

19

Teaching and Learning Vocabulary for Second Language Learners

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KEY QUESTIONS

- ▶ What does it mean to know a word?
- ▶ What do you think is most challenging about vocabulary teaching and learning?
- ▶ How would you go about selecting the words that you should teach?

EXPERIENCE

Hi dear teacher,

I am writing this in the **intermission** between classes to tell you of my **extolment** for your class. Your group work **rouses a deep sense of admiration and joy** within me. I enjoy **every step of the work** in your class. It **comes without speaking** that your class is the best. I don't know how to **give vent to my feelings**. You help me with the **difficultness** of English. I know other **guys** and I **suggest them** to take your class. I'm **so much happy** to be student of a **sagely teacher** such as you and getting your **advices**. Your help is beyond **valuability**.

Bye for now,
Teo

WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO KNOW A WORD?

What is it about the word use in Teo's expressive letter that does not sound quite right, even though we understand its message? It appears that he knows enough about the words to communicate, but there are gaps in his word knowledge. For example, to know a word means to know a considerable amount about its meaning; Teo uses the word *intermission* ("a short period of time between the parts of a play, film, concert, etc.") to apply to the *break* between classes. He knows the literal meaning of *to give vent*

to his feelings but misses the subtle distinction that *vent* is usually used with negative feelings (*I vented my anger*). In addition, to know a word or phrase means to know its *collocations*, or how it is used in combination with other words; for example, although *every step of the way* is a recognizable collocation, **every step of the work* is not. While we understand the meaning of **It comes without speaking*, we are accustomed to the formulaic expression *It goes without saying*. Knowing a word also means to know its grammatical function (e.g., *suggest* is a transitive verb; *advice* is an uncountable noun) and its word parts (e.g., *difficulty* rather than **difficultness*, and *value* rather than **valuability*). Finally, knowing a word means to know its register, or level of formality. *Extolment* is a noun (meaning "enthusiastic praise and admiration"), but it is very formal and infrequently used. Teo also uses several other very formal terms (*rouses a deep sense of admiration and joy*) along with some very informal ones (*guys*; *Bye for now*).

This letter demonstrates the enormity of the word-learning task; there are many words to know and many details to be known about each word. I. S. P. Nation (1990, p. 31) sheds light on the word-learning task, suggesting that word knowledge includes the mastery of the word's:

- *Meaning(s)*: What does the word mean? Are there multiple meanings? Are there connotations (implied additional meanings)?
- *Written form*: What does the word look like? How is it spelled?
- *Spoken form*: What does it sound like? How is it pronounced?

- *Grammatical behavior*: In what patterns does it occur?
- *Collocations*: What words are often used before or after the word? Are there certain words we must use with this word?
- *Register*: Is the word formal or informal? Where can I expect to hear it or use it?
- *Associations*: How does this word relate to other words? What words could we use in place of this one?
- *Frequency*: Is this word common? Is it rare? Old-fashioned?

This knowledge about the aspects of each word is referred to as *vocabulary depth*. But vocabulary depth is not Teo's only concern. In addition, he needs to know an enormous number of words, referred to as *vocabulary breadth*. Word knowledge is further described by distinguishing between *receptive knowledge* (recognizing a word in reading or listening) and *productive knowledge* (using a word in writing and speaking). Teo's letter is a demonstration of his productive knowledge; a reading or listening task would be a demonstration of his receptive word knowledge.

Considerable vocabulary research and methodology illuminate the challenges faced in the word-learning task. In this chapter, I focus on the nature of word learning and on how to facilitate effective word use, beginning with some basic background.

Counting words and managing word counts

How many words are there in English? That seems a simple question, but answers vary greatly. What do we include as a *word*? For example, is *tongue in cheek* or *first of all* one word or three? Are *differ*, *difference*, *different*, and *differently* one word or four? How many words do we count for *gross*, as in *gross national product* and *gross* (disgusting) *food*? Do we include proper names such as *Washington*, *McDonald's*, and *PowerPoint*? And which words count as English words? Do we include words associated with French cooking and Japanese martial arts?

For the same reasons, it is challenging to state how many words a learner should know. Some people answer this question by counting the words in very large dictionaries. For example, the second edition of the 20-volume *Oxford English Dictionary* contains over 180,000 entries. However, this hardly

represents the realistic language use of most people. There are more reasonable ways to estimate the number of words a speaker needs to know and to describe the scope of the word-learning task, including the use of word families. A word family includes the base word, its inflections (the word with affixes added according to the requirements of grammar, such as adding *-s* to a verb to mark the third person singular) and its derivatives (the word with affixes that change the word class or part of speech of the word, such as the suffix *-ness*, which changes an adjective to a noun). For example, the word family for *publish* includes the base word (*publish*), its inflections (*publishes*, *published*, *publishing*), and its derivatives (*publisher* [noun], *unpublished* [adjective], and *published* [adjective]).

Word families have been used by many researchers to estimate vocabulary size. For example, Zechmeister (1995) estimates that educated first language (L1) speakers of English know about 20,000 word families, not including proper nouns. Roughly speaking, L1 speakers learn about 1,000 word families per year throughout childhood, and some have learned as many as 5,000 words per year (Nagy & Anderson, 1984). This suggests that those who begin learning English after childhood will have a considerable deficit, even if they are able to learn at the L1 rate of 1,000 word families per year once they begin. Word learning is thus a moving target; L1 speakers continue to learn at this rate, while second language (L2) speakers try to keep up while also trying to make up for lost time.

What do L2 word learners need as they approach the word-learning task, and how can we help them? Central interests of language educators today include language use and authentic communication, but these have not always been the priority. Before we focus on the current perspective, let us take a look at history.

