Researching and teaching vocabulary in the AMEP

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ABSTRACT

Over a number of years, action research projects have contributed to practitioner-based research and professional development in the Adult Migrant English Program (AMEP). In this article, we describe a recent national project focusing on the teaching of vocabulary. We worked, as a researcher from the National Centre for English Language Teaching and Research (NCELTR) and a researcher from the NSW Adult Migrant English Service (NSW AMES), with 25 AMEP teachers from different States to investigate different aspects of teaching and learning vocabulary. These aspects were selected by the teachers according to their interests, their learners’ needs and the focus of their classes. Summarised accounts of four studies from the project are presented as examples.

Background to the project

Vocabulary is an area of interest for many teachers and learners. It makes intuitive sense that acquiring vocabulary and lexical units is a central aspect of learning any language. Yet, the role of vocabulary in the history of language teaching has had an uncertain status. Richards (2000: xi) argues that at times vocabulary has almost disappeared from view ‘as scholars and applied linguists turned their attention to other dimensions of language knowledge’. A renewed interest in vocabulary research in the 1990s has returned vocabulary to the language learning and teaching agenda. In this article we provide a description of a recent action research project where we worked as researcher-coordinators with 25 AMEP teachers who investigated the teaching and learning of vocabulary in their classrooms. Our role was to manage the project, organise workshop discussions on teaching vocabulary and conducting action research, and provide advice and support to the teachers as they carried out their studies.

Research on vocabulary and vocabulary learning covers a large terrain, and it is not our intention to address aspects of the research that other contributors to this volume have laid out in more detail. Teachers in the project were asked to read and discuss some of the recent literature on vocabulary (Nattinger 1988, Ellis 1997, Laufer 1997, Nation and Waring 1997). Additional sources used in the project were Carter and McCarthy (1988), McCarthy (1990) and
Schmitt (2000). In the following section, we highlight the areas of the literature that provided a background for our project and a basis for some of the practical classroom investigations.¹

**The nature of vocabulary**

An initial key question was to enquire into what is meant by ‘vocabulary’ and how it is composed. A commonsense view implies that vocabulary consists of words, ‘freestanding items of language that have meaning’ (McCarthy 1990: 3), for example, *dressing*. Some word elements (morphemes) are bound (-*ing*) and cannot stand alone. We can speak, therefore, of root words (*dress*) to which other morphemes can be added as prefixes (*un-dress*) or suffixes (*dress-ed*). Focusing attention on root words and word formation seems to be helpful for learners. For example, Perkins (2000), an AMEP teacher, documents how this strategy assisted reading development for Lin, a Chinese student whose home and classroom reading practices she studied.

The readings for the project also alerted us to multiword units (MWUs). English, like other languages, contains a large number of fixed forms that commonly recur and consist of more than one word. These words tend to cluster together systematically to provide a single meaning (*as a matter of fact*, *to smell a rat*, *take it or leave it*). Multiword units are very common aspects of language use and serve the purpose of easing the task that speakers and writers have in producing language under pressure. Some of the most common MWUs (Schmitt 2000) include compound words (*dishwasher*), phrasal verbs (*to get up, off, out, in, down, on*), fixed phrases (binominal, consisting of two key words in fixed order – *to and fro, back and forth, ladies and gentlemen*; and trinominal, consisting of three words – *morning, noon and night, here, there and everywhere, this, that and the next thing*), idioms (*to kick the bucket*), proverbs (*a watched pot never boils*), and lexical phrases, which are also termed lexical chunks, prefabricated routines and gambits (*Guess who I just met?, Can I help you?*).

The notion of lexical patterns was also an important insight. Not only do individual words collocate, but so also do strings of words – that is, two or more words cluster together grammatically or semantically. Nattinger and DeCorrico (1992) suggest that words act less as individual units and more as parts of lexical phrases in connected discourse. The recall of lexical phrases, rather than individual words, would seem to help in the processing of language as ‘chunks’ (Lewis 1993, 1997). The notions of MWUs and other word patterns suggested the need to take a broad view of vocabulary learning and teaching in the project.

