

# **AN INDIVIDUALISED VOCABULARY PROGRAMME**

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## **INTRODUCTION**

A focused approach to vocabulary learning is widely accepted as an important component of courses in English as a Second Language, but it is not easy to implement a systematic vocabulary programme to suit all class members. Teachers often choose one of the textbook series available which lead students through a carefully arranged set of lists at fixed levels (see for example Barnard, 1980). Such textbooks have the advantage of allowing easy classroom revision and practice, and frequent testing to monitor and give feedback on the students' learning.

However, choosing a textbook for a whole class of learners is problematic for several reasons. All of the students in a class will rarely be at the same stage of vocabulary development, and may have differing future needs for English. For ease of test marking, there is often an emphasis on receptive rather than productive knowledge of vocabulary items. A further problem lies in the approach of such texts, which does not allow for learner autonomy or different learning styles, both of which are now regarded as important in language teaching.

Faced with these problems, some teachers have implemented programmes which allow students to choose their own words to study. However, these programmes also have limitations. Firstly, the words chosen by students may be inappropriate if the students have no way of deciding which words will be most useful. The second problem is that it is very difficult to monitor the students' learning of the words through testing, if each student has their own list. Mulling's (1995) system overcomes these problems by linking the vocabulary with a reading programme, and requiring the students to write their own tests. Although these tests are easy to mark, they require redrafting in the writing stages. This process is useful for the learners, but is too time-consuming to allow for frequent testing throughout the course.

This paper outlines a programme which I have developed in order to minimise these problems<sup>1</sup>. The programme been used at Victoria University of Wellington, Auckland University and International Pacific College as part of English language courses for a variety of academic and non-academic purposes. I begin by explaining the philosophy underpinning the programme, before describing how the programme is implemented.

## **PHILOSOPHY BEHIND THE PROGRAMME**

Research in both memory and language acquisition has consistently pinpointed the principles which result in the most efficient vocabulary learning (Schmitt and Schmitt,

1995). The development of this programme has been driven by a set of principles about what vocabulary should be studied, how it should be studied and how it can be monitored.

### **What should be studied?**

A key principle of the programme is that learners should focus on the most useful words. Nation's research into vocabulary learning indicates which words are most useful for learners to target at different stages of their development (Nation, 1990); the rewards of study will be greater if the students focus on the high frequency words that they are more likely to meet. It is very important for all learners to know the first 2,000 words of English. For students of academic English a further 800 general academic words can be added, followed by about 1,000-2,000 technical words for specific subject areas (Nation, 1990, p.19). Therefore, students should spend time in learning words at the level they need most.

The emphasis in the programme is on productive uses of words. For pronunciation, word knowledge must include word stress, which is essential for comprehensibility in English. For grammatical word knowledge, the importance of correct collocations is emphasised by Bahns (1995), who points out the need for specific training in collocational competence. Modern dictionaries include both of these aspects (as well as information on word frequency), and learners can be trained to have access to this tool for independent use once the course has finished.

### **How should vocabulary be studied?**

The student-centred approach, favoured through recent years in language teaching, aims to give students the control over their learning. The language teacher helps students identify their own learning goals and chooses activities to support these. In a vocabulary programme, this means that students can choose which words they learn and how they will learn them. Teachers can help students to make informed choices through the following processes:

- *Information is provided about English vocabulary*  
Students are given information about aspects of vocabulary such as frequency, collocations and word stress, in order to help them determine the words they will study.
- *Information is provided about ways to learn vocabulary*  
The way that learners learn the words is equally individual; for example, some learners like to use mother tongue translations and others prefer to use English explanations. Exploration and experimentation of memorisation techniques will provide students with options in their study.
- *Information is provided about different learning styles*  
An awareness that any teaching programme should be flexible enough to allow for the different learning styles of students goes hand in hand with learner training. Ellis and Sinclair (1989) provide materials to train students to make their own choices, whether these are to be autonomous or teacher-dependent. In vocabulary

learning, some students may feel more secure being directed towards specific lists of words, while others may have clear preferences towards determining their own sources, such as words they meet in everyday situations, or words they read or hear in areas they are studying for occupational need.

Although student choice is at the heart of this programme, it also provides a system for structured study. Sanaoui (1995, p.26) found that learners who had a structured system of vocabulary learning were more successful than those with an unstructured approach. Students will benefit from being provided with methods of structuring their study to cover the important aspects of word knowledge.

A further important aspect of vocabulary study is revision, in order for learning to take place Nation (1990, p.43). Morgan and Rinvoluceri (1986, pp.5-6) point out the importance of the relationship that learners have with words, and that exploring this in the social context of the classroom can be motivating. Classroom work should therefore provide an opportunity for the revision of new words.

### **How should vocabulary learning be monitored?**

For students to see some progress and monitor their understanding of the learning process, it is necessary for the teacher to give frequent feedback. The easiest way for this is through tests. Weekly testing gives the students the motivation to keep to a regular programme of study, and measures progress towards a final test at the end of the course.