A historical look at vocabulary instruction

The role of vocabulary in L2 instruction has changed over time; it has been perceived and prioritized differently. I highlight six of the relatively recent approaches here, focusing on how they viewed and presented vocabulary (Schmitt, 2000). (See Celce-Murcia, this volume, for a more thorough discussion of the history of approaches to language teaching.)

Grammar-translation approach. The primary goals of this approach were to prepare students to study the classics and to pass standardized exams. Students were not expected to use the language for communication. Their skill was evaluated according to their ability to translate from the target language into the mother tongue, to analyze structures, and to conjugate verbs. Words were chosen according to their occurrence in the classics and their usefulness in demonstrating grammatical rules. The teaching of vocabulary primarily covered definitions and etymology (word origins). It was during this time that bilingual dictionaries became commonplace as reference tools. This method dominated language teaching at least as late as the 1920s. It has been challenged on many fronts.

Reform approach. In reaction to grammar-translation, the purpose of the reform approach,¹ a primarily British movement, was the development of phonetic training or *oral language fluency*, defined here as accurate pronunciation of connected passages. Phonetic training and carefully controlled spoken language were emphasized. Isolated words or sentences were avoided. For the first time, emphasis was placed on language associated with reality, not grammatical patterns or isolated words. Target words were selected according to their simplicity and usefulness; students were not to be distracted by interesting words. Since reformers focused on the sentence rather than isolated words, they chose simple, practical, and even dull words (e.g., names of household items and articles of clothing) that would not distract learners from the central task of phonetic training.

Direct method. Another reaction against grammar-translation, the purpose of this approach is to produce students who could communicate in the foreign language. Still used today in the Berlitz method, interaction in the target language is the focus of every lesson and use of the mother tongue is not allowed. Words are chosen for their familiarity and their use in classroom interaction; this includes everyday items that can be fit into classroom exchanges (e.g., objects in the classroom and parts of body). Charts, pictures, and realia came to be used at this time.

Reading approach. This approach was in part a response to the 1929 Coleman report (A. Coleman, 1929), which showed declining reading scores

in U.S. schools. It challenged the past by focusing on reading and on a scientific and quantifiable approach to the selection of target-language content. It suggested that reading skill could be improved by the development of vocabulary, and it criticized stressing speech without selecting content in a principled way. One result of this scientific and quantifiable focus was the Vocabulary Control Movement, which was the beginning of word lists based on frequency. Vocabulary was considered primary in language instruction, and words were chosen according to their usefulness and frequency. It was during this period that *A General Service List of English Words* (GSL) was published by Michael West (1953). This list of the 2,000 most frequent words in English is still widely used today in research and course materials.

Audiolingualism. Audiolingualism (ALM) emphasized oral-aural skills and focused on syntax and language structure. It was based on the behaviorist view of habit formation and featured modeling, drills, memorization, and feedback. Charles Fries, a structural linguist and the ALM founder, believed that syntactic structure was the starting point of language learning, and he saw vocabulary as objects used to illustrate grammatical points. He believed that too much focus on words could give learners the false impression that they knew the language because they knew some words. His solution was to choose simple and familiar words so students would not put too much faith in their word knowledge.

Communicative Language Teaching. This term encompasses many differing methods, but the unifying feature is the belief that language is meant for communication. The goal is the ability to communicate rather than the understanding of structures. This goal includes linguistic creativity, which is quite different from the previous approaches based on habit formation. Vocabulary is chosen from authentic materials according to their usefulness. Corpora have recently played a role in identifying target words as they are authentically used. I discuss corpus use in more detail later in the chapter. (For a more thorough discussion of historical trends in second language vocabulary acquisition, see Zimmerman, 1997b.)

Changes in approaches to teaching words. Vocabulary research was once criticized for focusing on teaching rather than word learning and for

providing little information about how words are learned (Meara, 1980). Today, we have considerable research that illuminates the word-learning process and that better prepares us for vocabulary instruction. Highlights of that research are discussed next.

CONCEPTUAL UNDERPINNINGS

Intentional and incidental learning

Word learning involves both *intentional learning* (the focused study of words; also referred to as *explicit learning*) and *incidental learning* (as when words are picked up while one's attention is focused on language use). Current teaching methods favor meaning-based approaches, believing that language features are acquired through use rather than only through direct instruction. Nevertheless, research suggests that some features are best acquired incidentally, while others benefit from explicit treatment. I. S. P. Nation (2001) suggests that form, collocation, and word class are best picked up incidentally, while aspects of meaning, register, and other constraints on use are best learned through explicit instruction. Schmitt (2008) sees a broader role for intentional learning, suggesting that many features of vocabulary require explicit attention because learners often do not notice the features of use when their attention is focused on the message (for thorough discussions of intentional and incidental learning, see I. S. P. Nation, 2001; Schmitt, 2008).

One way that incidental word-learning features prominently is in reading. Vocabulary knowledge is widely accepted as a key predictor to reading success (Laufer & Ravenhorst-Kalovski, 2010), and a great deal of vocabulary growth is a direct result of reading (Nagy, Herman, & Anderson, 1985). But the task of benefiting from reading is not an easy one. It is estimated that learners need to know approximately 98% of the words in an oral or written text to comprehend it (Hu & Nation, 2000; Laufer & Ravenhorst-Kalovski, 2010). In a passage of 50 words, knowledge of 98% of the words means that only one word is unknown. This high rate of coverage is needed to guess words in context, make inferences from the clues, and otherwise grasp the content. In addition, to have 98% coverage when reading novels or newspapers, the reader

must know 8,000–9,000 word families (plus proper nouns). To have 98% coverage for spoken English, learners must know 6,000–7,000 word families (plus proper nouns). The considerable challenge of reading is referred to as the *beginner's paradox*; beginning readers do not know enough words to comprehend the text, but they need to read to acquire new words (I. S. P. Nation, 1990; see Schmitt, 2008, for a discussion of the research related to vocabulary size).

