VOCABULARY TEACHING AND LEARNING SPECIAL ISSUE

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Editorial

As we enter the new millennium, we look back and note that, just 20 years ago, vocabulary was considered the Cinderella of language teaching, and was referred to as a ‘neglected’ aspect of our profession (Meara 1980). Since then, a number of books have been published which have argued the case for bringing vocabulary back into the centre-frame of language teaching (Carter 1987; Carter and McCarthy 1988; McCarthy 1990; Nation 1990; Schmitt and McCarthy 1997; Schmitt 2000; Nation 2001), so that by now it is not controversial to consider vocabulary teaching and learning as an indispensable area of concern for teacher education, materials designers, curriculum planners, language test designers and teachers and learners in their classrooms.

Vocabulary, though, covers a very wide range of interests, from description of the vocabulary of any given language to the questions of how vocabulary is acquired and to the practical issues of how to teach and test it. Some current examples of key questions in these areas are:

• What is the most reliable source of description for vocabulary? Traditional dictionaries? Complex systems of describing meaning as elaborated by semanticists? Computer-based corpora? There is no doubt that computational analysis of corpora, and the production of word lists and context-based concordances have become central to description, and few would doubt that they will become more and more influential. No respectable publisher would put out a dictionary for learners that was not, wherever feasible, based on corpus evidence of actual usage, and vocabulary materials are also now often corpus-informed. But a corpus has to be collected somewhere, and the question arises: Whose vocabulary are we describing or should we be basing our teaching on? That of British speakers? That of Australians? That of expert non-native users of English as an International Language?

• Should vocabulary acquisition just be concerned with breadth of learning (how many words one can learn), or also with depth of learning (how much one can know about those words)? What sorts of knowledge do we need about words apart from their basic meanings? Researchers have argued that knowledge of register, collocation, word-grammar and connotations are all important features of ‘knowing’ words, especially as the learner progresses up the attainment levels.

• In what ways does acquisition take place? What is the mental lexicon like? Does it consist of words, or of words plus numerous fixed and semi-fixed expressions (‘chunks’) and idioms? How do the items in the mental lexicon relate to one another? How do we process idioms and metaphors? Recent
studies have stressed the importance of networks of associations in the mind, and of the creation of neural ‘connections’ between words and meanings in the mind (hence the rise of the theory of ‘connectionism’), and the significance of mental imagery. Allied questions include how many exposures to new words are needed before proper acquisition can take place, and how large learners’ vocabularies are likely to be at any given level, and how learning or possessing more than one foreign language influences acquisition.

• What are the best ways of delivering the vocabulary needed in materials and in the classroom? How many words per unit/per lesson can a learner absorb? How important is interaction (with the teacher and/or with other learners)? Is extensive reading the best way to build a large vocabulary? How important is recycling vocabulary?

• What do vocabulary tests show us? Is it possible to use the results of vocabulary tests to predict general proficiency in a foreign language? How can we test knowledge of collocation and the more subtle aspects of word meaning and use? How can we test and observe what level a learner has achieved in vocabulary and what the learner can do with their vocabulary?

This edited collection of papers cannot, of course, answer all of these questions, but we have tried to put together a variety of papers that tackle some of them.

Meara and Bell’s paper looks at how the lexical complexity of learners’ texts can be measured. When a learner, especially a low-level learner, writes a composition or other kind of text, how can we get some sort of objective measure of how rich that learner’s vocabulary use is? Meara and Bell offer a formula for assessing how many difficult words (i.e., low frequency words with reference to external word counts) appear in the different parts of the text, which will give us an idea of how well the learner commands the vocabulary of the target language.

Burns and Joyce take a different line, and their emphasis is on involving teachers in action research into their own teaching of vocabulary and the vocabulary learning of their own students. In their study, teachers are given the opportunity to raise their professional knowledge and awareness of vocabulary issues and then to investigate their own classes. The results of the projects, Burns and Joyce argue, provide extremely useful information regarding the vocabulary needs of learner groups at particular levels, the integration of vocabulary teaching into wider course planning, techniques and activities for vocabulary teaching, and teaching specific areas of vocabulary, particularly idioms.

Boers’ paper also deals with idioms and raises the question of how useful mental imagery is in the processing and understanding of idiomatic expressions.
If it can be shown that introducing imagery during the presentation of idioms can assist learners to understand them, how can learners be encouraged to become autonomous in this activity? Boers’ study investigates the usefulness of mental hypothesising on the etymological origin of idioms as a key to learning them, and the results appear very encouraging.

One of the questions that is constantly at the forefront in vocabulary learning is how important extensive reading is. For many learners, this will probably be their main opportunity to encounter a wide range of new words. But Laufer, in her paper, suggests that extensive reading alone may only provide relatively small gains in vocabulary; reading plus word-focused tasks is likely to be a more powerful means of vocabulary expansion, and the power of word-focused tasks even on their own is considerable. Crucially the type of task or activity affects the degree of success in retaining new words.

Nation and Deweerdt’s paper takes another angle on reading as a way of expanding vocabulary. He looks at some of the criticisms of simplified readers and concludes that it is poorly simplified ones that are the problem, not simplification in itself. At a time when corpus-based approaches to language teaching are becoming more and more important, there is pressure on teachers and materials designers to make everything ‘real’ and not to tinker with natural texts. Nation and Deweerdt argue that unsimplified texts are too dense for lower level learners to benefit from extensive reading. Good simplified texts can provide just the right environment for vocabulary growth through reading.

Three book reviews are also included, all of which would prove valuable resources for those who wish to further their knowledge of vocabulary learning and teaching. Anne Burns reviews the recent volume referred to above by Norbert Schmitt, *Vocabulary in language teaching*. The assessment of vocabulary is not a topic covered explicitly in any of the papers in this volume, but those interested in this topic could follow up by reading John Read’s volume, *Assessing vocabulary*, which is reviewed by Steven Snyder. Finally, Helen de Silva Joyce reviews *Idioms organiser*, by Jon Wright, which provides practical ideas for classroom activities designed to enhance understanding of idioms.

The collection of papers in this issue thus confront some of the general questions raised in this introduction. They also provide references which are useful launch-pads for further investigation of their own areas of preoccupation and the wider concerns of vocabulary teaching and learning. Vocabulary never goes away, and we all have a gut feeling that, at the end of the day, learning a language is largely about learning a lot of words. Hopefully this collection of papers will provide some useful pointers for teachers and spark off thinking to make that mammoth learning task a little less daunting.
REFERENCES

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