The final principle underpinning this programme is that it is teacher friendly. Tests are easy and quick to mark so that the frequent feedback is not a burden on the teacher's time.

## **IMPLEMENTATION OF THE PROGRAMME**

### **Determining individual student needs**

The first part of the programme is Nation's (1990, pp. 264-272) diagnostic test which tests productive knowledge of vocabulary from lists at the 2,000, 3,000, 5,000, 10,000 and frequency levels, as well as academic vocabulary (called the University word list). At each level there are groups of six words, from which words must be chosen to match in meaning with three other words. Six of these groups at each level provide totals out of 18 which form a profile of vocabulary ability for each student at the five levels.

### **Negotiation of individual programmes**

The teacher gives a general explanation of the implications of the profile results as well as an explanation of vocabulary frequency and how each level is best learnt, before each individual receives their profile. Students then discuss their results with the teacher and negotiate a programme for their individual learning needs; some from word lists (Nation, 1986), some from their reading, lectures or other sources such as language use with their

host family. A weekly target of thirty or forty words is set for the whole class determined according to their level and the time which they will have available for study.

### **Weekly choice of words**

Although students choose any words from the source negotiated with the teacher, they must choose a set number of words in particular grammatical categories to enable the testing to take place. These are decided for the whole class to add up to a realistic weekly total, such as ten nouns, ten verbs, ten adjectives and ten adverbs. Categories such as transitive verbs and intransitive verbs can be included for advanced classes, and provide the opportunity to focus on the grammar of the word. Once the students are familiar with the programme, the categories can be varied from week to week.

### **Independent study**

Next, there is class work on what vocabulary knowledge entails, and ways to acquire it, with a focus on productive knowledge. The class work is carried out in conjunction with an introduction to the vocabulary study sheet, which is a simple grid consisting of a row for each word, divided into columns with the following headings:

- *Pronunciation*  
Students write the phonetic description, including word stress.
- *Part of speech and usage*  
Students note the part of speech and any usage comments which are indicated in the dictionary.
- *Meaning*  
Students choose to write either English definitions or mother tongue translations of the words.
- *Collocations*  
If students are using vocabulary lists, they note down collocation phrases or sentences from the example sentences in the dictionary only, but if they are finding words from other sources they also include the original collocations. If the word is an adjective, they should find a noun which it collocates with, eg 'a grin' collocates with 'delighted'. If the word is a transitive verb, they find nouns to collocate as its subject and verb, eg 'a terrorist' as the subject for 'hijacks', and 'a plane' as its object. If the word is an adverb, the collocation may be a verb, eg 'laugh' with 'happily', or an adjective, eg 'sorry' with 'terribly'.
- *Other words in the family*  
This column encourages the students to see that they are also learning meaning for other words, for example the word 'definite' is related to 'definition', 'indefinite' and 'define'.

Although it might seem that this rather rigid study sheet goes against the aim of student allowing for individual learning styles, it fulfils the aim of providing a method for structured study. It is my experience that for most students it is helpful to encourage them to organise their learning of the aspects of vocabulary that will enable them to produce the word, particularly through the emphasis on learning the collocations of the words. This method also gives students confidence in monolingual dictionary use.

### Preparation for testing

Students write the words onto a list divided into grammatical categories. The teacher collects this list and codes each word (see Appendix 1 for an example of a coded list). The codes relate to the tasks required in the test:

Symbol	Words this is used for	Task required in the test
#	any multi-syllabic word	underline the stressed syllable
~	adjectives	write a noun commonly used as a collocation
*	transitive verbs	write nouns commonly used as collocations for its subject and object
^	adverbs	write adjectives or verbs commonly used as collocations
+	any	write a sentence using the word

The students must prepare each word thoroughly, since they do not know which code will be allocated to which word. Most of the tasks require the production of the collocations which they have found in the dictionary or from the original source of the word.

### Revision activities

In class time before the test, students participate in revision activities which provide an opportunity for general revision of the words and introduce some practice in pronunciation. Activities which are appropriate for group work when students have individual lists are those which require students to choose words from their lists in order to complete a particular task. These activities are chosen with the aim of encouraging creativity and the development of student relationships with the words (a list of activities from published sources is included in Appendix 2). Students then explain their choices to other classmates, and in doing so gain practice in speaking the word. They often enjoy these tasks because they are different from vocabulary activities traditionally used in the classroom.

### Testing

The weekly cycle ends with the test. Students are given back the coded list which they use



to fill in a test sheet (see Appendix 3) according to the symbols which appear beside each word. The same test can be used each week, or it can be varied to include other grammatical categories. The test focuses on productive knowledge of the words, and provides a mixture of open and closed question types. In one version I also include a section on attitudes towards the words, in order to encourage a reflective approach to the vocabulary learning. The marking of the test is very straightforward and intuitive, for example collocations are marked as to whether they are common rather than possible. The results form feedback as the students begin their study of the next week's words.

