

# Options for vocabulary learning through communication tasks

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*In a task-based approach to learning, learners will often meet new vocabulary 'in passing', as they pursue communicative goals. This paper argues that such encounters can be turned to the learners' advantage, and that rather than remove difficult words, teachers should consider a number of cooperative options for exposing learners to new words during task-based interaction. The article examines data from a number of classroom tasks where learners had to deal with new words during task performance without access to a dictionary or teacher's intervention. The results suggest not only that rich language use resulted from negotiating new words, but that the meaning of many of these words was retained in the days after the task performance. The paper concludes by considering a number of post-task options for reinforcing vocabulary learning.*

## Introduction

Encounters with unfamiliar vocabulary are among the obvious and inevitable challenges faced by language learners using the target language in communication outside the classroom, whether for work, travel, or recreation, when using the media, or in academic contexts. Such encounters present a common dilemma; how can a learner meet the dual demands of attending to unfamiliar language during on-line communication while also maintaining the flow of communication or comprehension?

The learners are ill-equipped to meet this challenge in classrooms in which the teacher carefully controls the introduction of new language forms, and controlled practice precedes freer communicative use of the new forms. A task-based approach, on the other hand, while not excluding the option of pre-teaching and pre-learning, addresses the challenge more directly by providing classroom experiences that approximate the demands of authentic language use. This approach enables learners to develop strategies for managing new vocabulary while also maintaining a communicative focus. These strategies include guessing with the use of context cues, negotiating meaning with others, and the means to attend to new items under communicative pressure.

Such an approach requires careful management by the teacher to prevent

the struggle with new words overtaking other important goals such as fluency or content-learning. Without such management, learners too often slip in and out of interaction as they search for word meanings in dictionaries, and fill their task sheets with written translations. Encouraging learners to leave the security of their bilingual dictionaries, and seek help through cooperation with one another, will require a willingness on the part of the teacher and the learners to explore new options for managing encounters with unfamiliar vocabulary in task-based interaction. These options are the subject of the following discussion, which is directed at two questions:

- 1 Within a task-based approach, what options are available to the teacher to assist learners to cope with any unfamiliar vocabulary they encounter?
- 2 How might meeting unfamiliar vocabulary in the midst of cooperative group work promote vocabulary growth?

### Options for dealing with unfamiliar vocabulary

Options for dealing with vocabulary can be considered within a three-stage task framework involving pre-emptive, in-task, and post-task stages (Skehan 1996). The main focus of the article is on options that promote cooperative learning.

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#### Options for targeting unfamiliar vocabulary in communication tasks

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<b>Pre-task options</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1 Predicting</li> <li>2 Cooperative dictionary search</li> <li>3 Words and definitions</li> </ol>
<b>In-task options</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>4 Glossary</li> <li>5 Interactive glossary</li> <li>6 Negotiation</li> </ol>
<b>Post-task options</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>7 Vocabulary logs</li> </ol>

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### Pre-task options

The main benefit of pre-teaching is that it gives learners a first chance to meet new words, thereby equipping them with the language they need, and reducing the ‘processing load’ of doing the task (Skehan 1996). If the task contains important words for the learners, then any time spent in pre-teaching them is well spent, having its payoff in more productive word use in task performance. Unfortunately, all too often pre-teaching vocabulary involves too much teacher-led explanation, and a lack of engagement by learners. Words introduced in this way may be remembered superficially, but quickly forgotten. A number of creative alternatives are thus worth considering.

#### Option 1: Predicting

In this option, learners work in groups to brainstorm a list of words related to the task title or topic. They build the words into a word web; a diagram which displays the words in semantic categories. If the word webs are constructed on A3-sized sheets they can be displayed and compared. After the task, learners add new words into the web from the task.

### **Option 2: Cooperative dictionary search**

In a dictionary search, each learner is given responsibility for looking up specific words from the task in their dictionaries. Then, working in rapidly changing pairs, they tell other learners about their words. Each learner has a simple word chart to fill in as they listen.

### **Option 3: Words and definitions**

In a simpler activity, learners match a list of words with a list of mixed definitions. This activity can be done cooperatively, in pairs, as an information gap task. Each learner is given a table in which they have half of the words, definitions for the words held by their partner, and gaps for the information they do not have. Each learner takes turns reading their definitions, and deciding on the matching word from their partner's list.

## In-task options

It has been argued that learning is most effective when learners pay attention to the form of the language in *response* to communicative need rather than in anticipation of it (Long and Robinson 1998). This was shown in a recent study by Laufer and Hulstijn (In press), which found that greater *involvement* with unfamiliar words led to better retention. 'Involvement' was defined as a combination of three factors: need (i.e. the need to understand the word for comprehension); search (trying to figure out the word); and evaluation (comparing one word with other words, and using it in communication). If we take this approach, new words will automatically be given attention, since they are encountered *during* task performance. Three options for meeting new words during task performance are discussed in order below, from the most teacher-directed (glossary) to the least (negotiation).

