

# Aspects of Vocabulary Acquisition and Teaching: An Overview

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## 概論：語彙習得とその教授方法についての見解

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### Abstract

There are several aspects of vocabulary learning and teaching that the teacher should be aware of. The first section of this paper considers what it means to actually 'know a word'. For the learner to 'know a word' several elements are involved including meaning, pronunciation, grammar, collocations, word formation, connotation, and register. Each of these elements will be examined in turn. The next section looks at the four major groups of vocabulary: high and low frequency words, academic words, and technical words, and, how much attention should be given to each depending on the learning purpose. The third section looks at the role of dictionaries in vocabulary learning. This includes the advantages and drawbacks of dictionary use, as well as monolingual and bilingual dictionaries usage. The next section looks at how meaning, or definitions, of words can be effectively conveyed by the teacher. Lastly, the need for, and types of vocabulary assessment will be briefly discussed.

### 要 旨

語彙習得とその教授方法には見解がいくつかあり、教師はそれらを知っておくべきである。この論文の第1部では、「実際に言葉を知っている」とはどういうことを考察する。「言葉を知ろうとする」学習者は、意味、発音、文法、連語、語形成、言外の意味、そして言語使用域といった要素に向き合わされて行く。これらの要素の一つ一つが順次、吟味される。第2部は語彙に関しての4分野を考察する。この4分野とは使用頻度の大小、学術用語、技術用語、そして学習目的次第でどの程度の配慮が、その各々になされるか、である。第3部は

語彙習得における辞書の役割を考察する。まず、辞書を使うことには利点と欠点があるということ論じ、次に単一言語辞書と2ヶ国語辞書の使用についても同じく利点と欠点を述べる。第4部は言葉の意味や定義を教師はどのように効果的に伝達するかを考察する。最後に語彙力評価に関しての必要性和その形式が簡潔に論じられる。

## A. WHAT IS INVOLVED IN KNOWING A WORD?

To 'know a word' comprises several elements, we have focused on the eight we feel are of most importance for the second language teacher. Most teachers tend to concentrate on the first three: meaning, pronunciation, and grammar. Practically speaking, these three are the easiest to teach and learn. Crothers and Suppes (1967) indicate an average of six to seven repetitions are necessary for learning to occur. Additionally, Higa (1965) contends that words used in a meaningful context (the students own realia and relevant texts) contribute significantly to actual learning. Six to seven repetitions can be achieved through intensive reading, dedicated vocabulary books, and other vocabulary specific materials. How much time to be spent by the teacher on a word group depends on the students' requirements. Academic, technical, or relevant low-frequency words should be given more time if the student will actually have a greater use for them in the future. Low-frequency words and topic specific words may not require as much time.

### 1. Meaning

There are several elements associated with the 'meaning' of a word. There is 'denotation', the precise, literal definition of a word that students would typically find in a dictionary. There is meaning in context, and also meaning in relation to the other words around it. "The aspect of word knowledge involves having a clear idea of the underlying meaning of a word running through its related uses, and also involves being aware of the range of particular uses it has, that is, what it can refer to" (Nation 2001, p.102).

"Knowing the meaning of a word is not just knowing its dictionary meaning (or meanings), it also means knowing the words commonly associated with it (its collocations) as well as its connotations, including its register and its cultural accretions" (Thornbury 2002, p.15). Practically speaking, the learner should know the actual meaning of the word in the context of how it is encountered in that instance. The teacher should then give one or two more examples of various other usages. However, depending on the student level, the teacher should be careful not to confuse or overload the student with too much information.

## 2. Pronunciation

It is up to the teacher on how much emphasis to place on pronunciation. It may be counterproductive by inhibiting the flow of a conversation or dialog to explain or correct pronunciation. "Research shows that words that are difficult to pronounce are more difficult to learn. Potentially difficult words will typically be those that contain sounds that are unfamiliar to some groups of learners - such as 'regular' and 'lorry' for Japanese learners" (Thornbury 2002, p.27). A useful technique is for the teacher to model the correct pronunciation as part of the dialog so as not to give the appearance of an actual correction or disrupt student output. A much more basic approach to pronunciation, especially for lower level learners, is for the teacher to simply put the target words on the board and have the students repeat them after giving the correct pronunciation.

An additional factor to consider in regards to pronunciation is the teacher's own receptiveness to students' poor pronunciation. In other words, the experienced teacher is so used to being exposed to strongly accented English that they can usually easily understand it. However we have found that many students complain that when visiting an English speaking country, they could often not be understood. Therefore, teachers should not become too complacent about accepting poor pronunciation.

