

2017-01-01

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Recommended Citation

Sheridan, Robert and Markslag, Laura (2017) "Effective Strategies for Teaching Vocabulary: An Introduction to Engaging Cooperative Vocabulary Card Activities," *PASAA*: Vol. 53, Article 8.

DOI: 10.58837/CHULA.PASAA.53.1.8

Available at: <https://digital.car.chula.ac.th/pasaa/vol53/iss1/8>

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Effective Strategies for Teaching Vocabulary: An Introduction to Engaging Cooperative Vocabulary Card Activities

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Abstract

Despite the vast extent of the English vocabulary, it has been estimated that only around 2400 high frequency word families, which are found on Browne, Culligan, and Phillips' (2013) *New General Service List* (NGSL), make up over 92% of most general English texts. Several studies have shown that a word must be encountered anywhere from six (Saragi, Nation, & Meister, 1978; Rott, 1999) to 20 times (Herman, Anderson, Pearson, & Nagy, 1987) for a learner to acquire it. Unfortunately, many EFL textbooks do not adequately recycle high frequency vocabulary and learners may not have enough encounters with these critical words in their language classes (Nation, 1993). This raises the question of how teachers can ensure learners encounter high frequency vocabulary on a regular basis. In this paper, we describe how learner-made vocabulary cards help students initially learn the lexical items found on the NSGL and other important special purpose vocabulary lists. We then

present a variety of engaging cooperative learning activities that reinforce the learning of these lexical items, thereby overcoming the lack of recycling in most EFL textbooks. These exciting activities have been well received by learners across levels in a variety of EFL contexts.

Keywords: vocabulary cards, high frequency vocabulary, cooperative learning activities

Introduction

Vocabulary research has shown that there is a close connection between a learner's second language (L2) vocabulary size and the ease in which that learner will have in coping with written (Laufer, 1989, 1992; Hu & Nation, 2000; Nation, 2001, 2006; Laufer & Ravenhorst-Kalovski, 2010) and spoken texts (Adolphs & Schmitt, 2004; Nation, 2006). In other words, the more L2 vocabulary a learner knows, the more likely they will be able to understand the target language. However, as Nation (2001) notes, learning all of the 20,000-25,000 words an average native English speaker knows is not a reasonable goal for most L2 learners, especially with limited time and resources. Consequently, he proposes that learners focus L2 vocabulary study on the small group of words that they are most likely to encounter in written and oral forms: high frequency vocabulary. High frequency vocabulary lists worth considering include Browne, Culligan, and Phillips' (2013) *New General Service List* (NGSL), whose 2368 word families make up 92.34% of the running words in most general English texts, as well as special purpose vocabulary lists such as the *New Academic Word List* (NAWL) (Browne, Culligan, & Phillips, 2013), *TOEIC Service List* (TSL) and the *Business Service List* (BSL) (Browne & Culligan, 2016) for learners who have mastered the lexical items found on the NGSL.

It's not only important which vocabulary items will be studied, but how they will be studied. Researchers have estimated the number

of times a learner needs to encounter a particular word to range from six (Saragi, Nation, & Meister, 1978; Rott 1999), to 16 (Nation, 1982), to 20 (Herman, Anderson, Pearson, & Nagy, 1987), to a general range of six to 15 (Nation, 2001) in order to successfully learn it. This raises the question: How can teachers ensure learners encounter high frequency vocabulary on a regular basis? There are many strategies for learning and reviewing vocabulary, from extensive reading to rote memorization drills. This paper, which builds on the authors' earlier report (Sheridan & Markslag, 2014), focuses on a particularly effective approach that targets high frequency vocabulary learning: vocabulary cards and in-class cooperative learning strategies to accompany them.

