Vocabulary Acquisition: The Research and Its Pedagogical Implications

Peter Duppenthaler

Abstract

The vast majority of students and teachers report that vocabulary acquisition is an essential part of first and second language learning.   This paper looks at some of the relevant research in the area of vocabulary acquisition, including both direct (such as the memorization of vocabulary items) and indirect (contextual) approaches.   It then moves on to an examination of the pedagogical implications of this research and to some practical classroom applications of the findings.

Introduction

Several authors (Folse, 2004; Walters, 2004; Hunt & Beglar, 2005) agree that in the past there was very little research being conducted in the field of ESL vocabulary.   In the last ten years, however, that has changed.   "Since the mid-1990s there has been a mini-explosion of research on second language vocabulary issues such as student needs, teaching techniques, learner strategies, and incidental learning" (Folse, 2004, p. v).   Although there has been an increase in the field of vocabulary research, classroom application of the findings has, for one reason or another, not kept pace.   This paper will look at some of the research and possible classroom applications.   It will focus on four areas: (1) What does it mean to "know" a word? (2) How many words do you need to know? (3) Teacher preferences, and (4) Instructional methods.

What does it mean to "know" a word?

It is generally assumed that it is impossible to talk about a subject without agreeing on the meaning of the terms.   However, with regard to vocabulary, agreement on the definition of certain key terms seems to be difficult.   "What is a word?" is a question with multiple answers depending on whether one adopts a narrow or a broad definition.   Another controversy surrounds the notion of what it mean to "know" a word.

Folse (2004, pp. 2-18) lists five kinds of vocabulary.   Although the terminology may be different (for example multi-word items [e.g., set phrases, phrasal verbs, idioms, etc,] are often referred to as "chunks" by other authors [see for example Lewis, 1997]) these five items constitute a fairly common list of what is defined as a "word" in the literature.   They are: (1) single words; (2) set

phrases (e.g., "in other words," "all of a sudden," "raining cats and dogs," etc.); (3) variable phrases (e.g., it has come to our/my attention); (4) phrasal verbs (e.g., put on, put off, put down, called off, called up, called on, etc.); and (5) idioms (e.g., kind of [the cobra is a kind of snake, vs. It's kind of hot today], etc.).   As one can see, the term "word" covers a very wide range of items.

What it means to "know" a word is another complicated issue.   (Folse , 2004, pp. 10-18) says that it includes seven things: (1) polysemy, indicating that a word rarely has more than one meaning (e.g., get the mail [go and retrieve], get angry [become], get to the airport [arrive], etc., and "head" [of a person, of a pin, of an organization]); (2) denotation & connotation (denotation refers to the most basic or specific meaning of a word).   Connotation (positive, negative, or neutral) is an idea that is suggested by or associated with a word (e.g. slender, thin, skinny); (3) spelling and pronunciation; (4) part of speech; (5) frequency; (6) usage (i.e., it is appropriate to use that word instead of a synonym or similar word); and (7) collocation ("A collocation is a word or phrase that naturally and frequently occurs before, after, or very near the target vocabulary item" [Folse , 2004, p. 16]). However, this is not an exhaustive list.   For example, in addition to the above, Moras (2001, pp. 1-2), based on the work of Gairns and Redman (1986), includes six additional items (numbers 8 – 13 below) that, according to him, an "advanced student" will need to work on: (8) boundaries between conceptual meaning (e.g. cup, mug, bowl); (9) homonymy: distinguishing between the various meanings of a single word form which has several meanings which are not closely related (e.g. a file: used to put papers in or a tool); (10) homophony: understanding words that have the same pronunciation but different spellings and meanings (e.g. flour, flower: to, too, two); (11) synonymy: distinguishing between the different shades of meaning that synonymous words have (e.g. extend, increase, expand); (12) style, register, dialect: being able to distinguish between different levels of formality, the effect of different contexts and topics, as well as differences in geographical variation; and (13) translation: awareness of certain differences and similarities between the native and the foreign language (e.g. false cognates).

As is readily apparent, a simple question such as, "Do you know this word?" can have a multitude of meanings depending on who is asking it.   Teachers will need to be aware of the above when they consider when and how to expose the students to this kind of information without overwhelming them.   It is also important not to confuse the students by teaching too much at one time. For example, both Nation (1990) and Folse (2004) caution against teaching lexical sets as doing so has been found to lead to the students confusing the various words.