## 3. Grammar

For correct usage in speaking and writing, two factors are essential for a learner to know concerning a word. First, what part of speech the word is: a noun, verb, adjective, etc. Second, its derivative forms. Derivatives are the different forms a word can have. For example: ride, riding, rode, ridden, rider. It is up to the teacher how far they want to go in explaining correct grammar. Usually, grammar correction is done more so in writing. This can be beneficial for students in that they can actually see the written corrections. While grammar correction during speaking is also beneficial, students may not always retain this knowledge unless they take notes.

How do vocabulary and grammar differ? Thornbury (2002, p.14) states that "while vocabulary is largely a collection of items, grammar is a system of rules." He proposes that there are two types of words, first 'grammatical (or functional) words'. These are generally prepositions, conjunctions, determiners, and pronouns. The second type is 'content words'. These carry a high information load and are usually nouns, verbs, adjectives, and adverbs. Traditionally grammatical words belonged to the domain of grammar teaching while vocabulary teaching was more concerned with content words. However, the distinction between the two is often blurred. Sinclair (1991) and Levelt (1989) contend that word choice often determines the grammatical form a learner will use.

#### 4. Collocations

Simply put, collocations can be defined as words that often occur together. For example: by the way, hurry up, too much. Pawley and Syder (1983) propose that the reason native speakers can speak with such fluency is that they have such a large volume of these memorized sequences on hand and can instantly call upon them without having to think about constructing such phrases from scratch. Miller (1999) additionally shows that an important aspect of knowing a word is having a cognitive recognition of the contextual background of such phrases. Nation (2001) puts forth that context involves basically three areas: situational context, topical context, and local (or cultural) context as well. Some collocations border on the idiomatic while others are quite logical. As far as teaching is concerned, the more idiomatic type collocations must be memorized while the more logical ones can be either be coherently explained by the teacher or deduced by the learner.

#### 5. Word Formation

Word formation (sometimes known as Affixation or Compounding) involves knowing how words are written and spoken and how they can change their form (derivatives) such as prefixes, suffixes, parts of speech, and nouns into verbs. These are also known as word families. For example the word family for 'use' can consist of: used, using, user, misuse, usury and so on.

Word formation also includes combining two words into one, such as dishwasher, paperback, or highway. "A knowledge of affixes and roots has two values for a learner of English: it can be used to help the learning of unfamiliar words by relating these words to known words or to known prefixes and suffixes, and can be used as a way of checking whether an unfamiliar word has been successfully guessed from context" (Nation 2001, p.264).

#### 6. Idioms

Idioms, specifically 'core idioms' (Grant and Bauer 2004), are those multi-word units that cannot be understood by a second language learner merely by understanding the meaning of their components. They must be memorized as whole units. Trying to analyze meaning through the components would prove to be impossible. For example 'break a leg' which in common entertainment parlance would mean to have good luck. Nation (2008) argues that core idioms occur with such low frequency that they need not be learned until learners have a better grasp of higher frequency words.

As mentioned above in Collocations (section 4), idiomatic expression can only be learned through memorization. However, it would be worth the teachers while to expose students

to the more commonly used idioms that they would likely encounter in everyday English as opposed to 'textbook' English which is often lacking in such expressions.

### **7. Connotation**

Connotation can be generally defined as those ideas, impressions, or other qualities implied by a word rather than its actual meaning (denotation). Sometimes there is a meaning that is not very clear from just reading or hearing the words, or even knowing the definition. In addition, dictionary definitions of two words may be the same, but there is a difference between the words which is sensed by native speakers. For example, the differences between smell and stink, thin and skinny, or thrifty and cheap. Learners need to be aware that meaning involves attitude and emotion as well as denotation. These subtle differences in meaning are best explained by the teacher as the learner encounters them.

### **8. Register**

Register concerns the formality or politeness of words or phrases used. Register is determined by the relationship of the interlocutors. For example, how one speaks to friends may not be appropriate when talking to a teacher, colleague, or company superior. Conversely, a doctor will speak much differently to a patient than to his staff. Learners need to be aware of the various meanings of words and how such words can affect the speaker / listener relationship.

Teachers should correct students' experimentation with words that they do not fully comprehend or misuse. This can be done by means of an explanation or by having the student look up the word in the dictionary. However, EFL teachers should not permit the vulgar or profane words students will sometimes use. These words are usually acquired from movie dialog or music lyrics and students often have no idea of their actual implications. This type of language should not be tolerated and the teacher should patiently explain why these types of words should not be used in a classroom.