The incremental nature of word learning

Word learning is *incremental*, that is, information about a word is gathered gradually over time. Considerable attention is needed to address the many details of what it means to know a word. What we might consider an “error” could be an indication of partial knowledge. For example, when Teo wrote in the letter that begins this chapter that he wanted to *give vent to his feelings*, he demonstrated that he knew the basic meaning, the grammatical form, and the collocations of the words. We say his knowledge was partial because he did not know that *vent* usually has a negative connotation. Similarly, when he used *difficultness* and *valuability*, he demonstrated knowledge of the base words (*difficult* and *value*) and of the noun suffixes (*-ness* and *-ity*) but combined the parts inaccurately.

These aspects of word knowledge can be disruptive to a learner's intended meaning and accuracy. Effective vocabulary instruction can address the incremental nature of word learning by including the following.

Repetition. Word learning is dependent on repeated exposure to target words in context because there is so much to learn about a word that the learner needs to meet it several times to gain the information needed. Popular wisdom accepts that learners need to meet a word 7, 10, or even 20 times, but the particulars of this finding are hard to pin down because different researchers have used differing research designs that are difficult to compare. For example, what is meant by having *learned* a word? What is meant by *context*? Citing some of the limitations of earlier studies, Webb (2007) controls for more factors and concludes that: (1) for each repetition of a word, some aspect of at least one feature of word knowledge was gained; and (2) ten repetitions of

any unknown word did lead to learning gains, but full word knowledge was apt to take more than 10 encounters.

Spaced repetition. It is not only the number of times that one encounters a word that is important to learning but also the spacing between the repetitions. Memory research has revealed that most forgetting takes place immediately after the first encounter with new information. That is, the older the piece of knowledge is, the more slowly it will be forgotten. This suggests that the first several encounters should be close together, with later encounters spaced further apart. So, rather than studying a word for one 15-minute period, learners should study it for 3 minutes initially, then for 3 minutes a few hours later, then for 3 minutes the next day, then for 3 minutes 2 days later, and finally a week later. Fifteen minutes spread across several days at progressive intervals will lead to longer retention than 15 minutes spent all at one time (I. S. P. Nation, 2001).

Opportunities to focus on both meaning and form. As previously discussed, some word learning requires explicit attention, while other learning takes place incidentally when learners are engaged in meaningful interaction. Learners need opportunities to focus on both meaning and form, and they need opportunities to produce the word. I. S. P. Nation proposes what he calls "the four strands," which include a balance between meaning and form: (1) focusing on meaning-focused input; (2) focusing on meaning-focused output; (3) focusing on language-focused learning; and (4) focusing on fluency development. This approach highlights the importance of providing a balanced variety of opportunities for learners to produce the word and to focus on both form and meaning (see I. S. P. Nation, 2008, for further discussion of the four strands).

Engagement. Engaging topics and tasks lead learners to thoughtful analysis and provide opportunities for them to reflect on words and their use. Research shows that learners are more likely to remember words when they pay attention to them and have to manipulate them. For example, Laufer and Hulstijn (as cited in Schmitt, 2008) find that learners who used target words in a writing task remembered them better than those who saw them only in a reading task, in part because they

needed to understand a linguistic aspect of the word to complete the task and they were required to search for the information (see Schmitt, 2008, for a discussion of research related to engagement and vocabulary).

Interaction and negotiation. Any activity that leads to more exposure, attention, time, and manipulation can add to word learning. Tasks involving oral interaction and negotiation can lead to all of these. When learners discuss the meanings of words in groups, for example, useful information can be exchanged about the words, and all aspects of word knowledge can be called on and discussed (Newton, 1993; Zimmerman, 1997a). For example, Newton (1995) reports that the words that learners acquired were the ones they used most frequently in interactions. For the words that learners saw only on worksheets and did not use in interactions, there was no improvement.

The role of materials in vocabulary instruction

Schmitt (2008) has suggested that there are four partners in the vocabulary learning task: students, teachers, researchers, and materials writers. Textbooks and resource materials guide teachers in which words they teach and how.

Textbooks. In many cases, textbooks are a source of training for teachers and play an important role in spreading ideas across the English language teaching profession. In a study investigating the nature of vocabulary teaching in nine general English textbooks from the beginning to intermediate levels, D. Brown (2011) concludes that textbooks have a narrow perspective on the word knowledge they present, giving most attention to form and meaning (51.8%) and less to grammatical functions (29%) and spoken form (14.8%); the remaining six aspects (including associations; collocations; word parts; and constraints on use, including register) received very little attention in the textbooks. In light of these findings, think back to the letter written by Teo (at the beginning of this chapter) and remember the difficulties that were reflected in it. Some of the aspects that were a challenge to him (e.g., collocations, word parts, frequency of use, and register) might have never been addressed in his course textbooks.

Dictionary use. Dictionaries are a rich and often underused source of information. They differ greatly in their purposes and intended audiences, so they should be selected carefully. Many English as a second/foreign language dictionaries are based on corpora (large, principled collections of naturally occurring text). Corpus-based dictionaries are rich sources of information for the language learner because they feature information drawn from authentic use, information about contexts, and nuances of meaning. Examples of widely used corpus-based dictionaries are the *Cambridge Dictionary of American English*, *Longman's Dictionary of Contemporary English*, and the *Oxford American Dictionary for Learners of English*. Learner's dictionaries are designed with the purpose of clearly explaining words and teaching word use to learners of English; they have clear definitions and example sentences that draw on a limited number of words. Unlike dictionaries written for native speakers of English, bilingual dictionaries, and most electronic dictionaries, learner's dictionaries include information about all aspects of word knowledge: collocation, grammatical forms, register, word parts, and more. For example, compare the entries for the noun form of *interior* in Table 1.