### **Option 4: Glossary**

A glossary allows learners to attend to vocabulary without using too much time to negotiate their way around difficult words. This approach has some flexibility over pre-teaching, since it allows learners to attend independently to words that cause them difficulty. However, it also denies learners the opportunities to practise the strategies they need outside the classroom, and like teacher-led pre-teaching, it encourages little 'involvement' in processing the new word. A study by Hulstijn (1992) showed that word meanings given to readers as marginal glosses were not retained as well as word meanings that learners had to infer. In other words, active processing of the new vocabulary led to better learning.

### **Option 5: Interactive glossary**

For an interactive glossary, learners are given definitions of task vocabulary on strips of paper, with the word on one side and the definition on the other. The definitions are divided among the learners, and laid face down beside them. When a learner requests help with a particular word during a task, the group follows a simple procedure:

- 1 Ask if anyone in the group knows the word.

- 2 If not, try to guess from context.
- 3 Check the written definition. One learner reads the definition to the group.
- 4 (Optional) Answer a question about the word (written on the definition) to enrich your understanding. For example, ‘*The word “prestige”*: Say what professions have the most “prestige” in your country.’

The fourth step, answering a question, encourages the learners to make associations between the new word and their life experience and world knowledge, and in so doing enriches their involvement with the task vocabulary.

Preparing an interactive glossary requires extra work on the teacher’s part, although not much more than for a standard glossary. Initially, the teacher also has to monitor the task, to ensure that learners do not ‘short-cut’ the process. Once they have understood it, I find that students willingly follow the steps, and enjoy the process of exploring a word together before turning to the definition.

This approach has a number of advantages. First of all, the students can be assured that the information they get from the definition is accurate. Secondly, the procedure is carefully structured to prevent negotiation taking too much time, and diverting attention away from the main goals of the task. In terms of learning value, the students have to attend carefully to each other as definitions are read aloud, because only the reader has visual access to the definition. The increase in effort and attention compared to a normal glossary is likely to result in better retention. Strategically, the procedure also trains learners to use context, and to seek help cooperatively, before using dictionaries. Finally, from a class perspective, the procedure emphasizes cooperative work.

### **Option 6: Negotiation**

A more challenging option is to encourage learners to negotiate the meaning of new items among themselves, using each other as a resource rather than relying on external assistance. One reason why this is possible is that learners can draw on context cues from the meaningful content of the task. Another reason is that the combined lexicons of learners in a group generally provide greater coverage of L2 vocabulary than the lexicon of any individual learner (Saragi, Nation, and Meister 1978). This was confirmed in a study conducted into vocabulary learning through task-based interaction (Newton 1993). This involved pre-testing the ability of eight adult ESOL learners (divided into two groups of four) to recognize 109 mostly low-frequency words that they would encounter in four communication tasks. Most of the learners could only recognize around 50–60 per cent of the words, and no one learner knew more than 70 per cent. However, close to 90 per cent of the words were recognized by at least one learner in each group. So while many words were *not* known by individuals, most of these words *were known* by at least one other learner. Even without outside help, so long as the learners were prepared to work cooperatively, they had sufficient resources within a group to tackle most unknown words.

Here is an example from the study of learners assisting each other, which shows how effectively learners used this knowledge to help each other.

### Example 1

- S7: [ do you know what is number nine? yeah  
S5: [ this one? dolphins, you know dolphin? ...  
dolphins yeah  
S7: [ what animal's that?  
S5: | yeah sometimes they show it in the performance  
S8: [ like swimming pool  
S5: yes= swimming pool they jump up and they catch the-  
S8: =yes  
S5: [ -ball  
S7: [ just something fish?  
S5: like a shark but they are not dangerous  
S8: [ oh yeah its funny  
S6: [ dangerous

Note the richness of the language used in this short interaction. The learners clarify the word *dolphin* by describing its defining behaviour and typical environment ('they show it in the performance like swimming pool', 'they jump up and they catch the ball'), its class ('fish'), a more familiar creature with which it is similar ('like a shark'), and other key characteristics ('not dangerous', 'funny'). Such language use requires creativity and engagement with the task. Once understood, the word is retrieved during the task, and used generatively (that is, in new contexts), which requires the learners to make rich associations with existing knowledge (Baddeley 1997). The conditions are in place for effective learning.

However, not all new words were treated in this way. Consider the following example.

### Example 2

- S8: [ next place yeah reptile  
S5: | yeah is a reptiles r e p  
S6: [ dicta what is this?  
S6: [ r e p t i l l e s yep [*The word is spelt letter by letter*]  
S7: | ah hang on -r e p t i l y e s, reptiles  
S5: [ t i l - l ? e s  
S8: [ reptiles reptiles  
S6: | reptiles yep l e s yep reptiles yes  
S7: | reptiles yes reptiles  
S5: [ reptiles e s yes  
S7: reptiles  
S5: reptiles and uh opposite this reptiles there is another ...

