

Using VOA Special English To Improve Advanced English Learners' Productive Use of High Frequency Words

In China many non-English majors, who often score high on English exams that emphasize reading comprehension and grammar, have difficulty finding the English words they need to express their ideas in speaking and writing. As university teachers of English for master's degree candidates in science, we have long witnessed our students' struggling to put their ideas into words. Their spoken and written production is often marked by incomprehensible sentences with an abundance of errors caused by wrong word choices. Their frustration is compounded by the fact that many common words they are familiar with do not come to mind when they are speaking and writing.

This problem is not unusual, and it is often difficult for students to use their receptive reading and listening vocabulary for the productive skills of speaking and writing (Nation 2001b). Although students do display individual differences when it comes to

vocabulary acquisition and use, they generally find it a great challenge to sufficiently master the spelling, pronunciation, and comprehension of words in their second language. This article discusses a method to deal with this obstacle to language production and illustrates how to use the Voice of America (VOA) Special English program to increase advanced students' vocabulary and improve their spoken and written skills.

Productive and receptive skills

Nation (1990) describes word knowledge in terms of receptive and productive knowledge, which together comprise the four language skills. Receptive knowledge is recognizing and understanding the words when listening to a conversation or reading a text, and productive knowledge is using words fluently and appropriately when speaking and writing. The receptive and productive skills relate

to each other in important ways and can also be categorized as written skills (reading and writing) and oral skills (speaking and listening) (Nation 2001b). For example, a student cannot write without reading and cannot hold a meaningful conversation without listening. This interrelationship between productive and receptive skills makes it crucial to adopt a four-skill approach to vocabulary teaching. The receptive skills, and especially reading, are known to be effective ways to acquire vocabulary, but those same words do not easily come to mind when the learner is speaking or writing (Nation 2001b). Therefore, in addition to general strategies for vocabulary acquisition, there is a pressing need for methods that will bring new and familiar words into productive use.

Learning high frequency vocabulary

One useful strategy in learning vocabulary is to master a large number of *high frequency words*—those words that appear most often in written and spoken texts and are therefore the most useful ones to learn. According to Nation and Newton (1997), the most frequent 2,000 words in English, with their inflected forms, “account for at least 85% of the words on any page of any book no matter what the subject matter” (238), and this percentage can be even higher for spoken language of comparable length. It is therefore important to expose students to a large amount of four-skill practice that contains a large percentage of high frequency words.

According to Nation and Waring (1997), educated adult native speakers of English have a vocabulary of about 20,000 word *families*, and they define a word family as “a base word, its inflected forms and a small number of reasonably regular derived forms” (8). However, second language learners of English can meet their basic needs with fewer words; based on word frequency research, Nation and Waring (1997) suggest that learners need a receptive vocabulary of 3,000 to 5,000 word families and a productive vocabulary of 2,000 to 3,000 word families to function well in their daily use of English.

Vocabulary knowledge cannot be gained from one single encounter with a word, even if this encounter involves a lot of direct teaching efforts (Nation 2001b). Vocabulary knowledge, as much for the second language

as for the first language learner, will grow gradually only through successive encounters with the word in various contexts and through different activities while the individual is “exposed to large amounts of comprehensible input” (Nagy 1997, 74).

Input is comprehensible when it includes a large amount of familiar vocabulary that is found in appropriate listening exercises and texts used for extensive reading (Nation 2001a). However, not every word in a language is equally useful, and teachers should make sure that materials contain the high frequency words that appear with great regularity in literature, conversations, and textbooks. Knowledge of high frequency words makes texts more comprehensible, and programs that devote too much time on low frequency words may be holding their students back from understanding and producing English.

According to Nation (2001a, 23), learners should learn low frequency words “gradually after they know the high frequency words,” and “teachers should not spend valuable class time” on low frequency words because “there are too many of them and the time spent on them is not repaid by opportunities to meet and use them.” When necessary, four strategies for learning low frequency words include: (1) guessing the words from context, (2) studying words and their translations on small cards, (3) analyzing the parts of words (roots, prefixes, and suffixes), and (4) using a dictionary to look up meanings (Nation 2001a).

