Vocabulary and the ESL/EFL Curriculum

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Introduction

Using the literature of curriculum studies and second language (L2) education, this article discusses the fundamental role of vocabulary within the L2 curriculum. In doing so, certain aspects of curriculum will first be outlined, and then the L2 curriculum will be considered in light of the field of curriculum studies. Next, I will argue the central place of English vocabulary within the English as a second and foreign language (ESL/EFL) curriculum. Finally, some of the educational implications of this reality will be noted by suggesting topics and questions that ESL/EFL educators are encouraged to reflect on and act upon in their own pedagogy and classroom research.

What is Curriculum?

In the educational literature, curriculum is viewed in both a narrow sense and a broader one, as Jackson (1992a) makes clear. Tyler (1975), for example, declares that the term is used both as "an outline of a course of study" and to refer to "everything that transpires in the planning, teaching, and learning in an educational institution." Writing in a major curriculum journal, Egan (1978) noted that curriculum specifically centers on two essential questions in educational practice: what is taught and how it is taught. Beyond this point, however, "curriculum is the study of any and all educational phenomena. It may draw on any external discipline for methodological help but does not allow the methodology to determine inquiry" (Egan, 1978, p. 71).

Curriculum handbooks like Jackson's (1992b) reveal that writers in the field of curriculum studies use both narrow and broader conceptions of curriculum in order to produce knowledge which is relevant to their respective areas of specialization. Beyond these perspectives, curriculum specialists in various disciplines have found Schwab's (1960) four curricular commonplaces particularly valuable in conceptualizing curriculum in their fields. These commonplaces are the subject, context, learning, and teaching. Whatever one's specific area, curriculum within a specialized discipline involves these essential aspects. Clandinin and Connelly (1992) have expanded our current understanding of curriculum. By declaring that they have two views of curriculum, one as "a course of study," and the other "a course of life," they have distinguished what one

usually experiences in school (the former) and what one experiences in life — both in and out of school (the latter). In this view, there is an obvious interaction between the two, with what one learns in life affecting what one experiences in school, and vice versa. Curriculum as both a course of study and a course of life leads to an understanding of a curriculum which "teachers and students live out" (Clandinin and Connelly, 1992, p. 365). This view is also important in considering the L2 curriculum.

L2 Curriculum

Turning now to the L2 curriculum, it is important to state, as Nunan (1988) does, that "until recently there has been a comparative neglect of curriculum theorizing in relation to ESL" (p. 15). He believes that this is because:

> Language learning has been seen as a linguistic, rather than an educational matter, and there has been a tendency to overlook research and development as well as planning processes related to general educational principles in favour of linguistic principles and, in recent years, second language acquisition research. (Nunan, 1988, p. 15)

Such influences from linguistics have been reflected in work on L2 curriculum (see Yalden, 1987) and trends in L2 pedagogy, as with the direct, audiolingual and communicative language teaching methods. Despite a general lack of attention to curriculum studies, some authors within L2 education have nonetheless incorporated general curriculum principles.

One such author is Stern (1983), whose work presents a general model for L2 teaching. The influence of curriculum studies is evident at each of the three levels of Stern's interactive model. Level one recognizes the disposition towards linguistics noted earlier by describing linguistics, sociolinguistics, and psycholinguistics (and related fields of anthropology, sociology, and psychology) as "foundations" along with educational theory and the history of language teaching. Level two reflects Schwab's four commonplaces in the "interlevel" by centering on educational linguistics and four essential aspects of L2 pedagogy: the target language (Schwab's subject or content), context, learning, and teaching. Level three, "practice," is devoted to methodology and organization in L2 pedagogy (Stern, 1983, pp. 45-50). In one sense, level three, also described in Stern (1992), focuses on Egan's question of <u>how</u> we teach, while levels one and two focus on <u>what</u> we teach, although there is obvious overlap.

