

## 6. Words: what are they, which to teach and how to teach them?

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### **Abstract**

The aim of this paper is to consider the problems that relate specifically to the teaching of vocabulary as opposed to grammar. It deals with the relative lack of system in vocabulary, the size of the English lexicon and the problems involved in selecting what lexis we should teach our learners. It also discusses the wide-ranging aspects of knowledge about a lexical item that are needed by the learner for that word to be truly known. Having considered the challenges raised for the vocabulary teacher and learner, the paper then looks at current second language acquisition research insofar as it affects vocabulary learning. The key issues discussed here are recycling, grouping, personalisation and learner training. Finally the paper discusses some ways of using the research to inform our vocabulary teaching by suggesting some simple ideas for recycling vocabulary and for developing learner training skills.

**T**his paper looks first at what specific problems there are in teaching and learning vocabulary. It then goes on to summarise what current research into second language acquisition has to tell us about effective vocabulary learning. It concludes by considering the implications of this for vocabulary teaching.

### **The main problems in learning vocabulary**

There are a number of particular challenges facing the vocabulary teacher and most of these reflect the fact that vocabulary does not present the finite and relatively neat system that can be found in grammar. There is a core of grammatical information which all learners need to have a grasp of, whether they are learning English for business, academic or hobby purposes. Learning these basics of grammar provides learners with a set of short cuts for understanding and using English in their own particular context. Vocabulary also has a small basic core but, beyond that, post-elementary learners may have widely differing needs in accordance with their own individual learning purposes. Moreover, vocabulary lessons provide few short cuts. The grammar / vocabulary dichotomy is thus in some ways analogous to the distinction between learning about the theory of

music and playing music. Learning about music theory – about such things as time, rhythm and how to read music – is a necessary part of all music studies regardless of the learner's instrument or the specific piece to be played. Yet theory on its own is only of academic use. Like grammar, it needs to be given substance by the vocabulary of a particular piece of music, of which there is an infinite variety, and each of which has to be individually learnt by the musician.

### *The size of the lexicon*

Ask most students what the main problem in learning English vocabulary is and they will probably answer that there are just too many words. English vocabulary is indeed extremely rich. Not content with drawing on the wealth of both its Anglo-Saxon and its Norman roots, English has gone on happily to welcome words from all the many different cultures with which its scholars and travellers have come into contact.

Exactly how many words are there in English? This is a difficult question to answer not least because it is surprisingly difficult to define what a word is. How many words are *go*, *goes*, *going*, *gone* and *went*, for example? What about *a go* and *to go*? What about *to go off*? Should it be disregarded as a mere sum of *go* and *off* or is it a new word in its own right? Is it, in fact, several words in its own right as *alarm clocks go off* in a very different way from *food* or *an event* or *a train*. What about compounds like *go-kart*, *go-ahead*, *go-between*? Then how about proper nouns – are *marmite* and *sellotape* words? And abbreviations? Is *AA* a word? Or indeed is it two words as the associations of *AA* are rather different for drivers and for heavy drinkers. Do slang words count? And archaic words? Or the many foreign words and expressions used in English? Or words that are only known by scientists in one narrow field? Or words that are only familiar to one regional variety of English? Dictionaries often have to exclude words from some or all of these categories and yet many would argue that they also provide not insignificant contributions to the word stock of English.

Although scholars, thanks to the different ways in which the concept of *word* can be defined or restricted, come to widely varying totals for the size of the English lexicon, the fact remains that even a conservative estimate gives English more words than there are in any other language in the world. Of course, not even the best-educated, most widely read native speaker of English knows, let alone uses,

all these words and it is generally accepted that foreign learners of English need to know an even smaller proportion of the total in order to be able to function adequately in the language. Nation and Waring (1997: 10), for example, claim that there are about 54,000 word families in English, that a typical educated native speaker knows about 20,000 of these and that a foreign learner needs to know about 5,000 of these. Note that Nation and Waring exclude proper names, compounds, abbreviations and foreign words and that a word family consists of a base word, its inflected forms and a small number of reasonably regular derived forms.

### Selecting what to teach

If our learners need only a small proportion of English words, how do we select what to teach them? It might seem that the answer to this is now simple. Data from language corpora allow us easily to produce reliable frequency lists. Surely we simply teach words more or less in their order of frequency?