Table 1 Comparison of Dictionary Entries for the Noun *Interior*

Random House Webster's College Dictionary (2001)	Oxford Basic American Dictionary for Learners of English (2011)	Dictionary .com (on cell phone)
interior – n the internal or inner part; space or regions within; inside.	interior – noun [count, usually singular] the inside part: <i>We painted the interior of the house white.</i>	In-te-ri-or [in-teer-ee-er] inside

Selecting the words to be taught

Even the best teachers in the most ideal settings can never teach all of the words that learners need. Choices need to be made. When deciding which words to address, teachers will find it useful to distinguish between increasing vocabulary (introducing

new words) and establishing vocabulary (building on and strengthening partial word knowledge). Both are important. I. S. P. Nation (1990) argues that “old material in any lesson is the most important” (p. 7), in part because of the incremental nature of word learning. It is wise to build on initial investments in word learning by giving known words more attention and giving learners a chance to focus on new aspects of a word in contextualized settings. Therefore, teachers will want to select words that their students have seen before but may not be able to use in their own production. They will also want to select new words that students will need. These choices should be guided by students' needs, including their level of learning and their academic and professional goals. These choices can be informed by: (1) the word's frequency; (2) the word's salience in the course content; and (3) corpus use.

Word frequency. The most important words in any language are those that are most frequent. The GSL, for example, is a high-frequency word list made up of the 2,000 word families that occur most frequently in a variety of domains (conversation, newspapers, novels, news programs, etc.); these high-frequency words make up at least 80% of written texts and 90% of conversation (I. S. P. Nation, 2008). Some frequency lists are designed for specific groups of learners. For example, the Academic Word List (AWL)² contains approximately 570 word families that occur most frequently in academic materials across four academic domains (business, the humanities, law, and the physical and life sciences). It is based on a corpus of 3.5 million words and is designed to guide word selection for general academic preparation in all fields. The criteria for inclusion on this list were that the words not appear on the GSL and that they occur frequently and uniformly across the four domains. The AWL is used widely in dictionaries and course materials (see Coxhead, 2000). Other frequency lists identify technical words (words frequently used in specific fields such as science, medicine, or math).³

Salience in course content. A word is salient when it is of central importance in a given context. Salience leads to retention of the word both because the learner needs the word to comprehend the meaning of the content and because its central role leads to natural repetitions of the word.

Therefore, when selecting target words from a reading passage (see example in Figure 1), select those that have a central role in the content of the passage. This will allow the learners to use the target words as they read the text, discuss it, complete activities, and write about the text.

Coober Pedy is a small town in Southern Australia which contains the world's richest sources of opal, a valuable **gem**. In order to **survive** the town's **harsh** heat, dust storms and flies, the **miners** live underground. Three-bedroom homes, hotels, restaurants and churches are all dug into the hills, where the **temperature** is cool and life is comfortable. This **mining** town is now often visited by **hearty** tourists who are interested in this unique story of **survival**.

Figure 1. Example of salient vocabulary in a reading passage.

Corpus use. Today, we not only have easy access to a variety of frequency lists, but we also have access to extensive authentic written and spoken English through corpus-based research. *Corpora* (the plural form of *corpus*) are "large, principled collections of naturally occurring texts (written or spoken) stored electronically" (Reppen, 2010, p. 2). In vocabulary studies, corpora are used to generate word lists and to help identify word frequency in various domains. In addition, corpus-based investigations can be used by teachers to generate lists of frequent words that students will encounter in specific articles or genres.

Word counts, word lists, and corpus-informed materials are useful as guides, but their use should be tempered by common sense. For example, an English as a second language course for immigrant housewives should at some point deal with vocabulary related to visiting a doctor, whether or not the words appear on a frequency list, in the materials, or in a given corpus. Likewise, an orientation course for international students should include words referring to the campus and campus life, regardless of their inclusion on the academic lists in their fields of study. Before the mid-1980s, there was limited research related to L2 vocabulary learning. Today there is more research available than most of us can manage, but much of it is not reflected in language classrooms. For example, while research demonstrates the complex nature of word knowledge and the incremental process of word learning, teachers too often present words with definitions

only and oversimplify the word-learning process. In a rich discussion about the complexity of the mental lexicon and of word learning, Singleton (1999) describes the current state of vocabulary teaching as "address[ing] only the tip of the lexical iceberg" (p. 272). Effective vocabulary teaching addresses the totality of the word-learning process. In the next section, I present activities that are principled, interactive, and meaningful to help teachers facilitate the word-learning process.

CLASSROOM APPLICATIONS

Word-learning activities

Effective activities address the incremental nature of word learning in a variety of ways. They prioritize repetition, engagement, and interaction, and they provide opportunities to focus both on form and meaning. Whenever possible, they provide chances to be content-rich and to elicit authentic language. For our purposes here, activities are divided into three levels:

1. *Word level.* Words are practiced in isolation, focusing on features such as meaning, derivative use, spelling, pronunciation, some grammatical features, associations, and register.
2. *Sentence level.* Words are practiced as they occur in sentences, using collocations and grammatical forms.
3. *Discourse or fluency level.* Words are practiced in paragraphs or longer content-rich segments, often focusing on fluency along with accuracy.

Word-level activities.

Ranking. Select five to eight target words that are familiar to students but that they have not mastered. Have students rank them according to one of the following, and then compare their answers with a partner.

- Rank words from easy to difficult in spelling, pronunciation, or grammatical form. (How easy is it to put into a sentence?)
- Rank words from frequent to infrequent. (How often do people use this word?)
- Rank words according to importance for work, study, personal relationships, travel, or some other area.

Rank related words (e.g., a list of appliances, electronic devices, or tools) according to affordability, practicality, dependability, entertainment value, or importance to people in general.

