

Developing vocabulary proficiency

Caroline Campbell and **Daniel Xerri** examine definitions of vocabulary and explore how it is learned.

One of the current trends in ELT is to give vocabulary priority, but this has not always been the case. For decades, traditional language teaching methods and approaches gave more importance to grammatical structures. However, as Wilkins (1972: 111) points out, 'While without grammar very little can be conveyed, without vocabulary nothing can be conveyed'. Hence, in recent years, vocabulary has started to be considered 'the core or heart of language' (Lewis, 1993: 89) and methodology has developed so as to give vocabulary more prominence in language learning. In turn, these developments have influenced the way materials writers tackle the area of vocabulary when designing coursebooks and the way teachers approach vocabulary teaching. When considering the importance of vocabulary activities in the classroom, Ur (2012: 3) affirms that 'you can usually convey what you want to say through vocabulary alone, with minimal grammar – but not the other way around'. This growing emphasis on vocabulary does not necessarily undermine the importance of grammar but rather indicates that vocabulary has perhaps been neglected for far too long.

In this article, we first examine definitions of vocabulary before exploring how vocabulary is learned, shedding light on implicit and explicit learning. In the process, we provide a brief overview of what learning and knowing vocabulary entails. As teacher trainers, we consider it important for practitioners to be familiar with the

theoretical underpinnings for classroom practices aimed at helping L2 learners to develop their vocabulary proficiency.

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Understanding the term 'vocabulary'

According to Nation & Chung (2011: 543), a good programme for vocabulary development should answer three questions: 'What is vocabulary? How should vocabulary be taught and learned? How should vocabulary knowledge and growth be assessed?'. For the purpose of this article, we will attempt to succinctly answer the first two questions. When one speaks of *vocabulary*, *words*, *lexis* or *lexical items* it is important to bear in mind that we do not merely refer to single words since these terms might also incorporate what are known as *lexical chunks* or a *multi-*

word units. In this article, we use the terms *vocabulary*, *words* and *lexical items* interchangeably. Ur (2012: 3) defines lexical chunks as 'groups of two or more words that convey meaning in the same way a word does'; this includes phrasal verbs and collocations as well as longer phrases and even full sentences, such as fixed expressions and idioms.

The importance of learning lexical chunks lies in the fact that they 'are learned and retained in the memory as a single lexical unit' (Ur, 2012: 3). In addition, Nation & Chung (2011) state that learning multi-word units helps L2 learners to discover collocations and grammatical patterns that allow them to produce native-like utterances. Some researchers argue that learning vocabulary in chunks facilitates vocabulary learning, while teaching words in isolation is often criticised because learners make little sense of words that are not presented in phrases or as larger units (Lewis, 1993; Nation & Chung, 2011). In our experience we have found that learners benefit from learning vocabulary in chunks or embedded in context.

A distinction must be made between *grammatical items*, such as articles, prepositions and pronouns, which form a closed set of words to which no new words can be added, and *functional items*, such as nouns, full verbs, adjectives and adverbs, which form an open set to which new words can be added. Guiding learners to understand the difference between these two sets may help them to categorise the newly-encountered vocabulary and thus retain new words. In addition, Lewis (1993: 51) maintains that

language consists of 'grammaticalised lexis, not lexicalised grammar', by which he means that vocabulary plays an important role when it comes to meaning while grammar plays a secondary role. This further emphasises the importance of providing learners with plenty of opportunities to develop their vocabulary.

How vocabulary is learned

When teaching vocabulary, teachers need to take into account the principle of *multiple encounters*. Schmitt & Carter (2000: 4) claim that 'Due to the incremental nature of vocabulary acquisition, repeated exposures are necessary to consolidate a new word in the learner's mind'. According to Ur (2012), learners need to encounter a new lexical item between six and 16 times before they can remember it and the second encounter needs to occur before the word is forgotten. Sonbul & Schmitt (2010: 259) found that 'a second reading of a passage within one week may prevent attrition of vocabulary gains achieved under incidental and explicit learning conditions'. This shows that learners would benefit from tasks that help them encounter the same lexical items several times.

There is also the question of which words should be learned first by L2 learners. Nation & Chung (2011) affirm that learning the first 1,000 *most frequent words* before the second 1,000 and so on is less costly and more beneficial because the first 2,000 most frequent words can be found in any text type. However, Nation (2001) argues that frequency-based studies have clearly shown that not all words are equally important to learners and some words are more useful than others. For some L2 learners, high-frequency words may be vocabulary linked to a specific context, meaning that 'where possible specialised vocabulary should be treated like high-frequency vocabulary' (Nation, 2001: 19). Thus, when focusing on vocabulary, teachers need to take into account the context in which the L2 is being learned. Moreover, low-frequency words are not to be ignored and teachers should train learners



to use such strategies as 'guessing from context, using word parts to help remember words, [and] using vocabulary cards and dictionaries' (Nation, 2001: 20) in order to help them expand their vocabulary.