## **B. FOUR MAJOR GROUPS OF VOCABULARY**

### **1. High frequency words**

High frequency words consist of the first 2000 words on the General Service List. The General Service List is a list of the basic vocabulary of English in order of frequency. It was first created in 1953 by Michael West (1953a) and has been revised several times since. High frequency words are a small group of words but cover 85% of those used in everyday reading and writing. The first 1000 words are actually the most important. In vocabulary classes the teacher should do everything possible to expose students to high

frequency words, they are very important, and whatever method the teacher uses is beneficial. Basically, if learners do not know the first 2000, it is almost pointless to teach the rest, learners will not be able to read, write, or comprehend. Of course this may not always be possible in a regular integrated skills or speaking class, but we have found that selecting specific graded readers, vocabulary books, or short vocabulary exercises related to the current topic can be most useful.

## **2. Academic vocabulary**

Academic vocabulary encompasses groups of word families that regularly appear across a broad range of academic subjects and fields. The Academic Word List (Coxhead 2000) contains 570 word families. A word family consists of the various forms a word can take (see Word Formation above). Nation (2008, p.125) states “that the 570 word families make up around 10% of the running words in academic text, about 4% in newspapers and less than 2% of novels.” Subsequently, these words deserve serious attention for those going on to academic study, or have specific academic goals. Nation (2008) recommends that academic vocabulary be learned both receptively and productively through the four strands including deliberate teaching and study of the words. The teaching of academic vocabulary should be focused directly on those items needed for the intended area or purpose.

## **3. Technical words**

Those words specific to various specialized fields (engineering, geology, medicine, etc.). In general they are considered low frequency words, however in relation to their respective fields they can be considered high frequency words. These words should be a part of the study of the subject and taught as they are encountered, not pre-taught by the EFL teacher. Nation (2008) contends that it is essential for the learning of technical vocabulary to occur as part of meaning focused input through listening and reading, especially intensive reading pertaining to the particular field.

## **4. Low frequency words**

Low frequency words comprise the vast majority of words in English and therefore are not worth spending time on, there are just too many and the cost benefit ratio is not worth it. The teachers' goal is not to teach actual low frequency words, but rather how to deal with them as they occur. Nation (1990) determined that is more efficient to spend class time teaching learning strategies such as guessing from context, using root words, or memorization techniques. If they are taught, it should be in the context of the specific topic in that instance.

## C. DICTIONARIES

### 1. Role

It is well known that dictionaries play an important role in language learning. Scholfield (1997) distinguishes between the various requirements and strategies for dictionary use. Namely, dictionaries used for comprehension (reading and listening) and those used for production (writing and speaking). Presently in Japan, we are primarily referring to the prevalent use of electronic dictionaries, it's rare to see a paper dictionary these days, at least in university classes. Some feel that since students work harder to find a word in a paper dictionary they will have greater retention. Research by Harvey and Yuill (1997) has shown that in writing tasks, the most common reasons students gave for using dictionaries, in order of frequency were:

1. To check Spelling.
2. To find meaning.
3. To see if a word exists in the second language.
4. To find a synonym.
5. To check grammar.

The key point for consideration is when and when not to use dictionaries. This will be discussed below in 'Advantages' and 'Drawbacks'.

### 2. Monolingual vs. Bilingual

The debate has been going on for years about the disadvantages and advantages of monolingual and bilingual dictionaries. Some argue that monolingual dictionaries usually do not provide sufficient grammatical information, information about pronunciation, word formation, and idiomatic use. Additionally not enough, or no examples of words used in sentences and phrases. Others argue the same about bilingual dictionaries. In Japan at least, this debate is pretty much irrelevant as today's electronic bilingual dictionaries used by most students provide all of this. In addition to being faster and easier to use, these dictionaries often include a useful oral pronunciation feature.

### 3. Advantages

From the students perspective dictionaries are convenient, fast, and easy to use. Looking up the meaning of a new word and finding its derivatives can be very brief. From the teacher's perspective they also can be convenient and can save time in the sense that they eliminate lengthy and often confusing explanations by the teacher. Although with higher level students, explanations provided by teachers can be advantageous for additional receptive learning. Nation (2008, p.64) states that "Dictionary use, like guessing from context, is a useful vocabulary learning strategy. When used for high frequency words or

technical words, dictionaries have the double benefits of helping to develop a useful strategy and giving attention to useful words.” For low frequency words dictionaries also help to reinforce learning strategy in the sense that learners can readily check words they have guessed from context.

