

OPENING THE CLASSROOM DOOR TO VOCABULARY LEARNING

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ABSTRACT

This paper details my effort to focus my attention on the learning of my students and to help each student see his or her own learning. Limiting the focus of my study to vocabulary learning, I describe my attempt to develop activities which would help students learn new words in the classroom and, subsequently, to appreciate this learning for themselves. I explain how, after a rather troubling start, I turned to a combination of literature research, classroom experimentation, reflective writing, and student feedback in order to learn how to facilitate my students' vocabulary learning. Following a description of my findings, I relate the rise of two unexpected challenges, and detail how I learned to address each issue by reformulating my thinking through alternative frameworks. In the end, what I learned about myself was as constructive to my work as what I learned academically through my classroom and literature research.

ERIC Descriptors

Experimental Teaching
Student Attitudes
Teacher Attitudes
Teacher Responsibility
Teacher Role
Teaching Conditions
Vocabulary

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INTRODUCTION

In a foreign language classroom, many great things can happen. People can laugh and have a good time. They can read thought-provoking texts and participate in interesting discussions. They can learn more about themselves and develop relationships with one another. These have all been positive aspects of my classroom and, given the choice, I would not want to lose them.

However, I have learned that there is one additional ingredient that must be present if my students are going to feel good about their involvement in the English course: my students must learn and appreciate their own learning. They must have a clear sense that throughout the language course they are moving forward in the direction of their goal to learn English.

This apparently simple insight into teaching took a long time for me to learn and assimilate. The next steps, beginning to look more closely at my students' learning and reacting with useful changes in my teaching, have required even more time. In the pages that follow, I will describe each step, from my insight, to the significant changes my teaching has since undergone. Within this description, I would like to provide for you, the reader, a sense of my own learning process. By including the process along with the product, I hope to portray the richness and complexity of my learning, involving both intellectual discoveries and emotional struggles while adventuring into new territory. Instrumental to this journey were the tools of reflective writing, observation and experimentation, structured student feedback and the research and writings of others, all of which appear throughout the text.

As the title of this paper suggests, my research focused on one singular area of language learning: vocabulary. While looking for ways to help students learn vocabulary, I brought such learning out into the open and made it part of the classroom experience in the hopes that both student and I could better appreciate their learning progress. My choice of vocabulary learning over the many other strands of language learning, such as grammatical structures or pronunciation, was, in fact, quite arbitrary. However, by limiting my research to exclusively vocabulary, I found that I was able to explore the subject and the arising questions with closer attention and to greater depths. As an added plus, I have also found that much of what I have learned from working with vocabulary learning has gone on to shape how I work with other areas of language learning.

Parker Palmer writes in his book, The Courage to Teach, that we, as teachers, so often close the doors of our classrooms while we work, leaving us isolated from one another in our profession. With no noise from the halls to disturb us, or observing teacher on hand to distract us, we work with our classes in privacy behind closed doors. But, I wonder, is it really the noise and distractions that we are so concerned about keeping out, or is it that we are we afraid of revealing something to potential observers? Are we afraid that our peers will see signs of our ignorance, our failures, our fears, or our inability to provide all of the answers?

I would like to make this paper an open door to my teaching and, more importantly, my learning how to teach. Collecting my learning experience and putting it into words has been an extremely challenging and beneficial process to me. Perhaps you, the reader, can also benefit by reflecting on what can be seen through my open door.

SECTION I

CHAPTER ONE

THE EARLY STAGES

In the classroom in which I teach there are typically from four to twelve students, depending on either the numbers registered or simply the attendance of that day. The students are overwhelmingly young adults for whom English is yet another activity in their busy days. For most, our class time together comes after a full day at high school, university or work. Although I would qualify their general level of classroom participation as being reasonably high, once they leave the classroom the vast majority spend little additional time in contact with the English language.

I teach eight such groups, each meeting twice weekly for 80-minute classes. The courses begin in October and finish in June, although not all of my students are enrolled for the full academic year, as some stop attending and others join mid-term. All of the courses, ranging from intermediate to advanced levels, are general English classes covering all skills of the language. For most of these levels we use textbooks which are new to me and to the school, a situation which usually repeats itself year after year as new books are sought for upper levels to avoid the students' repeating material should they continue at the same level the following year.

In preparation for each evening class, I spend time looking over the upcoming material in the new textbooks, thinking about how I will try to engage my students in that material. Considering how tired and distracted they often can be after a full day of work

or school, I have found that such planning of subtle elements and shifts can often help draw and hold my students' attention to the material before them.

However, a question I began asking myself several years ago was whether my students were really learning in my class. They were engaged, but was anything sticking? With each day there were new pages of texts and listening activities, new vocabulary and work on pronunciation and grammatical structures. With just under three hours of class each week and a thick textbook to cover it seemed that we were just "moving forward" with practically no revision of specific language items. If nothing was being reviewed, were my students actually learning or remembering anything? And just whose responsibility was it to review previously covered material? Was it part of my job to plan for regular in-class revision of "old material" in addition to finding engaging ways to work with "new material?" Or was reviewing the responsibility of each, individual student to do at home, outside of class?

At the start of the fall trimester in 2000, I began to consider and explore these issues around revision, with a particular focus on the area of vocabulary learning. On October 10th, I wrote in my reflective writing after my final class of the day,

Do they even record vocabulary? Do they have the maturity as language students to know how to choose words to learn? Or do they still need their teacher to do that for them? Should they be working independently or should we have class vocabulary lists? Do we have time to work on learning and studying vocabulary in class, doing learning activities to help them learn the words or should I just let them do whatever they do (or don't do!) at home in order to help themselves remember the vocabulary? I must think about what is doable for them and me and what's useful.

I believed that in order for vocabulary to be learned, revision needed to be done. But I was struggling with whether students should be left to their own devices or if it

should become a classroom activity. My sarcastic tone towards my students' sense of responsibility suggested the resentment that I felt at the time for having to possibly take on the responsibility myself and organize vocabulary learning activities for the classroom.

In the weeks which followed, I continued doing some experimental work around vocabulary learning in the classroom and I saw how helpful it was to my students. A significant change was underway in my approach towards how to work with my students and their vocabulary learning. On November 9th I excitedly wrote,

I've been working at getting vocabulary work into my lessons - activities to actively get them to learn words. It seems...that students react very positively towards this kind of work. Why? (1) It's useful to them; they can use these words as they attempt to communicate (2) [It's] something solid; they can put them in their pocket and say what they learned today. It's tangible to them....

So I used to feel that learning vocabulary was entirely up to my students and depended on their motivation, initiative and studies outside of class. Now, I feel that I should be doing things in class to give them opportunities to learn.

It became clearer to me that real learning had to be brought into the classroom; what students did before or after class was beyond my control, but what they could do during the 80 minutes of class was in large part decided by me. Class time had to be used wisely for effective learning, including some focused learning and revision of new vocabulary. If students were not reviewing words at home, I could get them to review in class through simple, organized class activities.

Planned vocabulary revision sounded easy enough, but one such simple, structured activity showed me early on that I had much to learn. Have a look through my open door at this classroom nightmare of mine.

THE CROSSWORD PUZZLE

IN THE PLANNING

While surfing the Internet for teaching articles and ideas, I came across a program on the Internet which made crossword puzzles. After downloading the program, I decided to create a crossword incorporating new vocabulary from the last class. Student A would have half of the target words already in place on the puzzle and student B the other half. To prepare one crossword it took roughly fifteen minutes of my time. In the following class, students would sit with a partner and define the words already in place on their page while their partner would recall the language and proceed to fill in his or her crossword. By taking turns defining the language missing from their partner's version of the puzzle, the two would go about the task of completing the crossword. I had enjoyed learning how the computer program worked, and was now equally excited to see how much fun my students would have with the resulting puzzle of vocabulary words.

IN THE CLASSROOM

The students are randomly paired up with a classmate sitting near them, each with one half of the puzzle. There are a number of students working with individuals who missed the last class. The latter have no clue what the words on their puzzle mean and cannot give any definitions, nor provide the words which their partners are trying to define. Others who attended the last class frequently cannot recall the meaning of the words and are shuffling through their notes to see if they can find any definitions for these words. Even in the cases where they do recall the word, they have trouble explaining to their partners what the word means. There is absolutely no enthusiasm in

the classroom, only extreme boredom and frustration. I am feeling very tense as I see that no one is enjoying the activity. The suffering drags on until I step in and call an end to the puzzle activity. I immediately move on to the new material in hopes that the disaster will be quickly forgotten.

AFTER CLASS

All I could see was that the experience with the activity was an absolute disaster. There was practically no work with the target vocabulary and the class was heavy with boredom and frustration. For me, it was a painfully uncomfortable experience, seeing all of those bored, unhappy looks on my students' faces. My reaction seemed almost instinctive, wanting to distance myself as far away as possible from the negative experience.