Other writers in L2 and ESL/EFL education have also been influenced by the larger field of curriculum studies. Stating that "the current need is for language curriculum designers to look beyond linguistics to the general field of educational research and theory

for assistance," Nunan (1988, p. 20) builds on Tyler (1949) and Stenhouse's (1975) work to develop his learner-centered curriculum. Combining both the product-oriented model of and process-oriented approach to curriculum, Nunan stresses that language learning is both process- and product-oriented. Similarly, Johnson (1989a) includes both process and product in his L2 curriculum framework, which is expanded on by others in Johnson (1989b). Richards (1990) is also influenced by Stenhouse (1975), and without referring to Schwab, he emphasizes the four curricular commonplaces in his language teaching matrix.

To return to the conceptions of curriculum outlined earlier, within the L2 specialized field "curriculum" also often refers in its narrow sense to a programme of study. In its broader sense:

> . . . the curriculum of a language course becomes virtually synonymous with language pedagogy and can be defined as a comprehensive, explicit or implicit plan of language teaching which organises into a more or less coherent whole the goals, content, strategies, techniques, and materials, as well as the timing, sequential arrangements, social organisation, and evaluative procedures of a course or programme or of a set of courses or programmes. (Stern, 1992, p. 20)

While this definition echoes Tyler's broad one above, Stern (1992, p. 20) notes that in the L2 field "this comprehensive interpretation of curriculum . . . is not accepted universally."

The ambiguity of the larger field of curriculum studies is also evident within the L2 field. Some writers prefer a narrow perspective, while others such as Breen (1984) and Candlin (1984) use a broad definition. For example, they note the spontaneous nature of curriculum as it is negotiated between the teacher and learners in a given context. Such a view echoes Clandinin and Connelly's (1992) "course of life" perspective. When we view curriculum as defined by Stern but explicitly add that it is negotiated in the classroom, we recognize that both teachers and learners bring what they experience in their "course of life" into their L2 "course of study." Particularly with ESL and EFL education, one's experience in life outside is connected to the learning that takes place within the classroom. With this holistic view, a person's experience is connected with his or her learning in various environments. We will see that this understanding is essential to ESL and EFL learning and teaching due to the central place of vocabulary within the curriculum.

Vocabulary and the ESL/EFL Curriculum

When one reviews many ESL and EFL programmes or individual course outlines and peruses their curriculum materials, it becomes evident that ESL/EFL teaching and learning

is often divided along the lines of the four major skills, listening, speaking, reading, and writing, although sometimes culture, a fifth dimension (Damen, 1987), is added. Despite its importance within the ESL/EFL curriculum, vocabulary is seldom explicitly mentioned, yet is always present. A glance at a programme or its materials will not necessarily reveal this reality, however, nor will much of the literature on vocabulary learning and teaching.

McCarthy (1990) begins his vocabulary book by stating that "it is the experience of most language teachers that the single, biggest component of any language course is vocabulary" (p. viii). Whatever skill one is teaching, in ESL/EFL education vocabulary represents a major part of one's course content (Egan's what we teach). Equally important is the fact that in ESL/EFL contexts where English is the medium of instruction, English vocabulary is also the *means* by which we teach and students learn (Egan's how we teach). However, vocabulary has only recently begun to attain greater stature in the ESL and EFL learning and teaching literature, a fact which is reflected in the appearance of various pedagogical works on the subject (such as Carter and McCarthy, 1988; Morgan and Rinvolucri, 1986; Nation, 1994; and Taylor, 1990, 1992).

In a survey article on L2 vocabulary, Maiguashca (1993) declares that even in the recent communicative approach, "vocabulary continued to play a marginal or ancillary role" (p. 84). She then summarizes why:

> The underlying assumption was that words and their meanings did not need to be taught explicitly since, it was claimed, learners will "pick up" vocabulary indirectly while engaged in grammatical or communicative activities or while reading. In short, lexical learning was seen as taking place automatically or unconsciously, as a cumulative by-product of other linguistic learning. (Maiguashca, 1993, p. 84)

As a result of this thinking, vocabulary has been referred to as the "poor relation" of L2 teaching (Carter, 1987).

