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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses a workshop given in Phnom Penh at the CamTESOL Conference on English Language Teaching, 2012. The content of the presentation focused on how best to adapt and use authentic written materials as input for speaking activities, using Nation's (2007) four strands as a theoretical framework. These speaking activities not only provide learners with plenty of comprehensible input, as well as opportunities for meaning-focused output, but they are also designed to provide learners with favourable conditions for vocabulary learning. Participants in the workshop were provided with information on useful principles for the adaptation of texts, as well as handouts of these activities as used in a university Media English course.

1. INTRODUCTION

The second-year students in the English Department at Kanda University of International Studies take three courses within the English Language Institute (ELI). These courses are Advanced Writing, Advanced Reading, and Media English, and each course meets for two 90-minute periods a week. Each teacher of a Media English course is given the responsibility of setting the goals and objectives for the class. The goals for this Media English class were:

1. To provide instruction and practice in effective vocabulary learning strategies, using the *General Service List* (West, 1953) (GSL) and the *Academic Word List* (Coxhead, 2000) (AWL) to guide vocabulary selection.
2. To improve the speaking skills of its course members through the use of carefully designed activities, as well as presentations, based on current issues in the media.
3. To improve course members' reading and writing skills on a specific issue through the use of an Issue Log (Watson, 2004).
4. To improve course members' speaking fluency.

These goals reflect the fact that the two other second-year courses within the ELI at this level are devoted to reading and writing.

Teachers of Media English are given a large degree of independence in creating their curriculum and designing class materials. These courses should be based on research and sound theoretical principles. The four strands (Nation, 2007) is one theoretical framework that can be easily used and applied by teachers in the design of English language courses.

2. THE FOUR STRANDS

Nation (2007, p.2) suggests that four strands of learning should be present in a well-balanced, principled language course: *meaning-focused input, meaning-focused output, language-focused learning and fluency development*. The underlying principles of the four strands are taken from research on language acquisition and the four strands provide teachers with a commonsense framework which they can use when planning their lessons and courses.

The *meaning-focused input* strand involves learners reading or listening to large quantities of input, in which no more than one in every 50 running words is unknown. It is called 'meaning-focused' as the learners main focus should be on understanding, enjoying, or gaining new knowledge through the reading or listening material. The *meaning-focused output* strand is where learners use language productively, through speaking and writing. Once again, the communication of meaning is of primary importance and learners should have plenty of opportunities to speak and write about things which they are relatively familiar with. The *language-focused learning* strand involves the deliberate learning of language features, such as pronunciation, grammar, vocabulary, and discourse. This strand includes activities such as learning vocabulary from word cards, intensive reading and pronunciation practice. In the *fluency development* strand learners are required to focus on the message, and use known language, in order to reach a higher than usual level of performance. One of the four skills of reading, listening, writing and speaking can be the focus of an activity within this strand, and typical activities include speed reading, ten-minute writing, and the 4/3/2 speaking activity.

3. VOCABULARY SELECTION

The material used for the Media English course is taken from a variety of media sources on the Internet, such as newspapers, magazines, YouTube, blogs, and so on. While there are many strong arguments for the use of carefully selected authentic materials in class without modification, the vocabulary burden of these texts needs to be

taken into consideration, especially as many of the students in this Media English course do not have knowledge of the first 2000 words in English. As mentioned earlier, one of the conditions for the *meaning-focused input* strand to be present is that at least 98% of the vocabulary is known to the learners. However, this condition is almost never satisfied with texts taken from media sources. For example, on average 80.3% of the vocabulary in newspaper articles is from the GSL, 3.9% of the vocabulary comes from the 570 word families in the AWL, and the remaining 15.7% are words which fall outside of these two lists (Nation, 2001, p. 17) and can be classified as low-frequency vocabulary. This is far below the optimal 98% coverage for students within this Media English course.

Nation (2008) argues that learners should focus on learning the first 2000 word families of English, which he calls ‘high-frequency’ vocabulary, for the following reasons: (1) high frequency words appear often in texts so learners will have many opportunities to meet this vocabulary, (2) this vocabulary occurs frequently in a variety of texts, such as academic texts, conversation, and newspapers, (3) the large majority of running words in any given text will be made up of high-frequency vocabulary, and (4) learning the 2000 high-frequency words is a manageable goal for learners who study English over the course of three to five years (p.13). Nation goes on to suggest that learners who wish to carry on with academic study should aim to learn the word families in the AWL as these words appear in academic and newspaper text at a higher frequency than the third 1000 words in English (2008, p.14).

Words outside of either the first 2000 word families or the AWL lists are classified as ‘low-frequency’ vocabulary. Nation suggests that these low-frequency words do not deserve classroom time as there are more than 100,000 words in this category,

which means the task of teaching them all is impossible (2008, p. 62). Furthermore, this low-frequency vocabulary occurs infrequently in texts, and it may be months, or in some cases years, before learners meet a particular word again.

As classroom time is limited, teachers need to make principled decisions on how to best to deal with low-frequency vocabulary within the classroom. Nation (2004) provides a useful summary of the options available to teachers for dealing with low-frequency items in intensive reading. His suggestions, and accompanying justifications, apply the principle that ‘words should earn attention through the frequency of their use’ (p.27) and include:

1. Replacing the word in the text before giving the text to the learners.
2. Putting it in a glossary to make the text more self-contained.
3. Quickly giving the meaning.
4. Doing nothing about the word.
5. Helping the learners use context to guess.
6. Helping the learners use a dictionary.
7. Breaking the word into parts and explaining the meaning.