#### 4. Drawbacks

Deriving meaning contextually is almost universally acknowledged as the most effective vocabulary learning technique. Dictionary use can be a distraction when doing timed or extensive reading, it hinders higher to mid-level students from thinking in context. The benefits from guessing from context are that it gives learners a greater sense of independence if there is no teacher or dictionary to rely on, and is an important strategy for developing fluency in reading. However when dealing with lower level students this strategy is not very realistic and dictionaries must be relied on.

Another point to consider is retention. Every time a new word or expression is learned without much effort on the part of the learner, there is a tendency to forget soon after. It was found that a majority of English learners who used dictionaries all the time, although they learned the meaning of many of words, found it difficult to remember those words the next time they encountered them. We have found this to be particularly true when using graded readers and dedicated vocabulary books using recycled words from previous chapters. Students often have to look up words encountered in earlier chapters. Most importantly, dictionary use should not inhibit spontaneity. Some teachers encourage students to write new words in a class vocabulary notebook to be looked up at a later time. It is left to the teacher to determine the use of dictionaries whenever they think it appropriate.

## D. DEFINITIONS

To define a word is to explain or show its meaning. I.S.P. Nation (personal communication. Lecture at Temple University Graduate School of Education, Tokyo, Oct. 1994) contends that this can be accomplished in several ways including:

1. Demonstration - conveying the meaning without using words. This would include actions, pointing, gestures, acting out, showing objects, and using diagrams and pictures on the board.
2. Context - by showing how the word is used in a natural situation, the learner deduces meaning. For example, the word ‘softly’, “the girl softly sat down in the chair because she didn’t want to wake up the baby.”
3. Translation - by means of either the teacher or a dictionary. This is used to save



time if the teacher thinks it appropriate.

4. Abstraction - the learner tries to find the most important ideas the word contains. Sometimes giving the etymology of the word can be helpful. Abstraction should only be used with the highest level students.

In reality, most teachers rely on a range of techniques to convey definition. For more complex or abstract definitions, especially those for technical vocabulary, it is more practical to use a bilingual dictionary. I.S.P. Nation (personal communication. Lecture at Temple University Graduate School of Education, Tokyo, Oct. 1994) further contends that the type of definition given by the teacher should depend on:

1. The importance of the word - is it high frequency or low frequency, and how much does the learner need it.
2. The words that are available to define it - namely, what does the learner already know and understand.
3. The learners age, interest (in the subject material), sophistication, education, and life experience.
4. The need for variety of presentation - the teacher should use various types of definitions to keep the learning situation a little interesting.

## E. ASSESSMENT

The necessity for measuring vocabulary is obvious, and the testing of vocabulary is fundamental to the teaching process (Nagy et al., 1985). The reasons for testing vocabulary depend on the needs of the learner or institution. Nation (2008, p.144) gives the following reasons for testing "to work out what needs to be taught, to monitor and encourage learning, to place learners in the right class, to measure learners' achievement by giving a grade, and to measure learners' vocabulary size or proficiency." Vocabulary can also be used to evaluate teaching and learning activities."

General vocabulary tests can be divided into two distinct types. First, testing 'Out of Context' (word recognition). Here we are looking for meaning only, not usage. Examples of test types would include multiple choice, matching definitions, or matching synonyms or antonyms. What is being tested for here is basically to see how many items learners know. The second type of testing is 'In Context' (productive). Here what we are looking for here is to see how well the learners know a word and can they use it correctly in regards to meaning, grammar, context, and so on. This type of test is much more difficult but can be adapted to various learner levels. The most commonly used would be a cloze exercise in which there are several blanks in a paragraph dealing with one topic. Or it

can be single unrelated sentences. These exercises can have a word list to choose from or not, depending on the level of difficulty the teacher deems appropriate. Another, and more difficult type, are writing exercises using words from a list that have been previously taught. Again, it can be a paragraph dealing with one topic, or single unrelated sentences. Nation (1982) argues that vocabulary should be measured for recognition as well as recall.

## Conclusion

For the teaching of vocabulary, the teachers' most important priorities should be proper training, planning, class perpetration, and a good knowledge of vocabulary strategies. If teachers and learners are well versed in vocabulary learning techniques and strategies the learners' chances for second language learning are greatly enhanced. Chall (1987) contends that the wider the learners reading experiences are, the more this will contribute to their ability to derive meaning from context. The learning goals can be met for a specific time period, be it a single class or a semester, but the ultimate aim is to instill a set of skills that will continue functioning long after the course has ended. Learning a language, particularly vocabulary, its principal component, is a never ending process.

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