Implicit or explicit

Lexical researchers distinguish between implicit and explicit approaches to learning vocabulary. High-frequency words can be learned either through *direct teaching*, for instance, through the teacher's explanation of unknown words and peer teaching; or else through *direct learning*, for example, by studying vocabulary using word cards or a dictionary (Nation, 2001). For direct and explicit teaching, Carter (2001) suggests giving learners lists of words to learn, for example, words presented with translated equivalents or organised in semantic sets. However, in our experience, translation can present limitations and is more likely to be effective in monolingual classes or when teachers speak the learners' L1 themselves.

Coursebooks provide learners with the opportunity to practise newly learned vocabulary through direct learning but also to discover new words incidentally and implicitly, for instance, through exposure to words embedded in context and through skills work (Carter, 2001). However, Nation (2001: 232) points out that many L2 learners 'do not experience the conditions that are needed for this kind of learning to occur' and they might be unable to benefit from it since it relies heavily on their reading skills (Nation, 2002). Incidental vocabulary learning can happen through guessing meaning from context or engaging in communicative activities but also through more planned encounters, for instance, the use of graded readers or the completion of exercises (Nation, 2001). In any case, some kind of meaning-focused input is necessary for consistent vocabulary growth. Moreover, a combination of explicit and implicit approaches has been found to be an effective approach since it allows learners to go deeper than simply recognising words (Sonbul

& Schmitt, 2010). Thus, teachers should ideally use tasks that employ a mixture of explicit and implicit approaches.

What knowing a word entails

When developing vocabulary knowledge, teachers and learners alike must understand that knowing a lexical item entails more than knowing its *meaning* and *form*. It also includes other aspects, such as knowing its spoken and written use, collocations, any grammatical, pragmatic and discoursal patterns it has, and so on (Carter, 2001). In fact, *cognitive depth*, also referred to as *vocabulary depth*, is one of the guiding principles for the acquisition of vocabulary. Schmitt (2000: 120) claims that 'the more one engages with a word (deeper processing), the more likely the word will be remembered for later use'. In teacher training, we have found that practitioners need to be guided to discover how to encourage learners to identify the vocabulary that is useful for their context, help them understand how words are used, and suggest ways that will help them remember that vocabulary.

Carter (2001: 43) affirms that knowing a word also entails 'knowing it

actively and productively as well as receptively'. According to Thornbury (2002), it is more common that learners acquire the ability to understand words before they can utter them, although this is not always the case. In fact, learners often know words receptively before they can use them actively and productively. Nation & Chung (2011) claim that the productive use of vocabulary is often neglected and emphasise that a focus on vocabulary should be integrated within the development of the four skills. This gives learners the possibility to encounter words in context and, eventually, to decide whether they need them for receptive or productive use or both.

Presenting, practising and retaining vocabulary

In traditional approaches, such as the Grammar Translation approach, vocabulary was often presented as word lists that learners translated into their L1. The main criticism of this approach was that learners were not able to use the vocabulary they had learned to communicate. As a reaction to this, other approaches were developed, such as the Direct Method and Audiolingualism, but vocabulary

teaching was still taken lightly and teachers only taught vocabulary that was easy to present or was strictly related to a lesson (Thornbury, 2002). Lewis (1993) raised awareness about the importance of learning lexis and identified the weaknesses of the methods used in the classroom, arguing that vocabulary should be learned with *collocations* and as *formulaic language*, more informally known as *chunks*. Concurrently, Willis (1990) developed the lexical syllabus based on high-frequency words and argued that a syllabus based on vocabulary is far more useful to learners than one based on grammar structures because it is based on the actual usage rather than on a linguistic theory. This brought many changes to the way vocabulary was taught in the classroom and tackled in coursebooks.

With the advent of the Communicative Approach, vocabulary learning and teaching occurred through the engagement of learners in meaningful tasks. In fact, Schmitt (2000) argues that there is no real need for direct vocabulary teaching since vocabulary can be acquired naturally through interaction and meaningful engagement with the L2. Moreover, McCarten (2007) claims that materials should present and practise vocabulary in natural contexts that are current and relevant to learners' needs, thus making better use of class time. In fact, Nation & Chung (2011) assert that since direct vocabulary teaching does not use class time efficiently it would be more useful to teach vocabulary integrated with intensive reading or as unknown words crop up in lesson activities. In spite of this, the latest editions of some L2 coursebooks still contain gap-fills, and matching and multiple-choice tasks, all of which target vocabulary directly.

Learners need to be guided to develop strategies that help them study and retain vocabulary, as well as trained to employ such strategies when learning high-frequency vocabulary, so that later they can apply them to learn low-frequency ones. This increases learners' autonomy and enables teachers to spend less time on direct vocabulary learning, focusing



instead 'on expanding and refining the learners' control of vocabulary learning and coping strategies' (Nation, 2001: 21). Besides strategies for learning vocabulary, learners need strategies that help them retain this knowledge. One of the most popular strategies identified in the literature is the use of vocabulary notebooks. However, teachers need to train learners to use their vocabulary notebooks strategically, especially since they often have difficulty selecting the most frequent and useful words (McCrostie, 2007). Our classroom experience has shown us that learners' choice of words tends to be limited to vocabulary taken from lesson materials and to certain parts of speech rather than others. Hence, it is vital to make learners aware of how to implement learning strategies effectively.

