Research and Practice in Vocabulary Teaching: When will they meet?
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The paper looks at four areas of vocabulary studies which have not moved into the design of course books and language courses to the degree they should. They include choosing useful vocabulary to focus on, doing deliberate learning, doing extensive reading, and avoiding interference. These gaps between research and practice are not the result of recent innovations, but are largely the result of the attraction of native-speaker models, and the proliferation of knowledge.

INTRODUCTION

There are clear gaps between vocabulary research and practice, especially as exemplified in published courses. This paper will look at some of the most obvious gaps and assess whether the gaps are serious or not. There may be a common theme in the gaps in that the gaps probably exist because of a commonsense myth that all teaching and learning must be communication focused making use of authentic native speaker materials. Put another way, the myth is that the ends should be the means. For example, the best way to learn to read is to read authentic native-speaker materials.

Certainly, the gaps do not exist because of the pace of new discoveries in language learning and language pedagogy. In almost every case that I look at in this article, the research evidence has been around for fifty years or more.

I will deal with the gaps in order of importance.

CHOOSE USEFUL VOCABULARY TO FOCUS ON

There has been a long history of frequency counting of vocabulary and the application of this to the teaching of vocabulary. In spite of this, designers of graded reading schemes, course designers, and teachers still take a largely laissez faire approach to vocabulary selection, leaving it to be guided by topic selection and expediency.

A well planned vocabulary programme should check to see that the high frequency vocabulary is being covered and repeated, and to see that it is actually being learned. This is important because there is a big difference in the value of learning high frequency words compared to low frequency words.

A striking example of this comes from a recent study of idioms in English. Idioms are loosely described as lexical items where the meaning of the whole is not obvious from the meaning of the parts. For example, off the wall, hell for leather, Bob’s your uncle. Grant (2003) did an exhaustive study of idiom dictionaries and other sources, strictly applying the criteria of non-compositionality (the parts do not reveal the meaning of the whole), and non-figurativeness to distinguish idioms from non-idioms. A figurative can be interpreted by taking a compositional untruth and extracting probable truth from it by an act of pragmatic interpretation. For example, for the figurative kill two birds with one stone, we can see it is not literally true but can imagine or visualise two being dealt with with one blow (which conveys the meaning of the phrase) and so it is figurative. There turned out to be just over 100 true idioms in English, and the most frequent, by and large, with 487 occurrences in 100,000,000 running words, did not even get into the most frequent 2000 words of English Australia
English. In spite of this, idioms fascinate both teachers and learners, and get attention at levels of proficiency where there are much more useful things to learn.

**DO DELIBERATE DECONTEXTUALISED LEARNING**

There is a large amount of very recent and also old evidence going back almost 100 years which shows that deliberate study of vocabulary can result in large, enduring increases in vocabulary size. Perhaps the most dramatic example is a single case study. Beaton, Gruneberg and Ellis (1995) studied a learner who had learned a 350 word Italian vocabulary using the keyword technique ten years previously but who had not had any opportunity to use the knowledge (the trip to Italy did not happen!). Ten years later it was found he remembered 35% of the test words with spelling fully correct and over 50% with minor spelling errors. After looking at the vocabulary list for 10 minutes, recall increased to 65% (fully accurate) and 76% (some minor spelling errors). After one and a half hours revision, recall was near to 100%.

When describing this approach to learning, I have decided to be somewhat prescriptive and give it a very specific name "learning from word cards". The reason for this is that I consider that the evidence shows that there are very clear research guidelines for this kind of learning and that the use of small cards with the foreign word on one side and its translation on the other most readily puts these guidelines into practice. Learners should know about these guidelines and be helped to understand them, and be encouraged to put them to use (see Appendix).

This deliberate learning has to be seen as only one part of a well balanced language course, but it is a very important part. It needs to be balanced by communicative opportunities to put this knowledge to use and to gather more vocabulary for such learning. It is an ideal opportunity for learners to take responsibility for and control of their learning.

This gap is very serious. Both learners and teachers usually see vocabulary knowledge as being very important for language use. Because deliberate learning can result in gains at least ten times as great as those from incidental learning in the same time, a failure to encourage learners to make use of deliberate learning can have severe results. Similarly, studies typically show a wide range of achievement from deliberate learning. Training in the use of the deliberate learning strategy can narrow this range.

**USE SIMPLIFIED MATERIAL**

There is a general feeling that material that has been specially prepared for language learners is not as good as authentic material intended for native speakers. The best argument against this was put forward by Widdowson (1976). He argued that authenticity does not lie in the material itself, but in the way it is used. That is, when a second language learner with a small vocabulary reads a text written for native speakers, the second language learner does not have an authentic reading experience. If the learner reads a simplified text at a suitable level, the learner can respond to that text in an authentic way, by getting enjoyment from the reading, by learning some new ideas, by being critical about the ideas in the text, or by experiencing ease in reading.

