

Plan V

Chris Payne insists on the importance of planning how we teach vocabulary.

Communication breaks down far more frequently because of a lack of *vocabulary* – or its incorrect use – than it does because of the incorrect use of *grammar*. An extensive knowledge of vocabulary is crucial to effective communication, because it is lexis, in the form of single words and chunks, which carries most meaning in a language.

This observation is best summed up by the memorable and much-quoted words of David Wilkins: ‘*Without grammar, very little can be conveyed, without vocabulary, nothing can be conveyed.*’

In many surveys, learners have indicated that they consider vocabulary knowledge to be one of the most important aspects of their language development, often *the* most important. But as teachers, are we doing enough to enable our learners to develop an extensive vocabulary?

I suggest that teachers should always have a ‘Plan V’: a vocabulary plan that is principled and organised, and I propose two questions for reflection and exploration:

1 Do we ever consult research into second language acquisition and, if we do, how much of this research evidence makes its way into the classroom? Here, we will explore semantic sets of words and word frequency lists.

2 Do we devote sufficient time to direct or explicit lexical instruction by teaching vocabulary consistently in every class? This can also be referred to as decontextualised learning.

Semantic sets

It is common practice for vocabulary in coursebooks to be arranged in lexical or semantic sets, and for well-meaning teachers to present words in such sets. Surely, learning words with others in the

same set helps students to remember the differences between their meanings?

For example, it would seem logical to teach together words which share a common superordinate concept, such as clothes, fruit, animals, jobs, etc. However, this belief appears to be based more on convenience than on research, as there is scant empirical evidence to support the belief that learning words in semantic sets facilitates learning. In fact, what research has shown is that it can actually *hinder* learning. Why is this so?

Semantic sets tend to be made up of words from the same word class, eg all adjectives or all nouns, like this set for clothes: *shirt, jacket, coat, sweater, dress, skirt*, etc. A consequence of this is that the words are all interchangeable in certain contexts, which can result in them being easily confused, thus increasing the learning burden for the students. For example:

1 *I’m going to try on this jacket/coat/shirt.*

2 *I like your new dress/skirt/sweater.*

Semantic study

Thomas Tinkham undertook a study in which he compared the rate of learning of words presented in semantic sets (he uses the term *semantic clusters*) with that of sets of words that are semantically unrelated to each other. The results of his research strongly suggest that it takes significantly longer to learn words in semantic sets than it does to learn unrelated words. Robert Waring closely replicated Tinkham’s study in order to verify its credibility, and Waring’s research confirmed Tinkham’s earlier findings.

The conclusion that we can draw is that although semantic sets of words are believed to be *stored* together in the mind, they should not necessarily be *learnt* together. Separate research has also found that learners are more prone to confuse near-synonyms, antonyms, homophones and words with a similar form (synforms), such as *lose* and *loose*, when they are presented at the same time.

On a more positive note for teachers, research has also revealed that it is not word sets *per se* that impede learning, but how the vocabulary is arranged. It was found that grouping words according to a *theme*, so long as they belong to a different word *class*, can aid retention and enhance learning because they are less interchangeable, and

therefore less likely to be confused. Here is one of Tinkham's thematic sets: *frog, swim, green, hop, pond, croak, slippery*.

The research findings can be summarised as follows: Presenting words in semantic sets can be more detrimental to learning than arranging them in unrelated sets. But research clearly suggests that learners can benefit from meeting new vocabulary in thematic sets. Although thematic sets can be more time-consuming to prepare than semantic sets, they are more likely to aid long-term retention.

Study and students

Before moving on, a word of caution is necessary. Some semantic sets – such as *days, months* and *seasons* – form closed sets, to which no new words will be added. Students usually expect to learn these words as a set, so it would be strange, and probably impractical, to introduce them at different times.

The research discussed has shown the negative effects on learning of arranging words in semantic sets when they are presented *for the first time*. But should we conclude that the same effects will be found with learners who already have partial knowledge of a semantic set? For instance, would learners who already know ten clothes words experience difficulty if they were asked to learn seven more clothes words presented together?