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Learning vocabulary through skills work

Most often coursebooks and teachers integrate vocabulary tasks with tasks aimed at developing the four skills. Learners can be encouraged to use vocabulary productively and creatively through speaking and writing tasks, such as retelling stories, engaging in

role plays, rewriting texts, and activities involving pair/group work. Learners could also achieve this goal through meaning-focused activities integrated with other skills, such as listening to stories, extensive reading or taking part in interactive speaking and reading activities. Sonbul & Schmitt (2010: 259) remark that 'the teaching of vocabulary during reading is definitely worth the effort' since it is an effective approach that helps learners recall form and meaning as well as recognise meaning through incidental learning. Moreover, learning vocabulary through reading is a form of implicit learning that can be done autonomously outside the classroom (Hunt & Beglar, 2002).

Although vocabulary can be learned through extensive reading, an explicit focus on vocabulary is still necessary, especially due to the incidence of words that are unknown to the learner. When teachers choose reading texts they need to bear in mind that for learners to be able to read unassisted, texts should have no more than one unknown word for every 50 running words (Nation & Chung, 2011). File & Adams (2010) declare that learning vocabulary in context may help learning by providing an immediate connection between meaning, form and use; however, effectiveness is reduced since there is less attention to the vocabulary items. Therefore, learners may benefit more from focusing on vocabulary in isolation first. For this reason, teachers should perhaps prepare a mixture of explicit and implicit vocabulary tasks integrated with skills work.

Using corpora for vocabulary development

In the last few decades, extensive work has been carried out to create corpora of authentic spoken and written materials that can be used to generate concordances. The latter are created by inputting a target word or words in a computer programme which can find all the examples present in the corpus and organise them in a keyword in context (KWIC) format. This innovative approach has brought about the development of



many sophisticated computer-based programmes that make it possible to access corpora, lists of words and authentic texts (Carter, 2001), all of which can be used by teachers and learners to analyse the use of vocabulary in authentic contexts (McCarten, 2007).

Concordances have revealed several surprising features about vocabulary. As McCarten (2007) points out, corpora can show us which words are most frequently used in speaking and writing, the contexts in which people use certain words, how words occur together, the grammatical patterns of words, and also how words are strategically used to form discourse. This information has had direct implications on the development of course materials. With these new sources of information about vocabulary, dictionaries and coursebooks are now based on more accurate data about the frequency and usage of words; previously it was mostly guesswork (Thornbury, 2002).

Conclusion

From our perspective as teacher trainers, we consider it fundamental for teachers to explore some of the principles underlying the practice of helping L2 learners develop their vocabulary proficiency given that vocabulary is a more 'complex phenomenon than at first it might

appear' (Thornbury, 2002: 12). It is important for teachers to understand what it means to have comprehensive knowledge of lexical items so as to enable learners to use vocabulary effectively. Teachers' familiarity with these principles enables them to design, plan and use tasks that help learners increase their vocabulary size and gain depth of knowledge.

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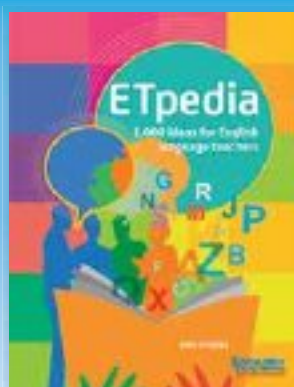
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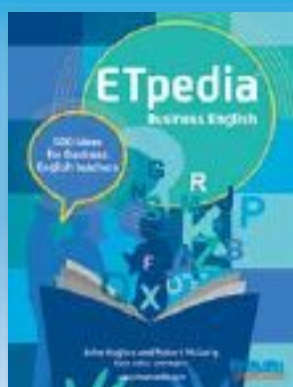
Caroline Campbell is the Director of Studies of Easy School of Languages in Valletta, Malta. She is currently completing an M.A. TESOL at the Centre for English Language Proficiency, University of Malta. Email: carecampbell@gmail.com



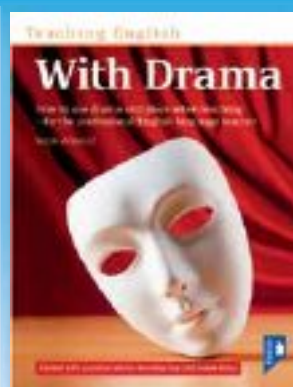
Daniel Xerri is a lecturer in TESOL at the Centre for English Language Proficiency, University of Malta. He is the joint coordinator and electronic manager of the IATEFL Research SIG, and chairs the ELT Council within the Ministry for Education and Employment in Malta. More information about his work can be found here: www.danielxerri.com Email: daniel.xerri@um.edu.mt



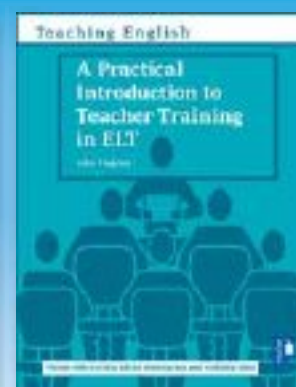
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