

What place does vocabulary have in the foreign language curriculum?

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Abstract

This paper discusses the need for an extensive reading component in all language programs. It is proposed that extensive reading should not be seen as supplemental or optional, but as a core and indispensable part of all language programs. The reasons put forward to support this notion are based on research evidence.

Keywords

Extensive Reading; Curriculum development; vocabulary reading; language input

'A teacher's goal is to make herself unemployed.' - Anonymous

This paper puts forward the idea that graded reading, or extensive reading, is a completely indispensable part of any language program, if not all language programs. In order to demonstrate the case for a graded reading component within any language program, it is useful to separate two kinds of learning. The first is learning to use language. The second is studying about language.

Learning to use language means not only be able to use it fluently in communicative events but also be able to read or listen fluently without having to be bogged down with the language features. Studying about language involves finding out about how the language works, such as the sound systems, the grammar, vocabulary, and so on. An analogy would be taking a car engine to pieces to see how it works. This is what our course books and classes are designed to do. Course books introduce a piece of language in

say, a reading or listening passage (for example a tense, or some vocabulary, or a strategy), and then ask the learners to analyze it and find out how it works. For example, the learners may learn the difference between make and do, or between the past perfect tense and the present perfect tense, when to have rising or falling intonation, what to say at a restaurant, and so on. Typically, this introduction phase is followed by a stage to check that the feature is understood and can be manipulated and controlled by giving some kind of drill, a gap-fill, a sentence completion activity, or a test, to see if the learners have learnt the item correctly. All this learning about language is fine, but how much language do they learners need to learn?

Let us first look at the vocabulary. We know from vocabulary research that English is made up of a very few extremely common words that make up the bulk of the language we meet. In written text, we know that about 2000 word families (words including the inflections e.g. *helped, helping*, and common derivations e.g. *helpless unhelpful*) cover about 85-90% of general texts (Nation, 2001). However, vocabulary learning is more than just learning words. There are the shades of meaning, the nuances, the pronunciation to learn as well. Moreover, in order to learn words well, the learner must also learn the word's collocations and colligations (the semantic or grammatical relationships between words, for example why we say a *beautiful* woman but not a **beautiful man*, or why we say *blonde hair*, not **yellowhair depend on someone to do something* not **depend of someone doing something*, and *be obsessed with something* not **do obsessed by something*). To illustrate the task at hand, here is a sample of some of the main collocations and colligations for the very common word *idea* (taken from Hill, and Lewis, 1997).

Verb uses of *Idea*. "Abandon an *idea*."

abandon, absorb, accept, adjust to, advocate, amplify, advance, back, be against, be committed/dedicated/drawn to, be obsessed with, be struck by, borrow, cherish, clarify, cling to, come out/up with, confirm, conjure up, consider, contemplate, convey, debate, debunk, defend, demonstrate, develop, deny, dismiss, dispel, disprove, distort, drop
iiiiiii .

These are just a small part of the verb collocations and colligations of one

word *idea*. And most of them were not given. I only gave those up to the letter d and there are about 100 more! In addition, the learners need to pick up the tens of thousands of useful phrases, and chunks of language that characterize much of native language such as *I'd rather not* *If it were up to me, I'd* *We got a quick bite to eat*; *What's the matter?*; *The best thing to do is* ; and so on and so on almost ad infinitum. If we now turn to the grammar, we can see a similarly daunting task ahead of our learners. Let's look at some examples of the *present perfect tense*.

___A government committee *has been created* to ;

He *hasn't seen* her for a while.

Why *haven't you been doing* your homework?

There's been a big accident in Market Street.

___*Have you ever seen* a ghost?

The present perfect tense, in its various guises, is masked by various forms. It comes with differing uses, differing subjects and objects, as questions, negatives or declaratives in active or passive, in continuous or simple, with irregular and regular past participles, and so on. To be able to induce the rules underlying the forms, let alone the different uses and nuances of the present perfect tense, must take thousands and thousands of meetings. It is no wonder that typically it is several years after learners have been introduced to language features that they finally feel comfortable enough with them to start to use them correctly.

No learner has the time to methodically go through and learn all the above. No course book, or course, can possibly hope to teach even a tiny fraction of them. There is too much to do. But our course books were not designed to teach all of this. Our course books concentrate on introducing new language items each appearing in new chapters, with new topics all the time. For example learners may be copula be and jobs in Unit 1, and in Unit 2 the *present simple tense* and simple actions, in Unit 3 frequency adverbs and hobbies and are taught and so on. Each chapter has something new-new grammar, new vocabulary, new reading skills, new pronunciation points, and so on. Thus the structure of course books shows us that they are not concerned with *deepening* knowledge of a given form, only *introducing* it or giving *minimal practice* in it beyond a token review unit, or test. They do not

concentrate on the *amount of* revisiting and revising necessary for acquisition. The assumption underlying most courses and course books is that our learners have 'met' or 'done that now' and we don't need to go back to it, so we can move on. Adopting this view of language teaching (that 'teaching equals learning' implicit in these materials) is a massive mistake *if that is all* we do. We have seen we need to meet the language features a lot in order to learn them. We also must meet them under the right conditions.