**LEARNING VOCABULARY**

Knowing and using vocabulary is more complex than simply acquiring receptive and productive skills (Nation 1999; Schmitt 2000). Nation (1990: 31, cited in
Schmitt (2000) draws attention to the diverse range of ‘knowledges’ involved in knowing a word:

- the meaning of the word
- the written form of the word
- the spoken form of the word
- the grammatical behaviour of the word
- the collocations of the word
- the register of the word
- the associations of the word
- the frequency of the word.

These different types of knowledge are not acquired in a linear process, but are interrelated and learned gradually over a lifetime. Given the different types of knowledge and the large numbers of word families known by adult native speakers (estimated at between 15,000 and 20,000) and non-native speakers (several thousands of word families, depending on the extent of learning, proficiency, exposure to the language and other factors), it is not surprising that learning takes place incrementally. It would seem that acquiring vocabulary involves two main processes: explicit learning of words, through deliberate and focused techniques, and incidental learning, through a focus on meaning and use in conversation, reading and so on. Both types of learning are important. Ellis (1997) suggests that much of the learning about the orthography and phonology of vocabulary comes from incidental tuning-in to patterns in spelling and sound systems. Meaning, on the other hand, may be better learned by explicit means such as guessing from context, using mnemonic techniques (imagery, memory) and other strategies that help to link meaning to form.

This bears out the experiences of many teachers that new vocabulary units cannot be presented once only. Learners need to be exposed to vocabulary repeatedly, and so recycling needs to be built into learning.

TEACHING VOCABULARY

While there may be no well-established or ‘best’ way to teach vocabulary, it is possible to derive some useful guidelines from the literature aimed at optimising vocabulary learning. In the project, we focused on: increasing the quantity of vocabulary taught; explicit approaches to teaching vocabulary; and incidental approaches to teaching vocabulary.

Schmitt (2000) suggests that, in terms of increasing the quantity of vocabulary, four approaches can be useful:
1 focusing on frequent words, such as those in the General Service List (West 1953);

2 using vocabulary for a specific context (eg technical terms in an ESP/EAP program);

3 asking learners to nominate vocabulary (eg based on contexts/topics identified through needs analysis);

4 developing vocabulary for classroom participation (eg classroom artefacts – whiteboard, pen, computer; classroom instructions – get into pairs, open your books).

Sökmen (1997) provides useful principles for an explicit focus on vocabulary teaching:

• build a large sight vocabulary
• integrate new words with old
• provide a number of encounters with a word
• promote a deep level of processing
• facilitate imaging
• make new words ‘real’ by connecting them to the student’s world in some way
• use a variety of techniques
• encourage independent learning strategies.

We drew on the following ideas for teaching according to an incidental approach:

• encourage learners to think of and use ways to maximise their exposure to native speakers (include media such as TV, radio, songs, plays etc);

• read regularly to students and encourage extensive reading activities (see Burns and de Silva Joyce 2000 for ideas from AMEP classrooms);

• introduce students to narrow reading (Schmitt and Carter 2000) where students read several texts on the same topic, thereby recycling vocabulary (see also Perkins 1997 for ideas on using a critical literacy approach);

• set ‘out-of-class’ tasks focusing on vocabulary (eg students bring new words or MWUs back to class, identify a ‘word of the week’ and develop more out-of-class activities around it);
• get students to use or find Internet sites set up for language learners;
• encourage use of other multimedia resources (penfriends, chat rooms, email, film) and discuss with students ways to find these resources;
• introduce students to a relevant learners’ dictionary and teach strategies for effective dictionary use (eg pronunciation conventions, alphabetical order, word form, concept of multiple meanings).

The project
The project adopted an action research approach involving cycles of planning, action, observation and reflection (see Burns 1995, 1999 for a description of action research in the AMEP). Twenty-five teachers from the Australian Capital Territory, New South Wales, Queensland, Tasmania, Victoria and Western Australia volunteered as teacher-researchers. They were mostly experienced AMEP teachers, some of whom had conducted action research in previous AMEP projects. In each of these locations, one teacher, usually with experience in professional development, became the team leader for the duration of the project, which was approximately six months in each location. This teacher was the contact point for us as the project coordinators. Each group adopted a similar program:

1 The local team leaders conducted two initial half-day workshops. In the first workshop, the teachers were asked to discuss these general questions:
   a) What role does vocabulary teaching play in your classroom?
   b) What importance do you place on vocabulary teaching?
   c) How do you approach vocabulary development in class? How does this differ with different level learners?
   d) Have you changed your focus on vocabulary?
   e) What attitude to vocabulary development do learners have?
   f) How do you encourage learners to take responsibility for developing vocabulary?