I felt sure that my students needed such revision. My own language learning experience taught me that seeing a word only once would not lead to my learning it or remembering it. However, giving students additional exposure to specific words was obviously more complicated than just tossing the words back to them in the next class. The apparent level of complication was more than I was ready to begin working through, and I decided to do no further work with recycling vocabulary.

There was, in fact, much to learn from this classroom experience, had I been willing to look at it. Instead, I swept it under the rug. My reaction probably had as much to do with my fears of facing issues of failure as with not wanting to put in hard work at learning about an area I seemed to know so little about. Apparently, I was not ready for the challenge of addressing either. Learning something new involves effort and

requires taking risks, often involving some amount of failure along the way. I would need a push before I would commit to making the effort to explore the issues vocabulary learning had raised. That push, or spark, would come several months later from the voice of a student during the spring trimester.

MARTA

As I so often do, I started my adult, upper-intermediate English class by engaging the early-arriving students in friendly conversation. On this particular day, the normally light chat would turn more personal than usual. Marta, a thirty-year-old, mild-mannered teacher of Spanish, said with a sad voice, "I'm frustrated. I feel like my level of English isn't improving at all."

The class was quiet as Marta spoke these words but my mind began to race. I wanted to respond by offering her encouragement but I suddenly became embarrassingly aware that I had not taken notice of any improvement in her level of English. Surely she had made some progress, but I had not made a point of watching for evidence of her learning, nor created any clear opportunities to make her learning observable. In the absence of such evidence as support, I resisted giving her what I considered would be empty words of encouragement. Instead, I continued to listen as she elaborated on her concerns, only responding to show her that I understood what she was saying.

Marta went on to explain how she had been studying English for the past several years at the language school and felt as if she had not been improving during that time in spite of her regular attendance and sincere interest in learning. She questioned her ability

to learn English, wondering if she was a capable student of languages or if she had already reached the limit of her learning potential.

As Marta finished explaining her feelings of frustration, she appeared to be somewhat more at ease. Her body language told me that she was ready to begin with the class lesson, so we went ahead and proceeded with the first class activity. However, her softly spoken words had left a powerful impression on me. Her comments helped me begin to focus and hold my attention on a fundamental aspect of teaching and learning which was by and large absent in our classes: the level of attention on learning. I, as Marta's teacher, had not been effectively focusing my attention on her learning, nor had I helped Marta direct her attention on her own learning. I had not made learning the focus of the classroom experience, for Marta or for any of my students. I needed to be providing concrete learning opportunities through which the students and I could appreciate their learning progress.

Upon further reflection following the class, I made a clear connection between this insight and my abandoned work around my students' vocabulary learning. I felt that if Marta and her classmates began reviewing vocabulary in the classroom, they would have a better chance of learning the new vocabulary and, more importantly, they could see for themselves the language that they were learning, thereby gaining a clearer sense of progress in their effort to learn English. Of course they would need to learn more than just vocabulary, but I wanted to make at least this one strand of language learning very visible to them.

It was Marta's voice which would provide the spark I needed to begin focusing my attention on planned vocabulary learning in the classroom. With her voice in mind, I

was able to go back and re-examine the events of the disastrous crossword puzzle. I was ready to begin learning from my mistakes and to take a step towards developing better vocabulary learning activities.

As I reflected on what occurred during the puzzle activity, many useful questions began to surface: “Why didn’t the activity work?” “Could I have done something to help make it work?” “Was the activity effectively designed to help students learn vocabulary?” “What does it really take to learn those words?” “And why was I so rattled when I saw that the activity wasn’t working?” I carried these questions with me as I began to experiment once again with vocabulary learning in the classroom.

What I have learned from these questions and others is described in the chapters that follow, the content of which is highly interrelated and not necessarily chronological. Section II examines the influence of published research on my work with vocabulary, namely that found in the book, Learning Vocabulary in Another Language, by I.S.P. Nation (Cambridge University Press, 2001). Section II is divided into four chapters, each of which corresponds to one of the following questions: Which words should be learned in class? What can be learned about a word? What processes occur in learning a word? And, how can these processes occur?

Section III moves from away from the literature on vocabulary learning and introduces what I have learned as a result of the day-to-day challenges which arose while working with student vocabulary learning on a regular basis. The two which I will focus on are irregular attendance and lack of balance. I will explain how I found constructive ways to deal with each of these two issues, a process which not only benefited my work with vocabulary learning but also contributed to my overall growth as a teacher.

SECTION II

MY LEARNING THROUGH LITERATURE RESEARCH

When I began to reflect on the events surrounding the crossword puzzle activity, I realized that my knowledge of vocabulary learning was very limited. Beyond recognizing the need for students to see words more than once, I knew very little else about how such learning occurred or how I should best facilitate this learning. As I began to increase my experimentation with recycling vocabulary, my need to become more knowledgeable about the “ins and outs” of vocabulary learning grew even stronger. I wondered whether any published work on the subject of vocabulary learning might be available which could stimulate my thinking as I continued my own classroom research.

I decided to pay a visit to a local English bookshop in search of any relevant published material. On the shelf were a surprising number of books dealing with vocabulary learning. After paging through several of them, I decided on one which seemed the most useful to me. It was entitled “Learning Vocabulary in Another Language,” written by I.S.P Nation. I had no idea at the time, but I would later discover that I had stumbled across a pre-eminent researcher and writer in the field of foreign vocabulary acquisition whose articles are frequently cited by other researchers and writers.

Nation’s 450-page book offers the reader a considerable survey of research and theory in vocabulary teaching and learning, along with a small number of suggested activities to use in the classroom. Throughout the text, the author provides arguments to

support what he considers to be an effective treatment of vocabulary teaching and learning in the classroom, based on analyzing the cost of time and effort in relation to the benefit, or the usefulness, to the students' learning. Although his book is exclusively dedicated to vocabulary learning and teaching, he insists repeatedly on the need for balance among the other areas of learning in what should be a complete language development program. He maintains that learning in and around reading, writing, listening, and speaking should continue to receive its fair share of attention, along with fluency practice and focused language learning in other important areas, such as grammar and pronunciation.

Of the various theories and arguments which appear in Nation's book, I will focus on those which have had the greatest impact on me, generating a deeper reflection on my work with vocabulary in the classroom, and altering my approach to vocabulary learning. I will address these in the following four chapters, all of which contain fundamental questions that I continue to explore: Which words should be learned in class? What can be learned about a word? What processes occur in learning a word? And how can these processes take place?

CHAPTER TWO

WHICH WORDS SHOULD BE LEARNED IN CLASS?

In any given lesson, many new vocabulary items may arise, via written texts, recordings, lists, and chats involving my students and me. When I ask my students to look at the new words and tell me which ones they would like to learn, they often say in a matter-of-fact tone, “All of them.” As their teacher, I would be more than happy to try and help my students learn them all. However, this is not realistically possible. Our class time is limited and learning just one, single word can often involve investing considerable time and effort. I have found that if I am not careful to help establish a limit to the number of words on which my students focus their learning, the class period can suddenly become swamped with vocabulary learning, at the cost of engaging the learners in other important work.

So, if a limit is to be set on the number of words for focused learning in the classroom, it is clearly important that the lexical items are chosen with some care so that my students get the most out of their learning efforts. Which vocabulary words should be chosen for intentional study? Nation treats this question in depth, basing his arguments on the frequency of a word’s use.

An educated native speaker of English knows an estimated 20,000 word families, amounting to a substantially larger figure when derived family member words are calculated (Nation p.9). However, of these, certain words are used far more frequently than others. As an English speaker, I may use and encounter the word “make,” for example, in a variety of forms and meanings on many occasions during any given week.

It is a high frequency word, and would clearly be useful to any student of English. On the other hand, a word such as “construe” is used and encountered on far fewer occasions and it is therefore considered to be a low frequency word. Its usefulness to students of English would be quite limited. According to Nation, the number of high frequency word families is generally agreed upon at 2000 words, based on studies of both range and frequency (p. 14). Therefore, of the estimated 20,000 word families known to an educated native speaker, the remaining 18,000 would be considered to be low frequency words.

Nation believes that high frequency words and low frequency words should be treated distinctly by the teacher in the classroom. High frequency words are extremely useful to the students and it is, therefore, justifiable to spend valuable class time helping the students learn them well. At just 2000 words, learning and teaching the high frequency words during class time is also a reasonable task for both students and teacher.

This is not the case with low frequency words. They are far too many and the vast majority are of substantially less use to the students. Therefore, Nation argues that class time should not be spent trying to learn low frequency words. Instead, once students have learned the high frequency words, the teacher should shift his or her focus from helping students learn new words in class to helping students learn to deal with new words both in and out of class.