Inevitably, it is not as straightforward as this. Firstly, there are a number of words with an extremely high frequency in English. Yet, these are grammar words like *the, in, is, it, not* and so on. Such words do not in themselves carry much content and are more the focus of a grammar than a vocabulary lesson. The next group of frequent words brings us back to *go* and other verbs which can be termed *delexical*. The verb *go* in the *Cambridge International Dictionary of English* is listed as having 24 distinct meanings and that is before any phrasal verbs are considered. Which of these 24 meanings do we teach to our elementary learners? When do we introduce the other meanings?

Working strictly by frequency lists would also lead us to do things that most teachers would consider ridiculous; it would require us, for example, to teach *Friday* long before we teach *Tuesday* and *salt* long before *pepper* and it would encourage us to leave words like *blackboard* and *homework* until relatively late in our students' language learning careers.

It soon becomes clear that, while frequency is one useful factor for us to take into account when organising a lexical syllabus for our learners, there are other criteria (White: 1988, 48-50) which must also play their part. These criteria include language-focused factors like *range* and *coverage*; in other words, how

widely a word is used in terms of context and register. Applying principles of range and coverage means that we teach, for example, *move* before *accelerate* or *stumble*, and *money* before *dosh* or *currency*.

Other factors in selection for a lexical syllabus focus more on pedagogic aspects of words, such things as their *learnability* and *teachability*. Clearly some words are much more easily taught and learnt than others. Concrete nouns are usually more straightforward to teach and learn than abstract nouns or adverbs. Words similar to those in the learner's L1 are usually easily mastered. At elementary levels, in particular, the teachability and learnability of words are likely to be significant factors in our choice of what words to teach.

Finally, there are learner-centred factors to be taken into account. It is sensible to draw on our learners' *spheres of interest* when selecting lexis for them to learn; thus, young schoolchildren may be taught words for pets or for playground games that an adult learner might not meet until much later in their course, or might indeed never encounter at all. *Opportunism* is another factor to be taken into account here. This refers to things like teaching the word *lightning* as it flashes outside the classroom window or vocabulary relating to the Olympics at the time when the Games are taking place.

Balancing frequency with all these other criteria should allow us to build a lexical syllabus appropriate for the needs of a specific class.

### *What is involved in knowing a word?*

Having selected the words one wants to teach, the next challenge facing the vocabulary teacher is what to teach about those words. What do our learners need to know in order truly to know a lexical item? They clearly need to know its denotational meaning, its spelling and its pronunciation but modern studies of lexis suggest that that is not enough. Students also need to know how to manipulate words in order to be able to use them and this involves some knowledge of word grammar – how plurals, past tenses or comparatives are formed, for instance. They also need to know about the word's collocations – whether it is associated with any particular prepositions, for example, and what other words it frequently appears with both in simple collocations and in

longer lexical chunks. Then they may need to know whether there are any special connotational aspects of the word; does it have special socio-cultural associations, for example, and is it of neutral or more restricted register? In some instances it may be appropriate to draw attention to other words at the same time – to words formed from the same root, to synonyms and antonyms, to homophones and homographs. In short, there is a lot to be learnt about a word before it is known in a fully rounded way and will not only be understood by the learner but can also be used effectively in the learner's own discourse.

### **What does research tell us about vocabulary acquisition?**

There has been a great deal of research into second language acquisition. Yet, as the index to Rod Ellis's large survey volume (1994), reveals, little of this research relates to the acquisition of lexis. This section briefly summarises the main research findings in the field.

#### ***Recycling***

Firstly, it has been clearly shown that a word has to be encountered a number of times before it finds its place in the learner's long-term memory. The average number of encounters is usually put at seven. Although this may seem a depressingly large number for many teachers, it is also true that many lexical items that are lower on the learnability scale actually require more than seven meetings.

#### ***Personalisation***

A second powerful finding of SLA research is that words are more likely to be committed to long-term memory if they have, or are given, some kind of personal relevance for the learner. Harmer (1997, 38) writes: 'The important thing is for students to take the words over for themselves, to make the words their own. This is when language changes from something that is taught to something that is learned.' Sokmen (1997, 242) makes the same point and suggests how it can be applied in practice: 'Learning is aided when material is made concrete (psychologically 'real') within the conceptual range of the learners. This may mean giving personal examples, relating words to current events, providing experiences with the words or, better yet, having students create these images and relate the words to their own lives.'

### *Grouping*

There is also research evidence to show that words are more easily remembered if they are associated in groups. The nature of the grouping is unimportant; there may be an obvious logic to it or words may be grouped in some highly personal and individual way.

