

## Critical Issues in Teaching Vocabulary to Second Language Learners

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### **Abstract**

This paper critically examines central issues and relevant research findings in the field of instructed second language vocabulary acquisition. Although this paper focuses primarily upon the acquisition of English as a foreign language, and mainly makes use of examples from a Japanese university teaching context, the issues discussed here are of relevance to language instructors in various teaching contexts. Specifically, the following eight topics will be addressed: vocabulary frequency, what it means to know a word, incidental and intentional vocabulary learning, approaches to introducing new vocabulary to learners, formulaic speech and multiword expressions, specialized vocabulary, vocabulary learning strategies, and assessment. As vocabulary knowledge remains central to successful L2 acquisition, an awareness and understanding of these issues can enable instructors to better meet the needs of their students.

### **How Many Words Should Be Explicitly Taught to Learners?**

The premise that frequency should guide vocabulary teaching, and that the first aim of language learners should be to acquire high frequency vocabulary is generally accepted by most SLA researchers (Loewen, 2015; Nation, 2013; Nation & Webb, 2011). As the most frequent words in the English language typically constitute a large portion—75% to 90%—of spoken and written text, learning high frequency words first can aid learners in improving their language skills quickly and efficiently (Nation, 2013). However, debate exists regarding the specific quantity of words that ought to be considered high frequency. Nation argues that the 2,000 most

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frequent word families in English constitute high frequency vocabulary and should be explicitly taught to learners. Others, namely Schmitt and Schmitt (2012), contend that learning 2,000 word families is insufficient for achieving any sort of satisfactory level of text comprehension. They propose labeling the first 3,000 word families high frequency, and view these words as the focus of explicit vocabulary teaching. As, Nation and Webb (2011) note, 95% to 98% coverage is needed for learners to achieve satisfactory comprehension of a text, Schmitt and Schmitt's argument receives some support as a rudimentary baseline for learners to understand spoken and written discourse. Furthermore, the Academic Word List, which many researchers argue should be the second goal of learners following acquisition of the most frequent 2,000 word families, is almost entirely subsumed by the adoption of a 3,000 word family learning goal.

Schmitt and Schmitt are correct in noting that a 3,000 word family learning goal is more useful to learners than the traditional target of 2,000 word families. However, whether this is a realistic goal for most language learners is debatable. As acquiring even the most frequent 2,000 word families in English is a significant undertaking, labeling the first 3,000 word families as learners' initial vocabulary learning goal potentially makes this goal unattainable to many. Having taught various English courses to learners at several Japanese universities, I have found that many words that fall well within the first 1,000 word families, such as *measure*, *provide*, and *govern*, are unknown by learners, despite their six years of prior language study in secondary school. Adopting a 3,000 word family goal seems unrealistic in such a context, and an overwhelming and unrealistic challenge to most learners. Nonetheless, supporters of both positions agree that frequency ought to guide vocabulary teaching, and this remains a notion that is often ignored by educators and textbook publishers (Nation, 2013). While the principle that teaching vocabulary in order of frequency is well established in SLA theory, the exact vocabulary learning goals of specific groups of students doubtlessly depend upon the particular teaching context in question.

### **What Does It Mean to Know a Word?**

To know a word involves knowing much more than its meaning. While learners typically view vocabulary acquisition as the practice of linking form to meaning, knowledge of collocation use, pragmatics, and conceptual associates also are substantially important to developing and deepening vocabulary knowledge. Nation (2013) states that knowledge of a word requires a receptive and productive understanding of various aspects of its form, meaning, and use. Pronunciation, common collocates, spelling, and constraints on use are often especially challenging for learn-

ers, and are representative of the significant gap that typically exists between a learner's larger receptive knowledge and their comparatively smaller productive vocabulary knowledge. Such partial vocabulary knowledge is typical in the case of many L2 words (*the* and *develop*, common examples in Japan, where learners' productive use of these words generally lags far behind their receptive understanding), as learners often know some, but not all aspects of a word. L1 interference is also another common cause of partial, or incorrect, word knowledge, as most language learners tend initially to map L2 forms onto L1 concepts (Laufer, 2013).