Knowing how to deal with new words involves a range of useful skills which are beneficial to students of foreign languages, particularly when encountering low frequency words. These include, among others, guessing the meaning of a word from grammatical and contextual clues, using a dictionary effectively and appropriately, and

employing autonomous learning strategies for the purpose of intentionally adding new words to our vocabulary. According to Nation, class time should be spent on learning low frequency words only when the previously mentioned skills and strategies are being taught. By equipping our students with these skills, each student can begin to work towards gradually building a larger vocabulary through more autonomous means. In this way, over time, the students can potentially approach a native-like level of vocabulary, an unobtainable goal if we were to try to teach and learn thousands of low frequency words in the classroom alone.

MY TEACHING

Nation's arguments caused me to reflect on the target words that I had been helping my students learn in class. Were the words I had selected for recycling the most useful words my students could be studying? And what did I hope my students could gain through the study of such words? In addition, should I be selecting the words myself so as to increase the chances that the words of study are useful, or should I invite the students to do their own selecting?

Prior to reading Nation, my approach to vocabulary learning was to spend class time on helping students learn vocabulary words which I felt were appropriate for the level of each particular group. For lower levels, this generally involved high frequency words. For advanced levels, however, this often meant learning far more obscure, low frequency vocabulary words, taken from reading texts and listening activities. I had been treating all levels and all vocabulary equally, considering that it was my job to help my students expand their vocabulary, whether this be to move from 2000 to 2400 words or

from 10,000 to 10,400. Having read Nation's arguments, I began to question my approach. Did words which were unknown to upper-level students really deserve different treatment because of their less common use?

The other day, while cleaning out my office, I came across a list of vocabulary words a former advanced class of mine had been working on learning a year ago. It contained the following words and expressions: "to be at a premium," "to snap," "to give someone their due," "to carp" and several others of similar frequency. I recall that these were language items which my students had selected from a reading text with the intention of learning them. During the following classes, we spent time with this vocabulary list, working with activities intended to help my students learn the words. More than a year later, I now find myself wondering if we should have bothered using class time on such low frequency words. Did they actually learn any of them? Were any of the words ever of use to my students? Have they encountered any of the words again since? Is there any chance that they remember, or would even recognize, a single one of them today, more than a year later?

If I were to assume that the answer is "no" to all of the questions above, would that lead me to feel that I made poor use of class time trying to help students learn such low frequency words? Maybe. Then again, perhaps my mistake lay not in the time spent on the new vocabulary, but with my limited vision of the learning available around these words. My focus was exclusively on the students' learning the specific words, and nothing more. Had I involved my students in learning useful coping skills and learning strategies, as Nation suggests, our class time spent on such low frequency words could have been far more fruitful. The students could have forgotten all of the words, but

ended up with important skills in such areas as guessing meaning from context, or developed new learning strategies, such as useful methods for recording and reviewing words.

According to a model for learning used at the School for International Training, learning can occur across any of the following four areas: Knowledge, Awareness, Skills, and Attitude (KASA). By applying this model to vocabulary learning, I can see more clearly how any activity can work on more than one aspect of learning at the same time, thereby enriching the learning potential. Let me elaborate through an example.

Selecting the word “snap” from the previous list of low frequency words, my students could learn the form, meaning and/or use of the word, thereby acquiring Knowledge. In addition, the students could potentially develop an awareness of the onomatopoeic quality of many sound words in English, as in “snap,” learning that the sound of the spoken word imitates the sound made in real life. Developing a personal awareness of this tendency might be helpful when encountering and learning additional new sound words.

The students might also further their skills at recording and learning words by developing an association to help remember the word “snap.” If a student recognizes a similar sounding word, such as “nap,” they might try creating a connection. For example, they could create a mental image of a person having a nap with the letter s added to the scene. Surprisingly few of my students have a system for recording and learning new words. Therefore, they might benefit from exposure to various methods known to work for some, and spending time developing the skills these methods involve. And finally, noticeable learning in any of these areas could have a positive effect on my

students' attitude towards their own learning. By successfully learning the word "snap," along with any of the other KASA aspects, they might be encouraged to continue working at learning more vocabulary, in class and on their own. This would be learning in the area of attitude.

It clearly makes sense to plan for learning around each of these four areas when working with vocabulary learning. As Nation reports, while it may be justifiable and feasible to learn all of the high frequency words in the classroom, the same is out of the question for the low frequency vocabulary items. There are simply far too many words for the limited amount of class time. However, if my advanced students hope to be able to function at a level closer to that of native and native-like English speakers, they do need to continue acquiring vocabulary. The vocabulary which remains to be learned is primarily lower frequency words and expressions. Learning any significant number of these words will only happen over an extended period of time with extensive exposure to the language. In the advanced classroom, the students can work on learning a small number of these, but more importantly, they should be working on developing skills and strategies which will be useful to them as they carry on learning once the school year is finished.

CHAPTER THREE

WHAT CAN BE LEARNED ABOUT A WORD?

The objective of the crossword puzzle was to help my students learn the new vocabulary words from the previous class. But what exactly does it mean to “learn” a word? When someone learns a word, what abilities do they possess with regard to that word? Can they define it accurately? Can they produce it on call when provided with a definition? Is it possible that they cannot work with its definition, yet are able to use it appropriately for themselves in a communicative situation? Or perhaps they are able to define a word, yet not able to use it appropriately for themselves?

When planning lesson activities, I believe that if I can identify with greater precision what I intend for students to learn through a specific task, both my students and I are then able to watch for and observe such learning more closely. Regarding vocabulary items, this must begin by my knowing more precisely what useful aspects can be learned about a word. In Nation, I found a framework which would help me begin to conceptualize what is involved in fully knowing a word.

Nation begins laying out this framework with a distinction between two types of word knowledge: receptive and productive. When we recognize words while reading or listening and apply a correct meaning to each word, it is said that we have receptive knowledge of those words. When, while speaking or writing, we retrieve and employ a word in the moment that its specific meaning needs expressing, it is said that we possess productive knowledge of the word. Generally, it is believed that words are considerably easier to add to our receptive vocabulary than to make them part of our productive

vocabulary (Nation p.28). That is to say, understanding words and their message while reading and listening is easier than using words accurately in speaking and writing. As a result, an individual's receptive vocabulary is larger than his or her productive vocabulary. Receptive and productive knowledge is often considered to reflect a continuum scale of knowledge or familiarity, with less known words limited to receptive use only, although this point is still a matter of open debate among researchers (Nation p.25).

Added to the receptive and productive distinction is the general division of what learning a word involves; namely, each word's form, meaning and use. As Table 1 indicates, a word's form, meaning and use are each comprised of three features, all of which subdivide further when bringing in the receptive or productive factor.

Table 1, reproduced from Nation (2001)

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

Note: In column 3, R = receptive knowledge, P = productive knowledge

What seems most striking to me when looking at the table is the extensive range of knowledge that an individual could potentially have about any given word. However, Nation is careful to point out that this broad range of knowledge is never acquired in one sitting. On the contrary, he repeats throughout his book that learning a word is a cumulative process, occurring slowly over time. Therefore, although it may be useful to be aware of what aspects are available for students to learn, it is quite another to try and teach them all, or expect the students to learn them all.

MY TEACHING

Using the table provided by Nation, I am able to be more specific about what aspects of a word I intend my students to work on learning during each stage of a vocabulary learning activity. In the case of the crossword puzzle activity, I can now see that I was asking students to work with the meaning of the words, or more specifically, to come up with the form-meaning connection for memory while alternating between both productive and receptive knowledge. The fact that all of my students were unable to work with the form-meaning connection in this way leaves me to ask myself how I could have altered the activity so that it would have been more doable for my students. Perhaps the best place to begin such a reflection would be in the area of productive versus receptive use.

Considering that it is easier to add words to our receptive knowledge than to our productive knowledge, perhaps students could have begun reviewing the target words by removing the need to produce them, at least initially. For example, by providing the students with both the target words and the definitions in random order on separate cards,

they could have worked at simply matching the two before checking their work.

Alternatively, the students could have been provided with the target words on cards along with half a dozen extra words and been asked to identify only those words which had come up in the previous class. In this second case, the meaning aspect is removed from the equation and the students are working only on form recognition. Upon successful completion of this task, the meaning cards could then be added for matching or, alternatively, saved for follow-up work in future lessons.

My students' work with learning new words can be thought of as expanding outward from what is known and moving into what unknown. By being aware of what my students already know about a word and what remains to be learned, I can turn to Nation's framework to access a wider range of material with which to engage my students in useful learning. I find that there is always something available to add to a student's knowledge of a word, whether it be a more intelligible pronunciation, rules of register, or some useful collocations.

At the same time, I should also be aware of the amount of new information with which my students are working. I do not want to overload my students with layer after layer of newness in one sitting, as this may be indigestible and counterproductive. This means that I should be selective about what knowledge I invite students to work with, always watching for indications of approaching saturation points or drifting levels of concentration or interest.