### **Summary of steps in the programme**

The following steps can be used in utilising the programme:

#### *Setting up the programme*

1. Administration of a diagnostic test, eg Nation (1990)
2. Discussion of vocabulary learning
3. Negotiation of individual programmes
4. Introduction to the study sheet
5. Introduction to the test

#### *Weekly schedule*

1. Students choose their words
2. Students work independently on the study sheets
3. Students hand in their individual test lists
4. The teacher codes the lists (see Appendix 1)
5. Revision activities are carried out in class (see Appendix 2)
6. Testing : The teacher hands back the coded lists. The students copy words into the appropriate spaces on the test sheet (Appendix 3)
7. The teacher marks and hands back the tests

These steps should be adapted to fit the requirements of a particular course. The programme can be integrated into the rest of a course of study by incorporating an analysis of vocabulary frequency levels for texts used in reading or dictations, using a computer programme such as Nation's (1993) *VocabProfile*. This approach raises learner awareness of the relevance of vocabulary levels by placing them in the context of other coursework.

### **CONCLUSION**

Once this programme is underway, the responsibility for vocabulary development is largely devolved to the individual students. Because most courses include some final testing which involves vocabulary proficiency, the students have an overall aim beyond the results of the weekly tests. Students acquire an understanding the relationship between grammar and vocabulary and some have reported beginning to enjoy using a monolingual dictionary. The long term benefit is therefore that the students gain confidence and some practical tools for

vocabulary study, in order that they can take control of their own vocabulary learning in an efficient and effective way once the course has finished.

## NOTES

1 I would like to thank Jo Hilder for her feedback during the development of the programme.

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## APPENDIX 1

### Example of a marked test list

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Week: \_\_\_\_\_

#### Vocabulary test list

Source of list: International relations lectures

##### Adjectives

~ progressive  
 # organic  
 ~ instrumental  
 # orthodox  
 ~ unprecedented  
 ~ sensible  
 ~ brash

##### Adverbs

# intimately  
 ^ conversely  
 ^ precisely  
 # misleadingly  
 ^ convincingly  
 ^ apparently  
 ^ merely

##### Nouns

# conservation  
 + legitimacy  
 # collectivism  
 + trial  
 + jury  
 # crusade  
 + scripture  
 # fraternity

##### Verbs

\* excommunicate  
 + oust  
 \* enact  
 # demilitarise  
 # annex  
 \* deploy  
 \* eliminate  
 \* seize



## APPENDIX 2

### Some revision activities suitable for an individualised programme

This list is a starting point from which the teacher can develop other activities to meet the interests of a particular class:

Lindstromberg, S., (Ed.). (1990). *The recipe book: practical ideas for the language classroom*. Essex: Longman.

*Favourite words orgy*, p.61

*Hated words vengeance*, p.62

Morgan, J., and Rinvolucris, M. (1986). *Vocabulary*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

*Elephants*, p.57

*Guided categorisation*, p.108

*Lexical furniture*, p. 114

*Leaping words*, p.114

*Gift words*, p.119

Nation, I.S.P. (Ed.). (1994). *New ways in teaching vocabulary*. Virginia: Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages.

*Real words from the real world*, p.12

## APPENDIX 3

## Test sheet

Name:

Week:

## Vocabulary test

- 1 Copy the words marked with # on your list.  
Write the part of speech and underline the stressed syllables in each word:

eg	<u>hungry</u>	adj		
a	_____		e	_____
b	_____		f	_____
c	_____		g	_____
d	_____		h	_____

\_\_\_\_\_/10 marks

- 2 Copy the adjectives marked with ~ on your list.  
Write nouns commonly used as collocations with each one:

eg	a delighted	grin
a	_____	_____
b	_____	_____
c	_____	_____
d	_____	_____

\_\_\_\_\_/5 marks

- 3 Copy the verbs marked with \* into the middle column below.  
Write nouns commonly used as collocations for their subjects and objects:

eg	a terrorist	hijacks	a plane	—
a	_____	_____	_____	_____
b	_____	_____	_____	_____
c	_____	_____	_____	_____
d	_____	_____	_____	_____

\_\_\_\_\_/10 marks

- 4 Copy the adverbs marked with ^ on your list into the column on the left or right below.  
Write verbs OR adjectives commonly used as collocations with each one:

eg laugh *happily*  
*terribly* sorry —

a \_\_\_\_\_  
b \_\_\_\_\_  
c \_\_\_\_\_  
d \_\_\_\_\_  
e \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_/5 marks

- 5 Copy the words or phrases from your list with + beside them.  
Write a sentence using each of the words or phrases.  
(Decide on the collocations first, then write the whole sentence).

a \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
b \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
c \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
d \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_/10 marks