

HELPING LEARNERS TAKE CONTROL OF THEIR VOCABULARY LEARNING

Paul Nation

Language learners see lack of vocabulary as being one of the major hindrances in being able to use another language. But, it is clear from studies of vocabulary size and text coverage that it is not possible for teachers to present and give practice with all the vocabulary needed for normal language use. It is thus critically important that learners become autonomous with regards to their vocabulary growth.

Autonomous learners take control and responsibility for their own learning. This does not necessarily mean that they study alone. It is possible to be an autonomous learner in a strongly teacher-led class, by deciding what should be given the greatest attention and effort, what should be looked at again outside class, how the material presented should be mentally processed, and how interaction with the teacher and others in the class should be carried out.

This underlines the importance of autonomy in language learning. No matter what the teacher does or what the course book presents, ultimately it is the learner who does the learning. The more learners are aware of how learning is best carried out, the better learning is likely to be.

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This article looks at the kind of knowledge and skill that a vocabulary learner needs to become autonomous, how that knowledge can be gained, and how autonomy can be fostered and hindered.

It is useful to think of autonomy as relying on three factors - attitude, awareness, and capability.

Attitude refers to the need for the learner to want to take control and responsibility for learning. This is one of the hardest aspects of autonomy to develop and yet it is the most crucial. Moir (1996) found in her study of vocabulary learners that although most of them

knew what they should do and knew that what they were doing was not efficient, they were reluctant to make the needed changes. Immediate pressures, the influence of past behaviour, and the effect of teacher demands easily overrode the wish to take control of their own learning.

Awareness refers to the need for the learner to be conscious of what approaches are being taken, to reflect on their effects, and to consider other approaches. Some writers on autonomy consider that all autonomous learning must involve metacognitive awareness. There is no autonomy without metacognition (Wenden, 1995). Reflection is a very powerful learning tool and a major means of developing autonomy.

Capability refers to the need for the learner to possess the skills and knowledge to be autonomous in a particular area of study. One of the purposes of this article is to outline the knowledge and skills needed to be an autonomous vocabulary learner. It will organize the discussion according to principles of vocabulary learning. The reason for using principles as the basis for a discussion of autonomy is that principles provide an opportunity for dialogue about learning, for personal reflection, and for a systematic coverage of a field of knowledge. The vocabulary learning principles will be organized according to the major parts of the syllabus design process, namely

- 1 goals
- 2 content and sequencing
- 3 format and presentation
- 4 monitoring and assessment

In this discussion, an interventionist approach to autonomy is taken in that a list of principles will be provided. However, to truly encourage autonomy, learners will later need to reflect on these principles on the basis of experience and to confirm, reject, modify, or add to them.

The goals of vocabulary learning

Principle 1: Learners should know what vocabulary to learn, what to learn about it, how to learn it, how to put it to use, and how to see how well it has been learned and used.

Because this principle represents the goals of vocabulary learning, it is in essence a summary of most of the other vocabulary learning principles. It includes the three parts of content and sequencing, format and presentation, and monitoring and assessment.

Principle 2: Learners should continue to increase their vocabulary size and enrich the words they already know.

Whereas Principle 1 focuses on the process of vocabulary learning, Principle 2 focuses on the results. Learners should be encouraged to set vocabulary learning goals for themselves such as learning a certain number of words per week, and doing a certain amount of extensive reading per week.

Content and sequencing: what should be learned and in what order?

Principle 3: Learners should use word frequency and personal need to determine what vocabulary should be learned.

This principle means that learners should be learning high frequency words before low frequency words, except where personal need and interest give importance to what otherwise would be low frequency words.

A learner with academic goals should be focusing on words in the academic word list after the general service high frequency words are known (Nation, 1990). There are other useful lists aimed at special purposes such as Crabbe and Nation's (1991) survival vocabulary.

