

A Comparison and Contrast of Two Vocabulary Acquisition Philosophies

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Introduction

Vocabulary acquisition is crucial to students' overall language abilities and in assimilating the four primary skills of speaking, listening, writing, and reading. As Wilson and Anderson (1986) pg. 63) proclaim, "without grammar very little can be conveyed; without vocabulary nothing can be conveyed". Vocabulary acquisition has been sidelined in the field of second language acquisition, with the priority placed on Communicative Language Teaching (CLT). However, findings from Senoo and Yonemoto's (2014) research states that the majority of students studying foreign languages in Japan cite vocabulary as their number one priority. It seems vocabulary acquisition has either been not allocated enough in a communication class, or been ignored in lesson plans.

Vocabulary acquisition philosophies have evolved over the years. Early approaches to L2 language acquisition did not always acknowledge the importance that vocabulary played in the success of second language acquisition (Kumaravadevelu, 2014). Recently, textbooks have been written specifically with the goal of vocabulary acquisition in mind. Two textbooks that have approached the idea that vocabulary should play a central role in the classroom curriculum are *4000 Essential English Words* and *Oxford Word skills*.

This article sets out to briefly review both of these textbooks in intermediate first and second year non-English major university classes. *Oxford Word Skills* (2012) was used as part of the overall curriculum. In class, the book was used daily as a reference but its role as a textbook was not central to the curriculum. The reason for this has to do with the format of the textbook not being conducive to a CLT

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lesson, with no communication or task based activities. Questions from the textbook were used to quiz student knowledge of targeted vocabulary. As such, it was used to start the lesson and introduce the vocabulary. In contrast, *4000 essential English words* (2009) was used not as part of the curriculum, but as homework. The easy layout was accessible to students and its supplementary exercises could be used for 10 minutes at the end of class or as homework. The textbook also lacked a conversational element so lessons were independent of the content of the textbooks.

Purpose

Both of these textbooks make high frequency English words a focal point of the text, but offer different vocabulary lists and layout designs. This paper aims to highlight the two opposing approaches to vocabulary acquisition presented in the two textbooks and discuss their practical application in a university level classroom.

High-frequency English word textbooks base vocabulary selection on criteria such as frequency, usefulness, and productivity (Kumaravadivelu, 2014). Complexity of the vocabulary will then determine the grade or level of the textbook. *Oxford Word Skills* (2012) lists words thematically and it lacks any acknowledgment of the frequency of word use. Instead, this textbook will have a detailed list of relevant vocabulary revolving around a key theme. For instance, different car parts will be identified in a unit related to cars.

The Textbooks Layout

4000 Essential English words by Nation (2009), closely follows the author's philosophy to language acquisition, based on his many publications (2001, 2002, 2004, 2007, 2008) and experience teaching second language (L2) learners in Japan. Vocabulary is learned through the principle of the four strands. The first strand is meaning-focused input. The textbook lays out 20 vocabulary words with definitions and examples. The second strand is meaning-focused output which relates to taking the new material and practicing/quizzing/studying for learned meaning. The third strand is language-focused learning meaning. The textbook has two pages of multiple choice questions and online learning resources to lead students through both the second and third strand. The last strand is fluency, which the textbook facilitates through activities involving a short graded reader. Graded readers are stories written around a frequency word list. The goal of a graded reader is for students to read at a high pace and for students to enjoy reading. The argument for graded readers is that the frequent exposure to vocabulary will develop a fluency and ease of use with the students L2 language acquisition. Enjoyment is also a key aspect in that enjoy-

ment will have beneficial side effects like study time being more frequent, more focused and more meaningful. Nation (2011) advocates graded readers to enhance reading enjoyment and subsequently each chapter ends with a short graded reader like story.

Oxford Word Skills (2012) is a collection of three books. Each book is divided into 80 units and each of the unit's are two to three pages. Colorful clip art introduces the vocabulary and then the textbook continues with a series of multiple-choice questions that test student's knowledge of learned vocabulary. Lessons are thematically based so a lesson on cars would include items such as a speedometer, accelerator and clutch. Notable to Oxford's approach is the thematically laid out design to vocabulary that is akin to a dictionary. The inclusion of vocabulary such as speedometer, accelerator and clutch fails to meet Kumaravadivelu (2014) criteria of high-frequency words based on frequency, usefulness, and productivity.

Essential English words (2009) has six textbooks in its catalogue. Each textbook is roughly 200 pages that is neatly divided into 30 chapters, suitable for two semesters of 15 weeks. Each chapter starts with an introduction of 20 vocabulary words. The following two pages are quizzes that also serve as a review of the vocabulary. Last is a reading section that finishes with five comprehension questions. *Essential English words* (2009) chapters list vocabulary that is specifically non-thematic. However, vocabulary is targeted toward what L2 language learners might encounter as he or she is trying expressing him or herself.

