. The first compartment is replenished with a new batch of 30 or 40 cards once the first batch of 30 or 40 cards has been learned and cleared from the first compartment.

Mondria and Mondria-de Vries (1994) listed some advantages of learning vocabulary lists using the above method. First, the learner can dedicate full attention to the word that still needs memorizing. Second, the order of the word card changes from one compartment to the other as the learning activity progresses. This constant shuffling effect benefits memorizing cards

randomly instead of remembering the word card patterns should the cards not be shuffled. This reshuffling ensures that learners memorize the meaning of the unknown word and not just remember the sequence. Third, the size of a shoebox can easily accommodate over 1000 cards, so it is possible to eventually fit all the 570-word families in the AWL as the learner works through the list, in addition to the advantages of working through the box of cards.

Mondria and Mondria-de Vries (1994) also noted that learners could memorize the word form when the learners write the word on the card. This practice of writing the word on the card is one of the benefits of studying physical cards instead of using a web application, as it forces the learner to practice the word form and not simply copy and paste the words into the application. Repeated word encounters through this method entrench the meaning of the word in learners' memory.

The fluency-development strand

The fluency-development strand employs the four skills (i.e., listening, speaking, reading, and writing). The goal for the learner is to maximize what they already know to receive and deliver messages (Nation, 2007). The necessary conditions for the fluency strand include that the reading, speaking, listening, or writing activities are familiar to the learner, that learners focus on sending and receiving meaning, that there is some sort of time pressure that motivate learners to perform at faster speeds, and that learners experience large amounts of input, or output (Nation, 2007).

Fluency Activity. This strand includes the 4-3-2 speaking activity, which involves repetitive reception or production of the same information or extensive reading (Nation, 2007). The 4-3-2 speaking activity consists of the repetition of the same task in shrinking-time conditions. In this activity, participants work in pairs to tell and listen to the same story three times with three partners. However, every time they perform this task, they have less time to complete it (i.e., four, three, and two minutes). The advantage of this activity is that the speakers can automatize their stories, and listeners receive additional input (Thai & Boers, 2016). Learners in this fluency-development strand can memorize a paragraph from their extensive reading program in the meaning-focused input strand (Nation, 2007).

In sum, the four different strands present language learners and teachers with different opportunities to learn vocabulary words using the four language skills of reading, writing, speaking, and listening. Although each strand has a particular focus, it is possible to combine and

sequence different activities to work as one unit. For example, an activity involving reading can support listening and speaking by having students talk with each other about the reading they completed. Similarly, the combination of the writing of word cards and deliberate memorization activities are two activities that can be helpful. Finally, the integration of speaking fluency activities with listening activities benefits each other. What is important to remember is that an equal amount of time is given to each strand for a well-balanced vocabulary learning course.

Conclusion

This paper described a way of implementing a vocabulary learning course using Coxhead's (2000) AWL to Japanese university students with a beginning level English proficiency, a way to determine learners vocabulary knowledge using VSTs and VLTs, and Nation's (2007) Four Strands (i.e., meaning-focused input, meaning-focused output, language-focused learning, and fluency-development). Equal instruction time should be allocated to each of the strands. Each strand should be supported by strand-specific activities (i.e., extensive reading, taking turns talking about reading, word card usage, and 4-3-2 speaking activity).

Word Count: 2151

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