

Editorial

Vocabulary Focus in Language Education: Availability, Technology and Strategies

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Vocabulary knowledge is an essential factor in the development of proficiency in another language. However, English and other languages have often been taught without a clear focus on vocabulary. This has unfortunately meant that students would have had to cope with words far outstripping their ability to acquire and adequately use them, which is detrimental to the learning process. It does hence not surprise that attempts to learn another language are abandoned by learners. For this reason, it is important to understand the relationship between the lexical inventory learners are exposed to and the principles governing vocabulary acquisition in another language. This volume examines the issues of lexical availability, use of technology and vocabulary learning strategies.

Researchers have since long been interested in describing and delimiting vocabulary knowledge. Looking at vocabulary knowledge and attempts at measuring it have raised several complementary perspectives: breadth vs. depth of knowledge (Schmitt 2014), receptive vs. productive knowledge (e.g. Nation 2013a), or lexical organization (Meara 1996; Aitchison 2012). In most of these perspectives, the property of word frequency is central to explore how vocabulary works. Words are classified according to their absolute and relative frequency in the input. However, the observation that very few words make up the list for the most frequent ones, and a vast number of words figure among the least frequent, has led researchers within pedagogical circles to question the adequacy of this measure for teaching purposes. Accordingly, the notion of lexical availability surfaces in an effort to find the words that are most needed or most readily produced in different semantic fields. Lexical availability can be understood as another dimension of lexical competence (Faerch et al., 1984), since it refers to the words stored in the mental lexicon, which are only activated, i.e. available, when the topic or situation require it (Lopez Morales 2014). Traditionally, lexical availability has fulfilled two main purposes, first pedagogical, with the identification of basic or fundamental words to be taught at the different levels of the foreign language (e.g. Michea 1953, Gougenheim et al., 1964), and second, sociolinguistic with studies exploring the words available to older vs younger speakers, men vs women, natives vs. FL learners, rural vs urban participants, and so on (e.g. López Morales 1999). Nevertheless, these available words also allow researchers to examine a more cognitive component, i.e. the structure and conceptualization of the mental lexicon or lexical store of native speakers or students of foreign languages (e.g. Hernández,

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Izura and Tomé 2014). In this sense, the present special issue presents four papers which extensively deal with lexical availability from 3 main perspectives: pedagogical or classroom-oriented (Geoghegan and Agustín Llach, and Montero), cultural (Cifone Ponte), and psycholinguistic (Jimenez Catalán).

The first of these papers (Geoghegan and Agustín Llach) explores the role of the lexical availability task typically used in lexical availability studies as a tool to inform and select the vocabulary to be taught in class banking on a) the most readably available words in the vocabularies of comparable native speakers, b) equivalent L2 items to highly available English L1 words, and c) the teaching context. Suggestions are also made for incorporating LA as a tool for vocabulary selection in classrooms.

Montero's paper addresses the relationship between perceptive learning style and production of vocabulary of 12th grade EFL learners in Spain. She finds that learners' productive vocabulary is not large, and that non-significant differences appeared among learners with different learning styles, although visual learners, who were the most numerous group also report higher means of productive vocabulary in descriptive terms. She concludes suggesting further instruction on EFL vocabulary in the Spanish educational system so that learners would be able to communicate effectively both orally and in written form in English.

In a very interesting approach to sociocultural aspects of vocabulary production, Cifone Ponte examines the cultural vocabulary of different level versions of *A Christmas Carol* by Charles Dickens in an effort to explore how culture, expressed through number of cultural words, is depicted in the different versions. She finds that cultural aspects and concepts are oversimplified in the adapted versions and that little changes as the level increases. She calls for adapting readings in a way that combines accessibility to EFL readers without sacrificing cultural focus, and this can be done by increasing the number of cultural words included.

Finally, Jiménez Catalán presents a study about the relationship between the level of productive vocabulary and lexical availability in English as a foreign language through a general quantitative way but also more qualitatively by looking into the frequency level of the exact responses. She concludes that lexical availability and productive vocabulary are two closely related dimensions. Furthermore, the words generated by two groups of EFL learners as responses to the lexical availability task predominantly find themselves between the 1,000 and 2,000 most frequent words in English.