This raises the question of whether the effects described in the research pertain only to beginner levels. Clearly, this is an area that requires further study.

Word frequency lists

Learning new vocabulary can be a fun and fascinating experience. It can also be a challenging, even daunting, task, owing to the sheer size of the English lexicon. Fortunately for our learners, not all words are equally useful.

Word frequency has long been considered a measure of usefulness, and a relatively small number of words occur very frequently in normal spoken and written language.

Nowadays, thanks to computer corpora, we have easy access to research data on word frequency, and to various lists which rank words in order of frequency. Two such lists are the New General Service List, which is a selection of words that are common and generally useful for all learners of English, and

the New Academic Word List, both created by Browne, Culligan and Phillips, in 2013 and 2014 respectively.

- Consisting of around 2,800 high-frequency words, the New General Service List (NGSL) is an updated and expanded version of Michael West's 1953 General Service List. The NGSL was developed using the two-billion-word Cambridge English Corpus, which includes British, American and other varieties of English, as well as the Cambridge Learner Corpus. Based on pedagogic insights, it provides the most useful high-frequency words for second language learners.
- In addition to high-frequency vocabulary, it is a good idea for learners to become familiar with the words on the New Academic Word List (NAWL). More recent than Averil Coxhead's classic Academic Word List (2000), the NAWL is an additional list of 963 frequent words which are very common in all areas of study, and which are often found in newspapers and serious writing. It is arranged in four categories: *Arts and Humanities, Life Sciences, Social Sciences* and *Physical Sciences*. Here, the name 'Academic' is perhaps a little misleading, as it tends to conjure up thoughts of highbrow vocabulary, whereas the list actually includes many everyday words, like *availability, bargain, deadline, feedback, interfere* and *nasty*.

Lists and learners

Vocabulary queries regularly crop up during a lesson, and it is motivating for the learners to focus on particular words that they are interested in. While this may be considered admirably learner-centred, one potential drawback of dealing with words on an *ad hoc* basis is that too much valuable class time can be spent teaching low-frequency words.

Of course, our learners' vocabulary interests need to be met, but good vocabulary teachers are not only reactive, they are also lexically aware and should not abdicate responsibility for selecting the lexis which is most linguistically useful for attention in class.

I advocate adopting a principled and structured approach to vocabulary instruction which involves proactively teaching frequent and useful words

along with their common collocates, like those on the NGSL and the NAWL.

How to teach

Explicit lexical instruction is the focus of our question two, and it is a method that is often compared with that of learning words in context. Let us briefly consider these two methods together, as there has been a long-standing debate about which of the two is better.

The notion that words are acquired more efficiently when they are learnt in context is intuitively appealing, and a major argument in favour of context is the fact that native speakers of a language acquire many thousands of words, of which only a small proportion can be ascribed to explicit vocabulary instruction.

Yet the extent to which second language learners benefit from context is debatable. Context clues tend to be of most use to learners who have already attained a reasonably high level of proficiency. It must also be pointed out that not all native speakers are good at using context to infer the meaning of unknown words. At this point, it is important to discriminate between *incidental* and *intentional* learning from context:

- Incidental learning is when learners acquire, or pick up, vocabulary by noticing language they are exposed to, while they are focused on the general meaning or gist of a text.
- Intentional learning is the deliberate and conscious use of context to derive word meaning.

While learners can, of course, derive meaning from context, this process by itself will not automatically promote durable retention of meaning. Furthermore, there is no conclusive research evidence which shows that learning vocabulary from context is more effective than explicit instruction for the vocabulary growth of second-language learners.

It would be naïve to assume that one method should be deployed to the exclusion of the other, as a combination of both is necessary for our L2 learners to develop a rounded knowledge of vocabulary. It is best to consider explicit or decontextualised learning as the first stage of learning a word, which will then be supplemented by exposure to vocabulary in context, so that the

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▶▶▶ learners gain a deeper knowledge of word meanings and collocations.