Practice with word parts: A picture tells a story. Write a four-column chart on the board, and label the columns with the parts of speech, as in Table 2. Select a picture (from a book, a magazine, or an Internet source such as Google Images) related to an interesting topic. Select three to five words that could be used to describe or ask questions about the picture. Ask students to place each word in the appropriate column of the chart according to its part of speech; then fill in the remaining cells with word forms derived from the original words. Mark an X in each cell that has no word form that fits. Table 2 presents a sample chart related to the topic of symbolic clothing. In this example, the teacher could use the picture of a bride and groom, a judge in a robe, a student dressed for graduation, or military personnel in uniform.

Table 2. Sample Word Chart for the Activity: A Picture Tells a Story

Noun	Verb	Adjective	Adverb
symbol symbolism	symbolize	symbolic	symbolically
convention	X	conventional	conventionally
importance	X	important	importantly
significance	signify	significant	significantly

How strong are these words? On the board, list several adjective pairs with opposite meanings, chosen according to the students' level (e.g., inept/expert; dumb/brilliant; early/late; apathetic/energetic; compassionate/unfeeling).

For each word pair, draw a straight line on the board to represent a continuum of word strength, placing one word (e.g., *happy*) at the left of the continuum and its antonym (e.g., *mad*) at the right. Leave space for additional words in between or at the ends of the continuum.

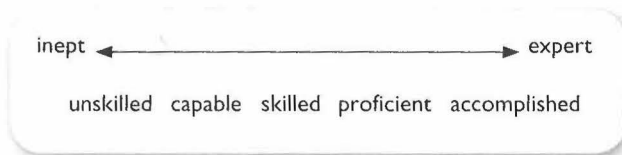


Figure 2. Sample word-strength continuum.

- Have students work in pairs, first copying the continuum onto their own paper. Have them then add three to four words to each continuum, positioning the words according to their relative strengths (e.g., *elated*, *furiously*, *angry*, *thrilled*, *annoyed*). Encourage students to use a thesaurus and to check meanings in a dictionary as needed.
- Have students write the continua on the board. Discuss the answers, noting that they may vary. For example, in Figure 2, there is only a slight difference between *proficient* and *accomplished*.

Phrasal verb practice. Draw a chart on the board similar to the one in Figure 3. Have students copy the chart onto a sheet of paper. Have them work in pairs to complete each phrasal verb with at least one item. For example, for the combination *take* and *on*, they could fill in (*take on*) *a challenge*. Encourage students to list as many responses as possible. In a class discussion, have students share their results, focusing on the many variations that are possible and how they are used.

	on	in	off	up	down
turn					
bring					
take	a challenge				

Figure 3. Sample phrasal verb chart.

Sentence-level activities.

Strip stories. Choose a short story with transparent sequencing and divide it into sentences. Group students, giving each student a different sentence to memorize. Have each student restate the sentence for the other students in the group, who then decide the order that the sentences should occur in for the story. No writing is allowed. When the ordering is finished, have the group retell the story to the entire class.

A picture tells a story. Refer to the completed four-column chart in Table 2 and the picture used in the word-level activity, "A picture tells a story." Have the students work in pairs, using the target words in questions about or descriptions of the picture.

Discourse-level activities.

How strong are these words? Have students complete the word-level activity "How strong are these words?" that accompanies Figure 2, using words that are suitable for the following scenario. (The teacher explains this scenario to students.)

- Select a university that you would like to attend. Pretend that you have applied to this university and that you have asked a teacher to write a letter of reference for you.
- Now, imagine you are your teacher or an employer: Write a brief letter recommending you for admission to the university. Use as many of the words from the word-strength continuum as possible. Or write a letter that you hope your teacher or employer would *not* write on your behalf. That is, using the idea of word strength, write a letter that describes you in a negative way. For example, "He is quite *inept* at using the computer and is often *late* with his work. He tends to be *apathetic* when given a new task to complete."

Story re-working. Select a short, interesting story or paragraph that is at a suitable level for the students, such as the one in Figure 4. (Possible sources include the course textbook, local or current news sources, or Internet searches on topics such as inventions, famous people, or little-known facts.) Identify three to four appropriate target words. (They should be salient to the story and useful for the students.) Write the words on the board, discuss their meanings, and answer any questions about them. Use any of the following activities with the text. (In the sample paragraph in Figure 4, the target words are in **boldface**.)

- **Hear and retell:** Have half of the class (Group 1) leave the room. Read the sample text to the other half of the class (Group 2) and then encourage students to ask questions to clarify the word use. Have Group 1 return, and pair students who heard the story with those who did not. Have students in Group 2 retell the story to their partner using the

Do you ever worry about having bad breath? Some bad breath is related to eating certain foods. In order to **reduce** bad breath usually **associated** with eating garlic or onions, you should **avoid** eating them at the same time that you eat fatty foods. If you do, the fat will **capture** their smell and **release** it each time you **exhale**.

Figure 4. Sample high-interest text.

target words and accurately transmitting the meaning. Compare the stories in a class discussion.

- **Read and retell:** Similar to the hear and retell exercise, give half the class (Group 1) the sample text to read. Have Group 1 read the text and put it away. Pair students in Group 1 with students who have not read the text (Group 2). Have the students in Group 1 retell the text to their partner. (It would be best to have two sample texts, one for Group 1 and one for Group 2. Have each student in the pair retell his or her text.)
- **Synonym search:** Have pairs of students read the sample text and replace as many words as possible with synonyms. The resulting meaning should be similar to the original text. Compare the results in a class discussion.
- **Register re-word:** As in the synonym search exercise, have pairs work together to replace words in the text with synonyms, but this time with the intent of changing the register of the text. For example, in the fairly formal sample text, have students change as many words as possible to informal words, without changing the meaning of the text.

Dictation. Read the sample text slowly to the class, allowing time for students to write; allow as much repetition as needed for accuracy. Then have partners compare their papers, adjusting spelling and language use as needed. Finally, show a copy of the original text to the students. Discuss with the class which features of the text caused the most challenges.