The second theme of our issue is the use of technology in vocabulary learning. The contribution by Ting and Jeaco and the contribution by Hakobyan base their approach on technology. Ting and Jeaco present an Evidence-Based Teaching Practice paper, describing technological innovations in the development of the Data Driven Learning vocabulary activity "One Item, Multiple Contexts" (Johns, 1997). The paper introduces the means by which questions are generated and presented for vocabulary building activities focusing on differences in the patterns of usage between words with similar meanings. After comparing the patterns in the sets of lines selected by the algorithm with the patterns of usage in the corpus as a whole, the paper presents insights gained through interviews with Chinese learners of English who had used the cross-platform app. The algorithm provided question banks which reflected the overall patterns and the interviewees were generally very positive. The paper concludes with ideas for further development of instructions and the game reward system.

In Hakobyan's paper, technology is beholden to a particular reception mode, which is listening. The main vehicle of delivery in this paper is podcast. Thus, the study examines the relationships between extensive listening to podcasts and vocabulary learning as well as that between encounters with words through listening to podcasts and vocabulary learning. The results of the study well confirm the predictions that extensive listening contributes to vocabulary growth. This ties the article to the last, and possibly the most comprehensive paper of the volume, namely the interview with Paul Nation. However, let us first explore the final theme of the volume.

Vocabulary learning strategies (VLS) constitute the third and final theme well represented in the issue. These are procedures used by learners to facilitate vocabulary learning (Pavčić Takac,

2008; Nation, 2013a). In the article by Dodigovic et al., strategies are one of the examined aspects of contextualised vocabulary learning. This type of learning depends on creating opportunities for learning, such as choosing words at an appropriate level, spaced repetition, as well as reception and production in communicative contexts (Nation, 2013a). This constitutes meaning-based learning, which in this study proves successful, without much emphasis on decontextualised learning. Overall, it appears that learners with a smaller vocabulary size were more dependent on VLS, as evident through their significantly greater reliance on vocabulary learning strategies.

The article by Tabak and Pavičić Takač introduces the less known concept of collocation learning strategies (CLS) as a subcategory of vocabulary learning strategies. They define those as “mental and physical actions learners consciously use to assist them in the specific task of learning collocations”. Collocations are usually defined as combinations of two words appearing together in context. The study examines the predictive power of CLS use with regard to receptive and productive collocational knowledge. Reinforcing the results of the study by Dodigovic et al., Tabak and Pavičić Takač find that strategies do facilitate contextualised learning of collocations.

Finally, Nation’s (2013b) four strands approach fits the strategy narrative very well. Although asked a number of questions regarding specifically the relationship between reading and vocabulary learning, Paul Nation, in an hour long interview emphasizes the need to train learners in language learning skills. This of course encompasses vocabulary learning strategies. From this paper, we learn how the academic environment he was a part of might have shaped his interest in both vocabulary learning and technology, which is another theme of this volume. However, as Nation claims himself (this volume), his interest in vocabulary is primarily intrinsic. We also learn about his concern for the language teachers of today who are faced with a flurry of research publications that need to be channelled to them in a structured way in order to leave their imprint on the teaching practice. His contributions to the solution cannot be underestimated. Most of all, however, Nation points out the need to organise language teaching around the four strands: input, output, language learning and fluency. It is the language learning aspect that best addresses the strategy theme of this volume. It includes vocabulary, learning strategies and becoming autonomous language learners by deliberately learning the language learning principles. Ending on a positive note, with a lot of excellent advice for both language teachers and researchers, this interview provides the perfect conclusion for this volume.

We hope that readers find this collection of papers insightful and inspiring, especially regarding its three main themes: lexical availability, use of technology and vocabulary learning strategies. The papers demonstrate that there is much scope for further developments in both research and pedagogical practices, but they also identify key principles and practical ways to address vocabulary needs. Mastering these principles should lead to a renewed focus on vocabulary in needs analysis, methods and materials selection as well as in assessment within language education. The trifold vocabulary focus should lead to the empowerment of learners to continue taking their language learning experience to the next level.

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