Additionally, as students work with one aspect of new learning, such as connecting the form with the correct meaning, I must allow for secondary errors in areas where their attention is not focused, such as on pronunciation. If the secondary aspect is

important, an appropriate learning opportunity can be prepared or will arise on its own in the future. Again, I am reminded of the importance of respecting the time which fully learning a word involves.

From an emotional standpoint, although my new understanding of what can be learned about a word has clearly been helpful in my planning activities, at times it has led me to feel distraught. This occurs when I consider that what we can cover in the classroom is only a tiny fraction of what the students would need to know to function as near-native speakers. In order to counteract these feelings it is important for me to understand and accept that my students will finish their course with me and still have significant gaps in their knowledge. Depending on the future of each student, a large number of these aspects may never be acquired. However, this is by no means a sign of failure. I needn't place an emphasis on an urgency for students to know and learn all there is to know and learn about a word. This is not a reasonable expectation for either me, as their teacher, or for my students. A more realistic goal is that they learn a little bit more than they knew before class, whether it is a more accurate pronunciation, a new collocation, an additional meaning or a better sense of the constraints of use.

CHAPTER FOUR

WHAT PROCESSES OCCUR IN LEARNING A WORD?

When I began my work on helping students learn vocabulary, my own understanding of just how such learning occurs was rather limited. My own experience as a learner of other languages gave me some useful guidance, directing me towards the student's need to see language items more than once, for example. But were there additional, important steps or practices which contribute in important ways to the students' learning of new words? Once again, I found material within the research collected by Nation which provided a useful framework to understand how vocabulary is learned.

Nation identifies three processes which may contribute to a student's learning of a vocabulary item (pp.63-71). The first of these is simply noticing the word, or attending to the vocabulary item for a moment. In this moment the student is aware of the usefulness of the vocabulary item. Students may be drawn towards words which are of specific interest to them, for reasons such as familiarity, particular usefulness to them, or necessity for understanding the message. The amount and quality of noticing will also be higher if the students take an interest in the message itself. The teacher may further facilitate this noticing process by pre-teaching or highlighting words which he or she considers useful.

Although this process often occurs while the students are engaged in a message-focused activity, Nation believes that noticing invariably involves decontextualization. As students focus their attention on select vocabulary items, their attention momentarily

shifts away from the message and the context in which it is found. In this moment the students are involved in a number of mental activities focusing on the language item itself, such as recognizing the word as one which they had encountered before, or by trying to negotiate and understand its meaning through their classmates, the teacher, or clues from the sentence in which it is located.

A second process involved in vocabulary learning is retrieval. Retrieval involves recalling information about the word on cue. For instance, when a student is trying to recall the word when given the definition, or vice versa, they are involved in retrieval. Research indicates that learning is optimized when retrieval is spaced rather than massed (Nation p.67). In other words, spending three minutes for five days on retrieving specific information is far more beneficial than spending fifteen minutes in one sitting. In addition, Nation reports that this repetition should be spaced out at gradually wider intervals of time so that the learner "has forgotten enough to feel that the repetition is worthwhile attending to and yet not forgotten too much so that there is still a good chance of recalling and thereby strengthening the form-meaning connection" (p.77). To learn a list of vocabulary words you might spend three minutes now, another three minutes an hour later, three minutes a day later, three minutes two days later, and finally three minutes a week later. This strengthens the memory of the word and counteracts the reported tendency for most forgetting to occur soon after the initial learning (p.76). Nation notes, however, that "there is no reason why the spacing between the repetitions should be a matter of precise measurement."

The third major process described is called creative or generative use. In this stage, a student encounters or uses a vocabulary word in ways that are different from its

original use. Using Nation's example, if a student is familiar with the use of cement as in "We cemented the path" and later encounters the phrase, "We cemented our relationship over a drink," they are involved in the generative process. In this case the generative nature of the vocabulary word is metaphorical, but it can also refer to additional collocations, grammatical uses, and meanings. Generative use can be either productive or receptive, and is believed to be an important contributing process in first and second language vocabulary learning (Nation p.68).

MY TEACHING

Nation's description of the three processes provides a model which helps me reflect on the classroom activities I use to help my students learn vocabulary. I can ask myself, "Do my activities provide opportunities for noticing, retrieval, and/or generative use? Do I have any signs from my students that they are involved in these processes, and are they helpful to their learning?" Let us look at these questions through a specific recycling activity I began using a year ago: storytelling. The following experience and student feedback dates back to the very first story I told to Marta's class for the purpose of recycling vocabulary.

STORYTELLING

On the board I have placed a large sheet of paper containing the vocabulary and expressions which my students encountered in a written text from the previous class and wanted to learn. I turn to the students and explain that I am going to tell them a story which will allow them to see the selected vocabulary a second time. I explain that when I

am finished, I will give them a chance to retell the story for themselves, working in pairs, while I listen in.

My students look very relaxed, sitting with their books and notebooks closed ready to hear my story. While telling the story, my eyes meet theirs and I observe how they seem to be following the story very closely with intense interest. Occasionally, their eyes bounce from me and onto the language on the board behind me. I see a momentary shift in their attention until they turn their eyes back to me to follow more of the story.

At times I perceive looks which suggest a lack of comprehension, so I make an effort to rephrase the idea or expression which seemed to have caused the confusion. This repetition and paraphrasing feels very natural while telling the story and I even find myself returning to words and expressions already used just because of the pleasure it seems to bring, as their smiles and laughs indicate.

When I am finished with the story, one of my students immediately speaks up and asks about an expression from the paper which I had unknowingly left out of the story. I am surprised at both her attentiveness to detail and her desire not to miss out on any part of the story. After I add the small details I carelessly left out, a second student points out a second expression I also failed to include.

When the students are convinced that they have heard the whole story, I invite them to work in pairs, retelling the story together, while I listen in and note a few mistakes for later work. The students take to the task enthusiastically, with one eye on their classmate and another on the board, trying to use the target vocabulary items. After the groups finish we discuss any specific questions about words which they may have had difficulty with or doubts about. Finally, I ask for written feedback to hear from my

students if, and in what ways, the activity helped them work on learning the target vocabulary, and what changes to the activity would benefit their learning.

NOTICING

While listening to the story, the students seem to spin in and out of two complementary activities: The first is to follow the message of my story, from which much student pleasure is clearly drawn. The desire to capture the message creates and maintains a high level of student interest. The second activity, enhanced by their level of engagement with my story, involves brief moments of noticing. Watching my students' faces, I can practically see the switches going on and off in their heads, as their attention shifts quickly from the message to specific language items used in the story. I facilitate this process by making these words salient in the story and by providing the written form on the board for students to refer to. Clearly the level of student attention to the target words is high, as the students even notice which words I unintentionally left out when first telling the story.

By giving students an opportunity to retell my story, their attention to the vocabulary items is even greater as they listen to how I use the words. Elia, a university student, in her written feedback refers to this noticing process, which she seems to be acutely aware of. She writes, "Retelling the story seeing the words I want to remember forces me to use that words so I pay attention to how these words are used (prepositions, if it's a noun,...).".

RETRIEVAL

When the students encounter the new language items in the story, they must correctly decipher the oral form of the word and make a connection to the meaning. This process of retrieval occurs each time the target language is used in the story. Later, when the students retell the story, they are again engaging in retrieval, but now at a productive level rather than the receptive level.

In written feedback a number of students refer to the usefulness of re-encountering words through the story. Carme, another university student, writes:

I think that if one day we learn some words and the week after we try to remember its, this is very useful. It's very interesting for me because this way I'm able to learn more vocabulary. If we hadn't revised this words today, I wouldn't learn the expressions until the exam day. If you tell a story and then we have to remember it, and try to explain it again, it make easier to remember the important vocabulary.

GENERATIVE USE

The vocabulary in the story appears differently from how it appears in the original encounter, in areas of context, grammar, meaning, or collocation. These differences may range from the subtle and imperceptible, requiring little effort on the student's part, to more substantial changes which really shake up the student's understanding of the language item. Both areas involve learning, just different levels of stretching. In written feedback, one of my students seems to make reference to this generative process. Maria, a university student, says, "It helps me to hear a story which includes the [target] words because I can understand them in a different context from the [original] text."

Additional alterations may occur as I repeat or paraphrase the expressions during the storytelling activity. Likewise, when my students work at retelling the story they occasionally use the target words in ways which vary from their original use. Such

alterations may be unintentional, but seem to be inherent in any retelling task as two versions are rarely retold identically.

Interestingly, when asked what changes they would make in the storytelling activity, two students from this same class mentioned their personal desire for additional creative space with the target words. Vaxtlen wrote, “I would not change anything. Just an idea: Sometimes we could play [out the role of] the protagonist of the stories.” Hugo, his male counterpart, expressed more of the same, saying, “I believe that the same exercise done it by us it’s good too. I mean, if we invent a story using the words we want to learn and you’re telling us if we’re wrong or not while we’re talking, it would be nice and funny.”