In this case, despite expending considerable effort in clarifying *the form* of the word 'reptiles', so they could write it on their task sheets, the learners paid little attention to the meaning of the word, which two of them did not know.

These two examples reflect a fundamental effect of task type on the attention learners pay to new words. The first example was from a task in which the learners had to discuss problems with the layout of a zoo, and decide how to rearrange the animals to overcome these problems. The goal of solving a problem caused learners to attend carefully to the meaning of the items in the task.

The second example was from an information gap task. The learners exchanged information about the layout of a zoo in order to complete a zoo map. This type of task is very popular in language classrooms, and encourages learners to spend much more time negotiating their understanding of one another's speech than in tasks which do not include an information gap (Doughty and Pica 1986). However, as the example shows, learners can spend time negotiating comprehension in such tasks with little concern for *meaning*.

How can this problem be solved? One option is to combine the two different types of task, so that the learners first complete an information gap activity and then use the same material for a problem-solving or discussion task. In this way, learners initially pay a lot of attention to the form of the new words, and subsequently use these items in highly meaningful ways. Teachers should look for ways to integrate these task types in order to achieve the complementary benefits of both.

The question remains as to the quality of vocabulary learning that can occur through group work when it is other learners and not the teacher who are explaining the meaning of new words, and when the demands of task performance are likely to strain processing resources. One answer comes from the study described above (Newton 1993) in which the learners made impressive gains in their ability to identify unfamiliar words from the tasks. A comparison of pre- and post-tests of task vocabulary showed gains for 17 of the 25 words that had been explicitly negotiated, and for 65 of the 121 unfamiliar words that were encountered in the written task input, and in the speech of other learners, but not negotiated. Learners appeared to be learning by paying attention to the way unfamiliar words were used, even when negotiation was not involved.

These figures show how useful cooperative task-based interaction can be for vocabulary learning. The eight learners in the study acquired aspects of the meaning of an average of 16 new words each over the four tasks they performed, with the smallest increase being ten words, and the largest 21. This is a promising result from classroom activities designed for oral fluency in which vocabulary learning occurs incidentally as learners actively pursue communication goals.

## Post-task options

Encountering newly learnt words more than once, and in different contexts and in different ways, is highly facilitative for learning (Baddeley 1997). Such opportunities are common in content-based or thematically-structured curricula, in which a core vocabulary is likely to be encountered in subsequent work on the same topic. Equally, regular tasks based on current affairs or the media will find learners encountering a core vocabulary reused in different stories. To supplement such encounters, other options available for following up new words include revision tests, quizzes, group activities involving review and analysis of new vocabulary, and systems for learners to independently record and revise new vocabulary. Because of space constraints I will only describe one such option here. (See Chapter 7 of Willis (1996) for a range of other options.)

### Option 7: Vocabulary logs

Vocabulary logs help learners to reinforce their own learning by building a record of the new words they encounter in communication, and setting up a procedure for reviewing them.

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#### Vocabulary log

Look back over the words you met for the first time in this task. Decide on five that you think will be useful for you. Then complete the table.

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New words	example sentence, collocation, definition
1	
2	
3	
4	
5	

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Show your words to another learner, and explain your plan for revising these words.

Notes:

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Vocabulary logs encourage learners to take responsibility for their learning by allowing them to choose the words they will revise, and the way they will do this. Ideas for revision include checking dictionary entries for the words, making flashcards using the words in new sentences, creating an imaginary story using all the words and telling it to, or writing it for a partner, and learners testing each other in pairs on new words.

## Conclusions

Communication tasks can be a productive site for vocabulary expansion, whether as one-off activities or as rehearsal space for content from other parts of the curriculum. In such tasks, learners meet language in ways that encourage the construction of multiple associations between old and new knowledge in their lexical systems. Through tasks, teachers have a number of options for enhancing attention to vocabulary, options which they must choose between in light of the particular constraints of person,

place, and time operating in their classrooms. This paper argues that a particularly effective option is to allow learners to work cooperatively with limited assistance to make sense of unfamiliar words in communicative settings. In the data I discussed, when learners negotiated word meanings during task performance, they were attending to words in meaningful contexts, with immediate opportunities to use them in communication. In addition to the negotiated encounters with new words, learners gained in their recognition of words that were simply used meaningfully by other members of the group.

It would seem that exposing the learners to interactive use of unfamiliar vocabulary in these contexts gave them sufficient information to begin constructing the meaning of the new items. Even in these cooperative options, however, the role of the teacher is vital. The teacher may need to work with groups to show them how to draw on context clues. The teacher may also need to assist in negotiation (Lynch 1997; Seedhouse 1997), monitor performance, observe difficulties, and look for positive features of performance to raise in post-task discussion. But most importantly from a vocabulary perspective, the teacher needs to ensure that, through tasks, learners are given opportunities to meet and explore new vocabulary without direct teacher assistance, and to use this vocabulary to meet meaningful task goals.

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