Raising awareness of limitations in learners' vocabulary knowledge, specifically by highlighting the various dimensions of knowing a word, is one means of assisting learners in independently attending to any gaps that exist in vocabulary knowledge. When, for example, explaining to learners the reason why saying "I played with my friends last weekend" a common utterance in Japanese university English classrooms, sounds awkward when uttered by university students, explanations must typically center around issues of pragmatics related to constraints on the use of such a phrase, as its semantic meaning is generally relatively clear. Similarly, when explaining why the English word *menu* is different than the Japanese word メニュー (*menyuu*)—which can be used in a greater variety of contexts where there exists a list of products or services, such as hair salons or spas, not only in places serving food or drinks—I generally focus upon the manner in which the English concept is distinct in meaning and use from the Japanese concept, in spite of the similarities in form. Raising awareness of the differences between L1 and L2 concepts (so called *false friends*) can not only aid learners in improving their L2 vocabulary knowledge, but elucidate for learners the various facets of successful vocabulary acquisition.

### How Should Vocabulary Be Introduced to Learners?

In some respects, the debate over how best to introduce new vocabulary items to learners is representative of the divide between SLA researchers and language instructors. Researchers, by and large, agree that semantically-related words should not be introduced to learners at the same time, as learners are apt to confuse and mix-up the meaning of new vocabulary items (Ishii, 2015). Nation (2000) specifically argues that near synonyms (*quick, fast*), free associates (*bed, sleep*) and opposites (*left, right*) are the most interfering to learners, unlike coordinates under a headword (*fruit-banana, pineapple, strawberry, kiwi*), which can facilitate vocabulary acquisition. While the suggestion by researchers that interference can be avoided by introducing related items at different times appears reasonable, the extent to which this is possible for language teachers depends greatly upon the context in question. In Japan, it is commonly the case that instructors see their students once a

week, for an hour or two at a time. Teaching a lesson on directions in which, say, *left* is introduced in Lesson 7 and *right* in Lesson 8 seems absurd, unrealistic, and entirely unreasonable from the perspective of language learners. Most learners expect items to be introduced in lexical sets, unaware perhaps of the potential problems such instruction might present, as introducing a new vocabulary item (*tomorrow*) can foster curiosity in similar items (*yesterday*). Yet, SLA research on this issue, and the experiences of learners facing difficulty acquiring new semantically-related vocabulary items, should not be discounted. A more realistic suggestion might be to raise learner awareness of the dangers of learning items in lexical sets, while using distinct collocations to highlight differences in meaning (*hot coffee, cold beer*) wherever possible and beneficial.

### **How Should Incidental and Intentional Vocabulary Learning Be Balanced?**

Incidental learning (where learners engage in tasks while primarily focused upon meaning) and intentional learning (where learning is explicit and focused primarily upon form) can both contribute to language learning in a manner similar to the benefits of possessing both explicit and implicit L2 knowledge (Loewen, 2015). The amount of unknown vocabulary items learners are likely to encounter in L2 texts is substantial, and beyond what could possibly be explicitly taught in any reasonable amount of time. However, intentional vocabulary learning does appear to be more effective in promoting vocabulary acquisition, according to most SLA research (Nation & Webb, 2011). Laufer (2003), for example, found that the vocabulary gains from reading were far smaller than those from intensive vocabulary learning exercises on both immediate and delayed post-tests. While one could critique Laufer's failure to measure partial word knowledge, or the short duration of the study, there exists little evidence that incidental vocabulary learning is a more efficient way of increasing vocabulary knowledge than intentional learning.

However, Nation (2013) argues that incidental vocabulary learning, notably through extensive reading, is one of the most important ways in which learners acquire vocabulary. Most likely, this divide represents distinct emphases on the acquisition of different aspects of vocabulary knowledge. While intentional vocabulary learning might be better suited to acquiring aspects of the form or meaning of a word, knowledge of collocations and pragmatics can often be gained more effectively through incidental learning. Furthermore, as acquiring a word typically takes place over the course of multiple encounters, extensive reading and listening tasks can assist learners in improving partial word knowledge and strengthening overall vocabulary development by contributing to implicit knowledge on how to use vocabulary productively. As, from the perspective of some learners, such tasks might

not appear to be an effective use of classroom time, instructors can encourage students to engage in meaning-focused tasks independently, through the use of graded readers and simplified listening activities.