Teachers were provided with a professional reading package (Nattinger 1988, Ellis 1997, Laufer 1997, Nation and Waring 1997). Each teacher was asked to read one of these articles in depth in preparation for the second workshop, and to present a summary to the group that included:

• the overall argument of the article
• the main points which they felt related to teaching adult ESL
In some cases, teachers eventually went beyond these initial readings and found others of interest to their research.

2 We attended a one-day meeting with the teachers in each State. The purpose of the meeting was to introduce teachers to the concept of action research and methods and techniques for conducting it. Teachers had the opportunity to discuss their initial ideas for investigation with the group and to devise a plan of action for carrying out the research, as well as to confer with us about ways of writing up the research.

3 Three further half-day workshops, led by team leaders, provided teachers with opportunities to discuss their ongoing investigations. The teachers used a variety of qualitative techniques to collect data (surveys, journals, classroom observations, student evaluations). The discussion of the data at group meetings also provided a means for reflection and analysis. At the final workshop, teachers discussed their reports, gained feedback from others in the group and set timelines for completing the writing.

Outcomes from the project
The teachers’ investigations focused on a variety of issues in classroom practice that fell into four broad areas:

• the vocabulary needs of learner groups at particular levels
• integrating vocabulary teaching into course programming
• devising techniques and activities for teaching vocabulary
• teaching specific language aspects of vocabulary, especially idioms.

We have chosen to summarise four of the action research projects across these four focus areas to give readers a sense of the project as a whole.

LEARNER GROUPS
In this research area, learners were taken as the starting point for thinking about vocabulary development. The projects focused on investigating learners’ needs and developing activities based on these needs. Research issues focused on the quantity of vocabulary to introduce at specific levels, and what teaching strategies to use to introduce new vocabulary. The balance between explicit and incidental teaching was also a key influence.

Colleen Fox (2001) focused on a learner group who study at home with volunteer tutors. At the time of the project, she was working as a Coordinator of the Home Tutor Scheme in the Australian Capital Territory. The Home Tutor
Scheme (HTS) is a section of the AMEP that matches volunteer tutors with newly arrived migrants. The tutors work with students who cannot access formal classroom tuition because of shift work, family duties or illness. Most HTS students tend to be recently arrived immigrants at beginner or post-beginner levels of English. Colleen’s role was to provide training for the volunteer tutors, who were from a broad range of backgrounds.

An initial survey of the tutors revealed that more than half consciously spent at least 25 per cent of their tutoring sessions on vocabulary, using a wide range of strategies such as reading exercises, theme work and picture discussions. Many tutors identified student interests and hobbies, in order to focus on vocabulary that was relevant to their students. Colleen decided to focus on explicit vocabulary teaching in response to Sökmen’s (1997) principles for an explicit focus on vocabulary teaching. She decided to work with home tutors in trialling vocabulary teaching materials and methods, while also focusing on student learning styles.

A vocabulary package was prepared that contained various vocabulary activities, two visual prompt sheets and information on learning styles and positive learning strategies. The package was designed to cater for a variety of English levels and educational backgrounds, and enabled tutors to choose activities that fitted the preferred learning styles of their students. The tutors were asked to undertake the activities with their students and evaluate the process. The theme of the package was *School Days*. It was hoped that this topic would prompt students to talk about their educational experiences, and thus give tutors an insight into the learning styles of their students.

In the first activity, students brainstormed words about school. Single words relating to school experience were then used to extend vocabulary and to compare the school experiences of student and tutor. The students listened to a tape about school and education in Australia. The students also read two stories: *Mrs Yeung from China* and *Margaret from Australia*. These stories were about school experiences and were accompanied by pen drawings and pictures. For each story, there was a short list of less familiar words, and tutors were asked to check this vocabulary with their students prior to reading. The students were also invited to write down the words they would like to remember from each story. In the final task, students were asked to tell stories about their school days in whatever format they preferred. Figure 1 shows a sample story.