Without simplified texts learners cannot experience authentic reading in the second language at all levels of their development. Like deliberate learning, graded reading needs to be seen as a means to an end. There has been a recent heightening of interest in graded reading as the main component of an extensive reading programme. Part of this is because of the book flood research, and the publication of books and research on extensive reading and graded readers. As publishers of graded readers can testify, there has always been an interest in graded reading, but few teachers include a substantial extensive reading programme as a part of their language course.
This gap is also serious. There is now plenty of evidence of the substantial benefits of extensive reading. The reasons for this gap are interesting and well worth researching.

AVOID INTERFERENCE

A less serious but nonetheless significant gap involves the way vocabulary is grouped in lessons. This can be seen on a broader scale as a direct effect of the way language syllabuses are designed.

There is now limited but well researched evidence that presenting unknown related words together increases the difficulty of learning. This means that learning items in a lexical set together, like the names of fruit, or pieces of clothing, makes learning more difficult. This difficulty is expressed in these ways.

1 It takes a longer time or more repetitions to learn all the items in a set, compared with learning unrelated items or thematically related items together. This increase of time ranges from 50% to 100%, so it is a significant increase.

2 Some items in the set get mixed with each other so that items like east and west are known to be directions but east is thought to be west and vice versa. Anecdotal evidence suggests this confusion can have long term effects.

3 Learners find it difficult and confusing and give up on these items as being too difficult.

This is one of the few areas in applied linguistics where there has been genuine replication of experiments, and the replications have yielded the same results. We still need research on the range of meaning and form relationships that are interfering. At present the research shows that these are hyponyms, near synonyms, opposites, and free associates.

The general rule for predicting and avoiding interference seems to be that if items are in a listing or paradigmatic relationship, then interference is likely. If they are in a type of story or syntagmatic relationship, this is likely to help learning. From a syllabus design perspective this means that the sequencing of vocabulary should occur from the way words occur in normal language use such as in stories or factual accounts, rather than in listings based on topics such as in the kitchen, at the market, or being polite.

CONCLUSION

The gaps I have pointed out vary in their importance but I consider that they are all of significance to learners. The gaps are not just gaps between teachers and researchers. They also exist for the topics described above between researchers and course designers, between researchers and teachers on post-graduate programmes, and between researchers themselves. This suggests that the gaps are ones resulting from the proliferation of knowledge and thus the difficulty of keeping up in times of increasing specialisation. Researchers thus must accept a large amount of the blame for the gaps in that they have not presented their findings widely enough and in an accessible enough form.

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English Australia
APPENDIX (Handout)

Neglected principles and sub-principles

1 Choose useful vocabulary to learn
   deliberately learn high frequency vocabulary
   concentrate initially on high frequency items
   learn strategies to help with high and low frequency vocabulary
   monitor your vocabulary growth

2 Do deliberate learning
   use word cards to encourage retrieval
   use L1 translations to make the meaning simple
   use increasingly spaced repetition to get long term establishment
   avoid interference
   use mnemonic tricks where necessary
   spend time learning how to use word cards
   balance direct learning with the other strands

3 Do extensive reading
   distinguish between reading for learning from input and reading for fluency
   when reading for input choose texts which provide 98% coverage
   read at least one reader per week
   read at least three readers at each level
   keep being enthusiastic about reading

4 Avoid interference
   understand the nature of interference
   separate potentially interfering items
   present potentially interfering items in quite different contexts

Choose useful vocabulary to learn

by and large  487 in 10,000,000 running words
so and so  327
such and such  196
out of hand  141
take the piss  137
and what have you 136
serve sb right  101
take sb to task  92
red herring  87
...
take the rise out of sb 2
lay an egg  1
how’s your father  1
make sth out of whole cloth1
all gas and gaiters 1

Do deliberate learning

English Australia
A word card

| independence | kemerdekaan |

Do extensive reading

George began the story that he had told Lennie many times before. “Men like us, who work on ranches, are the loneliest men in the world. They have no family and no home. They go to a ranch, work for some money and then go into town and spend it all. Then they go to another ranch to look for more work. They have nothing to think about in the future.”

Lennie was delighted. “That’s it - that’s it. Now tell me about us.”

George continued. “But we’re not like those men. We’ve got something in the future. We’ve got each other. We can talk to each other and forget other lonely people.”

*(Of Mice and Men* Heinemann Guided Readers: Upper level 2,200 words)*

Avoid interference

Which sets are interfering?

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REFERENCES