What to teach

Paul Nation, author of numerous books on vocabulary, recommends teaching learners four types of vocabulary, in the following order of priority:

- 1 High-frequency
- 2 Academic
- 3 Technical
- 4 Low-frequency

Word frequency lists are a good source for planned direct vocabulary teaching. These lists can play an important role in the vocabulary component of an English course, provided that we also consider the range and coverage of words, and not solely their frequency. 'Range' refers to words that occur in a variety of text types, and 'coverage' denotes the extent to which a word can be used in place of another word. For instance, *go* can often replace *travel* or *walk* because it has a broader coverage and, consequently, it should be presented first. Teachers can judiciously select words from a frequency list to teach in class. This is not the same as giving the learners long lists of words to memorise, which is perhaps the reason that using lists fell out of favour with many teachers.

When to teach

Keith Folse relates how he taught a 40-hour course, consisting of one 50-minute class per day, in which he set out explicitly to teach his students around 25 words in every class. Folse's full-on approach to vocabulary teaching was extremely popular with the students, despite the fact that it was demanding for both the students and the teacher. At the end of the course, the students evaluated it in glowing terms, saying that *'this was the best course that they had ever taken'*.

I suspect that the popularity of Folse's course was at least partly due to the simple fact that language learners, myself included, always like to leave the classroom having learnt something new, as it makes learning a more rewarding experience. Too often, learners have the perception that they spend a lot of class

time revising. Unlike teachers, not all students value the importance of revision, which is why it is vital that we strike a balance between recycling language and teaching new vocabulary.

Thus, the idea of directly teaching new words consistently in every class is a sound one, and one which I would urge all teachers to implement. Where my approach differs from Folse's is with the number of words presented in each class. His was a one-off vocabulary course, but to deliver high-quality lessons as part of a long-term plan requires teachers to attend to other language issues as well as vocabulary. With this in mind, I suggest focusing on *seven to ten* well-chosen words *in every class*.

What's your Plan V?

Folse carried out observations of vocabulary learning in English classes and noted that many teachers lacked a clear plan for teaching new vocabulary and attached little importance to recycling words: *'Only a few teachers wrote new vocabulary on the board. In fact, most teachers did very little with the vocabulary.'*

He also observed that in classes on grammar, reading, writing and speaking, student queries were predominantly related to vocabulary. And in listening activities, a lack of vocabulary was a major cause of comprehension problems, even with learners who possessed good listening skills.

Learners are well aware that vocabulary knowledge is essential for their overall language development, so we are short-changing our students if we merely pay lip-service to the idea that vocabulary is important. We cannot assume that our students will notice and acquire enough useful vocabulary on their own, which is why we must be proactive and include new words in all our lessons, recycling them effectively in subsequent classes.

I believe that any planned vocabulary teaching for learners of general English must focus primarily on *high-frequency* and *academic words*, as they account for approximately 90 percent of all English text that we encounter through speaking, writing, reading and listening. Then other vocabulary, which is tailored to the needs and level of the students, can be presented.

Learners should also be encouraged to plan their vocabulary learning by

always keeping a written record of the target lexis for future reference. Vocabulary that is dealt with only orally in class can be easily forgotten, whereas the act of writing words down in an example sentence which shows typical collocation helps many learners remember them better.

Furthermore, to consolidate learning, words should also be recycled through the use of games, activities, quizzes and tests. Giving our learners frequent vocabulary tests sends out a clear message that we value vocabulary knowledge.



To sum up, an awareness of research on second language acquisition will allow us to make informed decisions about best teaching practice. Teachers who are genuinely concerned with the learning process will not only react to and teach new vocabulary that emerges during a lesson, but they will also be proactive and formulate a principled plan for vocabulary teaching.

The onus is on the teacher to be consistent and to ensure that all the learners receive more explicit lexical instruction by teaching them carefully selected words in every class. **ETP**

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