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*Figure 1*: Sample student story

My name is Nuzhat. I was born and went to school in Pakistan. It was a girls school. I was lucky my school was opposite my home. I enjoyed school very much because everyone was friendly. I had seven subjects: English, Urdu, Maths, Islamic Studies, Science, Social Studies and Household.

I had different timetable in summer and winter. In summer school was open at 7.30 am and closed at 2.00 pm. In winter it was 7.30 to 3.00 pm.

The happiest time was at recess when we was free to play games and talk happily to each other.
Fox reports that her final evaluation of the vocabulary package indicated that the students made clear choices about activities according to their preferred styles of learning. The students indicated that the theme of *School Days* promoted the learning of vocabulary and improved the retention of new words because it provided an opportunity for them to use language related to their own experiences, and the different modes of presenting vocabulary supported recycling.

**PROGRAMMING**

In this group of projects, teachers were interested in how they could integrate vocabulary teaching and learning into their course design. The question of whether to select an explicit or an incidental approach was important, as well as concrete ways of implementing these approaches in the classroom. Teachers drew on several of the techniques referred to previously, including developing a weekly vocabulary list, using an ESP approach for specific contexts and giving learners responsibility for decision-making.

Cheryl Pfister (2001), a full-time teacher in Hobart, Tasmania, focused on how she could develop a teaching program that would enable students to develop individualised English for Specific Purpose (ESP) vocabulary. She chose this focus because she had become ‘increasingly aware of the frustration experienced by students who were unable to describe their vocational skills, experiences and recreational interests because of restrictions in vocabulary. It did not seem to matter how competent a student was in general English, their vocabulary in English for Specific Purposes (ESP) was consistently lacking’ (Pfister 2001: 39).

With her post-beginner class, she set up a framework that enabled her students to develop vocabulary in an area of their choice. The framework provided opportunities for ongoing links to resources and also teacher support and encouragement. The teacher’s role was to help the students to establish realistic, short-term and achievable goals. Through the framework, she wanted the students to take responsibility for their own learning and establish self-monitoring strategies for assessing which words were appropriate and useful.

The students nominated an area of specific vocabulary they wanted to develop. This development was to be through independent study, supported by three classroom sessions with the teacher. In these sessions, the teacher drew attention to definitions and categories, verbs and phrases, collocations involved in moving from individual vocabulary items to sentences, consequences, results, relationships, and words and clauses in context. A fourth and final session was scheduled for student presentations.

For independent study, the students were provided with visual and reference materials, dictionaries, technical books, ESL/ESP textbooks, newspapers and journals, a variety of CD-ROMs and computers with Internet access. Other
community resources were also made available. For example, one student spoke to a music teacher about how to read music, two students audited a tourism lecture at the local technical college and another student spoke to a salesman in a car yard.

The ESP interests of the students were varied and were guided by recreational or career interests. They included: Genetics, Biology, Travel and Tourism, Cars, Graphics in Computers, Guitars and Music, Soccer Clubs and Sponsorship, Journalism, Magnetism and Energy in Physics, Bangkok, the Structure and Operation of an Import/Export Company and Enzymes in Humans.

The student presentations were an opportunity for the students to display their new vocabulary. The inventiveness of the students was revealed in the range of presentations, which took varied forms: a song written and sung in English; an explanation of the computerised Galileo system of international travel and hotel reservations; a simulated bus tour of Bangkok; a car salesman giving a sales pitch; and a description of the process of getting a hot tip for a newspaper story to print.

The students were asked to identify their sources of vocabulary. In order of importance and frequency of use these were: books, the Internet, people, newspapers, brochures, visits, CD-ROMs and other resources such as video.

Pfister argues that this approach meant that the students became more confident in taking responsibility for ESP vocabulary development once they had been given a starting point and strategies. She concluded that ‘ESP is not an unmanageable area of an ESL classroom, requiring diverse knowledge and individual preparation. It requires setting up opportunities, offering support and, finally, trusting the students to use their time effectively’ (Pfister 2001: 45).