Information about word frequency is not as accessible as it should be. The second edition of the *COBUILD Dictionary* is the only dictionary to tag the higher frequency words of English. It uses a useful system of five frequency bands which allows learners to distinguish high frequency words from those of moderate and low frequency. Unfortunately the selection of the words is suspect as the second highest band contains many very strange items (*Lithuanian, Byelorussian, Yemeni*), indicating that perhaps frequency alone and not frequency combined with range was used to select the words. Nevertheless, the idea of indicating frequency in learners' dictionaries is an excellent idea and a major step forward.

It may be possible with a little practice and feedback for learners to develop a feeling for what is high frequency and what is low frequency. Eaton's (1940) comparison of English, French, German, and Spanish word frequency lists showed very close correspondences between the frequency levels of words referring to similar concepts in the four languages. The major problem in developing an intuitive feel for word frequency comes with synonyms like *start, begin, commence*. Generally, however, in English there is a tendency for shorter words to be more frequent than longer words, and for words of Anglo-Saxon origin to be more frequent than the morphologically more complex words from French, Latin or Greek. This area of developing learners' intuitions about word frequency is unresearched.

For the 2,000 high frequency words and the academic word list, teachers can usefully provide lists for learners to use as checklists that they can refer to as a frequency guide.

Hirsh and Nation (1992: 695) found that the more times a word occurred in a novel, the

more likely it was to be found in other novels. If learners notice words recurring in their reading, this should suggest to them that the word is worth learning.

There are now computer programs which quickly turn a text into a word frequency list. Learners can get quite excited about the results of this when they see (a) the very high coverage of the text provided by a small number of high frequency words, and (b) the large number of low frequency words needed to cover even a small proportion of the text. This visual demonstration can be a useful way of underlining the importance of the high frequency/low frequency distinction.

Principle 4: Learners should be aware of what is involved in knowing a word and should be able to find that information about particular words.

Knowing a word involves knowing a wide range of features. At the most basic this involves being familiar with the written and spoken forms of the word and being able to associate a meaning with those forms. While

this kind of knowledge is critically important, it is only a part of what is involved in knowing a word. Other kinds of knowledge include being able to use it grammatically correctly in a sentence with suitable collocations, being able to interpret and create other members of its word family by using inflectional and derivational affixes, being aware of restrictions on the use of the word for cultural, geographical, stylistic, or register reasons, and being aware of the range of meanings and associations the word has. For some words, much of this knowledge will be highly predictable from knowledge of the learners' first language and their knowledge of the subsystems of English. For other words, there will be a lot of new learning.

Learners need to be aware of the different things there is to know about a word. This awareness needs to be based on some organized system so that learners can easily remember what to look for and can easily check for gaps in their knowledge. One system is to use the information in Table 1. R refers to receptive knowledge, P to productive knowledge.

Table 1: What is involved in knowing a word

Form	spoken	R P	What does the word sound like? How is the word pronounced?
	written	R P	What does the word look like? How is the word written and spelled?
	word parts	R P	What parts are recognizable in this word? What word parts are needed to express the meaning?
Meaning	referents	R P	What does the word refer to? What word can refer to this?
	underlying concept	R P	What does the word mean? What word can express this meaning?
	associations	R P	What other words does this make us think of? What other words could we use instead of this one?
Use	grammatical functions	R P	In what patterns does the word occur? In what patterns must we use this word?
	collocations	R P	What words or types of words occur with this one? What words or types of words must we use with this one?
	constraints on use (register, frequency ...)	R P	Where, when, and how often would we expect to meet this word? Where and when can we use this word?

This diagram has the advantage of having a simple three-part division with each part being divided into three parts. It can be used as a means of recording information about words. The "word spider" (McComish, 1990) is a way of doing this using each leg of the diagram of a spider to represent a different aspect of knowledge about a word.

Learners can be alerted to the importance of this range of information about words by feedback on errors they make in

vocabulary use, by reporting to others on new words they have met (Mhone, 1988), and by comparing

information on L2 words with the corresponding L1 word.