Making and Managing Vocabulary Cards

Vocabulary cards are especially useful tools when made by the learner and contain key elements about the target word (see Figure 1). Nation (2001, 2013) sets out five key points for making effective vocabulary cards: use L1 translations; promote retrieval by putting the L2 word and/or phrase on one side of the card and the L1 meaning on the reverse side; use pictures where possible; keep the cards simple; and ensure the number of the words in the pack suits the difficulty of the words. Nation (2005) also believes that it is beneficial to the learner's understanding of a word's use, meaning, and form to provide a few similar collocates, give its part of speech, and how the word is pronounced. Ideally, no more than 10 to 15 cards should be made at a time and, to avoid interference, words should be selected that start with different letters of the alphabet and are not related in meaning (Nation, 2001). Finally, as suggested by Griffin (1992), learners need to be instructed on how to manage their vocabulary cards to optimize learning. They should frequently change the order of the cards to avoid serial learning, place more challenging items at the front of the pack to give them more attention, and reform packs by removing now known words and replacing them with new items. This process of making and managing vocabulary cards is indeed labor-intensive and time-consuming, however, research (Nunan, 1991; Coady, 1993) identifies

that the amount of deep processing associated with it is a key factor in vocabulary retention (as cited in Zenuk-Nishide, 2011).



Figure 1: Sample of a student-made vocabulary card

Note. 連 (*ren*) stands for 連語 (*rengo*) which means “collocation” in Japanese. .

Using Vocabulary Cards in the Classroom

Goerss, Beck, and McKeown (1999) assert that learners need to be involved in active learning to successfully acquire and retain new vocabulary. This allows them to make meaningful connections between their experiences and the target vocabulary, and also provides them with opportunities to practice speaking and discuss word knowledge. Below we describe several co-operative learning strategies with vocabulary cards that promote active learning.

Recall Activities

Repetition, though often difficult to motivate, is an essential part of language learning (Fountain, 1979; Webb, 2007). When combined with small groups and elements of competition, as found in “Slap Down” and “Word Card Tennis,” learners are challenged to retrieve and

reproduce words they have encountered. Learners benefit from these quick activities in many ways: they learn new words from each other, they focus on the forms of the written words, and most importantly, they are motivated to work together to achieve a goal.

Activity 1: Slap Down

Learner English level: Beginner to advanced	Learner maturity: High school and above
Activity time: 10-15 minutes	Materials: Five to 10 vocabulary cards. The number of vocabulary cards that students choose depends on their familiarity with the game and the number of students in their group.
Number of students: Groups of 3 or 4	
Procedure: Step1: Put the students in groups of 3 to 4 students. Have each group sit around a desk or table facing one another. Step 2: Have each student (from each group) choose 5-10 cards from their own set of vocabulary cards. Instruct the students to take the 5-10 cards they have chosen out of their set of vocabulary cards and place them in a pile on the desk in front of them. Step 3: Tell the students that they are going to be teachers. They will be responsible for teaching the 5-10 vocabulary items that they have chosen to the rest of their group. Write the following 4 steps on the whiteboard/blackboard: 1. Say the word 2. Repeat 3. Say the (L1) meaning of the word 4. Say an example sentence. Step 4: Choose a strong group of students to demonstrate the activity. Select one student from the group to be the first “teacher.” Instruct the “teacher” student to say the first vocabulary item they have selected aloud and get the other members of their group to repeat the word. Next, “the teacher” should say the Japanese meaning of the English word. Finally, the “teacher” should say the example sentence, which they have chosen and written on their card. The “teacher” should repeat steps 1 to 4 above until they have taught	

all of their words. After the first “teacher” has taught all of their vocabulary cards, choose another student to be the “teacher.” Repeat this process until each student has taught all of his or her vocabulary cards.

Step 5: Have the students randomly scatter all of their vocabulary cards on the desk with the English side of the card facing up. Get the students to play paper-rock-scissors to decide the order of the game (clockwise). The first person will say the L1 meaning of the vocabulary item and the other members will try to be the first to “slap” and say the word in English.

Variation: This game can be played with either the English or L1 side of the vocabulary card facing up. When the game is played with the English side of the vocabulary card face up, it tests the students’ receptive knowledge. When the game is played with the L1 side of the vocabulary card face up, it tests the students’ productive knowledge.

Conclusion

This is an excellent warm up and/or review activity to test the students’ receptive or productive knowledge of the vocabulary items. It requires little preparation by the teacher and can be done in only 10 to 15 minutes.

Activity 2: Word Card Tennis

Learner English level: Beginner to advanced	Learner maturity: High school and above
Activity time: Five to 15 minutes	Materials: 10+ vocabulary cards, stopwatch (optional)
Number of students: In pairs or group of 3	
Procedure: Step 1: Choose a strong student to demonstrate the activity. Tell them that you are going to play tennis and pretend to use an imaginary tennis racket to serve an imaginary ball. Wait for their response. If they pretend to return the imaginary ball back then hit it back to them. If they do not return the imaginary ball, smile and	

pretend to hit another imaginary ball to them. They usually understand that you are waiting for the ball to be returned. Explain to the class that they will play tennis too. However, instead of using a ball they are going to use their vocabulary cards and instead of using rackets they are going to use their voices. Each time they say a word correctly (hit the ball) they will get one point.