Considerable evidence (e.g. Nation, 2001; Waring and Takaki, 2003) suggests that our brains do not learn things all in one go, and we are destined to forget things we learn and we tend to pick up complex things like language in small incremental pieces rather than as whole chunks of language. We know for example that it takes between 10-30 meetings of a word receptively for the form (spelling or sound) of an average word to be connected to its meaning. A far greater number of meetings will be needed to deepen the knowledge of the word (e.g. to learn a word's collocations and colligations, whether it is typically spoken or written, informal or formal and so on). This may take thousands of meetings-consider the word *idea* or the *present perfect tense* example above. Moreover, Laufer (1989) and Nation (2001), and many others have shown that unless we have about 98-99% coverage of the vocabulary of the *other words* in the text the chance that an unknown word will be learnt is minimal. This means that *at minimum* there should be one new word in 40, or 1 in 50 for the right conditions for learning unknown language from context. The figures for learning from listening appear to be even higher due to the transitory nature of listening.

As we have seen, course books are not designed to recycle words and grammar in later chapters and therefore do not meet these requirements for depth of acquisition. Course books deal with *initial* meetings with language. So, how are the learners going to deepen their knowledge if they do not have time to learn these things consciously, and our course books do not re-visit the features they teach? Where is the recycling of language we need for acquisition? The answer lies with graded or extensive reading.

Graded reading and extensive reading and listening are focused on several things. Most importantly, graded and extensive reading (and listening) are primarily about meaning. The aim is to read, or listen to, massive amounts of

comprehensible language within one's comfort zone with the aim being to build fluency. Reading fluently allows learners to read a lot of language which provides opportunities to notice and pick up more depth of knowledge about language features that the course books can only introduce. Importantly, if the reading text is too hard (less than about 98% knowledge of the surrounding unknown words), then their fluent reading will stop as will their chance of meeting a lot of language. Thus they will not be able to meet enough language input to meet and pick up new words or collocations from context. Therefore, it is *vital* that when they are learning to use language fluently that they read fluently and smoothly with minimal interruption. When they are *studying* language (such as that done in course books and grammar books) the text can be more difficult. Very often in language programs I see teachers using native materials with the intention of exposing the learner to 'authentic' texts. This is fine if, and this is a *huge* if, *if the learner can deal with it*. If not, then the text is noise and frustrational (for the teacher and learner) and not instructional but interfering with instruction.

Probably most important benefit of being exposed to massive amounts of text is the opportunity it gives the learner to consolidate the language that was learnt discretely in the 'studying about' phases. Our course books, and studying language in general, *necessarily* remove the item being studied from its context so the learners can examine it. The aim is not about being able to work with *meanings*, but about being able to *understand* and get control over language features in an abstract sense. However, this knowledge is separated and removed from context and is knowledge *about* that feature which is not connected to other features. Therefore, It is largely unavailable for production in anything but a limited way. Therefore, the learners also must meet these items in real contexts to see how they work together, to see how they fit *together*. In other words learners must get a 'sense' or 'feeling' for how the language works. This can only be done by meeting the language items very often and by seeing them work together in actual language use (i.e. from their reading or listening). This depth of knowledge gives learners the depth of language awareness and confidence to feel comfortable with the language that will enable them to speak or write. Thus any program that does not allow learners to develop their comfort zone of language is denying them the chance to progress to productive language use.

Bluntly stated, language programs that do not have an extensive reading or graded reading component of massive comprehensible sustained silent individualized language practice will hold back their learners. Most language programs do not require their learners to read much. Instead, they consider the reading as some how supportive, or supplemental and rarely set fluent reading for homework. I have argued that it is *fundamental mistake* to consider sustained silent reading as supplemental, or optional. Extensive reading (or listening) is the only way in which learners can get access to language at their own comfort level, read something they want to read, at the pace they feel comfortable with, which will allow them to meet the language enough times to pick up a *sense* of how the language fits together and to consolidate what they know. It is impossible for us to teach a 'sense' of language. We do not have time, and it is not our job. It is the learners' job to get that sense for themselves. This *depth* of knowledge of language must, and can only, be acquired through constant massive exposure. It is a massive task that requires massive amounts of reading and listening.

If all learners do is plough through course books, and endless intensive reading books, they will not be able to pick up their own sense of how the language works until very late in their careers. This, I suspect, is one of the reasons people complain that even after several years of English education, Japanese learners cannot make even simple sentences. Simply put, they did not meet enough language to make sense of what they were been taught in school. The endless drudgery emphasizing only abstract knowledge for tests, at the expense of language use, compounds this problem.

Teachers and learners can opt out and avoid extensive reading (or listening) if they wish, but no matter what happens, it will still take a certain amount of time to get that sense of what is right in English. Getting a 'sense' of a language will take time. This applies just as much to general English classes as it does to special purposes classes. Learners studying a specialist area (say nursing or engineering) also need constant exposure to massive amounts of text from their discipline to master and consolidate their knowledge of the specialist language, too. Thus the principle that extensive reading is indispensable for all language programs is maintained. Where else are they going to pick up the collocations, the colligations and the tens of thousands of lexical phrases they need to sound native-like? Certainly not from only from

working with their course books, or word lists. Unless they read or listen extensively, they will be tied to classes and teachers, dictionaries and course books until they have met the required volume of language. There is no way round this. Thus, there is no excuse for not having an integral extensive reading program in every language program. It would, quite rightly, be a scandal if the learners were denied access to graded reading materials.

You may say, 'but we do not have a budget, time or resources to do this'. My answer is, speak to the people who make decisions, tell them why it is vital (not just a good idea) that your learners have chances to read (and are *required* to read if necessary) massive amounts of comprehensible texts within their comfort zone. If necessary, re-allocate budgets and re-draw curriculums to give your learners a chance to get out of your classes instead of pinning them in them. Carry on your good work with the course books to help them study about language but let's add the extensive reading component to deepen this knowledge, and not just as a supplement. Let's aim to make ourselves unemployed. It is our job!

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Bio-data

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