In her article, Maiguashca (1993) goes on to declare that "the study of vocabulary is perhaps the fastest growing area of second language education in terms of research output and publications" (p. 85). While this appears to be true, she then mistakenly, from my perspective, suggests that vocabulary has therefore become the "guest of honor" of language teaching. In essence, Maiguashca appears to have missed two important points that I believe must be addressed within L2 education generally, and the ESL/EFL curriculum in particular.

First, while it is true that publications reveal greater research interest in vocabulary within applied linguistics (see, for example, Arnaud and Bejoint, 1992; Hatch and Brown, 1995; Huckin, Haynes, and Coady, 1993; Meara, 1992; and Schreuder and Weltens, 1993), both observation studies and curriculum materials suggest that it is inappropriate to equate such academic and research interest with a greater focus on vocabulary in the L2 classroom or curriculum. For example, one French immersion classroom observation study reported this important finding:

> We conclude that vocabulary teaching in the immersion classes occupied a rather narrow place in the overall teaching plan, and that it mainly involved meaning interpretation, with little attention to other aspects of vocabulary knowledge. (Allen, Swain, Harley, and Cummins, 1990, p. 64)

This perspective is reiterated in other research on French as a second language (FSL) students' vocabulary learning which also incorporated classroom observation (Sanaoui, 1992). Many English language educators would argue that the same situation generally exists in most ESL/EFL pedagogy, where "meaning interpretation" through synonymy is perhaps most common.

Beyond observation studies, however, an examination of many current, commonly used ESL and EFL texts reveals little systematic focus on English vocabulary learning and development within them, although some progress must be conceded in a few recent texts. This anecdotal and observational evidence points to vocabulary as a neglected aspect of the ESL/EFL curriculum, although one major exception is Willis' (1990) lexical syllabus. Lewis's (1993) lexical approach should also be noted, though no observation studies on this methodology in ESL/EFL have appeared to date. Perhaps after Lewis (in press) appears there will be more opportunity for such research.

Second, Maiguashca (1993) underestimates the importance of vocabulary in L2 pedagogy if she believes that the image of "guest" is at all appropriate, even to describe progress in the field. Vocabulary — words, phrases, idioms, etc. — is at the heart of all language usage in the skill areas of listening, speaking, reading, and writing, as well as culture (Luo, 1992). Furthermore, three minimal and widely recognized aspects of L2 lexical knowledge are form, meaning, and use. While vocabulary might at first glance easily be equated with "meaning," it is also inherent in form (spelling, reading, etc.) and use (register, idioms, written vs. oral language, etc.). Vocabulary's role in ESL/EFL and L2 pedagogy is therefore much more than that of a simple, although perhaps often honored, "guest." The following quotation from McCarthy (1990) puts it this way: "No matter how well the student learns grammar, no matter how successfully the sounds of L2

are mastered, without words to express a wide range of meanings, communication in an L2 just cannot happen in any meaningful way" (p. viii).

As noted above, vocabulary is both a major part of what and how we teach in ESL/EFL pedagogy. Beyond programme components and materials, therefore, English vocabulary is at the centre of the ESL/EFL curriculum. In summary, vocabulary remains a neglected aspect of the ESL/EFL curriculum despite its central place within language learning and teaching and significant vocabulary research activity in the L2 field. We turn, therefore, to some educational implications of this reality for ESL/EFL educators.

Suggestions for ESL/EFL Pedagogy and Research

In light of the discussion on curriculum above and the recent focus on reflective teaching and teacher research in L2 education (Edge and Richards, 1993; Freeman and Richards, 1996; Richards and Lockhart, 1994), this section will offer questions and suggestions concerning the role of vocabulary in ESL/EFL pedagogy and classroom research.

