

Setting and Achieving Realistic Vocabulary Goals in a Communication English Course

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Abstract

This paper follows the creation of the vocabulary component of a communication English course in a university in Japan, showing how Nation's (2000) course design process model and four strands framework (Nation, 2001) can be utilised to structure and evaluate a language course for effective vocabulary learning. Following the model, a needs analysis is conducted, making use of vocabulary size and level tests (Laufer & Nation, 1999; Nation & Beglar, 2007) to identify learner vocabulary knowledge and goals. Based on the principle that the more time you spend on a skill the better you will become at that skill, the four strands framework helps identify the various learning conditions and balance them across the curriculum. The four strands or learning conditions are: meaning focused input (MFI), meaning focused output (MFO), language focused learning (LFL) and fluency development (F). The planning process described in this paper can be used as an example or a

starting point for those who want to design structured, balanced and goal-focused communicative language courses.

Keywords: curriculum design, needs analysis, vocabulary testing, goal setting, vocabulary acquisition, course evaluation

1. Introduction

When planning a language course, there are many things to take into consideration therefore it is helpful to have a model for reference to ensure that important areas are not overlooked.

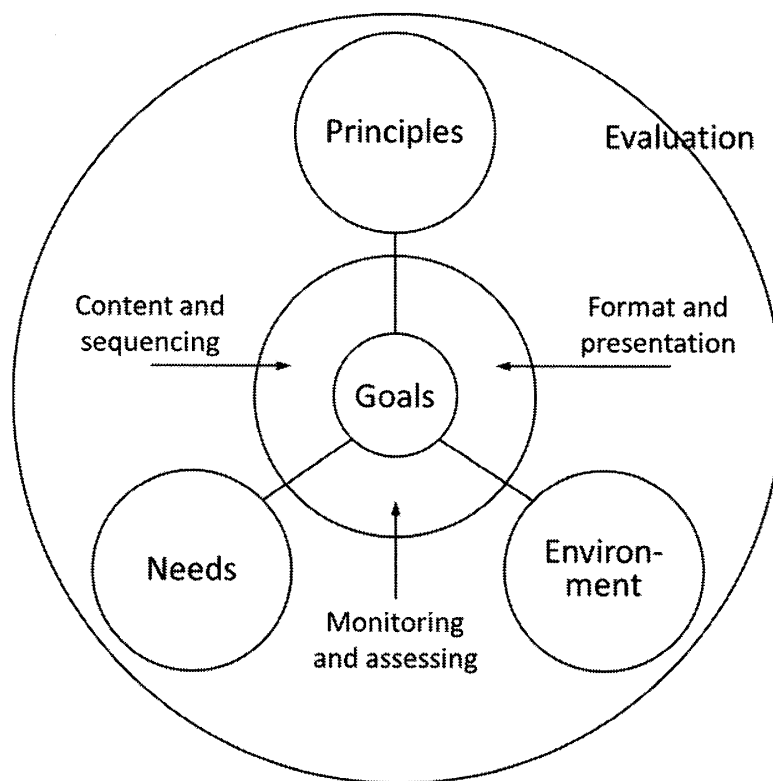


Figure 1: Model of the course design process
(adapted from Nation, 2000, p. 5)

Nation (2000) has proposed a model that covers the important areas needed in course design and also relates the entire design to the course goals, making it an attractive model for a goal orientated course. Learning goals are set after a needs and environmental analysis are carried out. The model also acknowledges the important influence that the course planner's or teacher's principles or beliefs regarding teaching will have on the goals (see figure 1 above). The blue-print for achieving the goals can then be mapped out through planning the content, sequencing, format, presentation, monitoring and assessment of the course. Learners' survey responses, continuous reflection by the teacher and assessment results will help the teacher to evaluate what has worked, what needs improvement, as well as generating ideas for improvement.

Generally, the more time we spend reading, the better we can expect to become at reading, this is called the time on task principle, and it can be applied to language learning. Nation (2007) argues that there are four learning strands or conditions under which all classroom activities can be categorised; meaning-focused input, meaning-focused output, language focused learning, and fluency development. Meaning focused input occurs when a learner listens to or reads language where approximately 98% of the words are familiar, an optimum percentage for incidental vocabulary learning (see Hu & Nation, 2000). Likewise meaning focused output occurs when a learner produces language in speech or writing for communication purposes, where learners use about 2% unfamiliar words, again this provides an opportunity for incidental vocabulary learning. Language focused learning happens when explicit attention is given to new words or language features and learning strategies,

and fluency is developed through activities where learners use 100% familiar language in communication with emphasis on increasing speed to real-time exchange.

