

Direct Teaching of Vocabulary?

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The goal of this paper is to discuss direct teaching of vocabulary using a skill-building approach and aiming at rapid mastery. This includes pre-teaching vocabulary before a story or reading a text, interrupting the reading or listening with vocabulary lessons, and post-story vocabulary instruction.

Most skill-building vocabulary teaching methodology begins with a list of words that will appear in the story or text, with translation into the first language, followed by vocabulary building activities that could come before, during or after the story. Here are some examples. [Numbers 1, 2 and 3 are from Mason and Krashen, 2004 and were used in their study, described below), Numbers 4, 5 and 6 are activities included in a Spanish text (Ray, Ray and Coxen, 2016.)]:

- 1. Comprehension questions (both yes/no and wh-questions) with target words used in questions and required in answers.**
- 2. The students read a written version of the story. They are then asked to underline the words they want to learn**
- 3. The students tell the story they just heard to another student and are encouraged to use words from the list story.**
- 4. Draw a line from the word to the definition.**
- 5. Work a crossword puzzle with target words.**
- 6. Work a word search puzzle.**

The use of these activities assumes that vocabulary development from reading or hearing stories is either impossible or is inefficient. It is, however, both possible and efficient.

Vocabulary Development Without Skill-Building

Those with large vocabularies rarely report doing or having done vocabulary study. Smith and Supanich (1984) tested 456 company presidents and reported that they had significantly larger vocabulary scores than a comparison group of adults did. When asked if they had attempted to increase their vocabulary since leaving school, 54.5 percent of the presidents said they had. When asked what they did to increase their vocabulary, however, about half of the 54.5 percent mentioned reading. Only 14 percent of those who tried to increase their vocabulary (3 percent of the total group) mentioned the use of vocabulary books.

Clearly, the value of commercial vocabulary programs should be empirically tested (for an interesting methodology, see McQuillan, 2019a).

Vocabulary Development is Gradual.

We don't acquire vocabulary all at once. We build up the full meanings of words gradually. Nagy, Herman and Anderson (1985) concluded that each time readers encountered a new word in a comprehensible context they acquired about five to ten percent of the meaning of the word. This may not seem like very much, but Nagy et. al. point out that with enough comprehensible input, this is more than enough to account for what is known of vocabulary development.

Ku and Anderson (2001) found very similar results for 4th graders in Taiwan reading in Mandarin, their first language. Each time they encountered an unfamiliar character in context, there was modest increase in recognizing the character on a test, similar to the increase found for reading unfamiliar words in English by native speakers of English.

Twadell (1973) anticipated the idea of gradual acquisition of vocabulary, pointing out that "we may 'know' a very large number of words with various degrees of vagueness ... in a twilight zone between the darkness of unfamiliarity and the brightness of complete familiarity."

The Relative Efficiency of Skill-building and Acquisition via Comprehensible Input.

The results of two studies of the impact of Story Listening (Mason and Krashen, 2004; Mason, Vanata, Jander, Borsch and Krashen, 2009) on vocabulary development are highly relevant.

In Story Listening, the teacher assembles "prompters," prepared before telling the story. A prompter is a list of words and phrases that appear in the story that the teacher needs to use to tell the story. Some of the words are already known to the students and some are unknown. When the teacher suspects that a word, phrase or structure is unknown, the teacher tells the story using already known language and inserts the unknown one while telling the story, providing help in making the new items clear by drawing when possible, and sometimes using the students' first language. In this way, the story becomes more comprehensible. The additional language also serves to make the story more meaningful, adding detail and depth.

At no time are students told that they are responsible for remembering the words; rather, the goal is to understand and enjoy the story.

In other words, Story Listening uses Comprehension-Aiding Supplementation, designed to help comprehension and thus language acquisition, as contrasted with Form-Focusing Supplementation, designed to help language learning (Krashen, Mason and Smith, 2018).

In Mason and Krashen (2004), two groups of first year EFL students in college in Japan heard a story in English. As described above, the teacher used prompters to make the story more comprehensible as well as more meaningful.

A second group heard the same story but also had supplementary vocabulary learning activities, including comprehension questions, retelling the story, and underlining the vocabulary they wanted to learn while reading the story. Table one presents the results of a surprise vocabulary test given five weeks after the groups heard the story.