Step 2: Ensure that each participant has 10 or more vocabulary cards and group the students into pairs. Student A and student B sit facing each other, similar to how two opponents would stand on the tennis court. They then exchange vocabulary cards and shuffle the decks.

Step 3: Student A holds up a vocabulary card so that student B sees only the English word. When student B says the L1 equivalent, student A puts the card on the desk for a point. Then student B then repeats the same steps for student A.

Step 4: If a student is not able to recall the translation equivalent within about three seconds, their partner should disclose the other side of the card and put the card about five cards back from the front of the vocabulary card deck so it will be viewed again in the very near future. The game continues until all the cards are gone or a time limit set by the teacher has been reached.

Step 5: The teacher should walk around the room and monitor pronunciation and progress.

Variation: Encourage students to practice their productive vocabulary knowledge by looking at the L1 side of the vocabulary card and orally producing the English word (L1 to L2). A second variation is to time the match. Set the stopwatch for two, three or five minutes. Tell the students that they will be competing to see which group can get the most points within the set amount of time. This encourages a fun competition in which students work together to get as many points as possible.

Conclusion: This is an excellent warm up and/or review activity that requires little preparation and can be done in as quickly as five minutes or be expanded up to about 15 minutes.

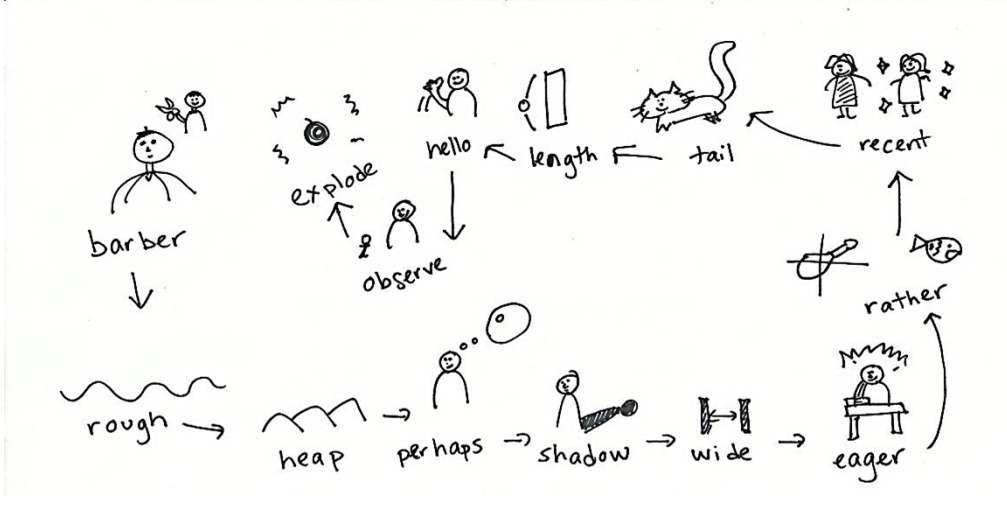
Deeper Connections Activities

Participation in pair and group vocabulary card activities that encourage learners to interact with concepts at a deeper level results in more successful vocabulary acquisition, as the learners associate the target vocabulary with their own experiences (Taylor, Mraz, & Nichols, 2009). Learners have a higher chance of retaining the new vocabulary when they undertake activities that require them to focus on the formal and semantic aspects of words and create richer associations with their existing knowledge (Laufer & Hulstijn, 2001). Thus, in order to retain the vocabulary information over a longer period of time, learners need to be engaged in a higher quality mental activity at the moment the learning is taking place.

As Nation (2009) highlights, higher quality mental vocabulary activities focus on meaning and form, involve normal language use, involve retrieval, encompass generative use (meeting and using words in new ways), require a useful focus of effort, and result in new learning. Examples of higher involvement load activities are “Connections+” and “(Re) telling a Story.” These small group activities provide learners with opportunities to practice and discuss word knowledge with hand drawn pictures and storytelling.

