

Teaching and Learning Vocabulary in Another Language

Review by Neil McBeath

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Coombe; Dwight Lloyd and David Palfreyman (eds) 2006, *Teaching and Learning Vocabulary in Another Language*. Peter Davidson; Christine Dubai, TESOL Arabia, ISBN 9948-8566-6-X

This book is an extremely important and extraordinarily comprehensive collection of 27 papers, specially commissioned by TESOL Arabia for their occasional publications series. The papers are general in application, and while there are contributions from Oman, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates, there are also papers from Canada, Japan, New Zealand, Poland, Turkey, the United Kingdom, and the United States.

The papers are organized under four broad headings—Implications of Vocabulary Research on Teaching (10 papers); Strategies for Teaching and Learning Vocabulary (7 papers); Integrating Vocabulary into the Curriculum (5 papers); and Assessing and Measuring Vocabulary (5 papers).

Outstanding contributions in the first section come from Michael McCarthy and Ronald Carter, both of whom investigate the problems specific to the area of advanced level vocabulary. McCarthy's "What Is Advanced Level Vocabulary?" (pp. 21-34) indicates that the advanced learner comes to the task with a receptive knowledge of some 4000-5000 words. To push comprehension above 90% on typical texts, that receptive vocabulary must be doubled. The only way that this can be accomplished is by using corpus-based research with strategic learning. Students must be introduced to collocations, idioms, metaphors and paraphrase.

Carter's "What is advanced level vocabulary? The case of chunks" (pp. 35-48) extends his colleague's work by emphasizing the importance of word clusters and formulaic language. He points out that these phrases are fixed—"People go (but not turn*) mad, insane, bald, blind" (p. 36)—and these fixed expressions are far more important than the familiar, yet very low frequency, idioms—raining cats and dogs—that feature in some textbooks.

Carter distinguishes carefully between receptive and productive knowledge but concludes that chunks of language perform core communicative functions even in

everyday discourse, and that mastery of these collocations may be of more benefit than the mastery of single words.

Other interesting papers in this section are Geoff Hall's (pp. 79-87) examination of poetic language, and Mark Maby's (pp. 134-147) investigation of how Chinese, French, and Japanese students' L1 influenced their processing of polysemous senses of the English word *over*. Maby, however, admits that his work is purely theoretical and that it "does not attempt to draw direct implications for the classroom" (p. 145).

By contrast, all seven papers in the second section are directly classroom oriented, and these investigate, in turn, inferring word meanings from context, prefixes and suffixes, the use of word classes in guessing strategies, graded readers, vocabulary notebooks, the use of post-reading tasks, and "some basic principles that should help ensure a smooth transition for any teachers making a shift from a grammar-dominated way of teaching to a more lexically-based approach" (p. 216).

In this section, teachers must follow their own interests, but it is interesting how closely Robert Ledbury's "What learners need to know about prefixes and suffixes" (pp. 163-172) seems to mirror current thinking among materials writers. Harrison (2006), Phillips (2006) and Philpot (2006) all include work on prefixes while Soars and Soars (2006) devote space to compound nouns based on the combination of prepositions and verbs, for example, *bypass* and *update*.

Section three moves from the classroom into the broader curriculum with Jan Cambrensis and Maxine Gillway (pp. 237-247) and Caleb Pritchard (pp. 275-282) showing how technology can be exploited to assist the learning process. From Japan, Pritchard explains how even a tool as crude as the Google search engine can be used to determine the frequency of lexical phrases while Cambrensis and Gillway explain the work of the Concordance Committee at the United Arab Emirates University, effectively offering a case study on the successful application of corpus linguistics.

In the same way, Adam Simpson (pp. 222-236) explains how a vocabulary syllabus was developed at Sabanci University in Turkey while Andrew O'Sullivan (pp. 248-259) demonstrates how the integration of vocabulary work with an existing syllabus has led students from the UAE Colleges of Higher Technology to extend their vocabulary and to use IT research tools. O'Sullivan's paper therefore validates Pritchard's research.

Turning to assessment, Christine Coombe's "Assessing vocabulary development in the language classroom" (pp. 285-297) offers a master-class in how-to-do. This is a paper that should be read by anyone concerned with the assessment of lexical knowledge. It answers basic questions like "How should I test vocabulary" (p. 286) and "How many items should I include?" (p. 287) before referring the reader to helpful tools and resources

and giving examples of multiple choice questions, matching formats, sentence completion, and gap-fill items.

Anne Marie Papadakis and Raja Mallek Bahoul (pp. 311-320), however, offer evidence from the University of Sharjah suggesting that many learners do not incorporate “learnt” vocabulary in their writing, raising the question of the stage at which passive lexical knowledge becomes active.

In the final paper of the collection, Averil Coxhead (pp. 331-342) examines the same problem and suggests, among other things, that L2 writers must be given the opportunity to develop flexibility by using words in a variety of contexts and situations. She points out that, under pressure, many L2 writers “play safe” and activate their old vocabulary, and so learners’ concerns about risk and register should be addressed by their instructors. She suggests that “there is much to be learned from the learners” (p. 341).

There is also much to learn from this book. It is firmly rooted in theory, but offers the results of widely based empirical research to propose sensible strategies for integrating vocabulary into the curriculum, teaching vocabulary, learning vocabulary and finally for assessing whether learning has taken place.

It would be difficult to find a more comprehensive coverage of this topic.

References

- Harrison, R. (2006). *New headway academic skills: Reading, writing and study skills (Student's book 1)*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
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- Philpot, S. (2006). *New headway academic skills: Reading, writing and study skills (Student's book 2)*. Oxford: Oxford University Press
- Soars, L. & Soars, J. (2006). *New headway advanced student's book*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

About the Reviewer

Neil McBeath served as a uniformed education officer in the Royal Air Force of Oman from 1981 to 2005. Refusing to renew contract, he took a two year contract with BAE systems in Saudi Arabia. He has now returned to Oman and is teaching at the Sultan Qaboos University.