TEACHING FOCUS

In the third research area, teachers focused on developing or changing the techniques they used for teaching vocabulary. A key question revolved around the most effective ways to recycle vocabulary, especially vocabulary to which learners had just been introduced. Some of the studies monitored the progress made by the students by introducing formal assessment techniques, such as tests and dictations.

Ari Van Eysden (2001) was teaching two classes, held once per week, on the north-west coast of Tasmania when she undertook her action research. The students ranged from beginner to post-intermediate levels, and their ages ranged from 19 to 45 years. As the learners had very little time in a formal learning context, Ari wanted to ‘find out if teaching them strategies to learn new words from television was a feasible method of helping them on a path towards autonomy’ (Van Eysden 2001: 73).

She saw television as a source of contextualised vocabulary learning. The
students were asked to keep a TV viewing journal in which they recorded the TV programs they watched, recorded the channel, the time and the day, and wrote down at least one new word from each program. At the beginning of each lesson, one or two students reported their results to the class.

From her research, Ari found that it was possible for students to use television as a source of vocabulary development, regardless of their level of English language proficiency. However, the students needed ‘a lot of initial support before they realised they could learn new vocabulary this way. Once the support was taken away, their ability weakened’ (Van Eysden 2001: 79). It appeared that students were more likely to pick up new words from longer programs because the ability to establish the context was important and a word was more likely to be repeated.

One benefit of this structured and shared way of developing vocabulary was that classroom discussions about learning vocabulary led to lessons that were more learner-centred. Students also adopted alternative strategies for learning vocabulary from the TV, such as using written words on the TV screen from news items or subtitles.

**LANGUAGE FOCUS**

In the fourth group of projects, teachers focused on language aspects rather than learning or teaching aspects of vocabulary. In particular, they were interested in multiword units, and specifically those with non-transparent and relatively fixed meanings that students often find difficult to acquire. The three teachers in this group chose to investigate the teaching of idioms, looking at issues such as their students’ use of idioms, familiarity with the concept of idioms, and the similarities and differences reflected from their first language, and the effects of increasing students’ knowledge of idioms on their overall vocabulary development.

Sandra Auld (2001), who was teaching a mixed intermediate/advanced class at the time of the project, was one of the three teachers who chose to focus on idioms. Through a class needs analysis, idiom had emerged as a priority need for her students. Sandra was interested in why some students use idioms after exposure and others do not, and what strategies students could use to retain these ready-made units of language.

The students completed a survey on their idiom usage and their strategies for understanding and learning idioms. The students were also asked to list examples of idioms they knew. This revealed that most of the students could provide examples of idiom with varying degrees of accuracy.

Sandra then adopted a two-pronged approach. The students kept a weekly log in which they were asked to record new idioms and to document the source and the context in which they occurred, and then to guess the meaning. The
teacher also presented a range of idiom-building exercises and activities in class. The aim of the classroom activities was to enable students to identify effective strategies for learning idioms. Exercises were clustered around idioms related to topics – for example, clothing idioms. The sequence of exercises included:

- matching idioms with their meanings;
- inserting idioms into cloze passages;
- listening to workplace conversations for gist and detail, focusing on the idioms and suggesting possible meanings from the context;
- reading the transcripts of taped conversations, comparing them with the same conversations without the idioms;
- looking at the literal meanings of verbs and adjectives contained in idioms related to topics.

Sources for learning idioms were discussed in class, and included Australian friends, neighbours, radio talkback programs, current affairs programs, TV soap operas, TV documentaries, magazines, local papers and advertisements. Each Monday, the students worked in groups and discussed their findings. They wrote the idioms they had identified on an overhead transparency, and each student reported to the class. The other students copied the idioms as a way of enlarging their own idiom repertoire.

At the end of the project period, the students were asked to complete an evaluation survey. This revealed that the most common contexts for encountering idioms in order were: casual conversations in social situations, the classroom, TV, shopping and newspapers.