Collocations

In addition to single words, there are words that habitually appear together in English. Because native speakers use such expressions all the time, it is important for a second language learner to achieve some mastery over them. Collocations are groups of words that appear together to convey meaning, such as *crystal clear*, or *green with envy*. Grouping differently might be grammatical, but it would create awkward sentences: “That idea is ice clear to me,” or “She was red with envy.” Every language is arbitrary in terms of how it puts words together, and collocational patterns are unpredictable (Nation 2001b). Therefore, learners must retain important collocations of the target language in their memory. The successful storage and retrieval of plenty of

common collocations is essential for the production of natural English.

A vocabulary development framework

According to Nation (2001a, 23), each high frequency word deserves time and effort from learners and should be “met repeatedly in listening, speaking, reading and writing, deliberately studied, and met in easy texts with some pressure to process them faster than usual.” A well-balanced vocabulary development program incorporates equal opportunities from the following four strands:

1. *Meaning-focused input.* A wide exposure to familiar vocabulary is essential, and it is achieved through spoken input and extensive reading (Nation 2001a). Extensive reading is defined as “one graded reader at an appropriate level (where 95%–98% of the words are already known) every one or two weeks and reading a total of about 20 per year” (Nation 2001a, 23).
2. *Meaning-focused output.* Learners also require speaking and writing activities that focus on negotiating the meaning of unfamiliar words. Clarifications, repetitions, and explanations of words help learners to enlarge and retain their productive vocabulary. Nation (2001b) suggests retelling a story, reporting on an article, and role play because these oral activities present familiar words in new contexts.
3. *Language-focused learning.* Research shows that students profit from directly studying word parts, collocations, and the meaning, pronunciation, and spelling of vocabulary (Nation 2001a). These activities also help students become independent learners.
4. *Fluency development.* Students benefit from a variety of four-skill activities that involve high frequency words. In fluency-centered activities, the learners know all the words used, pay more attention to communicating ideas, and perform tasks during a limited time. Nation (2001a, 24) suggests activities such as “extensive reading using easy graded readers, ten-minute writing (where learners write as much as they can in ten minutes), listening to

the same text several times” and the *4/3/2 activity* in which students switch among three partners and tell the same story in decreasing amounts of time (i.e., four, three, and two minutes).

Problems with advanced learners

In our experience, even if students demonstrate knowledge of high frequency vocabulary in certain contexts, an instructional framework like the one recommended by Nation is very important. Having studied English for at least eight years, our students know about 6,500 target words listed by the Chinese Ministry of Education (2004) as a college undergraduate requirement. About 2,533 of those words are from Nation’s (2001a) academic word list and most frequently used first 1,000 and second 1,000 word lists. However, the students are still unable to express themselves effectively in speaking and writing. They are the type of advanced learners who “understand most of what they hear and read in the language class, although they still need help with material intended for native speakers of English” (Allen 1983, 45). Their poor speaking and writing indicate that they need additional vocabulary.

Several factors underlie these advanced learners’ inability to use high frequency words in productive exercises, including the following:

- Students have a tendency to favor lower frequency words as the way to improve their productive skills. Inevitably, such attitudes lead to a lot of errors. They assume that high frequency words require little effort or indicate poor English proficiency.
- Students are exposed to a limited amount of language input. Their main source is the English textbook, whose content is often far removed from real life. The exam-oriented education system also drives them to read books that focus on vocabulary recognition, grammar, and reading comprehension. Their listening comprehension exercises are also limited.
- Students are exposed to a limited amount of language output. Due to the exam-oriented education system, the students receive little practice in the productive use of English, doing mainly reading and listening, with little speaking and writing.

- The learners have a weak sense of collocation. Vocabulary learning to them means the rote learning of Chinese definitions of decontextualized lists of English words. Speaking and writing in English becomes a matter of word-for-word translation from Chinese into English with little attention to the collocational patterns of English. Consequently, collocations are simply not available for productive use no matter how easy they appear to be when students read or hear them. Not surprisingly, students end up producing a lot of strange collocations such as *eat the finger* when they mean *suck the finger*, and *close the light* when they mean *turn off the light* (here the Chinese equivalent for the verb *close* is the same word for *turn off*).

