Response to Tom Cobb

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I can find little to disagree with in Tom Cobb's response. Let me make my own position on vocabulary learning clear. I consider that vocabulary is best learned across the four equal strands of meaning-focused input, meaning-focused output, language-focused learning, and fluency development. Learning through reading occupies about 3/16 of this guideline (half of meaning-focused input, and one quarter of fluency development). Clearly, I do not support a reading only program as the sole input or activity for language learning.

However, reading at the right level and in large quantities is a very important part of a language program and as I have written elsewhere (Nation, 2013), I consider that the single most important change a teacher could make to a language course is to have a substantial extensive reading program incorporating both input and fluency strands. The input strand allows for the learning of new vocabulary from guessing from context and dictionary use.

I agree that it would be a good idea to run the study again using different types of texts, and Table 4 in my 2014 article makes a step towards doing this, showing that a mixture of text types, especially spoken and written are likely to provide better contact with the top 9000 word families than homogeneous corpora, and with academic text not doing so well.

I agree that my argument is based on wishful thinking. The wishful thinking is not just that learners can learn 1000 words a year, but that there would be material up to the 8000 word level that would allow comprehensible input while still providing new vocabulary to learn at a low text density. The mid-frequency readers, both fiction and non-fiction, are an attempt to put my money where my mouth is. My website contains a slowly increasing number of these, but there are still not enough.

Speed reading courses are intended to improve reading fluency in all types of reading, but speeds of 150 words per minute or more require that learners know most of the vocabulary in the text with probably around 2% or fewer of the running words being unfamiliar and candidates for learning.

When I mentioned that "there was no published research to support his figure" of 1000 words per year, I was being cautious. There are institutions like Akio Furukawa's SEG schools in Tokyo where learners do very large amounts of reading in evening classes in addition to their regular school English classes and make substantial increases in their knowledge of the language. Unfortunately there is no hard research on these.

I agree with Tom that number crunching would be useful to help learners choose appropriate unsimplified texts to provide reading material at an appropriate level with only a low density of unknown words.

I consider that Tom's response is consistent with what he has written before and which I agree with. I still see the basic argument as this: Tom Cobb argues that with present material and learners' slow reading speeds, reading beyond the 3000 levels will not result in much vocabulary learning. My wishful thinking based on the data in the 2014 article is that with appropriate reading material and encouragement, it is feasible to learn close to 1000 words a year through reading. However, it is not an easy magic fix. To get from the 3rd 1000 to the 9th 1000 would take several years at one thousand words a year, and in the later years this would involve very substantial amounts of reading. A more balanced course including listening input, fluency development and deliberate learning would be better, but would still involve substantial learning.

References

Nation, P. (2013). *What should every EFL Teacher Know?* Seoul: Compass Publishing.
Nation, I.S.P. (2014). How much input do you need to learn the most frequent 9,000 words?
        Reading in a Foreign Language, *26*, 1–16.

About the Author

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