Clearly, my storytelling activity contains substantial elements of all three learning processes as defined by Nation, and offers potentially more work along creative lines. By using the paradigm Nation provides through his description of the three processes, I am better able to interpret my observations during the storytelling activity. Although my instincts as a teacher and feedback from my students had indicated that storytelling was a useful activity, re-examining the activity in light of the three processes of learning has provided me with a deeper understanding of how learning was occurring. I now feel better skilled at selecting and creating vocabulary learning activities by considering in what ways a given activity allows for students to engage in these three processes.

CHAPTER FIVE

HOW CAN THESE PROCESSES TAKE PLACE?

My interest in helping students learn vocabulary and appreciate their own learning began with the assumption that my students needed to revisit, or re-encounter, specific vocabulary. If they had little exposure to English outside of class, then they needed to revisit target words in class. My readings of Nation, and the research he provided, supported my naïve theory, and enriched my thinking of which words should be selected, what could be learned about them, and the processes used by students to learn vocabulary. Later, however, I would begin to question such recycling of vocabulary. Was the systematic learning of selected vocabulary through a series of recycling activities the best option? Did all classroom vocabulary learning have to involve planning and studying? What about “chance” learning? Was there any legitimacy to that as well? My questions would lead me once again to Nation’s book where I found useful information I had not noticed during my first readings, caught up as I was in the excitement of recycling vocabulary.

Nation describes two sources of language learning: intentional and incidental (p.232). Intentional learning involves examining and studying language items in isolation, removed from a truly communicative message. When a student writes a vocabulary word in his or her notebook along with a translation and later reviews that list for the purpose of learning the language, the student is involved in intentional learning. Incidental learning, in contrast, is any language learning which occurs while the learner is focused fundamentally on the message, whether through reading, listening, or

conversing. Although conscious attention may be momentarily paid to language items, the vocabulary is left in context and the primary activity remains that of conveying and interpreting messages for communicative purposes. Any vocabulary, or aspect thereof, which is unknown to the student, is interpreted immediately through guessing and inferring, based on context, and any other available clues.

As Nation admits, the distinction between intentional and incidental learning can often become fuzzy. Storytelling, for example, seems to move in and out of both learning frames. However, rather than spending time splitting hairs, perhaps it is best to focus on two separate activities which do appear to clearly represent both distinct learning sources. These are “word cards” and “reading for pleasure.”

Word cards, as described by Nation, are essentially individual cards or pieces of paper with the target vocabulary item on one side and useful information on the opposite side, placed there to help stimulate recollection of the target item. The cards can be referred to at will for any number of activities, designed to help the students learn the target words. Reading for pleasure, referred to in a number of studies, involves students reading for the sake of enjoying the content of the written material. In its pure form, any attention to specific language is, at most, brief with the student moving along in the text, guessing any unknown aspects of the language.

Many arguments have been made by researchers against the use of intentional learning practices. It is argued that by removing vocabulary items from their original setting and studying them in isolation, the learning experience is severely weakened (p.297). This occurs for two reasons. Firstly, it is claimed that the communicative experience is instrumental in helping students learn and remember vocabulary. Without

their link to the full, original context in which the vocabulary appeared, the isolated words on cards become far more difficult to hold in our memory. Secondly, it is said that word cards can provide only a fraction of what students need to know to develop the necessary depth in their vocabulary knowledge. The depth is limited because commonly the only information recorded on a word card is the written form and a definition or translation. This ignores other important areas involved in knowing a word, such as varieties of meaning and constraints of use, referred to earlier in the chapter. Some researchers even go as far as to say that intentional learning through such activities as word cards is hazardous to the student's learning because it reinforces the students' general tendency to erroneously interpret foreign vocabulary words as always having a perfect first language equivalent and vice versa (Twaddell p.63).

Yet another criticism commonly made is that it is not very feasible to record and study the large number of low frequency words that intermediate students need to begin to acquire in order to reach more advanced levels of English (Nation p.299). As Nation explains, in order to read English novels with relative ease, a student may need a receptive vocabulary of 15,000 to 20,000 words. Can an intermediate student be expected to learn the bulk of these words intentionally by studying word cards?

A far richer alternative, as a number of these same researchers argue, is to learn vocabulary incidentally by encountering them in their original text. By simply reading extensively for pleasure, students can expand and enrich their vocabulary knowledge greatly (Hatch and Brown p.369). Of course, the reading material needs to be of interest to the students and at a level which is appropriate for them. This way, the students

follow the message of the text closely and guess any unknown words, an important skill which may need teaching and developing in class (Nation p.236).

Nation supports the role of such incidental learning in the development of a student's vocabulary, stating research which shows that such learning is significant when significant exposure occurs. However, at the same time, he argues for the use of intentional learning as a complementary learning source to incidental learning. He challenges the arguments against intentional vocabulary learning as being extremist and simplistic, and at times even erroneous, considering the substantial amount of research data available which supports the ability of students to learn from focused learning techniques, in spite of any decontextualization (p.299).

In addition, although Nation recognizes that word card learning is limited in its scope and range, he feels that this is no reason to abandon its use completely. As he argues throughout his book, vocabulary learning is always cumulative. Students never learn everything about a word in one sitting. They learn little by little, piece by piece. According to Nation, if students can learn the form-meaning connection through word cards, they have taken one important step in beginning to learn the target words.

Moreover, intentional learning through word cards offers the student the luxury of ensuring that target vocabulary will be re-encountered on repeated occasions so as to activate the retrieval processing which contributes towards word retention (p.296). Retrieval can begin with receptive knowledge (recalling the meaning from the word) and later move on to the greater challenge of developing productive knowledge (recalling the word from the meaning). Such re-encounters are left far more to chance when involved in an incidental learning activity, such as reading for pleasure.

Considering the usefulness and contributions of both learning sources, Nation argues adamantly for a balanced approach to classroom planning. He feels that focused, direct study of language items should amount to a quarter of the class time, leaving equal time for the three additional strands in which incidental learning can occur: meaning-focused input in the form of reading and listening, meaning-focused output in the form of speaking and writing, and finally, fluency development (p. 2). Intentional and incidental learning needn't be seen as opposing sources of learning, but rather as complementary of one another. Both are useful in their own right, and become even more useful by enhancing the learning of the other. An intentional learning activity may help a student learn its form-meaning connection, which is then expanded and enhanced as the student begins to encounter the vocabulary item in various contexts, and thus develops a richer sense of its use and the subtle varieties in meaning.

MY TEACHING

During an intermediate level class this past year, I observed what appeared to be the complementary workings of intentional and incidental learning. Following a brief, teacher-directed look at a new expression which had come up during class, one of the students, named Beatriz, asked if she could share a personal observation. She began to explain how so often after our focused look at a particular word in class, the same word would suddenly begin to appear in her encounters with English outside of class. She gave the example of "spot," and mentioned how the meaning seemed to curiously change according to the different contexts in which it appeared.

Beatriz is by no means a typical student of mine. She uses English for work, makes a deliberate effort to watch English movies and read English texts during her leisure time, and she rarely misses a class. Few of my students spend so much time immersed in English, receiving such extensive exposure to the language and its vocabulary. Nevertheless, I feel that Beatriz's learning experience offers a valuable insight into how intentional and incidental learning can complement and enrich one another.

Beatriz experienced both intentional and incidental learning. By intentionally focusing on the vocabulary item in the classroom, she was able to learn to some degree its form, both written and spoken, and develop a sense of its meaning. Later, when involved in a number of message-focused activities, she happened to re-encounter the word in contextually rich settings and proceeded to learn more about the word. Through the use of both learning sources she is involved in the gradual, cumulative process of learning a foreign word. In addition, Beatriz sees for herself that she is learning, and feels a clear sense of satisfaction for the value and reward of her efforts.

I suspect that many of my students could benefit from the same experience of combining intentional and incidental vocabulary learning. Although either learning source could theoretically be assigned as homework, the reality is that most of my students do little to work on their English outside of class. Therefore, I must make a point of allowing for class time to do regular work on intentional vocabulary learning activities, such as word cards, along with regular work on incidental vocabulary learning activities, such as reading for pleasure. In a 90-minute class, this means keeping to short

sessions of both so as not to encroach on time needed for work on the other important areas of language development.

As for finding evidence of learning during class, it may be easier to observe when students are involved in intentional learning activities than when involved in incidental learning. If I hold up a word card from the previous class and the students remember the information on the other side, there is clear evidence of learning. Finding such clear evidence of learning during incidental learning activities, in contrast, is not as easy and often requires my looking for smaller clues. For example, while my students are reading newspaper clippings in the classroom for pleasure and interest, I can hear them occasionally say out loud, “Hey, we’ve studied this word!” This clearly shows that they are involved in at least one of the three processes of learning: noticing a target word, and perhaps engaged in retrieval and generative use as well. However, when the students remain silent while reading I can only trust that during their exposure to the language they are sporadically involved in these learning processes.