By identifying which strand each class activity fits into, a teacher can plan and review each lesson to ensure that class time is evenly spread across all four strands in order to take advantage of each learning condition. New ideas emerging out of language acquisition research can be incorporated into a course when the strand the activity belongs to is identified and time is allocated accordingly. In this way, innovation is possible while still retaining a balanced curriculum.

This paper will describe the development of the vocabulary component of an English communication course at a Japanese university using the course design process model above combined with the four strands framework. The example is presented so that readers can see how the theories can be put into practise and to provide a model for those planning language courses.

2. Needs analysis

As seen in Figure 1 above, goals are at the centre of the course design model and when they relate to the vocabulary component of a course the goals will generally be to increase the learners' useable vocabulary size (Nation, 2001). However, in order to set relevant and specific goals, the needs of the learners need to be identified.

The needs analysis I carried out can be seen in the Appendix, two questions were considered: 'what type of vocabulary needs to be focused on?' and 'how much needs to be learned?' In order to answer these questions two vocabulary tests were

administered. First, the vocabulary size test (Nation & Beglar, 2007) using an online Japanese version of the test, which automatically scored the tests.ⁱ This online test had a Japanese (L1) format, which reduced the effect of non-vocabulary features present in monolingual formats of vocabulary tests (see Ishii & Schmitt, 2009; Karami, 2012; Nguyen & Nation, 2011 for discussion). Results from the vocabulary size test showed that students had an average receptive vocabulary size of 6700 words. The test had a multiple-choice format so it is possible that guessing and known associates may have inflated this score slightly (see Paul, Stallman & O'Rourke, 1990; Webb, 2008).

It should be noted that the vocabulary size test score does not reveal how well the learners know or can use the words (Ishii & Schmitt, 2009). On reflection, the diagnostic vocabulary levels test (Nation, 1983, 1990; Schmitt, Schmitt, & Clapham, 2001) may have been a better receptive test choice as it is a diagnostic test giving useful information about which frequency levelsⁱⁱ of vocabulary the learners need to work on. However, the vocabulary levels test was not available in a centrally graded online bilingual format, which made the vocabulary size test the easier option for administration.ⁱⁱⁱ

I was also interested in the productive vocabulary of the learners because the course was 'communicative' and as such I saw increasing their productive vocabulary as the main vocabulary goal. Several productive tests were considered, but ultimately rejected due to time constraints and practicality, such as analysing learner writing (c.f. Meara & Alcoy, 2010), developing a productive translation test (c.f. Webb, 2008) or creating a productive version of the vocabulary size test in a

Japanese format providing a comparison with the vocabulary size test (c.f. Webb, 2008). It was decided, however, to use the practical and time-efficient monolingual productive levels test (Laufer & Nation, 1999). Despite the problems that come with a monolingual format and receptive word recognition (see Webb, 2008 for discussion), I still considered the productive levels test able to reveal some useful information about learners' productive vocabulary.

If learners had productive knowledge of the 2000 most frequent words and the academic word list this would give them 95% coverage of most academic texts, a critical threshold for understanding and consequently also using such language productively (see Nation, 2001). Based on the results of the vocabulary size test, I decided to administer the productive levels test for the first 2000 most frequent words and the academic word list, with the expectation that learners would need to work on the academic word list. However, the results showed learners had only 62% productive knowledge of the first 2000 most frequent words and 22% knowledge of the academic word list. This showed a clear lack of productive knowledge; 38% of the highest frequency words represented a significant and pressing knowledge gap.

It is not particularly surprising to find that learners in an English as a foreign language environment have greater receptive vocabulary than productive vocabulary knowledge (see Webb, 2008). Vocabulary learning is known to be incremental (see Schmitt, 2000), therefore, although these learners probably have receptive knowledge of the words in the productive test, they do not know them well enough to use them productively. However, their receptive knowledge presents a

primed platform for extending and deepening into productive knowledge.

3. Strategies for vocabulary learning

As part of the needs analysis, learners' strategy knowledge was gaged through class-observation and surveys. According to Nation (2008, p. 3), there are four key strategies for vocabulary learning: guessing from context, using word-cards, word-parts and dictionaries. Learners showed some ability at guessing from context, word-cards were new to them, they knew some word-parts (but this knowledge showed room for extension), and dictionaries were actively being used. In light of this, it was decided that strategy instruction should focus on word-cards and word-parts.

4. Setting course goals

As high frequency words are considered the essential starting point for knowing and using language, closing the productive vocabulary gap discovered through the productive levels test became an important goal for this course. Learners clearly communicated through surveys that they desired to speak more fluently, and a good way to increase fluency is through memorising high-frequency clauses and phrases (Pawley & Syder, 1983; Wood, 2006). The goals for this course were decided in light of this, and were as follows: a) to improve fluency; b) to increase productive knowledge of the 2000 most frequent words; c) to memorise and be able to use high-frequency clauses and phrases; d) to become proficient in word-card and word-part strategies.