When asked about the social situations in which they would use idioms, the students identified the following situations in order: social situations with friends, talking with other students, talking with neighbours and talking with members of the family. When asked why they did not use idioms, the answers clustered around four main difficulties: memorising idioms, using idioms correctly, knowing the appropriate context in which to use idioms, and familiarity with the person they were talking to. As one student said: *Sometimes I don't know very well my talking partner.*

To identify the meaning of idioms, most students asked someone or looked for clues in the context. When asked about how they learned idioms, the students identified the following strategies in order of importance:

- write a sentence using the idiom
- write the idiom in a list
- associate the idiom with similar words in other expressions
• associate the idiom with an image or mental picture
• associate the idiom with a similar expression in my language
• just learn the idiom
• associate the idiom with a picture or diagram in a book or worksheet
• remember the idiom by its grammar
• draw a diagram or picture of the idiom.

Overall, Sandra observed that the process of searching for idioms, recording them, examining the context, determining their meaning and reporting back in class appeared to contribute to an increase in individual idiom repertoires and in student confidence in using idioms outside the classroom.

Conclusion

There were several aspects of this study that could be taken up by other teacher groups or teacher educators. Some relate to the action research process and others to areas of vocabulary teaching.

Having a series of focus questions, and specific time set aside at the start of the project for discussion of the readings, meant that teachers were able to reflect on their current practices and familiarise themselves with some of the recent literature. Because all the teachers were asked to lead a discussion on one reading, they were motivated to read in depth on a particular research issue, to consider the relevance of the theoretical concepts to teaching, and to lead the group to question and critique their feasibility. Circulating the role of discussion leader also eased the burden for teachers who wanted to be up to date with the literature but did not always have time for extensive reading.

The collaborative aspect of the process, where each teacher focused on the common area of vocabulary but took this up in different ways in their research, meant that practical ideas could be shared with peers, tried out in the classroom and brought back to the group for further discussion. In addition, the group provided a catalyst for thinking and experimentation, and was a professional development mechanism that gave ownership of the process primarily to the teachers. This collaborative aspect provided a contrast to other models of action research that place the emphasis on individual teacher research (Crookes 1993).

Overall, the studies reported in this article, as well as others in the published collection (Burns and de Silva Joyce 2001), suggest that it is worthwhile for teachers to include explicit vocabulary teaching in their repertoire of classroom techniques. Little is currently known about how AMEP teachers incorporate vocabulary teaching into their classroom interactions; classroom observations involving collaboration between teachers and researchers could shed further
light on this. More research could be carried out by teachers on whether students prefer techniques that give them complete independence in their choice of topics, as in Pfister’s research, or those where the choice of vocabulary is derived from the teacher’s analysis of their needs, as in Fox’s research. Teachers could also experiment with explicit discussions with their learners of the explicit or incidental techniques being used and ask learners to provide feedback on which techniques they find the most useful.

Alternatively, drawing on the literature they have read, teachers could try out different teaching techniques from those they have typically used, as Van Eysden attempted in her classroom with a structured and shared focus on television watching. In this study, there was a limited number of projects focusing on multiword units (eg Auld’s study on idioms). As multiword units are pervasive in natural communication, it would be useful for teachers to investigate students’ learning of MWUs further, perhaps by asking them to record one unit per day over a week and then to compare notes about those they have found most puzzling, memorable or useful.

The anecdotal comments we received from the teachers during the workshops suggested that, in general, they found this project a stimulating way to undertake professional development, as it was immediately relevant to their teaching contexts, their theoretical concerns and their practical teaching problems. It also afforded them time to collaborate and share ideas with their peers, an ‘aspect of the project [that] cannot be undervalued’, as one teacher put it (O’Keeffe 2001: 57). Their enthusiasm to participate in the project also seems to confirm that the revival of interest in this area in the literature is matched by many AMEP teachers’ desire to revisit the teaching and learning of vocabulary as an important aspect of classroom practice.3

NOTES
1 Readers interested in a more detailed overview of the literature used in the project and the range of issues investigated by the teachers are referred to Burns and de Silva Joyce (2001).
2 Reports written by teachers who participated in this project are published in Burns and de Silva Joyce (2001).
3 This article is based on an earlier version in Burns and de Silva Joyce (2001).

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