Acquisition theories

Oxford Word Skills (2012) seems to ignore current language acquisition theories. Some of the central tenets of vocabulary acquisition include adherence to the frequency word list, acquisition through graded readers, and autonomy in vocabulary learning. The first point the concerns the absence of graded readers; any sort of reading based activity would have to be supplied by the instructor. The second point Oxford puts thematic lists above the frequency word list. As such, there are overlaps where the listing of a chapter in Oxford coincides with the frequency word list, but this is not consistent throughout the textbook.

In contrast, *Essential English words* (2009) lays its foundation upon a high frequency English word list. Each chapter focuses on words that are taken specifically from the list. The reason for this is three-fold. First, it addresses the belief that simple and frequent words should be learned in the early stages of L2 development. Secondly, Nation hopes to use the book as a segue to graded readers. For this reason the first two tenets mentioned above are closely followed. The third tenant, student autonomy, is more elusive. The students do not have an opportunity to choose

words themselves, and the textbooks lack of thematic layout, characteristic of a reference book. As students get a strong handle on words from the frequency word list they will be able to use their knowledge when they do tasks in the L2. One of these tasks involves the graded readers. A student with a sound vocabulary base will be able to read a wider range of graded readers and will also be able to read faster. The student will be able to read a wider range of vocabulary and not get caught up in the frustrations that often stifle lower level learners.

The strengths and weaknesses of both textbooks are readily understandable through in-class use. *4000 Essential English Words* (2009) is easy to use and is especially designed to allow for homework assignments. Nation (2011) argues that “the use of reading and other input sources may be the only practical options for out of class language development for some learners” (p. 155). This line of argument is particularly relevant for learners in an EFL context. The layout is easy to follow because the vocabulary is introduced with pictures and clear examples. The questions that cover two pages are nothing outside what any Japanese student has encountered during his or her career in the world of academia. The last page includes a short story, or essentially, a decontextualized graded reader. Understanding vocabulary in their static non-contextual state is confusing and ambiguous (Piagada & Schmitt 2006).

To balance the argument, a critique of *4000 Essential English Words* (2009) is its over reliance on using multiple choice questions. The use of questions is at times awkward and at other times confusing even to native speakers. Consider this question found from (textbook) (p. 124):

Choose the right word

Reflect

- a. Tell someone what to do
- b. to think about something
- c. To damage something badly
- d. To send an image back.

Clearly (b) and (d) both can serve for the definition of *reflect*. The lesson was trying to quiz students on the meaning of *reflect*. An example of the ambiguity is one can look in the mirror and see a reflection or another meaning which is akin to ponder or consider. The word may not fit neatly in a box and this leads to confusing questions. Other times the questions prove too laborious like the following question from the same page.

Already:

- a. Not made up
- b. Before a certain time
- c. More than is needed
- d. Very simple

The answer appears to be (b) but the mental processing that one needs to do to arrive at the meaning is problematic. *Already* can be readily understood in the mother language. *Already* does not have any immediate simile so the attempt to find a synonym is also problematic.

The readings are an important part of the vocabulary learning process. Trying to fit the 20 vocabulary into a short story at times was contrived and stilted. For example, the story of the Dog's Bell (p.30) as an example. The dog is described as a dog that "bit people frequently" and that this was "not an appropriate way for a dog to behave." *Appropriate* and *behave* are both words that Nation had to fit into a story. To describe a dog bite as "not appropriate" is awkward and forced. By setting out to use selected vocabulary in a story not only compromises the story but also the set of words where used in a well formed story. *Essential English Words* (2009) main weakness is that it selects aspects of vocabulary acquisition (e.g. frequency and reading) that should be spontaneous and organic into the confines of a textbook. A better use of lessons and perhaps a method that would be closer to Nation's core philosophies would be to abandon the vocabulary quiz, have students choose words that are of personal relevance and assign the students a graded reading task. This approach facilitates learner autonomy, which cannot only be motivating, but according to Piagada& Schmitt (2006) could dramatically improve vocabulary learning.

Conclusion

4000 Essential English words (2009) attempts to capture the spontaneous and organic nature of language acquisition, whereas *Oxford Word Skills* (2012) takes a different approach of early turn of the century rote learning followed by drills. Nation (2011) vocabulary is non-thematic and loosely based around the idea of words that can be spun into a story. The vocabulary in *Oxford Word Skills* (2012), on the other hand, are thematically based. The advantage of the Oxford textbook is that the teacher can expand on the material, whereas *4000 Essential English words* (2009) involve more fixed activities. The colorful layout of *Oxford Word Skills* and the thematic use of vocabulary lists makes for easy reference. For a self-contained book that adheres to academic vocabulary acquisition theories, *Essential English Words* (2009) would prove to be the best textbook. As a stand-alone book, *Oxford Word*

Skills (2012) falls short although it can be useful as the springboard to a conversation lesson. On the other hand, *4000 Essential English Words (2009)* is easy to use, simple and enjoyable for stand-alone use.

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