Clearly, both forms of learning contain their own benefits and drawbacks. Creating opportunities for both intentional and incidental learning to occur in the language classroom means accepting the limitations both forms create while simultaneously gaining the unique benefits which each contribute. By understanding this, I am able to incorporate useful amounts of both forms of learning while always watching for evidence of successful learning.

SECTION III

MY LEARNING THROUGH CHALLENGES

My learning described in Section II was initiated by researching current literature, namely, Nation, in order to satisfy my need for more knowledge about the ins and outs of vocabulary learning. By reading and reflecting on the material presented by Nation, I found concepts, models, and theories which began to fill such gaps in knowledge, as described in each of the previous chapters. This process of learning occurred across a period of just under a year. It seemed that each time I re-read particular pages I was able to make new connections based on more recent teaching and learning experiences from the classroom. Over time, this reflective process would serve as a fruitful source for my own learning as I was able to form a deeper understanding of the complex world of vocabulary learning and began to develop my own workable, personal approach to vocabulary learning in the classroom.

The learning stimulated by Nation and the research he presented, however, is but part of the learning picture. A second important stimulus for my learning originated not from the research of others, but from the day to day events which occurred in my own classroom. When I saw that something worked with me and my students, I tried to understand precisely why so that I could learn from the experience. Likewise, when something did not work, I tried to identify the reasons for the failure and subsequently make changes so as to provide better learning opportunities for my students in future classes. Once again, observation, student feedback, and personal reflection were critical

to my learning process, along with the incorporation of several models, or frameworks, which helped me find my way through a number of challenges which arose.

To illustrate just how this learning occurred, I have chosen two such issues which surfaced while working on vocabulary teaching. The two issues, I can now comfortably recall, seemed overwhelming at the time and each nearly led to my abandoning any further work to help students learn vocabulary. By finding my way through these challenges, I was able to learn and develop, as a teacher, in significant ways. The two challenges which I will address in this paper were irregular student attendance, the focus of chapter six, and a lack of balance in effort, the subject of chapter seven.

CHAPTER SIX

IRREGULAR ATTENDANCE

Irregular attendance had never been a terribly significant issue when my teaching consisted of merely introducing new material in each class. However, as I began to focus on returning to specific vocabulary items in class, and building up learning around such items, poor attendance became an immediate obstacle. On any given day in a class of ten students I could easily be seeing the faces of five students who had been absent the previous class. How could I hope to recycle select vocabulary when half of the class was seeing the words for the very first time? The boredom and frustration which occurred among my students during the crossword puzzle activity repeated itself to some degree every time I tried to initiate a recycling activity in groups where some students had missed previous classes. Clearly, if I wanted to recycle vocabulary, this imbalance produced by irregular attendance had to be reconciled in such a way so as to allow each student to participate and learn through the vocabulary activity, regardless of their level of familiarity with the target items.

Storytelling, described in the last chapter, was my early remedy to this dilemma and, in fact, proved to be an excellent way of engaging each student on learning the target vocabulary. My stories provided a rich, meaningful context for those students who were seeing the language for the first time, and fulfilled my goal of offering a second, or third encounter to returning students to hear and use the targeted language in engaging and non-threatening ways. In spite of the amazing richness, however, I would soon find

storytelling impractical for wide-scale recycling. Creating numerous stories on a weekly basis for eight different groups was simply far too much work for me.

As I began experimenting with other vocabulary recycling activities, such as class word cards, the attendance dilemma would resurface yet again, causing repeated difficulties in participation and level of engagement. Seeing activities flounder because of the disparaging levels of familiarity left me feeling very frustrated. My frustration quickly turned to bitterness when I considered that it was my students' fault for the extra work they were causing me. I thought, "Hey, if my students are not going to come to class on a regular basis, then why should I bother figuring out how to help them learn words systematically. Maybe the best thing would be just to abandon planned vocabulary recycling activities and just leave such revision up to individual students."

However, that was not the option that I chose. It seems that my eyes had been opened far too wide to close them once again to the importance and usefulness of recycling specific vocabulary. I was intent on finding a way of making it work, regardless of the barrier that irregular attendance represented. I went back to examine the issue further.

Upon re-examination and reflection of the situation at a deeper level, I realized that my involvement with the students' learning through recycling vocabulary had been very teacher-centered. I had made the assumption that I was the sole source of learning and information around the target vocabulary, while completely ignoring another highly valuable resource of knowledge in the classroom: my students.

Students who have gained some level of familiarity with the target words can be a useful source of knowledge for those classmates who are less familiar with the words.

By working together and sharing what they know, my returning students can be challenged to retrieve and solidify their understanding of the target vocabulary and in the process, appreciate for themselves what they have learned. Students who have missed recent classes are able to participate as they work alongside a classmate who can provide explanations and assistance during the activity. The former are encouraged to learn from their classmates as they generally want to participate fully and learn the same material the rest of group has been learning.

My role as teacher during this process of sharing newly acquired knowledge is to observe and listen to the students at work. Although I may get involved when it seems that some degree of facilitation would be useful to my students, I generally remain outside of the exchanges, simply watching the mixture of students, all working on their own learning. When the students have finished working in pairs, small groups, or as a full class, I then make myself available to confirm, clarify, or expand upon any useful aspects surrounding the target words.

Working in this way with students may sound fairly simple on paper, but for me it was terribly challenging to initiate. My primary challenge began with me, and how I understood my role as teacher in the classroom. Cognitively, I may have understood the benefits of allowing students to work together on their learning, but unconsciously, I was still tied to a need to show control and expertise during every moment in my role as teacher. In addition, I believed that many of my students would expect it to be my duty, as their teacher, to provide answers to their questions. I feared that they would resent having to spend their time seeking out or sharing information among their classmates.

Before feeling comfortable with asking students to “peer teach,” I needed to redefine my understanding of what my role was in the learning process of my students. To help me reach this goal, I found it useful to turn to a model of teaching which is found within the philosophical framework of Community Language Learning, or CLL, an approach to teaching second and foreign languages developed in the 1960s by Charles Curran.

Within CLL, the teacher can interact with his or her students while assuming one of two distinct, yet complementary, positions: “standing” and “understanding.” Standing is the position the teacher takes as “knower.” Here, the teacher speaks from a position of authority on the subject matter and shares his or her knowledge with the students. The knowledge of the teacher provides a certain degree of security which is very useful to students who are in the process of learning a foreign language and are in need of such support.

In contrast to standing is the position of understanding. Here, the teacher makes a clear break from his or her position as knower and focuses on facilitating the students’ self-expression of what they know, think and feel. While the teacher is acting from a position of understanding, he or she is not judging the students’ contributions as being either right or wrong. His or her role is merely to facilitate the students’ participation, providing proper support so that they may sort out for themselves what they wish to say.

Both positions play important complementary roles in the students’ learning. The first provides knowledge and instruction which is useful both for its educational value as well as for providing an important sense of security to the students. The second position, understanding, provides students with the space needed for them to move on their own,

involved in both self-expression and experimentation with what the language means and how they can use it. Deciding which position to assume, and for how long, depends in large part on the students. I watch for signs which may indicate that my students need either space for self-discovery or the security of my knowledge and authority. When students anxiously or frustratingly say, “But what does this word mean?” they are probably indicating a need for the teacher’s “standing” and the security such clarity provides. Inversely, when the students say, “No, don’t tell us yet! Let us figure it out,” they are asking for space to sort on their own, an activity which can be facilitated by a teacher’s understanding responses.

When I invite my students to peer teach recycled vocabulary, I employ the two roles of standing and understanding. As students work in groups explaining to one another what knowledge they have around the target vocabulary, I take an understanding position. This may involve offering understanding responses to students in order to facilitate their work with one another, or it may be less vocal and involve simply observing. I am hearing what people say, and not stepping in to correct anyone. My purpose is to support my students as they sort out for themselves what they feel they know and don’t know. When it appears that students are ready for my knowledge, I announce a clear shift and take on the standing role. Here I may confirm correct answers, when it appears that such confirmation is useful, and I may fill in any important gaps in their interpretation of the vocabulary items.

Now, with my teaching role in my students’ learning more clearly defined, I am able to comfortably ask my students to work with their classmates and peer teach. My comfort with both my approach and technique also seems to lead to greater comfort

among my students as they take on what may be very new roles for them: teaching and learning from their peers.

Ironically, what was originally an overwhelming barrier to recycling vocabulary has now turned into an opportunity for both students and me to see what learning has taken place. Now, when I arrive to class and see a couple of students who missed the language items of last class or two, I no longer cringe. Instead, I turn to the returning students and offer them an opportunity to share what they have learned with their classmates, a process which can be useful to all of the students in the classroom.