In order to gather this information for themselves, learners need to become skilful and critical in their dictionary use, and need to be able to gather information from seeing words in context. This involves the ability to detach oneself from the act of communication and assume an analytical stance. The use of context to gain information on grammar, collocation, and derivatives could make use of computer-based concordance searches (McKay, 1980; Descamps, 1992; Stevens, 1991). Developing skill in gathering this kind of information can begin as a co-operative activity in groups. The group discussion and analysis can act as a consciousness-raising activity (Ellis, 1991) encouraging reflection and metacognitive awareness of what is involved in knowing a word.

Principle 5: Learners should be familiar with the generalizable language systems that lie behind vocabulary use.

In spite of the irregularity of many aspects of language use, there are regular patterns that can be used to help comprehend and produce language. These patterns exist at all levels - orthographic, phonological, morphological, collocational, grammatical, and discourse.

Because knowledge of these patterns allows learners to comprehend and produce language that they have not met in that exact form before, these patterns are much more important than the exceptions and deserve more attention from the teacher and learner. Here are some examples of patterns that affect vocabulary use.

Spelling The rule governing free and checked vowels affects a lot of English spelling,

including the doubling of consonants and the use of final silent *e*. Let us illustrate the rule using the written vowel *i*. The free

pronunciation of *i* is /aɪ/, the checked pronunciation is /ɪ/. The free pronunciation usually occurs in the following pattern (C = consonant, V = vowel):

*i*CV (the vowel may be final silent *e*) *dine*
dining

The checked pronunciation usually occurs in the following patterns:

*i*C (where C is the final letter in a word) *din*
*i*CCV *dinner*
spinning

Note that when *-ing* is added to *spin*, the *n* is doubled so that *i* can keep its checked pronunciation.

The rule governing free and checked vowels only applies to stressed syllables. Not only *i*, but also *a*, *e*, *o* and *u* have free and checked pronunciations and follow the same rule.

Pronunciation There is a grammar of sounds that describes the order and sounds that can occur in consonant clusters in English. For example, /spr/ is a permitted initial cluster, while /srp/ is not.

Word building There is a small group of very frequent, regular affixes which can be used to create new words (Bauer & Nation, 1993). These include *-able*, *-er*, *-ish*, *-less*, *-ly*, *-ness*, *-th*, *-y*, *non-*, *un-*.

Collocation Sinclair's (1991) corpus based studies of collocation show that there are general descriptions that can be used to characterize the collocates of a particular word. For example, *set about* is typically followed by a situation of trying to solve a problem or attempting to do something.

In some cases, learners can gain information about these patterns through discovering them themselves or through reading descriptions of them, for example in grammar books written for learners of English. In other cases, they will need to rely on explanation from a teacher. The most important requirement is the awareness that there are patterns and an interest in looking for the patterns.

This awareness and interest can often be stimulated by activities which use data in the form of examples which have to be classified or analysed. Many of the "consciousness-raising" activities described by Ellis (1991) are like this.

Learners also need to know which books containing descriptions of English are the most useful and accessible for them, and need to gain skill and confidence in using them.

When learners meet a new word, they should reflect on the ways it is similar to the words they already know. This reflection need not be restricted to the second language, but should also involve comparison with the first language.

Many learners expect that English courses will teach them grammar and other descriptive aspects of the language, and they feel somewhat cheated if a course does not do this. These learners are probably at the other end of the scale from autonomous learners who see the course as simply one available instance of organised resources and opportunities. This felt need can be usefully satisfied by encouraging learners to discover the frequent regular patterns that lie behind language use, but learners may also need to reflect on the value and place of grammar focused work in a learning programme.

Format and presentation: how should the learning be done?

Principle 6: Learners should know how to make the most effective use of direct, decontextualized learning procedures.

There has been a very large amount of research on the effectiveness of direct decontextualized learning of vocabulary, even though many teachers and writers about language learning have negative attitudes towards it. As the only kind of vocabulary learning, it is insufficient, but when it is used along with message-focused incidental learning it can be extremely effective.