How many words do you need to know?

Different researchers provide us with different numbers; however, not surprisingly this seems to be mainly due to whether the researcher is counting "words" or "word families" (i.e., base forms and their derived and inflected forms; e.g., aid [the headword], aided, aiding, aids, unaided). In addition, there is the question of what type of vocabulary is needed, and how many words a learner would need to know in order to perform well at any given language-proficiency level.

Obviously students need to acquire a large enough vocabulary to reach what is often referred to in the literature as the "lexical threshold" (Laufer, 1997, p. 31). However, the actual number of words needed to reach the "threshold" seems to vary from study to study. Although they refrain from giving an actual number, Perkins, Brutten, and Pohlmann (1989), conducting research in Japan, suggested that Japanese EFL students would need a score interval of 375 – 429 on the paper TOEFL test (i.e., a score interval of 93 – 150 on the CBT TOEFL, 30 – 52 on the IBT TOEFL, and 255 – 400 on the TOEIC test). In other words somewhere between a high beginner ("Able to satisfy immediate survival needs,") and an intermediate level ("Speaker has a functional, but limited proficiency. Able to maintain very simple face-to-face conversations on familiar topics") as described in the TOEIC website.

Laufer and Sim (1985), Nation (1994) and Laufer (1997), among others, all agree that learners need to acquire a fairly large set of basic vocabulary in order to read with any degree of success. They, like most researchers, base their number on frequency lists – the higher the frequency the more likely it is to be encountered and by extension the more important for a person to know. Laufer (1997) sets the lexical threshold for reading comprehension at about 3,000 word families (approximately 5,000 words). He argues that this will cover about 95% of the words in most texts. Nation (1994) has suggested that 2,000 word families is enough. He says that, "These 2,000 words [actually "word families"] are used so often that they make up about 87% of the running words in formal written texts and more than 95% of the words in informal spoken texts" (Nation, 1994, p. 3).

All of these authors agree that,

By far the greatest lexical obstacle to good reading is insufficient number of words in the learner's lexicon. Lexis was found to be the best predictor of success in reading, better than syntax or general reading ability. Whatever the effect of reading strategies is, it is short-circuited if the vocabulary is below the threshold (Laufer, 1997, p. 31).

Obviously students are going to have to learn a fairly large amount of vocabulary before they are able to function with any degree of success. Teachers who would like to know more about the "level" of the material they are using can analyze any text by using the online version of the

VocabProfile program (see References for website).   This is an easy to use program that will tell you how many words in the text are contained in each of the following four frequency levels: (1) the list of the most frequent 1000 word families, (2) the second 1000, (3) the Academic Word List, and (4) words that do not appear in the other lists.

Vocabulary lists based on frequency are readily available and a number of them have been published in Japan.   Nation (1990) provides sample vocabulary lists.   In addition, *The Reading Teacher's Book of Lists* (Fry, Kress, & Fountoukidis, 1993) includes a useful vocabulary list ("The First 1,000 Instant Words").   The advantage to this list is that it is broken down into 25-word groups, based on frequency, starting with the first 25 most frequently used words and proceeding in 25-word units up until the first 1,000 high-frequency words.

Teacher Preferences

There is an old saying that "teachers teach the way that they were taught."   This is of course an oversimplification, but nevertheless, a useful one to keep in mind.   Coady (1997) expands on this idea to include four things that have an impact on the way teachers teach vocabulary: (1) the teacher's own learning experiences, (2) the teacher's metacognitive attitude toward learning vocabulary, (3) the teacher's knowledge of the research in the field, and (4) the effect of experiences gained through teaching.   Who we are and why we teach the way we do are important questions – the answers to which inform both our outlook on teaching and our practice of it.   However, despite the importance of these questions, they are ones that many teachers do not spend much time considering.   Whether you agree with this or not, teachers do need to be aware of the teaching methods they are using and open to the possibility of trying something else.

After a survey of a number of articles in the field of L2 vocabulary acquisition Coady (1997) proposes that there are four main approaches to L2 vocabulary instruction: (1) Context Alone, (2) Strategy Instruction, (3) Development plus Explicit Instruction, and (4) Classroom Activities. According to him, these four approaches represent a continuum along which teachers fall, with Context Alone at one end and Classroom Activities at the other.