### *Learner training*

The final strong body of research relating to the acquisition of second language vocabulary proves that learner training helps students to learn vocabulary more effectively. Learner training is particularly significant given the fact that the lexis any individual needs to focus on will depend at least to some extent on the individual's own personal selection of items appropriate to his or her specific needs and interests. Some individual study is thus crucial and, obviously, the more informed this is, the better.

### **How can these points inform our teaching?**

The points discussed so far in this paper have a number of implications for us as language teachers.

The importance of revising vocabulary means that we need to have at our disposal a variety of activities which will allow us to recycle words in a way that will help them to transfer to our learners' long-term memories. Clearly students will become bored if words are simply presented and practised in more or less the same way as they were the first time round and so we need to have an arsenal of enjoyable exercises that can be easily adapted to match any particular lexis we are focusing on. Adding a puzzle or a competitive element to an activity will often provide it with a degree of fun that makes it more motivating for students.

The following three basic exercise types are constantly useful for recycling in an easily adaptable and enjoyable way.

#### *Which is the odd one out?*

e.g.    cat, dog, tortoise, lion  
         move, love, dove, shove  
         hearts, diamonds, rubies, spades

...

***Who can think of most?***

- e.g. words associated with birthdays  
 collocates for the verb, do  
 nouns with irregular plurals  
 ...

***Categories***

- e.g. *Who can be the first to write down a word beginning with S  
 in each of these categories?*  
 adjective describing a film  
 word with pleasant associations for you  
 slang word  
 ...

As the examples show, these three exercise types can be very easily adapted to focus on all sorts of aspects of word knowledge, over and above simple denotational meaning and so they have an added potential for learner training. These exercises also exploit the powers of personalising and of grouping vocabulary items with the aim of increasing the pedagogic effect of the activities.

As we have seen, there is a great deal of scope for individual selection of the language to be focused on when working with vocabulary. This highlights the need to ensure our students can work effectively on the words that are important to them. Much of this will have to be done outside the classroom and so students must be encouraged to both read and listen to English in their own time and also given the skills to do this in an efficient way.

Learner training skills that are relevant here include such things as learning how to effectively:

- use both bilingual and monolingual learner's dictionaries
- record vocabulary
- distinguish between active and passive vocabulary
- be aware of the different elements of vocabulary knowledge discussed earlier
- work out meaning from context
- review vocabulary studied
- practise using new lexis
- learn from own errors

As just one of the tools we give our learners to help them work with vocabulary on their own, a set of generic exercises – exercises that will work with any text – can be very useful. These exercises should pay attention to all the aspects of word knowledge we discussed earlier.

The suggestion is that students are given a sheet of exercises along the lines of those below. They are encouraged to use some rather than all of them whenever they wish to work outside school on the vocabulary of a text relating to their own specific interests. Point out that focusing their work by using these exercises will help their independent study to be more directed and therefore hopefully more fruitful.

***Denotation***

Choose three words from the text that you did not know before and write them down in the most appropriate way in your vocabulary notebook.

Do you think you need to have these words in your active or your passive vocabulary?

***Pronunciation***

Find three words in the text which have silent letters.

Find words in the text with these pronunciation patterns: - oO, Oo, oOo, Ooo oOoo, ooOo.

***Collocation***

Find a verb, an adjective and a noun that you would like to learn from the text.

What do each of these three words collocate with in the text? Use a good learner's dictionary to find out and write down what other collocates these words have.

***Word formation***

What examples of words using prefixes and suffixes can you find in the text?

Do these prefixes and suffixes help you to work out the meaning of any of the words whose meanings you are not sure about?

***Connotation***

What can you tell about the attitude of the originator of this text? Which words and expressions in the text help to convey the writer or speaker's attitude?

...

## Conclusion

It would not be possible to provide definitive solutions to the many challenges which we are faced with as vocabulary teachers. This paper has simply tried to raise some of the main issues involved. It has looked to research to consider how that can inform our work and has suggested some ways in which research findings may be applied to those challenges. The theme that underpins the ideas suggested in this final section is that of active learner involvement not only through the type of vocabulary learning activities used but also in the selection of lexis to be focused on.

## Biodata

**Felicity O'Dell** is a freelance writer, examiner and teacher trainer. After studying Russian and doing a doctorate on children's literature in the USSR, she worked for many years at a language school in Cambridge where she had special responsibility for the multimedia learning centre. She has an MA TESOL from the Institute of Education in London, which she studied for online. She has written over twenty books, mainly for Cambridge University Press, including *English Panorama*, a general English course for advanced learners, and (with Mike McCarthy) *English Vocabulary in Use: Upper Intermediate* and *English Vocabulary in Use: Elementary*.

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