Games. Vocabulary games allow students to isolate and practice particular features of word knowledge such as spelling, word parts, meaning, or grammatical features. Words for the following

games can be selected from a recently studied unit or from a given category such as nouns, verbs, food, or math words.

■ *Speller line-up:* Give the first student a word to spell. If the student spells it correctly, the next student says a word beginning with the last letter of the word given. Another student then spells that word. If he or she spells it correctly, a new student then nominates a new word beginning with the last letter of the word just given. If a word is misspelled, the student involved is eliminated from the game. The game continues round-robin style until the last student remaining wins the game. Assuming there is interest on the part of the students, a new round of the game can then begin.

■ *Hangman:* Divide the class into two teams. Choose a word, and on the blackboard, draw spaces for the number of letters in a word. Have players from each team take turns guessing the letters. When a student guesses a letter that is in the word, write the letter in the correct space. The team's turn continues until one of the members makes an incorrect guess. When a guess is incorrect, start drawing a stick figure of the man being hanged, one body part per incorrect guess, drawing first the head, then the body, an arm, and so on. The team that guesses the word first receives a point. Then start the game over.

■ *Password:* Select target words that are level-appropriate for the students and that lend themselves to multiple synonyms. (Consult a thesaurus for ideas.) Have two students stand in front of the room, facing the class. Write the word on the board or a card so that it is visible to everyone except the two "contestants." One at a time, have the rest of the students volunteer one-word clues to help the contestants guess the target word. Contestants take turns guessing the word until the word is guessed. The contestant who guesses the target word remains at the front of the class; the student who gave the final clue replaces the other contestant. Variation: Pair students into teams of two players (one A and one B). Have the A players sit side by side, facing the board, and

have the B players sit opposite their partners with their backs to the board. Write the target word on the board so the A players can see it. Taking turns, have the A players give a clue word to their partner, who gets one guess for each clue. Points are given to the team that guesses the word first.

■ *Adverbs in action:* Divide the blackboard in two. On one side, write as many verbs as the class can call out; on the other side, write adverbs. Then have one team choose a verb and adverb combination, and have the other team act it out (e.g., *laugh hilariously*). Variation: Have one team choose a verb and adverb combination and the other team write a sentence using the combination.

■ *Twenty questions:* Select nouns and verbs for this game. Have teams take turns asking *yes-no* questions such as "Is it something you can do?" and "Is it something you can eat?" The team that guesses the word first receives a point. Then start the game over.

Word-learning strategies

Since students learn only a fraction of the words they need in the language classroom and they often have only a partial knowledge of the ones they learn, it is essential that they are equipped to continue vocabulary development on their own. *Word-learning strategies* are the planned approaches that a word learner takes as an agent of his or her own word learning. They are used to discover a word's meaning (e.g., analyzing parts of speech or word parts, guessing meaning from context, using a dictionary, and asking questions about words). They are also used to establish the use of a word once it has been encountered (e.g., studying and practicing the meaning with classmates, using semantic maps, using word cards or a vocabulary notebook, using spaced repetition in word practice, and using English-language media such as songs, movies, and social media). For a discussion of the research and techniques related to word-learning strategies, see Schmitt (1997).

Research suggests that effective strategy use leads to word-learning success. This requires that learners know a variety of strategies, can select them appropriately, and are able to use them effectively

(I. S. P. Nation, 2001; Schmitt, 1997). Learners benefit when a wide variety of strategies are modeled and used as a regular part of classroom practice. The goal is for the strategies to become useful tools for subsequent independent word learning. Following are some ways to shape opportunities in class for vocabulary strategy practice.

Reflection. Perceptive word learners take the time to think about words and reflect on how they are used. They accurately assess their own understanding of a new word, think about the roles and purposes of the people who use the word, and reflect on the information they need to use the word appropriately. Reflection includes the ability to ask insightful questions that will lead to accurate word use:

- (if the word is a noun) Is it countable or uncountable?
- (if the word is a verb) Is there a particular preposition that follows it?
- Is it a formal word?
- Does it have positive or negative connotations?⁴

Memory aids: Word cards. Word cards (see sample depicted in Figure 5) provide efficient practice in terms of time and effort. They allow learners to practice linking meaning with form and to use recall as they practice. Word cards are convenient and allow learners to practice often and work at their own pace. They can be customized to include information such as the target word's

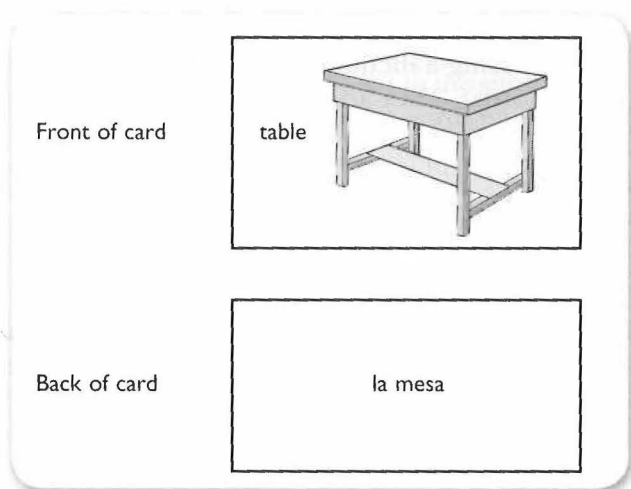


Figure 5. Sample word card.

translation, part of speech, a sample sentence, pronunciation, collocations, and a picture. I. S. P. Nation suggests that word cards are most effective when kept simple: place the target word on one side and translation on the other side of small cards, adding more information only if it helps the learner remember the word. For example, teachers of young learners often ask students to draw a picture. Word cards allow learners to learn words first receptively and then productively; after practicing the meaning, they can put words in sentences, practicing grammatical features and collocations. As with all word practice, cards are most effective when words are processed deeply and thoughtfully (for more about word-card research and techniques, see I. S. P. Nation, 2008).