Cooperative vocabulary activities are highly motivational. As Dornyei (1991) notes, motivation increases in cohesive class groups because group members have a greater responsibility for obtaining the group goals and students who collaborate together to achieve common goals are more motivated and successful. The nature of the intragroup competition stimulates students of all levels, including those less inclined to participate openly. Small group activities foster inter-member relationships, and individual group members are more likely to learn, help, and encourage others in their group – and consequently enhance learning – as a result of this social cohesion (Slavin, 2011; Kagan, 2013).

Activity 3: Connections +

	
Learner English level: Beginner to advanced	Learner maturity: High school and above
Activity time: 15 minutes	Materials: 50+ vocabulary cards per group member.
Number of students: Groups of 3 or 4	Note: This activity works best after each student has created at least 50 cards.
Procedure: Step 1: Using a student's set of vocabulary cards, demonstrate the "Connections +" activity on the board. Choose one vocabulary card from the student's deck to start with and write the word on the board. Under the word draw a picture that represents the word. Explain the connection between the picture and the word to the class. Ask the students what the last letter of the word is. After hearing the correct response, find another word from the student's set of vocabulary cards that begins with that letter. Write that word on the board along with a picture that represents the word under the word. Explain to the students that the first word is connected in two ways, by a picture and by the last and first letter of the next word (like the Japanese game <i>shiritori</i>). Put the students in groups of 3-4 students. Explain that each group will have 10 minutes to try to make as many "connections" as possible.	

Step 2: One student from the group chooses a vocabulary card to start and writes the word on the sheet of paper. Under the word a student from the group draws a picture that represents the word, thus connecting the word with a picture.

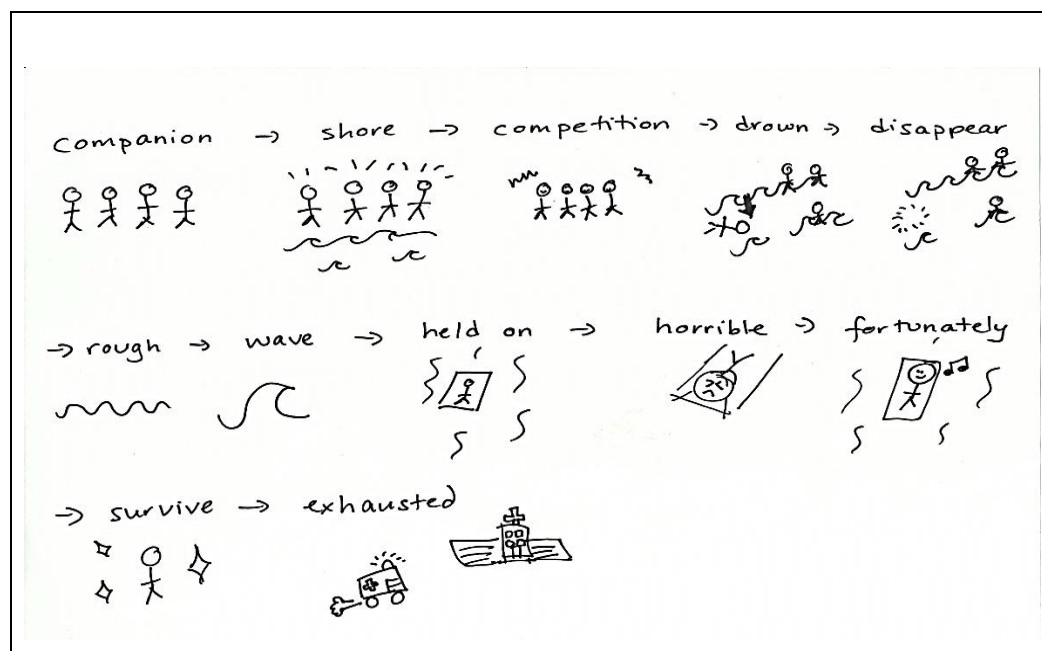
Step 3: All of the members of the group work together to find another word from their vocabulary cards that starts with the last letter of the previous word. When a word is found, they write the word along with a picture which represents the word. They continue doing this for about 10 minutes or until the teacher stops the activity.

Step 4: Ask each group how many connections they have made and write the number on the board. Congratulate each group for a job well done.

Step 5: Put two groups together and have them take turns explaining their “connections” sheets to the other group.