Context Alone "proposes that there is actually no need or even justification for direct vocabulary instruction.   This position is based on the claim [by Krashen, 1989, and others] that students will learn all the vocabulary they need from context by reading extensively, as long as there is successful comprehension" (Coady, 1997 p. 275).

Those in favour of *Strategy Instruction* "also believe that context is the major source of vocabulary learning but they express some significant reservations about how well students can deal

with context on their own" (Coady, 1997, p. 276). They tend to feel that "teaching … vocabulary learning strategies is essential" (Coady, 1997, p. 277).

Development plus Explicit Instruction "argues for explicit teaching of certain types of vocabulary using a large number of techniques and even direct memorization of certain highly frequent items" (Coady, 1997, pp. 278-9). This approach seems to favour "a combination of regular periods of self-selected reading [often using graded readers] and interactive vocabulary instruction" (Coady, 1997, p. 280).

Finally, *Classroom Activities*, "advocates the teaching of vocabulary words along very traditional lines" (Coady, 1997, p. 280). "These are best exemplified by a number of practical handbooks for teachers such as Allen's *Techniques in Teaching Vocabulary* (1983), Gairns and Redman's *Working with Words* (1986), Morgan and Rinvolucri's *Vocabulary* (1986), Taylor's *Teaching and Learning Vocabulary* (1990), and Nation's *New Ways in Teaching Vocabulary* (1994). …these texts tend to present generic activities for vocabulary learning to teachers" (Coady, 1997, pp. 280-81).

Coady's continuum of approaches provides a useful starting point for teachers who are looking to gain insights into who they are, why they teach the way they do, and where they fit into the broader picture of vocabulary instruction. Readers who are interested in the above might take the questionnaire at the end of this article (see Appendix A). By answering the questions, teachers will be able to gain a fairly clear picture of their thoughts on the teaching of vocabulary. After filling in the questionnaire, teachers will need to think about where they fall on Coady's continuum and if they are happy with the situation. Ultimately teachers decide on what to teach and how to teach it, even when they are presented with set curricula. There are always ways to fit in something a teacher thinks is important and worthwhile. The trick is to decide on what those things are and to be willing to do them – self-awareness is a good starting place. What the teachers do with that self-awareness is up to them.

Instructional Methods

The article by Hunt and Beglar (2005) includes an extensive meta-analysis of first and second language reading/vocabulary research. On the basis of their analysis, they propose that teachers use a combination of explicit and implicit techniques in order to facilitate vocabulary acquisition. They quote Doughty and Williams (1998) to say that "the goal of explicit teaching is to '*direct* learner attention,' whereas the aim of an implicit focus on form is to '*attract* learner attention' while 'minimizing any interruption to the communication of meaning'" (Doughty and Williams, 1998, p. 231; italics in the original) (Hunt & Beglar, 2005, p. 2). They propose that, "the most effective and efficient lexical development will occur in multifaceted curriculums that achieve a pedagogically sound

balance between explicit and implicit activities for L2 learners at all levels of their development" (Hunt & Beglar, 2005, p. 1).

Although their paper focuses on reading/vocabulary research, their findings seem to be equally applicable to the area of vocabulary acquisition as a whole. Their emphasis on the need for a combination of explicit and implicit instruction is also favored by a number of other researchers (see for example Nation, 1994, and Loucky, 1998).

To most researchers, explicit instruction usually refers to the direct teaching of vocabulary and vocabulary strategies, while implicit instruction refers to the use of integrated tasks, often combined with some type of reading program, designed to provide opportunities for students to use what they have learned, and to further cement and deepen their understanding of the vocabulary that they have been exposed to. In addition, it is generally assumed that students will acquire both fluency and some additional vocabulary through these activities.

However, Nation (1990) and others (see for example Krashen's notion of "comprehensible input") caution that, "the essential element in developing fluency lies in the opportunity for meaningful use of vocabulary in tasks with a low cognitive load" (Nation, 1994, p. viii). This means that the tasks must be at or below the students' true vocabulary level in order for them to derive any real benefit from them. Tasks which are beyond the students' ability will do little to further vocabulary development or enhance fluency. In fact, quite the contrary, as students are more likely to become overwhelmed and frustrated by the task, with a resulting loss of motivation. In order to be successful, teachers will need to be acutely aware of their students' vocabulary levels and design tasks accordingly. They will also need to allow ample time for consolidation and review.