Because of their frequent failure to find the needed words for speaking and writing, many learners regard learning English as a formidable task. They do not know which direction to take. Some students, with no intention of going abroad at all, state that their next objective is to score high on the TOEFL or GRE to obtain a document testifying to their English proficiency, even though in many cases they are not ready for these tests. Many more students have even given up on efforts to improve their English. They are, therefore, in need of guidance.

Advantages of the VOA Special English program

The VOA Special English program offers teachers and students the opportunity to develop their high frequency vocabulary in all four skills, with a special emphasis on making that vocabulary available for speaking and writing. The Special English program uses a basic vocabulary of 1,500 English words to deliver interesting written and audio reports on news, music, language, culture, and other topics. Most of the vocabulary consists of high frequency words, although some words are more difficult when reports deal with topics like medicine and science.

The VOA Special English program has gained great popularity with English learners around the world, especially with beginners. But we have learned that the speaking and

writing skills of advanced learners can also derive considerable benefits from this program. Some advantages of the Special English program include:

- It is easily accessible on the Internet at www.voanews.com/specialenglish. This saves learners much time and effort in finding appropriate English learning materials. In addition, some websites that serve English learners in China offer a free downloading service of the Special English program that is updated daily.
- The Special English program exposes learners to a large amount of comprehensible input using high frequency words. The repeated use of these words and their collocations in different contexts makes it easier for students to learn essential vocabulary. Special English also offers instructional opportunities for extensive speaking and writing.
- The Special English program arouses the learners' enthusiasm for English learning with its interesting, informative, and detailed reports. It exposes learners to vocabulary used to express current issues that are widely discussed around the world and thus provides learners with what they actually need in terms of vocabulary for authentic communication, which is in stark contrast to the topics in their textbooks. Learners are highly motivated to learn from such relevant materials expressed by many words and expressions that meet their communicative needs. When the material is interesting, students are more likely to become engaged in the task and learn the content. The use of interesting and relevant topics is especially critical for speaking and writing tasks (Nation 2001b).

These advantages led us to teach the following course to improve our students' productive use of high frequency English words.

A vocabulary course using VOA Special English

The course is based on two student-centered activities that employ reports from VOA Special English. For the first two months we train students on how to use the Special Eng-

lish program to its full potential; then students present reports they have developed on their own. The course begins with two 90-minute class sessions that introduce students to the correct approach to vocabulary learning, collocations, and the VOA Special English program.

Session 1

The first session presents basic theoretical knowledge concerning word learning. This entails teaching students about vocabulary use in receptive and productive contexts and illustrating how the mastery of a large number of high frequency words in receptive activities can help them dramatically improve their production of fluent and accurate English. It is one thing to be able to understand a word, whether in a written or oral context, but quite another to be able to use that word fluently to express oneself. More speaking and writing activities, with proper attention to high frequency vocabulary items, are necessary to improve the students' ability to use the words fluently. Equally important, students realize that learning involves much more than memorizing the Chinese definition of a word. This introduction encourages them and helps them realize that vocabulary acquisition is not beyond their reach.

The first session also orients students to the VOA Special English program and shows them why it is an excellent source to increase both their receptive and productive vocabulary. This introduction is essential to arouse students' enthusiasm and maximize the program's instructional value.

Session 2

Session 2 is specifically devoted to raising the students' awareness of collocations through the selection of Special English reports that contain (1) interesting topics related to textbook material and (2) the most useful vocabulary and collocations. We use common collocations to point out how the individual words relate to each other to create a special meaning. We also indicate the pitfalls caused by word-for-word translations of English collocations into Chinese.

Classroom vocabulary activities

After the first two sessions, the teacher selects reports for vocabulary activities. For example, when the textbook chapter covered

health problems, we chose the Special English report "Freshman Fifteen" (Gollust, Moss, and Weaver 2005). This report deals with a relevant health problem that troubles college students worldwide and has many useful collocations such as: *put on weight*, *poor diet*, and *foods high in fat and sugar*. The students also find reports that correspond to a wide variety of topics from their textbooks. The same health-related textbook chapter led them to choose reports about a variety of health concerns such as SARS, AIDS, and Bird Flu. The type of classroom activity that occurs during the first two months is described below.