Vocabulary notebooks. Vocabulary notebooks are used to promote learner independence. Teachers guide learners in what information should be recorded, but learners select the words and record information they have gathered on their own. Notebook entries should contain the target word and about four other categories, such as a sample sentence (“Write the sentence in which it appeared”), dictionary definition, translation, part of speech, pronunciation, word family members, collocations, other occurrences (“If you have seen or heard the word somewhere else, describe where and show how it was used”), or an original sentence (“Use the word in your own sentence”).

Research suggests that, when left on their own, learners do not get as much from this exercise as they might. For example, they tend to draw most of their target words from textbooks or test study guides (such as for the Test of English as a Foreign Language [TOEFL]) rather than the many other sources that might be valuable (e.g., newspapers, campus publications, websites, and ads). Learners also have difficulty distinguishing high-frequency words from others and tend to view all words as having equal importance. Teachers can help by providing guidelines on how to select words from relevant sources. They can encourage students to repeat the words in their own sentences and to focus on a variety of features. The notebooks can be collected every few weeks so teachers can follow students' progress and better understand how perceptive students are about noticing what is important.

Teachers do not need to comment on every entry; providing a few suggestions or guiding questions should be enough (e.g., "This is a very useful word. Listen for it in the news or when people are talking about politics" or "Notice the collocations here").

Dictionary use. Dictionary use is not easy; it requires the ability to alphabetize words, incorporate the use of antonyms and synonyms, break a concept down into parts according to its appearance or function, and differentiate similar words. Learners need guidance and practice in using this analytic tool that organizes language. Hands-on dictionary practice is very useful to students, such as the following.

Is that a real word? Pairs of students work together to review a list of words prepared by the teacher, such as the one in Figure 6. (The teacher should be sure that at least some of the words are known to the students.)

Learner's dictionary practice. All students will need a dictionary for this activity. Those who select learner's dictionaries will have an advantage; teachers might use this activity to demonstrate that other dictionaries have less useful information than learner's dictionaries. The teacher should review the aspects of word knowledge and the various symbols used for countable and uncountable nouns, register, and so on. Pairs of students should work together to check how the dictionary might have helped correct the underlined errors in Teo's letter (or another passage).

- I don't know how to give vent to my feelings.
- You help me with the difficultness of English.
- I know other guys and I suggest them to take your class.
- I . . . am happy to be getting your advices.
- Your help is beyond valuability.

Put a check mark (✓) beside the words below that are real. Use the dictionary as needed to confirm your guesses. Be prepared to discuss your findings.

procrastinate
retrivane
eclectic

cognitive
frugal
misdrew

jastle
impunity
artivious

cumbersome
simplistic
forensics

Figure 6. Sample dictionary use exercise: Is that a real word?

Navigating the dictionary: Where is the letter? Students will need a paper dictionary for this activity.⁵ Point out that some letters of the alphabet have much larger sections with more words in them than others. Dictate some letters of the alphabet (e.g., *B, E, M, S, Y*), and ask the students to predict which ones might begin the most words in English. Compare the number of pages for the letter *S* with the number of pages for *J* or *K*.

Beyond the planned lesson

No matter how much planning a teacher does, there are always surprises. This is certainly true when one is dealing with the unwieldy nature of words. Effective teachers understand the incremental and often illogical aspects of word knowledge and are willing to analyze their own unconscious knowledge about words as questions and needs arrive. This is a fascinating process and an ongoing endeavor. The following skills will improve with experience and insightful awareness about the nature of word knowledge.

Defining words. A skilled vocabulary teacher can briefly and accurately illuminate the meaning of a new word. First, the teacher should use everyday language and begin the definition by focusing on the basic meaning before moving on to the details. Creating a sample sentence will help the teacher formulate what is important about the word, and the sample sentence will often be clearer to the student because it is less abstract than a definition. Other ways to clarify definitions include:

- Examples (e.g., "Examples of Romance languages are Spanish and French.")
- Negative examples (e.g., "*To slurp* is like *to drink*, but it is noisier, sometimes with a loud sucking sound.")

- Synonyms (e.g., “A synonym for *exhausted* is *very tired*.”)
- Antonyms (e.g., “An antonym for *novice* is *expert*.”)
- Situational contexts (e.g., “*Sympathy* is what you feel when your friend’s father or mother dies or when something else terrible happens to someone.”)
- Realia (e.g., food cartons, pictures, toys, and utensils)
- Gesture, pantomime, or demonstration (e.g., When explaining the word *pulse*, the teacher places a hand on his or her own neck and/or wrist and pretends to count.)

In addition, whenever a student asks the meaning of a word, the teacher should find out the context in which the student found the word. The teacher should allow this context to be the guide so that not all possible meanings have to be addressed. For example, if a student asks the meaning of the word *run*, the teacher has many choices of meanings and a summary of them would be very confusing. By asking, “Where did you see the word?” and learning that the student heard the word in reference to a baseball game (as opposed to the act of moving very quickly), the teacher’s task of explaining becomes simpler and clearer.

Answering questions about words. Once the definition is clear, the teacher should think beyond the meaning. In what ways could this word cause the students trouble? Is the pronunciation challenging? Is it a transitive verb, therefore requiring an object? For example, the verb *suggest* is often followed by *that*. The teacher should try to anticipate two or three challenging items but select the information to be imparted carefully. He or she should not tell the students everything they need at once; instead, the teacher should learn to understand what is most challenging for word learners. Experience will make these decisions easier. The teacher should not be surprised if students’ questions are unexpected. As already mentioned, it is very difficult for a native speaker or a proficient speaker of English to access information that is intuitive or unconscious. The more the teacher can develop his or her own awareness of how words are used, the more the teacher will be able to assist the L2 learners.