Pedagogy

As McCarthy (1990) states, ". . . vocabulary often seems to be the least systematized and the least well catered for of all the aspects of learning a [second] or foreign language" (p. viii). In terms of ESL/EFL pedagogy, then, one major implication of the argument above is that both curriculum and instruction need to incorporate English vocabulary more systematically. Beyond "meaning identification," ESL/EFL educators need to address what it means to know and use vocabulary in a broader way, including those aspects summarized by Nation (1990, pp. 29-49; see also Schmitt, 1995). Resources now exist to help teachers address these areas, yet until materials include such aspects of vocabulary knowledge and learning, ESL/EFL teacher training must incorporate appropriate methods for teachers to do so in order to supplement current texts and other materials.

In practical terms, ESL/EFL teachers might begin to address vocabulary teaching more systematically in their classes by seriously asking and reflecting on Egan's (1978) two curricular questions: for each class, what is the vocabulary I will, should, or need to teach in this lesson, and how might that best be accomplished? More specifically, Schwab's curricular commonplaces suggest four further questions: What is the vocabulary of the topic, situation, or function at hand? How can it or is it usually used in various contexts? How do native English speakers and ESL/EFL students often learn it, and is this information helpful for these learners? How might I best teach such vocabulary in this course? When ESL/EFL educators answer these questions and act upon the information they provide, we view curriculum in the comprehensive sense Stern (1992) outlined above,

and vocabulary should no longer be a simple "guest" in our ESL/EFL classrooms, but rather at the centre of our curriculum.

In addressing such issues, classroom practitioners will be well aware of the vocabulary used in their lessons, texts, and materials and make the most of it. As for programmes, perhaps vocabulary should become a required or elective course, as culture is, in some intensive ESL programmes. In such a class, as well as in general ESL/EFL courses, one could concentrate on vocabulary teaching for specific levels of language proficiency and train learners in vocabulary learning strategies, as outlined by Cohen (1990), Oxford and Crookall (1990), and Schmitt (forthcoming). In both ESL and EFL contexts, more work needs to be done to help learners acquire vocabulary on their own both within the classroom (in one's course of study) and outside it (in one's course of life). As Nation, quoted in Schmitt (1995, p. 6), has declared, ". . . learners can benefit far more per time spent learning vocabulary strategies than being directly taught low frequency words." One example of an instructor challenging students' approaches to ESL vocabulary development through vocabulary learning strategies exists in Lessard-Clouston (1994).

In addition, ESL/EFL texts need to be developed which present and deal with vocabulary more creatively, and which present real life vocabulary usage (McCarthy, 1996). Word lists and translations in texts may be useful (Meara, 1995) but are insufficient where we are dealing with learners who have a variety of learning styles. As Sanaoui's (1995) studies indicated that one's review of vocabulary is important in lexical learning, course materials should review, both implicitly and explicitly, vocabulary presented earlier. While Willis's (1990) lexical syllabus does this at earlier stages, a particular need exists for such curricula at advanced levels of English proficiency, as well as in English for Academic and Specific Purposes materials. As Nunan (1988) noted above, L2 learning involves both process and product. ESL and EFL materials need to address this fact by incorporating both vocabulary items and ways for students to develop and use vocabulary learning strategies on their own beyond their texts and courses, in their "course of life."

Research

Turning briefly to research, teacher researchers should understand both the narrow and broader conceptions of curriculum discussed above and consider specific (What vocabulary is being taught in this lesson?) as well as broader research questions (What incidental vocabulary learning may be taking place here?) which include and reflect both Clandinin and Connelly's (1992) "course of study" and "course of life" perspectives. In doing so, we also need to recognize the centrality of vocabulary in ESL/EFL teaching and learning by maintaining and increasing recent interest in L2 vocabulary research. A better understanding of what it means for students to know a word, especially in terms of breadth

and depth of vocabulary knowledge (see Nagy and Herman, 1987; Wesche and Paribakht, forthcoming) is needed, and we must move beyond models in linguistics and recognize the individual nature of vocabulary learning and knowledge (Lessard-Clouston, forthcoming). As Maiguashca (1993) has rightly noted, much of our understanding in L2 education centers on grammar, which "amounts to a system of rules and constitutes . . . a coherent and structured whole. The same cannot be said, however, for vocabulary" (p. 91). We thus need to study both incidental ESL and EFL vocabulary learning and teaching in a variety of educational contexts (Ellis, 1994).

