TEACHING VOCABULARY

Vocabulary in the curriculum

By
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1. Reasons and goals
Various reasons …

1. There is increasing awareness of the importance of vocabulary learning for proficiency
2. Not enough vocabulary is being taught through textbooks
3. Most textbooks do not differentiate between frequent, useful vocabulary and infrequent, relatively useless vocabulary
1. Quantity and importance

Vocabulary is the crucial factor in reading comprehension

But also

The main component of proficiency in general: Listening, speaking and writing, as well as reading.
Experience and reflection

Can you understand what this text means?

...day, ... lion and ... bear ... be ... forest ... saw ... goat ... path ... jump ... goat ... killed ..., then start ... fight ... ... decide ... eat ....

As compared to:

One ... a ... a ... were in a. they (Vpast) a ..... on the ... they (Vpast) on the .... and (Vpast) it, (Vpast) (Ving) to (Vbase form) who would (Vbase form) it.
Bottom line:

Vocabulary is probably THE most important component of language proficiency to learn for comprehension...

... and even more so for production.
BUT

How much time do teachers spend talking about grammar in lessons? Vocabulary?
How much space in workbooks is occupied by grammar exercises? Vocabulary?
2. How much vocabulary do students need to know?
How much vocabulary (%) do you need to know in order to understand a text?

What would you guess? 80%? 85%? 90%? 95%?
Answer:

Answer: readers probably need to understand 95-98% of a text in order to understand the main gist...

... and in order to guess the rest from context (Schmitt, 2008).

Let’s try it out
That is the work we began last year. Since the day I took office, we renewed our focus on the __________ who __________ our nation. We have made substantial __________ in our homeland __________ and disrupted __________ that threatened to take American __________.

(86%)
And now? (95%)

That is the work we began last year. Since the day I took office, we renewed our focus on the __________ who threaten our nation. We have made substantial __________ in our homeland security and disrupted plots that threatened to take American lives.

(95%)
That is the work we began last year. Since the day I took office, we renewed our focus on the terrorists who threaten our nation. We have made substantial investments in our homeland security and disrupted plots that threatened to take American lives.
Conclusion

With 85% of the text unknown, it is difficult to get the gist.
Even with 95% we cannot be sure of guessing unknown words correctly.
According to research

...Students need to know 5,000 – 8,000 vocabulary items families in order to understand an unsimplified text (Schmitt, 2008). But it appears that most 4- or 5- point students in 12th grade know about 3000. Hence - difficulty with the Bagrut reading texts (60% of the grade)

What can be done?
So: a vocabulary component in the curriculum, whose goals are:

1. To make sure that enough vocabulary is taught (i.e. a minimum number of items for each level);

2. To make sure that the most important items are covered at elementary and intermediate levels.
Vocabulary in the curriculum 1:

Goals:
By the end of 6th grade: 1200 items
By the end of 9th grade, another 2000: 3200 items altogether
By the end of 12th grade, another 2200: 5400 items altogether
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Foundation</th>
<th>Intermediate</th>
<th>Proficiency</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Altogether</td>
<td>1200 items</td>
<td>3200 items</td>
<td>5400 items</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1200 new items</td>
<td>(about 400 a year)</td>
<td>2000 new items</td>
<td>2200 new items</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(600-700 a year)</td>
<td>(700-800 a year)</td>
<td></td>
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So, assuming students learn English in school about 30 weeks a year
They should be learning...
... at least 12 new items a week in elementary;
... at least 20 new items a week in Junior High;
... at least 30 new items a week in High School.
Probably in the younger classes, nearly all of these need to be deliberately taught.
In older classes, some of the responsibility can be taken by the students themselves.
Vocabulary in the curriculum 2: Selection

A core list of items (words and ‘chunks’) that must be taught.
About half or less of the total number required according to the table.
These were chosen according to the following criteria.
Criteria for inclusion

1. Frequency
2. Practical usefulness (classroom)
3. Relevance
4. Easiness

Not necessarily included:
cognates
lexical sets
Why not cognates?

Many are not the same for all the students’ L1 (e.g. banana);
No consensus as to which are the most important ones;
Teachers and materials writers can select their own and include.
Why not lexical sets?

The research indicates that words that are a list of similar items (colors, clothes, parts of the body) are not learnt well if presented together.