### **Should Multiword Expressions Be Explicitly Taught?**

Although most language learners tend to focus upon the acquisition of individual lexical items, multiword expressions (MWEs) composite a substantial portion of spoken and written discourse. MWEs can include collocations (*strong coffee*), multiword verbs (*put up with*), idioms (*tie the knot*), lexical bundles (*in other words*) and various other conceptual categories that refer to expressions consisting of more than a single word (Siyanova-Chanturia & Martinez, 2015). They contribute greatly to the fluency of native speakers, but are notoriously difficult for nonnative speakers, who tend to rely more on creative processing, rather than formulaic speech (Paquot & Granger, 2012). MWEs are also notably unique to specific languages, not necessarily adhering to any easily articulated logic, at once seemingly limitless (*have a good/nice/great day*) and greatly limited (*\*have a strong/positive/big day*).

Undoubtedly, some MWEs require explicit instruction and attention. Phrasal verbs, for example, where meaning cannot easily be inferred from individual words (*turn up/down/off/on/into/around/over*) are unlikely to be acquired by learners unless explicitly taught. However, in regards to collocation use, where learners need to develop a *feel* for what is appropriate, the large number of possible combinations makes explicit instruction almost impossible. Here, the development of learners' implicit knowledge, through graded readers and meaning-focused tasks appears a more efficient manner of facilitating acquisition. Nevertheless, the ubiquity and importance of MWEs to developing native-like fluency in a second language ensures that they are deserving of explicit attention both inside and outside of the classroom.

### **What Specialized Vocabulary Do Learners Need?**

Just as the general language learning goals of particular groups of students differ substantially, so too do the specific vocabulary learning needs of distinct groups of language learners. While high frequency vocabulary constitutes such a large amount of all written and spoken discourse that its acquisition inevitably remains the initial goal of all language learners, for intermediate learners, more specialized vocabulary needs are common. The most well-known specialized vocabulary list is the Academic Word List, which provides coverage of a substantial portion, 10%, of academic texts (Coxhead, 2000). For learners studying academic English, such a list can be greatly useful.

For others, technical vocabulary can be quite important. Chung and Nation (2003) state that technical vocabulary constitutes a large amount of specialized texts—30% of an anatomy textbook and 20% of an applied linguistics textbook. Explicit instruction of such vocabulary can be more beneficial to learners than the use of frequency lists based entirely upon general-purpose English. Providing opportunities to productively use such vocabulary, in meaning-focused tasks, can also facilitate learning, as learners' explicit knowledge of vocabulary is generally much weaker than their implicit knowledge. Medical students studying English in Japan, for example, are often able to receptively understand technical terms—particularly in written form—and may even have studied medicine using English texts at Japanese medical schools. However, using such terms productively remains significantly more challenging, even with learners who possess strong receptive vocabulary knowledge. Providing learners with opportunities to produce such *pushed* output can foster fluency development and facilitate the proceduralization of vocabulary knowledge that is oftentimes primarily known only explicitly (Swain & Lapkin, 1995).

### **Should Vocabulary Learning Strategies Be Taught?**

Learners cannot possibly ever be taught all the vocabulary they might confront through explicit instruction. The teaching of vocabulary learning strategies is one common approach utilized to aid learners in more effectively developing vocabulary knowledge independently. Generally, such strategies have been found to be effective, and their use supported by SLA research (Nation, 2013). One old, yet popular and effective vocabulary learning strategy is the keyword method (see Pressley, 1977), in which learners use an L1 word that sounds similar to a new L2 item (e.g. りんご, or *ringo* (apple) in Japanese sounds similar to *ring* in English) and visualize an image linking the two concepts (e.g. an apple with a ring around it). Dual-coding theory, i.e., linking a word visually and verbally to a concept, might be one factor underlying the effectiveness of this approach (Loewen, 2015). Another commonly taught strategy is the word-part technique (see Zheng & Nation, 2013), in which learners divide a word into its component parts (e.g. *-scribe*), link the parts to their meaning (e.g. *to write*) before connecting the word parts to their use in other English words (e.g. describe, prescribe, transcribe). The large number of affixes in the English language make this technique particularly useful for English language learners.