FUTURE TRENDS

While vocabulary research once provided little information about how words were learned, much has changed. Considerable research today illuminates the task of word learning and the role of students as agents of their own word learning. Individual learner variables and learner needs are better understood. As research and technology continue to advance, we can expect more access to information about brain function in word learning. We can expect that corpus-based research will continue to help us better understand the nature of authentic language use and will lead to advances in the authentic representation of language in research and instructional materials. Ease of online access should make increasingly targeted information more readily available to classroom teachers. It is hoped that these developments will allow teachers and learners more access to focused and relevant research and information about language use and that the result will be an increase in principled vocabulary instruction in second language classrooms.

CONCLUSION

Just as word learning is daunting for the student, vocabulary teaching may appear intimidating to the instructor. There are so many words! There is so much to know about each word! And there is so little time! Teachers should remind themselves that no single teacher is responsible for covering every word that a student needs or everything a student needs to know about a word. Students come to class with partial word knowledge that they have picked up on their own or from other teachers. Teachers should be aware of what it means to know a word, and help their students move from this partial knowledge to effective word use. Teachers should use principled instruction as they show learners how to select the new words they invest in, what they need to know about the words, and how to use word learning strategies. And teachers should use every opportunity to demonstrate the importance of repeated exposure to words and of the effective use of word-learning strategies. With a balance of respect for and awareness of the word-learning task, teachers can contribute greatly to the language learning of their students.

SUMMARY

- To know a word means to know a great deal about it.
- Some aspects of word learning are learned through direct instruction, while others are learned incidentally.
- The process of word learning is incremental and includes the development of vocabulary depth, vocabulary breadth, receptive vocabulary, and productive vocabulary.
- Teachers should not expect to teach all the words that learners need, but they can equip learners to understand the word-learning process and to effectively use word-learning strategies as independent word learners.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. As a learner of a second or foreign language, what strategies did you use to learn vocabulary? Which were more successful? Less successful?
2. Some language learners overuse or misuse the dictionary, leading to errors like the use of *extolment* and *sagely* in the letter at the beginning of the chapter. What other types of errors might you expect from the overuse or misuse of a dictionary or a thesaurus?
3. Review the history of second language vocabulary teaching at the beginning of this chapter. Which of the insights from the past do you consider most valuable to us today?
4. In your opinion, what are the primary benefits of using communicative activities to teach vocabulary? Be specific, referring to the four skills of reading, writing, speaking, and listening.
5. As a teacher, are you more concerned about the quality of word learning or the quantity? How will you divide your teaching time between teaching words and teaching word-learning strategies?

SUGGESTED ACTIVITIES

1. Review the letter at the beginning of the chapter. Which of the lexical errors would you

correct for this intermediate student? Which would you overlook? Based on this letter, which topic might you prioritize in a future lesson: Collocation? Meaning? Word parts or derivatives? Grammatical forms? Other?

2. Review the meanings of the following terms used in the chapter:

receptive word knowledge
productive word knowledge
vocabulary depth
vocabulary breadth
word families
etymology
explicit instruction
incidental learning
increasing vocabulary
establishing vocabulary
derivatives
inflections
register

Think about the needs of the word learners in each of the following classroom populations. Select three of the above items that you would prioritize in your instruction for each group.

- a. primary school children in Korea
 - b. older adult immigrant Spanish speakers in California, preparing for citizenship
 - c. learners preparing for the TOEFL and university entrance
 - d. advanced writing students, preparing for a Business English class
 - e. other? (Add a setting you are familiar with.)
3. Select a variety of dictionaries, including those that are designed for native speakers of English, designed for learners of English, corpus-based, non-corpus-based, more than 10 years old, and bilingual dictionaries. Look up the following words in each dictionary (or use a list of your choice): *God*, *interfere*, *hunger*, *infer*, *access*, *contribute*. Compare the dictionary entries for each word in terms of:
 - a. amount of information about each word
 - b. clarity and accuracy of definitions
 - c. availability and value of sample sentences
 - d. availability, accuracy, and usefulness of other information, such as parts of speech, collocations, word parts, register, and

near-synonyms (Note that some of this information changes over time, so the information may vary.)

- e. help with pronunciation
- f. other?

Be prepared to discuss your findings.

FURTHER READING

Leany, C. (2007). *Dictionary activities*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

The aim of this book is to equip teachers to help students know how to select dictionaries and how to make the most of them. It covers relevant topics such as dictionary skill-building, confidence-building, and language-building activities (including vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation, and reading).

Nation, I. S. P. (2001). *Learning vocabulary in another language*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

This is a practical guide to vocabulary instruction that is grounded in a comprehensive and clearly

explained collection of research. It is driven by the idea that vocabulary research should be systematically integrated into language instruction.

Zimmerman, C. B. (2009). *Word knowledge: A vocabulary teacher's handbook*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Word Knowledge is written as a handbook for teachers, breaking down the aspects of word knowledge (meaning, collocation, grammatical features, etc.) and showing teachers how to guide students in their mastery of each aspect. It includes examples and activities designed to clarify word teaching and learning.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ For more information on the reform movement, see Howatt (2004).
- ² Coxhead's *Academic Word List* can be accessed at <http://www.victoria.ac.nz/tals/resources/academicwordlist/default.aspx>
- ³ See Cobb's *The Compleat Lexical Tutor* at <http://www.lextutor.ca/> for access to the AWL and the GSL. This site provides useful guidance to teachers in generating their own word lists.
- ⁴ See Zimmerman (2009, p. 117) for more about reflection and for more examples of reflection questions.
- ⁵ This activity is adapted from Leany (2007, pp. 11–12).

UNIT II

Language Skills

Assessing the Language Skills