Research
Compilation

Careful selection of a limited list
Use of corpora, and research on frequency of words and ‘chunks’
Plus professional judgment
Including classroom items
Samples from lists. Note that:

1. Verb past forms provided only when irregular
2. Chunks are provided under ‘headword’ alphabetical order: so in front of after from
3. Meaning illustrated by brief sample uses, e.g. grade

   I study in sixth grade.
friend
from
in front of
full
funny
game
garden
get, got
girl
give, gave

glad
glass

go, went
go on, went
on

going to
good
good at
goodbye

great
green
grow, grew
guess
half
half past
hand
hang
happen
happy
hard
have, had
have to, had to
he
head
hear, heard
hello
help
her
herself
here
high
him
himself
his
hold, held
home
hope
hot
hour
house
how
How are you?
hundred
I'm hungry
idea
if
immediately
important

I study in sixth grade.
The car is mine.

Your behavior is odd.
3. How can these requirements be implemented in practice?
1. Textbook writers

Will need to publish in series.

Elementary:

1/3 of the listed items by end of 4th grade
1/2 – 2/3 by the end of 5th grade
ALL by the end of 6th grade

+ another 600 items they will choose themselves.
Textbook writers, contd.

Junior High School: also recommended to publish a series such that:

1/3 of the listed items are taught by end of 7th grade

1/2 – 2/3 by the end of 8th grade

ALL by the end of 9th grade

Plus another 1200 or so items (400 a year) they will choose themselves.
Textbook writers, contd.

High School: no need for a series.
About 700 new items each year, chosen by textbook writers.
2. Teachers

- Awareness of need to teach most frequent items.
- Awareness of need to teach also ‘chunks’.
- Awareness of need to teach a lot of vocabulary.
4. Questions
Why no list for Proficiency level?

Problematic selection process beyond the first 1000 – 2000: very difficult.

Need for feedback on the first two lists

Priority: sheer quantity rather than selection.
We’re already working very hard: how can we add all this vocabulary teaching?

The question is not one of adding but of reorganizing my time.

And giving students more responsibility for vocabulary learning.

What am I doing now that maybe is less important and that I can cut down to free up time for vocabulary? Or that I can use to teach vocabulary?
Strategy 1: make students responsible

Explain to students the importance of vocabulary learning (you can tell them something about some of the research!).

Tell them that there’s no way you can teach them all the items they need to know, they need to expand their vocabulary themselves.

Tell them to keep vocabulary notebooks, and to spend time noting down and reviewing.

And that you’ll give them lesson and homework time to study.
Strategy 2

Use quick, 5-minute vocabulary activities:

• Ask students to call out all the items they’ve learnt in the last two weeks, write them up as fast as you can. Add any they’ve forgotten.

• Have the items on the board at the beginning of the lesson; ask students to scan them, say if there are any whose meaning they don’t remember; tell them.

• Give students five minutes during class time to look through their notebooks and review.

• Dictate the items in L1, ask students to say the English equivalents (in chorus); or vice versa.

• Ask each student to say one word or expression they’ve recently learnt or come across, round the class. They/you explain where necessary.
Strategy 3

Cut down on grammar explanations and exercises, and do vocabulary presentation and practice instead.
Strategy 4

Use homework for vocabulary study:

• ‘Spend 10 minutes reviewing vocabulary we’ve learnt recently’.
• ‘Find a word or expression in the book that you didn’t know before, find out what it means, come to class and tell the others.’
• Find online vocabulary activities at their level and invite them to do them. e.g. http://www.learnenglishfeelgood.com/vocabulary/ http://a4esl.org/a/v3.html
Strategy 5

Combine fluency exercises in the four skills with vocabulary practice or expansion.
For example....
Speaking

Groups get a list of 20-30 items you want to review.

They tell a story (each student has to contribute at least one sentence) which brings in as many of the items as they can. (They can ask you if there are any they don’t remember).
Writing

Give each student a word or expression you want to review (remind them of meanings if necessary).

Ask an informative question beginning ‘Can you tell me about’ (e.g. ‘Can you tell me about someone in your family?)

Students write a sentence or paragraph that has to bring in their word or expression.

Students read out their results.
Listening

Students write down the numbers 1-20 down the left-hand side of a page (or screen).
Say 20 statements (which can be true or false), each one including one word or expression that you’ve recently taught and want to review.
Students write ✔ or ✗ by each number, according to whether they think it is true or false.
Reading

1. Same as for listening, but in writing.
2. Simply rereading a text that included items you want them to learn, underlining the items they remember you taught them.
Mission impossible?

These are goals.
The attempt to achieve them will ensure substantial improvement ... Even if we don’t get up to the top target numbers.
Thank you for your attention!