A look at the research reveals certain themes that appear again and again. First, there is the advice to teachers that a combination of explicit and implicit instruction is a sound idea. Second, there seems to be general agreement on the importance of "comprehensible input." The problem, or course, is that one student's "comprehensible" is another's "incomprehensible." The question has always been how to make the tasks comprehensible yet challenging to all. Teachers who are interested in developing a vocabulary component may find a table from Nation (1994) (see Appendix B) helpful. It may also be helpful to keep the following quote from Nation (1994) in mind.

> Vocabulary is not an end in itself. A rich vocabulary makes the skills of
> listening, speaking, reading, and writing easier to perform. Learners'
> growth in vocabulary must be accompanied by opportunities to become
> fluent with that vocabulary. This fluency can be partly achieved through
> activities that lead to the establishment and enrichment of vocabulary

knowledge, but the essential element in developing fluency lies in the
opportunity for meaningful use of vocabulary in tasks with a low cognitive
load (Nation, 1994, p. viii).

If you agree with the above then it may be helpful to look more closely at Nation's idea of the major components of a vocabulary course.   According to Nation (1994, p. v) they are:

1. Meeting new vocabulary for the first time

2. Establishing previously met vocabulary

3. Enriching previously met vocabulary

4. Developing vocabulary strategies

5. Developing fluency with known vocabulary

Folse (2004), and Hunt and Beglar (2005) both use Nation's five components.   These five components provide teachers not only with a way to organize a course but also to check on its effectiveness.   In order to help teachers see what activities this system might include, I have taken suggestions from the above authors, as well as others, and listed them under the five components (see Appendix C).   By referring to Appendix C, teachers will be able to see what researchers/teachers (Nation, 1990, 1994; Coady, 1997; Loucky, 1998; Folse, 2004; Hunt & Beglar, 2005; and Wang, 2007) suggest using in order to accomplish the goals of each of the five components and use this to make some informed decisions on what they would like to include in their own vocabulary programs; keeping in mind that, "Words and phrases are essential to language learning.   The only real issue is the best manner in which to acquire them" (Coady, 1997, p. 287).

Conclusion

We have looked at a sample of the research covering four areas that have an impact on the teaching of vocabulary: (1) What does it mean to "know" a word? (2) How many words to you need to know? (3) Teacher preferences and (4) Instructional methods. By following the suggestions in each of these, and making use of the information provided in the three appendices contained in this article, teachers should be able to develop an effective vocabulary program.   In conclusion, let me say that I agree with (Folse, 2004) when he says,

From the viewpoint of second language learners, learning vocabulary –
learning the meaning of new words – is probably the most common activity
in their whole experience of learning a new language.   Unfortunately, it is
also a very frustrating one (Folse, 2004, p. 160).

However, there is no reason why it should be this way.

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Appendix A

Questionnaire

1. What level do you teach?

    elementary   junior high school   high school   junior college   college

2. What are your students' needs?

3. Arrange the following list in order from most (1) to least (6) important.
   (a) grammar   (b) listening   (c) reading   (d) speaking   (e) vocabulary   (f) writing

    1. ___   2. ___   3. ___   4. ___   5. ___   6. ___

4. Are your students interested in learning/studying vocabulary?
   (0 = not at all … 5 = a lot)

    0   1   2   3   4   5

5. What is your students' vocabulary level?   How do you know?

    beginning   elementary   intermediate   advanced

6. How many words do you think your students need to know by they time they graduate? _____

7. Which of the following do they need to know/do? Arrange the following list in order from most (1) to least (7) important.
   (a) understand the meaning of a word   (b) use a word in a sentence   (c) spelling   (d) part of speech   (e) synonym   (f) antonym   (g) change the root to a different part of speech

    1. ___   2. ___   3. ___   4. ___   5. ___   6. ___   7. ___

8. How much class time do you spend a week on vocabulary activities using:
   1. formal instruction   _____
   2. incidental learning (e.g., extensive reading, etc.)   _____
   3. review   _____
   4. testing   _____

   out of a total of _____ classroom hours per week?