5. Environmental analysis

The environmental analysis can be found in the Appendix below the needs analysis. One of the most significant environmental factors for this course was the use of a course book: *ACTIVE Skills for Communication 1* (Sandy & Kelly, 2008). The book is designed to develop learners' speaking and listening skills at an elementary level. I would have liked to analyse the entire text of the book to reveal the frequency of the words and phrases in it (see Matsuoka & Hirsh, 2010 for an example of such an analysis). However due to time and access constraints, I only analysed one short section as a representative sample using an online tool, Vocab Profiler (Cobb, 1994).^{iv} This revealed over 95% of the text to be high frequency words and proper nouns. Therefore the content of the book appeared to be appropriate for the course goals.

Other environmental factors included that the course met for 30 classes over one year allowing for long-term goals to be set, and that the learners shared Japanese as their first language, making translation and cross-linguistic comparison possible for creating paths from first language knowledge to second language knowledge (see Hall & Cook, 2012; Laufer & Girsai, 2008).

6. Content and sequencing

The course book had a task-based unit of progression which naturally avoided problematic 'interference' (see Tinkham, 1993, 1997; Waring, 1997) and encouraged repetition and retrieval through communication tasks. Each unit built upon a theme introducing conversation models through listening and reading. Students then personalised the topics through writing and

speaking activities which culminated in a “challenge” communicative activity; this seemed to be an appropriate unit of progression to use in the course with clear communication goals. Vocabulary was covered as it was introduced in the book and as it seemed useful for the communication scenarios that were used.

7. Principles of vocabulary teaching

“The vocabulary component of a language course should be guided by a set of well-justified principles” (Nation, 2001, p. 384). This plan was based on the principle that effective vocabulary learning takes place when learners notice, retrieve and use target words or phrases creatively (Nation, 2001, p. 63). Therefore, ensuring that learners had multiple opportunities to interact with words in meaning focused input, meaning focused output, language focused learning and fluency activities was important. A list of other principles guiding the vocabulary component of this course can be seen in Nation (2001, p. 385).

8. Format and presentation

Class time should be split equally across the four strands; note that three of the strands are communication focused, meaning that only 25% of class time should be spent on deliberate vocabulary learning (Nation & Yamamoto, in press). Multiple strands can be recognised in some activities which makes evaluation of the time spent on each somewhat complex. Table 1 below shows my interpretation of which strand each section of the book and course generally fit into and the approximate class time it took. Each unit in the book took about

two 90 minute classes; and the third class was then used for the unit test which had a similar balance of the four strands.

Table 1

Time allocation in minutes for the 4 strands (90 min class x 2)

Activity	Book section ¹	MFI	MFO	LFL	F	Total time
Intro with pictures and discussion	Warm-up (10)	5	5	-	-	10
Listening, answering, and speaking using the model	Preview (15)	10	5	-	-	15
Examples, focus on form, writing and speaking	Working on language (25)	10	10	5	-	25
Writing and speaking	Communicate (23)	6	10	-	7	23
Listening, writing, and speaking	Working on fluency (26)	6	10	3	7	26
Writing and speaking	Challenge (30)	3	-	-	27	30
Vocab learning strategies, practise and short tests (15)	N/A	-	-	15	-	15
Teacher feedback (20)	N/A	2	-	18	-	20
Reflection time (16)	N/A	3	5	4	4	16
Total time		45	45	45	45	180

¹ *ACTIVE Skills for Communication 1* (Sandy & Kelly, 2008)

The vocabulary learning strategies of word-cards and word-parts were systematically introduced to complement and reinforce the course book content. Learning these strategies helped learners take control of their own learning, while also providing repetition and deep learning. For example, word cards were introduced to practise 'chunks' productively that appeared in the course book and learners personalised these for generative learning. Being able to use memorised chunks frees up cognitive resources for other aspects of communicating which is beneficial for improving fluency (see Boers, Eyckmans, Kappel, Stengers, & Demecheleer, 2006; Ellis, 1996; Pawley & Syder, 1983; Wood, 2006). Japanese learners are known for their skills at rote learning (Tinkham, 1989), and the word-card strategy makes concentrated use of this skill while also deepening their knowledge of chunks for fluency. Words and chunks with a heavier learning burden (words or collocations that do not have the equivalent meaning in the L1) were given more time and attention than those with concepts that learners were already familiar with from their L1 language system (see Jiang, 2002; Yamashita & Jiang, 2010).