The word-context method has also been proven to be an effective means of developing vocabulary knowledge (Clarke & Nation, 1980). The approach, while relatively simple, is often more systematic than the typical manner in which learners confront unknown lexical items. When encountering an unknown vocabulary item

learners, first, identify its part of speech before looking at the immediate context of the word. They then look at the wider context of the word in a text, take a guess, and, finally, check their guess. Compared to the manner in which learners might typically deal with unknown words (i.e. immediate dictionary use) the greater level of processing involved in such an approach is arguably more likely to facilitate vocabulary acquisition. While Laufer and Hadar (1997) demonstrate that dictionary use can be beneficial to language learners, without some level of processing or engagement, acquisition of new vocabulary items is unlikely. Learners using vocabulary notebooks, word cards, or those who explicitly push themselves to use new items in subsequent interactions are much more likely to develop vocabulary knowledge compared to those who, having learned the meaning of a word necessary for a specific task, avoid the work involved in developing and deepening their vocabulary knowledge for use in subsequent contexts. Teaching vocabulary learning strategies, which learners can independently choose to make use of, is one means of guiding learners towards using techniques to more effectively and efficiently manage their own vocabulary development.

### **How Should Vocabulary Be Assessed?**

Assessment plays a strong role in facilitating vocabulary acquisition, as the data gained from the administration of assessment instruments is of use both to instructors and learners. Instructors can use assessment to gain insight into learners' current proficiency level, their interlanguage development, and the strengths and weaknesses of a course's design. Learners can use the feedback provided by assessment to better manage and understand their vocabulary learning, and recognize existing gaps in vocabulary knowledge.

Beglar and Nation (2014) list various tests that have been used to measure vocabulary knowledge, a few of which will be discussed here. Two of the most commonly administered vocabulary tests are the Vocabulary Size Test and the Vocabulary Levels Test, both of which are designed to measure the number of most frequent word families learners have acquired. While the tests' simplistic formats allow instructors to easily gain a general understanding of learners' vocabulary knowledge, the focus upon receptive knowledge can overestimate learners' vocabulary size, as partial knowledge can be sufficient to correctly answer items in such standardized tests. Other tests have sought to measure productive vocabulary use, such as the Controlled Productive Vocabulary Test, in which learners must complete words in meaningful sentences where only the first few letters are provided, and the Lex 30, a word association test. However, one issue of concern is whether the controlled and uncommunicative contexts of these tests measure productive ability effectively.

Lexical diversity has typically been measured by submitting learners' written compositions to software designed to measure type-token ratio (or a variant). While such tools measure the variety of words utilized by learners, they arguably fail to measure the depth of learners' vocabulary knowledge.

Classroom assessment instruments are the most familiar means of measuring vocabulary knowledge for most learners, and the most commonly utilized instruments administered by language instructors. Typically, both formative and summative classroom assessment is tailored closely to the needs of specific groups of learners, and is not viewed as a tool for measuring general linguistic proficiency. As such, language instructors have increased opportunities to measure productive and receptive knowledge, in contexts more communicative and realistic than possible in standardized tests. The effect that vocabulary testing has upon learners and course design (i.e., washback), can both be positive and negative—a means of motivating students to develop vocabulary knowledge, and a cause of anxiety and test-centered learning (Fulcher & Davidson, 2007). Yet, despite such drawbacks, testing remain central to language instruction, from the perspective of both learners and instructors, as they promote an increased understanding of learners' interlanguage development and guide future language study and instruction (Singh, 2015). Ensuring that vocabulary testing effectively measures both receptive and productive knowledge, examines the various aspects of vocabulary knowledge, and is tailored towards the needs of specific learners can help facilitate increased learning, and can more accurately measure the extent to which learning has, or has not, taken place.

### **Conclusion**

In Japan, the most common comment I hear from language learners is that they need to “learn more vocabulary.” While vocabulary acquisition is only one aspect of L2 knowledge, it remains central to improving language comprehension and communicating ideas effectively. Developing vocabulary knowledge is undoubtedly a substantial undertaking, one that involves years of study, and a focus on both the breadth and depth of one's vocabulary knowledge. However, by utilizing findings from SLA research in second language classrooms, instructors can guide language learning more effectively by making decisions that are informed, supported by research, and based upon an understanding of how L2 instruction can successfully facilitate vocabulary development. This can ensure that students not only learn more L2 words, but develop their vocabulary knowledge in a way that most effectively addresses their individual learning needs.

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