9. How often do you assign vocabulary homework each week?

10. How do you decide on which vocabulary items to teach?

11. Is there any sequencing (e.g., based on frequency, level of difficulty, etc.) of the vocabulary you teach?

(0 = not at all … 5 = a lot)

    0   1   2   3   4   5

12. Will your focus be on particular words or on strategies?

13. How much emphasis will you give to decontextualized vocabulary learning?

14. Will most of your class work involve teacher-directed class activities, group or pair work, or individual work?

15. Which types of vocabulary activities have you found to be the most popular with your students? Give specific examples and reasons why you think these types of activities are popular.

16. Give a brief outline of your favorite vocabulary activity.   Include time, required procedures, when to include it in the lesson/year, etc.

17. Which type of vocabulary activities did you like when you were a student?

18. Do you use computer assisted language learning (CALL) vocabulary activities?
    Yes →
    1. Think of the sites you like.   What features make these sites worthwhile?
    2. Think of the sites you do not like.   What features make these sites less than worthwhile?
    No   →   Why not?

19. Is it your responsibility to make the students learn the vocabulary in the textbook you are using?
    (0 = not at all … 5 = a lot)

    0   1   2   3   4   5

20. Is it the students' responsibility to learn the vocabulary in the textbook they are using?
    (0 = not at all … 5 = a lot)

    0   1   2   3   4   5

21. Is it your responsibility to make the students increase their total vocabulary from sources outside the textbook?
    (0 = not at all … 5 = a lot)

    0   1   2   3   4   5

22. Is it the students' responsibility to increase their total vocabulary from sources outside the textbook?
    (0 = not at all … 5 = a lot)

    0   1   2   3   4   5

Note: Numbers 12, 13 and 14 are from Nation, I. S. P. (1990). Teaching and Learning Vocabulary Boston, MA. Heinle & Heinle Pub., p. 7.

Appendix B

Evaluating the Vocabulary Component of an ESL Program

What to Look For	How to Look for It	How to Include It
Does the teacher know what the learners' vocabulary level and needs are?	Ask the teacher	Use the levels test (Nation, 1990) Interview the learners
Is the program focusing appropriately on the appropriate level of vocabulary?	Look at what vocabulary or strategies are being taught	Decide whether the focus is high, academic, or low frequency vocabulary
Is the vocabulary helpfully sequenced?	Check that opposites, near synonyms, lexical sets are not being presented in the same lesson	Use texts and normal [classroom] use [of them] to sequence the vocabulary
Are the skill activities designed to help vocabulary learning?	Look at the written input to the activities Ask the teacher	Include and monitor wanted vocabulary in the written input
Is there a suitable proportion of opportunities to develop fluency with known vocabulary?	Look at the amount of graded reading, listening to stories, free writing and message-based speaking	Use techniques that develop well-beaten paths and rich [mental] maps
Does the presentation of vocabulary help learning?	Look for deliberate repetition and spacing Rate the activities for depth of processing	Develop teaching and revision cycles Choose a few deep processing techniques to use often
Are the learners excited about their progress?	Watch the learners doing tasks Ask the learners	Set goals Give feedback on progress Keep records

(From: Nation, 1994, p. vi).

Appendix C

Major Components of a Vocabulary Course

1. Meeting new vocabulary for the first time

Through: formal presentations, communicative activities & the written input for these, extensive reading, extensive listening (e.g. to stories. "…particularly if the person reading aloud or telling the story gives the new words a little attention such as briefly explaining them or noting them on the board without interrupting the story too much"). (Nation, 1994, p. vii).

"combining inferencing with dictionary use" (Hunt & Beglar, 2005, p. 6).

"pre-reading [and pre-listening] activities that highlight the vocabulary in the text" (Hunt & Beglar, 2005, p. 6).

"post-reading [and post-listening] activities in which learners first notice the target lexis by highlighting, underlining, or circling them, and then processing them by classifying, analyzing, or using the items productively (Willis, 1996)" (Hunt & Beglar, 2005, p.87).

(from Coady, 1997, p. 281):
1. Providing learners with both definitional and contextual information about a word.
2. Encourage learners to process information about words at a deeper level
3. Providing learners with multiple exposure to a word

Teachers need to help students distinguish between infrequent, less important words that can be guessed from context or given in a note, and frequent words.