CHAPTER SEVEN

A NEED FOR BALANCE

First of all, you have to be very aware of what you are doing. You have to be mindful of your buffalo and you have to be mindful of the plow. If the plow goes too deep it gets stuck; if it's too shallow, it doesn't do any good. You have to be mindful of where to turn, of what signals you are giving the buffalo, and a host of other factors.

“Ploughing Your Fields”
from the teachings of Ajahn Buddhadasa

As a teacher, it is important that I work towards finding balance. In the classroom, for example, I must balance my knowledge and beliefs in how learning occurs with what my students know and believe. Although my knowledge can be useful in contributing significantly to my students' learning, if it is forced upon reluctant individuals it will only create tension and a struggle. By finding a balance which attempts to truly respect all beliefs and experiences in the classroom, I can help create a calmer classroom experience which is beneficial to learning.

I must also search for a balance within myself. I must balance my knowledge and enthusiasm for student learning with the acceptance of what may play out in the classroom. If I know that students generally need to encounter new words on repeated occasions in order to learn them, I must learn to deal with the reality that this may not occur with every new word which arises in class, nor to perfection with the few words which are selected for intentional study. If I desire to carry out what I have learned about vocabulary learning without surrendering to what takes place in my classroom, I may

struggle and suffer from excessive tension, resulting in an interference in my ability to teach well.

The important role balance plays in my work as a teacher became known to me in the midst of my work with vocabulary learning. Due to a lack of balance around my work with vocabulary learning, I would learn how terribly disruptive and unproductive such an imbalance can become. Incredibly, my work would turn into a personally unpleasant experience involving a struggle of such proportion that I nearly abandoned my involvement in my students' learning. By working my way through this personally difficult experience, I have learned for myself what balance is and have learned one way in which I can work towards establishing balance in me and in my teaching.

Interestingly, my problems with balance started only after I had obtained the clearest evidence of success in my work with my students' vocabulary learning. The positive feedback came throughout the month of July as I taught a small group of enthusiastic students. At the end of the fruitful, 32-hour intensive course, I was exhilarated as I reflected on the month's work. I noted in my journal following the final class,

July 27

The course has finished and it felt like one of the best teaching experiences I have had yet. This feeling of completeness, in part, is due to the way I tried to focus on the students' learning and provided them with multiple opportunities to see and use the same language, and begin to expand on the language. Because I had made an effort to focus on their learning and was transparent with them in what we were trying to learn, it was so much easier to ask them for structured feedback.... I certainly feel better about what I did for them, and for myself as a professional.

I was clearly pleased with the changes in my teaching. I had observed numerous signs of successful learning through activities designed to recycle specific language items. This success throughout the month-long course instilled in me a growing confidence in my ability to help students learn. As a result, I was able to speak more openly than ever to my students about their learning.

My enthusiasm increased even further after reading my students' self-evaluations. The evaluations, in the form of a fictitious letter to a friend, were intended to invite each student to reflect on and describe his or her own individual learning. In each letter, I found that the students had identified new vocabulary as an area where they had learned a great deal during the course. The regular recycling of words was mentioned by everyone as fundamental to their learning of these new lexical items. One fifteen-year-old student, Aureli, wrote the following insightful comments in his fictitious letter:

...but I'm aware that what I've improved most is in vocabulary: we were always reviewing old vocabulary, and that is so helpful to learn it. If we made some new vocabulary once and we didn't review it another day, I'm totally sure I wouldn't remember it some months [from now], but the way our teacher does [things] helps us remember every word.

...I have proved [to myself] that I have learned so much vocabulary, because we touched on once some vocabulary about failing exams, where I [learned] the word "bomb" [an exam] and another day we made an exam which went terrible to me and I told my classmates I had bombed it. So I have learned a lot.

Aureli described what for me was the essence of my entire project around vocabulary learning. Although he had failed the mock Cambridge Advanced exam, he felt a strong sense of achievement in his ability to recall and use new vocabulary from the course. Looking at his learning through the KASA model mentioned in chapter two, he seemed to be showing evidence of learning in the areas of knowledge, awareness, skills,

and attitude. He had gained knowledge of new words, had shown an awareness of his own learning along with the usefulness of regular revision, and had developed a positive attitude towards his own learning and towards the usefulness of new words. Although not mentioned in his letter, he had also demonstrated the important learning skill of using a new word when the opportunity arises in an open conversation.

The closure of the July intensive course marked an early peak moment in my work with vocabulary learning. I was very excited about what I had learned, in particular about the usefulness of recycling vocabulary. Following a month's vacation in August, I returned to the classroom in September with a high level of enthusiasm for vocabulary learning. That same month was also when I began reading I.S.P. Nation, which I was very anxious to learn from, as I immediately recognized it as a rich source of research and theory in the area of vocabulary learning.

Through my readings of Nation, I began to learn more about the depth and breadth of vocabulary learning, along with the need for regular intervals of retrieval, as I have described in detail in chapters two, three, and four of this paper. Such knowledge and enthusiasm in vocabulary learning, however, left me struggling with how to find time for recycling new vocabulary in the classroom, and yet continue to spend an appropriate amount of time exposing students to language through reading and listening activities.

On September 13, after just over a week of classes, I wrote:

When I think about what to do in class tonight, part of me wants to give them a reading or listening text but then I realize that there is so much [specific language] that has already been introduced to them that would be beneficial to recycle and explore further, look for greater fluency, [and] deeper understanding.

At the time of this reflective writing, I had not yet learned the concepts of incidental learning and intentional learning, as described in chapter five. Nevertheless, I knew that exposure to language through reading and listening activities usually offered my students a pleasant shift away from our focus on specific language during the class period. Now, however, my attention was being pulled towards intentional learning, where I was absorbing new and exciting techniques and theories in my early readings of Nation. Above all, I was becoming increasingly sensitized to the need to systematically recycle specific language in order to help retain what had already been covered. By the second week of September's intensive course, I wrote in my reflective journal, "I'm beginning to feel that we are identifying too much language to remember. Posters and cards full of language! Pretty soon we could spend all two hours of class on recycling alone."

When too much time passed between encounters of recycled vocabulary items, I saw how the words became unknown once again, with all previous learning completely forgotten. As a result, I sought to improve, or perhaps perfect, our recycling pattern.

Sept. 21

Interesting to see students working with some old vocabulary. They felt that they couldn't remember much. The vocabulary was from 2 weeks ago. It had been reviewed probably 1 or 2 days after its first encounter, so according to Nation's calculations, it should have been "retrieved" a week ago. Makes sense. Maybe I could have a language chart for each class and check off when something has been revisited so that there aren't big gaps like this one.

By the last week of the month-long course, I had reached a state of fairly high anxiety due to the responsibility I had assumed for my students' vocabulary learning. I was feeling a growing level of tension and frustration, both in and out of the classroom,

as expressed in my journal entry of September 25: “Again, I am thinking about what I should be doing with what we’ve been covering. Can I possibly get students to come back and revisit it all? If I don’t, they’re far less likely to remember it down the road!”

My enthusiasm and desire to make vocabulary learning happen was becoming excessive and perhaps even obsessive, causing me increasingly greater stress and anxiety. I had been learning the theories and practices of intentional learning, and wanted to carry them out for my students in the classroom. I seemed to feel that nearly every new word which arose in class needed to be captured and learned across the four-week course through recycling. In my mind, failure to do so meant that the language would be lost, perhaps forever.

The same tendency for extremism continued into the following academic year, ultimately leading to very irregular work on recycling. I would begin a trimester strong, with plenty of energy and work around vocabulary recycling, only to feel myself soon tremendously overwhelmed by the amount of language accumulating and the responsibility involved in directing such intentional learning efforts for eight different groups. As a result, I would soon after abandon practically all recycling efforts and limit class time to working with only new material. Later, after a period of rest, I would pick up and return to recycling vocabulary with a steam of energy only to run myself into the ground once again.

Interestingly, in his book, Nation stresses the need to maintain a balance when working with intentional vocabulary learning, a warning he states in the very first page of his book and to which he returns periodically throughout his writing. “The teaching and learning of vocabulary is only part of a language development program,” he writes. “It is

thus important that vocabulary learning and teaching is placed in its proper perspective” (p.1). “Where recommendations are made for direct vocabulary learning, these should be seen as fitting into that 25% of the course which is devoted to language-focused learning” (p.3).

Nation’s warning certainly applied to me. I was beginning to focus nearly all of my attention on intentional vocabulary learning. In the process, I was neglecting the many other strands of learning which deserve their share of class time, including the skills involved in reading, writing, listening, and speaking, along with the language exposure such areas involve. I had read Nation’s warning to maintain balance, yet his words seemed to pass right through me.