Table 1: Delayed test = five weeks later

	Gain	Time	Efficiency
Story only	3.8	15"	0.25
Story+study	11.4	70"	0.16

At first glance, it seems that the extra study paid off. The “story+study” group made larger gains. But they also spent a great deal of extra time doing the exercises. Considering vocabulary gained per minute of study, the story-only group did better. They were more efficient.

Mason, Vanata, Jander, Borsch, and Krashen, (2009, study II) also informs us about the lasting effect of study versus acquisition from context, a study of Japanese students acquiring German as a second foreign language. The students had had no exposure to German in their secondary schools, unlike their previous experience with English.

Table 2: The long-term effect of skill-building

	Post test	Delayed test	Time	Efficiency
Story only	12.4 (36%)	4.5 (13.2%)	20"	0.23
List only	22 (65%)	4.6 (13.6%)	35"	0.13

As in Mason and Krashen (2004), one group heard a story told in Story Listening fashion. The story included 36 words considered to be unknown to the students (this was confirmed on a pre-test: mean score = 1.9/36).

(Unlike more recent Story Listening procedures, described above, the words were written on the board, and students wrote a summary in Japanese after hearing the story while looking at the word list.)

In the “study” condition, subjects were exposed to 36 different words, also mostly unfamiliar to them (mean score on pre-test = 2.4/36). They did not listen to a story but instead received explanations of each word both in English and Japanese (20 minutes) and were then told to memorize the words “in any way they wanted to” (p. 5) for 15 minutes.

On the post-test, the “list” group did better (Table 2). But on a delayed test, after only a two-week delay, gains were equivalent, and the “list” group was less efficient. In other words, the comparison group showed more forgetting after two weeks.

Taken together, these studies strongly suggest that direct teaching of vocabulary is not as efficient as acquiring vocabulary via listening to stories, and that the effect of direct instruction is more fragile: it fades more with time. The time dedicated to skill-building would have been better spent listening to stories and reading, a decision that would probably have been greeted with pleasure by students. For other studies reaching similar conclusions, see McQuillan, 2016, 2019b; Mason and Krashen, 2010).

The Case Against Context: Is Context “Misleading”?

Context, it has been argued, is unreliable: without a clear explanation or translation of new words, it is possible for acquirers to arrive at the wrong meaning. The classic example is a language acquirer seeing a picture of a hand pointing, but doesn’t know if the word describing the picture means “finger” or “pointing.”

More comprehensible input, however, if there is enough of it, will help the acquirer come to the right conclusion, or one reasonably close to it; information provided by additional input will narrow the meaning down.

Most contexts are not “deceptive,” or “misleading”; they do not lead the acquirer in the wrong direction. Beck, McKeown and McClaslin, (1983) examined contexts in basal readings: 61% provided at least some clues to the meanings of unfamiliar words, 31% were of no help, and only 8% were “misdirective.” Similarly, Parry (1993) asked an advanced acquirer in English as a foreign language to list words she didn’t know while reading an anthropology textbook and guess their meanings. She was able to guess 37% correctly, and was partly correct on another 40%. She was completely wrong on only 22% of her guesses.

Once again, we don't expect full acquisition of the meaning of a word from one exposure; rather, meaning is built up gradually, a little at a time, as we encounter the word again and again in comprehensible contexts. Acquiring vocabulary from context is the way we have acquired nearly all of the thousands of words we know in our L1 and L2(s), not direct instruction. Taking advantage of context is not “cheating” but a part of how we understand input and acquire language.

Conclusion

The arguments presented here are consistent with those presented by McQuillan and Tse (1999). Seely and Ray (1999) claimed that “the pre-teaching of vocabulary helps students comprehend and acquire language” (p. 5). They report that in their

experience “comprehension is far worse when vocabulary is not thoroughly taught before a story is presented” (p. 5).

But McQuillan and Tse conclude that input “can be made comprehensible without isolated vocabulary teaching, through techniques such as visuals, gestures, and intonation. Moreover, studies indicate that most vocabulary acquisition is incidental and incremental. Students pick up new words while otherwise focusing on a meaningful activity, getting a bit more of the meaning each time they encounter the word in context ... Explicitly teaching words thoroughly is not necessary and may even be undesirable” (p. 6).

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