Dictionary instruction:

"Several studies found that many adult L2 learners systematically misinterpret [English-English] dictionary entries and take much more time compared to nondictionary users with limited advantage gained" (Coady, 1997, p. 286).

"Grabe and Stoller (Chapter 6, this volume) found that using a bilingual dictionary in a consistent and appropriate manner was indeed beneficial for vocabulary learning and reading development" (Coady, 1997, p. 285).

Collocation research:

"Several studies have found that multiword phrases [e.g., collocations and institutionalized expression (e.g., To whom it may concern; It has come to our attention, etc.] are not learned well through ordinary language experience and suggest that there is a need for them to be learned explicitly" (Coady, 1997, p. 282). This …seems to necessitate explicit learning and contrived encounters in order to achieve significant fluency" (Coady, 1997, p. 287).

"Collocation is of much higher importance, however, in terms of use, acquisition and ultimate success in language learning. In a vocabulary presentation, one-tenth of our time should be spent on establishing a definition, and the rest of the time should be spent on collocation and use"

(Stockdale, J. G. III. (May 2004). Definition Plus Collocation in Vocabulary Teaching and Learning. *The Internet TESL Journal, X*(5), http://iteslj.org/Articles/Stockdale-Vocabulary.html).

Bottom-up processing research:

"Yang (chapter 7, in this volume) found that the main task for vocabulary acquisition for adults at the earliest stages of L2 acquisition is not to establish a new semantic network but rather to achieve automated recognition of L2 word forms" (Coady, 1997, p. 284).   Coady also mentions "potential handicaps in orthographic processing , phonological working memory, and word recognition. Presumably there should be some instructional emphasis on these skills" (Coady, 1997, p. 284).

Contextual acquisition research:

"The contextual acquisition research does demonstrate that most vocabulary knowledge comes from meaningful language encounters.   If the language is authentic, rich in context, enjoyable, and above all, comprehensible, then learning is more successful" (Coady, 1997, p. 286).

"Perhaps one of the main indirect points of Pigada and Schmitt's (2006) study is that, irrespective of reader level, thoughtful selection of a second-language (L2) text is paramount to vocabulary being gleaned from it. Pigada and Schmitt also seem to demonstrate that teachers can encourage L2 vocabulary learning by recommending readings corresponding to L2 learners' competency levels." (Taylor, 2006, 116).

2. Establishing previously met vocabulary

"…[spaced]   repetition of vocabulary can be added to a course in several complementary ways:

· by setting aside class time for revision
· by periodically and systematically testing previously met vocabulary and following up on the results
· by planning the recycling of previously met vocabulary through pair and group activities (Nation, 1994, pp. vii-viii).   For example: vocabulary cards, cloze, crossword puzzles, word searches, and other word games.

"Vocabulary cards are also invaluable in consolidating initial gains because of their portability, ease of use and the number of communicative activities in which they can be used, as well as their potential for increasing student motivation" (Hunt & Beglar, 2005, p. 7).

3. Enriching previously met vocabulary

"… meeting and having to use the word in a variety of new contexts" (Nation, 1994, p. viii).

dictionary work

From Loucky (1998) pp. 2-3

A variety of new context is best for learning and fixing important new word meanings.

4. Developing vocabulary strategies

"These strategies include guessing from context, using word parts, using word cards along with mnemonic techniques like the key word technique" (Nation, 1994, p. 4).

"… strategies to cope with unknown vocabulary met in listening and reading text, to make up for gaps in productive vocabulary met in speaking and writing, to gain fluency in using known vocabulary, and to learn new words in isolation" (Nation, 1994, p. viii).

strategies [such as word-decoding and recognition skills]

According to Hunt & Beglar (2005, p. 1) the three most crucial explicit lexical instruction and learning strategies are:

1) acquiring decontextualized lexis,

2) using dictionaries and

3) inferring from context.

Teach & test both word-decoding skills & vocabulary recognition skills (e.g., fluent phonic skills, strategies to cope with unknown vocabulary met in listening).

5. Developing fluency with know vocabulary" (Nation 1994, p. v)

"… meaningful use of vocabulary in tasks with a low cognitive load" (p. viii).

contextualized, meaning-based tasks