1. Students listen to a selected Special English report three times without the script. They are required to take notes of key words and collocations while listening.
2. Students then work in pairs using the words and collocations from the report to discuss the topic.
3. Students listen to the report two more times with the script projected onto a screen; they focus on problematic vocabulary and concepts.
4. Students do oral exercises in pairs or groups without the script, such as asking and answering questions and translating collocations to make sure they can use the words and collocations correctly.
5. Finally, students do the fluency-oriented 4/3/2 activity. As an alternative, they can write as much as possible about the report for fifteen minutes.

Homework

The students have to study at least one Special English report after class every other day. After reading the reports and listening to the corresponding audio files, they use the words and collocations to practice retelling the main ideas of the reports, either orally or in writing. Retelling the reports orally to oneself is encouraged when no partners or family members are available. Moreover, students must write summaries of their reports in a notebook to prepare for their later presentations. If time allows, they can write longer passages that include their impressions or opinions.

Vocabulary notebook

Throughout the course students are instructed to keep a pocket-size notebook

to collect both new and familiar words, collocations, and sentences they encounter in the Special English reports or from other sources. Jotting down even those familiar words and collocations that they recognize helps them retrieve familiar vocabulary when speaking and writing. They are encouraged to ask themselves these questions: "Can I use this word/collocation at will when it is needed to express my ideas? If not, do I need to make it a part of my productive vocabulary?"

Students are encouraged to carry their vocabulary notebooks with them most of the time for frequent addition, review, and recycling of the entries. When they have time, they can copy those entries into three-ring binders, which are classified into sections like "Food," "Family," "Health," and "Music." Anything not belonging to a particular category goes into a "Miscellaneous" section. These binders help students organize, memorize, and locate the entries.

Grading and testing

Grading and testing are opportunities to motivate students to value the activities and work harder. We regularly collect and grade their writing and vocabulary notebooks and binders to give immediate feedback about problems and progress and to ensure that students are complying with assignments.

Moreover, during class time, while students are working in pairs or groups, we take some time to give an oral test on a one-to-one basis to ensure they have reviewed and recycled the entries recorded in their notebooks and binders. We give the Chinese translation of the recorded words and collocations and students tell us what they are in English. Alternatively, we prompt students to produce the target words and collocations by asking questions. Sometimes students are instructed to give short talks about topics we pick from their writing notebooks.

Student presentations

After two months students begin giving their oral presentations from the Special English reports they studied for homework. Students take turns giving presentations, either to the whole class or to members of their small groups of four members. Speakers who present to the whole class are usually informed one week in advance so that they have time to prepare. Stu-

dents must do some additional research about their topic so they are prepared to answer challenging questions from the class. The presentations include the following three steps:

1. The speakers write down the key words and collocations they find helpful on the blackboard (for whole class presentations) or on pieces of paper (for small group presentations).
2. The speakers give their oral presentations about the Special English reports.
3. The rest of the students ask the presenters questions about anything they find unclear or interesting.

When students present in small groups, we walk around the classroom to participate in their discussions and give any help that may be needed. After each class presentation, the teacher comments on the speaker's performance, points out obvious errors, and makes suggestions to help improve the student's presentation skills.

Conclusion

In vocabulary learning, the focus should be not just on expanding learners' vocabulary but also on helping them gain greater familiarity with high frequency words and collocations. And this should be as much the case with advanced learners as with beginners and intermediate learners. Efforts should be taken to enable students to progress gradually from receptive knowledge to productive knowledge and from consciously knowing words to subconsciously and automatically using them.

After two months of using the VOA Special English reports as a means to focus on high frequency words and collocations, our students began to see progress in their speaking and writing. The progress in turn built up their confidence and increased their engagement with these activities; moreover, the learning habits they acquired now help them become more independent, responsible, and confident language learners who will continue to pursue better proficiency in English beyond the course.

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