(Nation, 2004, p. 27)

If teachers do give attention to a low-frequency item in class, then this time should be used as an opportunity to introduce, and provide practice in using, vocabulary strategies so that learners have options in dealing with low-frequency vocabulary when they are outside of the classroom and without teacher support. In the above list, vocabulary strategies are addressed in the fifth, sixth, and seventh options. This paper focuses on the

first option, which involves the simplification of authentic media texts through the replacement of low-frequency vocabulary.

4. THE PROCESS OF SIMPLIFICATION

The website *Compleat Lexical Tutor* (www.lextutor.ca) contains the computer program *VocabProfile* (Cobb, 2009), which can be used to analyze the vocabulary of written texts and assist teachers in selecting which vocabulary needs to be replaced. *VocabProfile* compares the written text against the GSL, as well as the AWL, and provides information on which word families are present from each of these two lists. Once the low-frequency vocabulary is identified, it is then possible to replace these words with vocabulary already known by the learner, or which will be of more benefit. An example of this would be replacing a low-frequency word such as *gradient* with *sloping line* (Nation & Gu, 2010, p. 74). The removal of a word takes away the opportunity for the learner to meet this item so it should only be done with low frequency vocabulary.

It is important to note that there are some words outside of the GSL and AWL which are useful for learners and that frequency should not be the only guiding principle in the selection of words to replace. Nation (2004, p.28) suggests that teachers should ask themselves ‘Will this word be useful in comprehending tomorrow’s text?’ when they are considering whether or not to give a word classroom attention. For example, there are words such as *whiteboard*, *textbook*, *classroom*, and *homework*, which fall outside of the two lists yet are obviously useful for learners in the future. A minor weakness of the GSL is its age, and this is reflected by the fact that words such as *television*, *email*, *online*, and

computer are not present in the list. Clearly these words are of immediate benefit to learners and should be given classroom attention.

5. A SAMPLE ACTIVITY

The article *McDonald's 'extremely unhappy' with San Francisco happy meal ban* ("McDonald's 'extremely disappointed'," 2010) was adapted and simplified for use within the Media English class through the use of VocabProfile. After analyzing the text with this program twelve words from the GSL and AWL were identified as being of particular use for the learners. These items included words from the GSL (*right, responsibility, vote, health, meal*), the AWL (*legislation, authorities, reaction, affect, stressful*), and some low-frequency vocabulary (*spokeswoman, ban*), as they were considered to be of benefit for learners.

The simple role-play activity called *Say it!* (Nation, 2001, p.137) was used as a post-reading activity (see Appendix). In this activity, learners first read a short text, typically from a newspaper, and work together in order to understand it well. In this particular class, a number of post-reading questions, as well as an information transfer activity (Palmer, 1982), were completed prior to undertaking the *Say it!* activity. Learners are put into small groups of three or four people, and given a grid which contains nine squares. The columns of the grid are labelled A, B, C while the rows are numbered. Each square contains a separate role-play task based on the point of view of one of the people featured in the article, such as, '*You are the single parent of two young children. What responsibilities do you have as a single parent?*' In order to do the activity, the first learner provides the second learner in the group with a square reference, such as B3, and the second learner performs that task. Upon completion, the second learner chooses a

different square reference for the third learner in the group, who must then perform that particular task. The third learner chooses a grid reference for the first learner, and so on. The same speaking task from a particular square may be repeated by different learners, as the answers largely depend on the individual learner's understanding and interpretation of the written text, which means there is no one specific answer.

The Say it! activity is useful for a number of pedagogical reasons. Not only does it provide speaking practice, and the opportunity to use vocabulary productively, it also creates the necessary conditions for vocabulary learning, namely *noticing*, *retrieval*, and *generative use* (Nation, 2001, pp.63-71). The target vocabulary is bolded in the activity in order to promote noticing and negotiation between learners. Further, the target words in the speaking grid are required by learners when performing the task, which also encourages noticing. The activity also provides opportunities for retrieval, especially if the written input is not referred to by learners during the speaking activity (Joe, 1998). If learners can retrieve vocabulary from the written input for productive use during the role-play, this will help strengthen the form and meaning connection. Finally, the use of a role-play activity provides opportunities for generative use, which is when learners use the words in ways which differ from how the words are met in the text. At its best, generative use involves the reconceptualisation of the meaning of a word (Nation, 2008, p. 54). The use of role-play is seen as one way to encourage generative use, along with retelling activities (Joe, 1998).

6. CONCLUSION

The main theme of this paper has been to highlight how authentic materials may be used in language classrooms through the process of simplification in order to meet the necessary conditions for *meaning-focused input* within the four strands framework. This paper provides some reasons for the use of simplification as well as a number of options available to teachers in dealing with low-frequency vocabulary in the classroom. Finally, it shows that teachers can create favourable conditions for vocabulary learning within the classroom through the careful design of speaking activities.

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Appendix

Media English: Say it!

	A	B	C
1	You are a young child. Explain why you like happy meals .	You are the single parent of two young children. What responsibilities do you have as a single parent?	You are the CEO of McDonald's. What was your immediate reaction to the ban ?
2	You are a member of the San Francisco Board of Supervisors. Why did you vote in favour of the ban ?	You are Danya Proud and spokeswoman for McDonald's. Do you really believe that McDonald's food is healthy and wholesome? Why/why not?	You are Scott Rodrick. Explain how this decision will affect your McDonald's franchises
3	You are Danya Proud. Is it stressful working as a spokeswoman for a big company such as McDonald's? Why?	You are Eric Mar. Why do you believe it was a fantastic victory for children's health ?	You are Scott Rodrick. Why were you so disappointed with the decision to ban happy meals ?