There are several subprinciples that can guide this kind of learning. These subprinciples can be a very useful starting point for reflection on the effectiveness of the subprinciples themselves, because learners can easily carry out simple experiments on themselves by applying and not applying the subprinciples to their learning, and comparing the results. Carrying out and discussing this action research in class is a first step to personal reflection on learning.

Research on vocabulary learning provides useful indications of how learning from vocabulary cards can be done most effectively (Nation, 1982; Nation, 1990).

- 1 *Retrieve rather than recognise.* Write the word to be learned on one side of the card and its translation on the other side. This forces retrieval of the item after the first meeting. Each retrieval strengthens the connection between the form of the word and its meaning (Baddeley, 1990). Seeing them both together does not do this.
- 2 *Use appropriately sized groups of cards.* Initially start with small packs of cards - about 15 or 20 words. Difficult items should be learned in small groups to allow more repetition and more thoughtful processing. As the learning gets easier increase the size of the pack - more than 50 seems to be unmanageable simply for keeping the cards together and getting through them all in one go.

3 *Space the repetitions.* The best spacing is to go through the cards a few minutes after first looking at them, and then an hour or so later, and then the next day, and then a week later, and then a couple of weeks later. This spacing is much more effective than massing the repetitions together into an hour of study. The total time taken may be the same but the result is different. Spaced repetition results in longer lasting learning.

4 *Process the words thoughtfully.* For words which are difficult to learn, use depth of processing techniques like the keyword technique. Think of the word in language contexts and situational contexts. Break the word into word parts if possible. The more associations you can make with an item, the better it will be remembered.

5 *Avoid interference.* Make sure that words of similar spelling or of related meaning are not together in the same pack of cards. This means days of the week should not be all learned at the same time. The same applies to months of the year, numbers, opposites, words with similar meanings, and words with the same superordinate such as items of clothing, names of fruit, parts of the body, and things in the kitchen. These items interfere with each other and make learning much more difficult (Higa, 1963; Tinkham, 1993).

6 *Avoid a serial learning effect.* Keep changing the order of the words in the pack. This will avoid serial learning where the meaning of one word reminds you of the meaning of the next word in the pack.

7 *Use context where this helps.* Write collocates of the words on the card too where this is helpful. This particularly applies to verbs. Some words are most usefully learned in a phrase.

Because there are several subprinciples, it is worth giving plenty of time to developing an understanding of them and observing them in action. This can be done in several ways.

1 The learners trial a principle and report on it to the class.

2 Learners observe others learning and comment on what they see, and interview the learners.

3 The learners organize simple experiments with one group applying a principle and the other group deliberately not applying it. For example, one group can learn unrelated words and another learns closely related words. Or, one group learns with cards and the other learns from a printed list.

4 Learners report on previous experiences of successful and unsuccessful learning.

5 The learners are tested on their understanding and application of the principles.

Learners may be aware of principles and yet not apply them. Counselling and class discussion needs to examine the causes of this to see what can be done. It may be because the principles were provided rather than discovered.

Principle 7: Vocabulary learning needs to operate across the four strands of meaning focused input, language focused learning, meaning focused output, and fluency development.

There is a feeling among some teachers that focusing on vocabulary and grammar out of context is detrimental to learning. The research evidence does not support this feeling, and in addition it reflects a view that there is only one way to do things. It is much more effective to see the many approaches to learning as being complementary to each other, each bringing different strengths that together can provide balanced support for learning.

One way of dividing up the approaches is to distinguish them on the basis of the conditions for learning that they set up. Four useful strands are

- 1 Meaning focused input
- 2 Language focused learning
- 3 Meaning focused output
- 4 Fluency development.

In terms of vocabulary learning, a well balanced vocabulary course has a roughly

equal proportion of time given to each of these four strands. This can be expressed as four subprinciples.

Learners need to have the opportunity to meet and learn vocabulary incidentally through meaning focused listening and through extensive reading of material at a suitable level of difficulty.