This may have been due, in part, to my lack of attention to the fullness of Nation’s message. At the time, I was particularly interested in the subject of intentional vocabulary learning, and I felt drawn towards reading and digesting only those portions of the book which discussed intentional vocabulary learning. However, in retrospect, I believe that my tunnel-like attention only explained part of the problem. I believe that at a deeper level, my problem was at the essence of how I processed my thoughts.

When looking back on my approach to teaching vocabulary, I seemed to move between poles of “either/or” thinking. Before beginning this project my attitude had been, “Either my students do the necessary work at home to re-encounter language, or they won’t learn it. Their learning depends entirely on them.” The result was that I failed to provide any support and guidance in vocabulary learning which my students could have benefited from. On a more personal level, this attitude also left me feeling

displeased with my work as a professional educator, knowing that I was doing little to help facilitate my students' learning.

Later, after gaining a greater understanding of the complex subject of vocabulary learning, my attitude seemed to swing 180 degrees. My thoughts became, "Either I do everything I know possible to make vocabulary learning happen in the classroom, or my students will not learn it. Their learning vocabulary depends entirely on me." The result for my students was excessive work on intentional vocabulary learning, at the expense of incidental learning through reading, discussion and listening activities. The result for me was near personal and professional burnout from assuming excessive amounts of responsibility for my students' learning. The anxiety this excessiveness produced, in turn, made me less capable of instilling a relaxed, comfortable atmosphere for learning.

"Either/or" thinking was interfering with my ability to work with vocabulary learning. As was the case with irregular attendance, I needed to find or develop a more workable definition of my role and responsibility in my students' learning. I needed a renewed approach to working with my students' vocabulary learning, one which could allow me to work with my students' learning and, at the same time, maintain a healthy distance for my own well-being. Unknowingly, the seed of a refreshingly new approach to my work had already been planted.

In early August I had attended a weekend course at the School for International Training entitled, "The Development of Mindfulness and Compassion in Teaching." The course, taught by Jack Millet and Claire Stanley, focused on the practice of mindfulness, which can be defined as simply the act of being in the "here and now." Rather than allowing the mind to wander, through mindfulness the individual remains aware of what

is occurring in the present moment. For teachers, this can mean an enhanced ability to stay present to their students in the classroom, while staying with the subject matter and keeping in touch with themselves. Stated in more practical terms, mindfulness can improve a teacher's ability to stay focused on his or her students' learning from moment to moment in the classroom, in lieu of following the many distracting thoughts that can so easily enter a teacher's mind when conducting class.

During the three-day course, I was introduced to the concept and practice of mindfulness through a number of experiential learning activities, ranging from sitting while focusing on my breath, to the carefully observed sensations involved in slowly eating a dozen raisins one by one. In the stillness of the more silent meditation activities, I began to realize how untrained my mind was at staying present. My ability to focus would often last less than five seconds before becoming distracted with other thoughts or images which would last long stretches of time. Each time that I realized my mind had been wandering, I would return once again to my point of focus.

Although the objective of the meditation is to stay with a selected present point of focus, it is through the repeated act of noticing the wandering mind and returning to the present that mindfulness is developed. Such "awakening" and returning to the present point of focus serves as a mental exercise to the mind, thereby strengthening its overall ability to remain present. As was stressed during the workshop, mindfulness may be practiced and developed in traditional meditation, or any other daily activity in which you decide to work at keeping the mind present rather than simply allowing it to wander as it so often does while we wash the dishes, mow the lawn, or drive down a long, quiet road.

It was through my study of mindfulness that I began to learn about balance; the balance between effort and surrender. Effort is required if I am to develop mindfulness. In meditation, without any effort my untrained mind will wander continuously. An effort is needed on my part if I am to notice this wandering and I bring my attention back to my place of focus. As I continue to practice mindfulness, my mind begins to develop new habits and greater awareness, and as a result, my mind begins to wander less and for shorter periods of time.

However, the degree of effort I make can easily become excessive. Fed by my enthusiasm to work at staying present, I may unconsciously increase my effort. Left unchecked, my effort can lead to an internal struggle, as I strain to improve and heighten my level of awareness. This struggle to stay more present may become so distracting that, ironically, I become unable to stay focused at all. Over time, such a struggle may result in such frustration that I decide to abandon my goal completely and give up my mindfulness practice.

For this reason, effort alone is not enough. I must also incorporate “surrender.” To surrender is to accept what happens. While practicing mindfulness, on each occasion that I observe my wandering mind, I accept this and simply return to my present point of focus. Surrendering is accepting the results, while not giving up to frustration or giving in to laziness. When joined with effort, surrender provides a balance which allows me to continue working productively towards my goal. The two function as a united paradox, of both working towards a clear goal to make something happen and, at the same time, allowing whatever happens to happen, whether it is a lot, a little, or nothing.

In my work with vocabulary learning in the classroom, I now realize that I had been striving to make learning happen. My newly gained insights into the workings of vocabulary learning along with the positive feedback from my students towards their learning emblazoned me with a tremendous enthusiasm for my work. However, this enthusiasm to help students learn was not in balance with any element of surrender. I was attached to nearly every new word which came up in class and completely consumed by my goal to help students learn them all. As a result, I suffered, feeling that I was never doing enough to help my students learn. This suffering would only increase as the weeks wore on and more material required reviewing and additional expansion.

Each time that my anxiety crossed a certain threshold, I would abandon my goal completely, making little to no effort on my part to help students work towards learning new vocabulary. This, in turn, left me feeling unsatisfied professionally. By not being involved in my students' learning, I was eliminating the immediate tension in me, but was losing the spark which provided me with a sense of satisfaction in my work.

By beginning to learn how to surrender, I have found a way to work more steadily with my students' vocabulary learning. I am able to make an effort to find ways of providing learning opportunities in the area of vocabulary learning and, at the same time, I surrender to the many variables which play a role in reaching those goals. These include what students do in and out of the class, what three hours per week allows us to do in class, and what my own energy level allows me to do, to name just a few. Each of these variables offers both opportunities and limitations. Learning to accept what comes about as a result of these variables while still working towards the goal of helping students learn new vocabulary is balance.

I have found that balance, once achieved, is easily recognizable. My reflective writing from the past months is full of entries describing how I had felt satisfied with my focused work in the classroom with my students and calm in the face of the many variables which clearly affect their learning. However, for nearly every entry describing my sense of balance, there is another entry a week later describing my struggle for greater learning and the resulting anxiety. Therefore, maintaining balance requires regular effort, and like my mind's attention to the present moment, can easily slip away.

Nevertheless, I have clearly encountered a useful tool which allows me to counter my tendency to think in terms of "either/or." I now increasingly interpret the events in the classroom in a different light, both accepting what is, and with a continued effort to work towards what can be. My thoughts have begun to move from, "Either I collect and recycle all of this new language for them or they won't learn it," to, "I will provide learning opportunities through recycling and I will observe what happens." The first causes struggle and turmoil, while the second is calm and constructive, for both me and my students, as I make an effort to help my students learn vocabulary.

CONCLUSION

My research into student vocabulary learning has had a significant impact on my teaching. Through an improved understanding of theory and techniques in vocabulary learning, I am now better able to plan vocabulary learning activities and interpret such learning events in the classroom. In addition, by acquiring the principles of alternative approaches, I have been able to address the particular challenges to vocabulary learning present in my classroom. Finally, on a much broader level, my learning has encompassed a number of universal themes, such as choice, responsibility, and balance, the lessons about which have affected not only my work with vocabulary learning but also my overall approach to teaching.

All together, from theory to themes, what I have learned has allowed me to develop a keener ability and desire to focus my attention and the attention of my students on their learning. The fear, humiliation, and resentment which initially prevented me from looking more directly at the question of my students' learning have all subsided. In their place, flourishes a sense of curiosity, confidence, and stability, all of which allow me to make student learning the focus of our work in the classroom. Now it is me, and not a "daring" student, who regularly raises this subject as I ask my students directly and calmly, "What have you learned?"

Of course, the quality and amount of learning that I observe varies. There are "good" days where the activities seem to engage the students in their learning, and there are "bad" days where nothing I had planned seems to work. There are students and groups which appear to learn and advance at a rapid pace, and others which seem to

move along more slowly. The key for me, however, is to continue making learning the focus of whatever we do in the classroom and to look for ways to help each student see his or her own learning, regardless of its size or speed.

Indeed, if I were asked to describe the characteristics of my own learning during this very project, I would say that it has been anything but smooth or obvious.

Oftentimes, it has felt chaotic and messy, and during stretches, completely static.

However, through the development and writing of this paper, I have been able to piece together my learning, bringing order to what frequently seemed so disjointed, and making fluid and linear what often felt terribly irregular. In short, I have been able to form a clearer sense and appreciation of my own learning, the same satisfying sense that I wish to make available to my students.

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