9. Monitoring and assessment

The course book provided tests at the end of each unit. These covered a cross-section of the unit communication scenarios and skills, indirectly testing vocabulary. Regular unit tests were important for monitoring progress and motivating students. Another way to motivate learners was to have them peer assess (see Topping, 2009); using the word-cards mentioned above, students tested each other productively. Whether this method was as effective for vocabulary learning as regular teacher

monitored tests, however, is a question for further research. The strength of peer-assessment using word-cards was that when learners shared their cards with peers they could take on a peer-teaching role as they negotiated the meaning together. A useful idea for self-assessment that Nation suggests is giving learners a list of the 2000 most frequent words so they can check their learning against the list and refer to it to determine if words they come across are within that high frequency range and therefore worth investing time in learning (Nation, 2001, p. 396). The 2000 word list could be combined with a simplified list (in the L1) of what is involved in knowing a word (see Nation, 2001, p. 27 for a list of what is involved in knowing a word). The 2000 word list would make the class goal personally visible and measureable, empowering learners to monitor their own progress. They could then check off words as they learnt them and check that they knew the various forms, meanings and uses of the word with the other list.

10. Evaluation

Evaluation of whether the course was fulfilling the goals set out came from learners' comments in their weekly reflections, mid-year and end of year feedback forms. Results on unit, mid-year and final tests plus regular vocabulary tests were also used to evaluate if the course was achieving the vocabulary learning goals. The teacher was also able to analyse specific learning activities to check that they are achieving their purposes (see Nation, 2001, p. 391). The vocabulary component plan for the course needed to be checked throughout the year to see how accurate and appropriate it was for the learners and environment with adjustments being made as necessary. The

amount of time spent on each strand also needed to be monitored to ensure that a balance was kept between strands. Even though the lexical profile of the course-book was not precisely known, this was evaluated and compared against high-frequency word lists using Vocab Profiler, with adaptations and additions being made when necessary to ensure that the class was covering the vocabulary necessary to attain their vocabulary learning goals.

11. Conclusion

This paper has taken Nation's model for successful course design and four strand framework and shown how they can be implemented into a specific syllabus. The model provides a structure for planning a language course while the four strands complement the model by giving it a core framework for managing the different aspects of language learning. With this framework, trying new ideas is possible but also solidly managed so that particular ways of learning do not dominate at the expense of others.

This plan set out a good road-map for achieving the course goals of this particular course. The key to successful implementation was continual reflection, evaluation and adjustment in relation to the course goals. The planning process presented here for the vocabulary component of a language course can be taken as a model for replication or adaptation for other language courses. Other language courses will differ from this example depending on learner needs and environmental factors, but the model for course planning and the framework for balancing the four strands of learning can be applied to any

language course, providing a good starting point for planning the vocabulary component of a language course.

Notes

- ⁱ The online vocabulary size test used can be found at <http://my.vocabularysize.com/>
- ⁱⁱ Word lists are based on the frequency with which words appear in corpora, for example the 2000 word level or high frequency words are a list of the 2000 most frequently occurring words in corpora. A classic example of a word list based on frequency is the general service list (see West, 1953).
- ⁱⁱⁱ Various versions of the vocabulary levels test can be found at <http://www.lextutor.ca/tests/>
- ^{iv} Vocab profiler <http://www.lextutor.ca/vp/> is an online tool for analysing the frequency profile of text.

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Appendix

<i>Needs and environmental analysis</i>	
What type of vocab needs to be focused on?	Productive high frequency vocabulary (most frequent 2000)
How much of this type of vocab needs to be learned?	(Productive levels test: how far below 2000 are they?) 38%
Which strategies need attention	Word-cards, word-parts
Specialised areas of vocab that need attention	General English course focused on communication – no specialised vocabulary
Knowledge of current learner strengths in vocab knowledge	Receptive vocab strong >5000 Productive vocab weak <2000
<i>Environmental factor</i>	
<i>Learners:</i>	
Learners share Japanese as L1	Translation can be used for defining words and testing vocabulary knowledge
Learners will do limited homework	Assign writing sections of the course book for homework. Have regular tests to motivate study.
Strong desire to 'speak' English	Communicative speaking activities
<i>Teacher:</i>	
Keen to try new techniques	Use latest ideas for vocabulary learning in class
<i>Situation:</i>	
L1 and L2 share cognate vocabulary	Draw attention to the similarities to decrease learning burden and utilise L1 knowledge- be careful to note any differences in meaning too.
Full year course	Set long-term goals for vocab learning
Prescribed text book	Make use of vocab utilised in the textbook and related vocab