Variation: For smaller classes, each group could present their “connections” to the rest of the class using the overhead projector.

Conclusion: This activity helps to improve the learners’ receptive and productive knowledge of the vocabulary items. By students interacting, cooperating and sharing ideas within their groups, this activity can help to increase learner motivation (Dornyei, 2001). The groups usually become quite competitive as they try to form more “connections” than the other groups. They enjoy listening to other group’s “connections” and explaining their own. This activity works well with classes of all sizes.

Activity 4: (Re) Telling a Story**Learner English level:**

Beginner to advanced

Learner maturity:

High school and above

Activity time:

20-30 minutes

Number of students:

Groups of 3 or 4

Materials: 50+ vocabulary cards per group member, one B4 or A3 sheet of paper for each group.

Note: This activity works best after each student has created at least 50 cards or used to review the vocabulary from a particular story or unit.

Procedure:

Step 1: Explain to the students that they will be working in groups of 3-4 students to make a story using their vocabulary cards. Using a student's set of vocabulary cards, demonstrate the "(Re) Telling a Story" activity on the board. Choose one vocabulary card from the student's deck to start with and write the word on the board. Under the word draw a picture that represents the word. Choose another word from the student's vocabulary cards that relates to the previous word in order to tell a story. Select 3 or 4 more words, creating a story as you go along. Put the students in groups of 3-4 students. Explain

that each group will have 20 minutes to work together to try to make a story.

Step 2: The group chooses any vocabulary card to start. One member of the group writes the word on the sheet of paper and draws a picture that represents the word under the word.

Step 3: All groups work together to find another word that relates to the previous word, creating a story as they go. They continue doing this for about 20 minutes or until the teacher stops the activity.

Step 5: Put two groups together and have them take turns telling the stories they have created to the other group.

Variation: This activity is also effective when done after the students finish a unit or story. They can use the vocabulary they learned to “retell” the story in their own words. For smaller classes, each group could present their stories to the rest of the class using the overhead projector. Although this can take more class time, the students seem to really enjoy doing this and it is a great way to provide them with numerous encounters of the vocabulary items.

Conclusion: This activity also helps to improve the learners’ receptive and productive knowledge of the vocabulary items. Just like with the “Connections +” activity, by students interacting, cooperating and sharing ideas within their groups, this activity can help to increase learner motivation (Dornyei, 2001). Groups often come up with very interesting and creative stories, and it is beneficial for students to listen to other groups’ stories and tell their own. This activity works well with classes of all sizes and can be a source of great artwork to decorate the classroom with.

Some Additional Tips for Teachers

The authors of this paper have successfully used the aforementioned vocabulary card activities across all proficiency levels (from beginner to advanced) at the secondary and university levels. These activities have been used in many classes where new and important vocabulary is introduced, such as EFL reading, speaking, writing, listening and TOEIC classes, as well as Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) classes. We have found that these activities

are best done at the beginning of the lesson as they serve as both an exciting warm-up and review activity, and a valuable classroom management tool. After one or two classes, students have their cards out ready to begin the lesson, so after the teacher briefly explains the activity, students are quickly on task, engaged in their own learning. The recall activities, “Slap Down,” and especially “Word Card Tennis,” can be done quickly in just five to 10 minutes and can be repeated throughout the course so they are an effective tool for a busy teacher who has limited time for extra activities. At the university level, where classes only meet once a week, we suggest doing an activity each lesson to help give students the necessary amount of encounters for them to acquire the new vocabulary. At the secondary level, where classes meet three or more times a week, we encourage teachers to do these activities as frequently as possible, but at least once a week. One obstacle that we have encountered is that students occasionally neglect to bring their vocabulary cards to class. To overcome this problem and allow for every student to participate in the activity, it is best to get the forgetful student(s) to borrow some cards from their partner or group members. If a student consistently forgets their cards, the teacher could ask the student to make vocabulary cards while the other students are participating in the activity.

Conclusion

A well-balanced language curriculum, according to Nation (2009), provides opportunities for developing language skills with meaning-focused input, meaning-focused output, language-focused learning, and fluency development. Vocabulary knowledge is an important part of all these strands, so any time teachers and learners can spend learning and reviewing high frequency vocabulary is time well spent. The co-operative learning strategies outlined in this paper are designed to effectively engage students in vocabulary learning and to keep them actively engaged in the learning process.

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