Autonomous learners know how to gain comprehensible input, by interacting with learners at a level roughly similar to theirs, by interacting with native speakers who are sensitive to their level of knowledge of the language, by preparing for communicative activity before it occurs, and by choosing reading and listening material that suits their level of knowledge.

Learners need to be able to effectively choose and learn vocabulary using word cards and other decontextualized ways of learning.

Here “decontextualized” means that the vocabulary learning is not occurring in normal use, but is deliberately focused on words as part of the language system. The focus is directed towards their spelling, pronunciation, grammar, meaning, use etc. and the linguistic rules that lie behind those parts of the language systems.

Learners need to be encouraged and have the opportunity to use vocabulary in speaking and writing where their major focus is on communicating messages.

Having to produce vocabulary to achieve communicative goals helps learners stretch their knowledge of words and become aware of gaps in their knowledge. It helps them gain control of the aspects of productive knowledge that differ from the knowledge required for receptive use.

Autonomous learners are brave enough to seek out opportunities for speaking and writing, and know how to use those situations to set up the conditions that can lead to successful learning.

Learners need to have the chance to use known vocabulary both receptively and productively under conditions that help them increase the fluency with which they can access and use that vocabulary.

Learners not only need to know vocabulary, they need to be able to use it fluently. Decontextualized learning can rapidly increase vocabulary size, but message focused language use with very easy language and easy communicative demands is needed to achieve fluency. In addition, there needs to be some pressure on the learners or some encouragement to perform at a faster than normal speed.

It is not too difficult for learners to arrange their own fluency activities. In reading, learners can work through a speed reading course which has strict vocabulary control, read graded readers at a level below their normal comfort level of reading, and reread the same material several times. While doing this learners need to be aware that their goal is to increase speed. They should also reflect on how the language unit that they give attention to changes as fluency develops. From having to become fluent at decoding individual letters (particularly if the English writing system differs from that of the first language), they next move to the speedy recognition of words, and then to the anticipation of phrases.

Learners can take control of the development of their writing fluency by writing on very easy topics, by writing on closely related topics, and by writing on the same topic several times. They can also write on topics that they have already read about and discussed, and on topics that relate closely to their own training and experience.

Learners can take control of their listening and speaking fluency development by setting up repeated opportunities to do the same kind of speaking, by getting a teacher or friend to give them repeated practice with important words, phrases and sentences (numbers, dates, greetings and polite phrases, description of yourself, your job, your recent experiences,

your country etc.), and by rehearsal just before speaking. It is usually not too difficult to anticipate the things that you will need to talk about most often, and with the help of a teacher or friend these can be written out, checked for correctness, and then memorized and rehearsed to a high degree of fluency. The items in Crabbe and Nation's (1991) survival syllabus provide a useful starting point.

It is not easy to gain a suitable balance across the four strands of a language learning programme. The language course is only one element in such a programme and learners need to balance the contributions of the programme in an organised way by what they do out of class. Learners need to make sure that the vocabulary that has been deliberately studied is also used for meaningful communication wherever possible and is brought to a suitable level of fluency. Similarly, vocabulary development through extensive reading needs to be stabilized and enriched through the deliberate study of words, affixes, and lexical sets.

Monitoring and assessment: How can progress be measured?

Principle 8: Learners should be aware of and excited by their progress in vocabulary learning.

It is often difficult for learners to realize that they are making progress in language learning. Learning a language is a long-term task and is often marked by frustration and disappointment when successful communication does not occur.

Learners need to find ways of monitoring their progress and to use these when they feel the need for encouragement. There are several ways in which learners can take control of this in their vocabulary learning.