The observation of vocabulary instruction in different settings, for example, could detail what teaching is actually taking place in ESL/EFL classrooms. Descriptive studies of the processes of ESL and EFL vocabulary instruction like Sanaoui's (1996) FSL study would provide a good start. It would be wonderful if future studies actually prove Maiguashca (1993) to be right and reveal vocabulary clearly at the centre of the curriculum. Furthermore, how has vocabulary teaching changed with the new vocabulary texts (including McCarthy and O'Dell, 1994, and Wellman, 1992) and resources now available for teachers? Experimental studies involving targeted instructional approaches, especially Lewis's (1993) lexical approach and other methods that place systematic focus on vocabulary, could research specific ESL/EFL vocabulary teaching techniques and their effectiveness for various groups of learners. In addition, what impact does the meaning interpretation Allen et. al. (1990) referred to actually have on ESL/EFL students' vocabulary acquisition? Does an oral or written context for lexical learning have the same effect? What is the relationship between vocabulary teaching and ESL/EFL reading or listening comprehension? Is teaching students individual vocabulary learning strategies more effective than using more generalizable ones? These and many other questions must be asked and answered in order for learners and teachers to understand vocabulary acquisition and use better.

With the development and use of technology in ESL/EFL education, research into vocabulary learning and teaching must also consider varied means of vocabulary instruction and acquisition. With computer programmes in courses, for example, the teacher is no longer necessarily the main source of lexical input in some contexts of L2 education. While some work on vocabulary learning and teaching through such means does exist (see Green and Meara, 1995, and Kang, 1995, for example), much more research needs to be carried out on such educational technologies before a more comprehensive understanding of vocabulary acquisition and use with such materials is attained.

Much L1 research has focused on vocabulary size (Nagy and Herman, 1987). Although there are various estimates, Willis (1990) asserts that educated native English

speakers are "likely to have a vocabulary of some 50,000 words" (p. 39). In addition, they may have encountered the 88,500 distinct word families which appear in printed school materials in English (Carroll, Davies, and Richman, 1971). Given these realities, research questions of interest to those who are teaching ESL and EFL students who will pursue post-secondary education in English include: 1) what vocabulary is needed by adult ESL/EFL learners who will do their academic work in English, and 2) how might they best learn the specialized vocabulary of their academic disciplines? Since Saville-Troike (1986) and Casanave (1992) have demonstrated that vocabulary is crucial to ESL students' academic success, these questions also need to be answered. In essence, vocabulary learning and use in academic contexts is where a student's ESL/EFL "course of study" interacts with and is fundamental to his or her present and future "course of life." Accordingly, the relationship between general and special purposes vocabulary (Nation and Hwang, 1995) is yet another aspect of L2 vocabulary use and acquisition that requires further study.

Conclusion

In this article I have briefly considered an essential aspect of L2 pedagogy by relating the central place of English vocabulary in ESL/EFL learning and teaching to the L2 curriculum. Suggestions have been made for ESL/EFL teachers to consider in their pedagogy and questions were raised for their classroom research. For ESL and EFL students, understanding thoughts and ideas expressed in English vocabulary and putting their own thoughts and ideas into English with words and expressions is crucial — in oral and written contexts, both within and beyond the ESL/EFL classroom. It is time for ESL and EFL teachers and researchers to act on this reality not only by recognizing vocabulary's important role in the curriculum, but also by giving it a central place in our teaching, materials, and research.

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