- 1 Keep a record of how many words have been learned. There are several ways of doing this. One way is to keep a record of the packs of vocabulary cards that have been used for direct study. If the words already learned are kept in packs of 50, this

Table 2: A checklist of common language use situations

Giving information about yourself and your family and asking others for similar information ☐ name ☐ address ☐ phone ☐ partner and family ☐ length of residence ☐ origin ☐ job ☐ age	Asking how to get to places and telling others directions ☐ directions ☐ distance and time ☐ using public transport	☐ where to look ☐ what to do
Meeting people ☐ greetings ☐ talking about the weather ☐ inviting for a meal etc ☐ telling the time and day ☐ saying what you like ☐ saying you are sorry ☐ joining a club ☐ giving thanks	Taking care of your health ☐ contacting a doctor ☐ reporting illness ☐ describing previous illness and medical conditions ☐ calling emergency services	Finding food and drink ☐ getting attention ☐ using a menu ☐ ordering a meal ☐ offering food ☐ praising the food ☐ finding a toilet
Going shopping ☐ finding goods ☐ asking for a quantity ☐ understanding prices	Describing your home, town, and country and asking others for similar information ☐ house\flat ☐ neighbourhood ☐ features of the town ☐ features of your country	Taking part in sport and entertainment ☐ saying when you are free ☐ buying tickets ☐ say what you like and do not like doing
Using important services ☐ post office ☐ bank ☐ public telephone ☐ police ☐ garage	Describing your job and asking others about their job ☐ job ☐ place ☐ conditions ☐ travelling to work	Controlling language use ☐ checking and showing understanding ☐ asking for repetition and slower input ☐ asking for needed words
Finding out how to get a job ☐ kind of job	Special needs ☐ ☐ ☐	

becomes an easy task. Looking back over these familiar words can give a feeling of achievement. Another way to keep a record of quantity is to look through a dictionary and see how many words per page are known. If a frequency-graded list is available, this can be used as a self-administered test to chart progress.

2 One way of getting a feeling of progress is to keep a record of how quickly learning can occur. For example, after making a pack of 50 vocabulary cards to study, keep a record of how much time and how many repetitions are needed to learn 80% or more of the words in the pack. The results will be surprising.

3 It is useful to make a list of situations and topics where the second language is used, and to tick these off as a certain degree of success is achieved. Table 2 contains a sample list.

Using such a list makes learning more goal directed, and breaks down a big task into smaller short term goals.

The list can also be used for a record of fluency development. An item can be ticked off when the needed vocabulary and phrases are known, and it can be ticked off again when the knowledge of these words and phrases are known to a high degree of fluency. For example, when buying stamps at the Post Office it is possible to know all the necessary numbers and words. Further

learning, however, is needed to quickly understand the numbers when the clerk tells you how much the stamps cost and to deal with unexpected questions. This can be practised and success noted.

4 Keep examples of language use at regular intervals. These examples may be tape recordings or videos of performance, examples of written work, or texts read and understood. Looking back over earlier performance can provide reassurance that progress has been made. If a course book is used, then going back over very early lessons that once were difficult can give a feeling of progress. A further way of charting progress is to ask a native speaker friend to act as a monitor of progress by evaluating language use at regular intervals.

The principles outlined here have been focused on vocabulary, but they clearly apply more widely.

Learners should be encouraged to reflect on these principles both for their vocabulary learning and any other kind of learning that they are engaged in. Appreciating the breadth of application of the principles is a useful step towards valuing the principles and coming to a deeper understanding of them.

Taking personal control of learning is a challenge. It is a challenge to the learner to gain the attitude, awareness and capability required for control. It is also a challenge for the teacher to help foster these three requirements while stepping back from control.

Paul Nation teaches in the School of Linguistics and Applied Language Studies at Victoria University of Wellington, New Zealand. He has taught in Indonesia, Thailand, the United States, Finland, and Japan. His specialist interest are language teaching methodology and vocabulary learning.

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"The time has come," the Walrus said,
 "To talk of many things:
 Of shoes—and ships—and sealing wax—
 Of cabbages—and kings—
 And why the sea is boiling hot—
 And whether pigs have wings."

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INFORMATION : GRETA, Plaza Nueva 2, 1º, Ofc.3; 18010 GRANADA
Phone : 958 - 21 03 18
Fax : 958 - 22 75 05
e-mail : infogreta@ctv.es