

## **IATEFL RESEARCH SIG**

---

### **Article Discussion Week TWO: Research into practice: Vocabulary**

**Date:** 16-20 January 2012

**Article:** 'Research into practice: Vocabulary', by Paul Nation

**Reference:** Nation, I.S.P. 2011. Research into practice: Vocabulary. *Language Teaching*, 44/4: 529-539.

**Guest moderator:** Anthony Bruton

[Download article here](#)

Many thanks to Anthony Bruton, the contributors, Glen Hill, Andy Barfield, Myles Grogan, Gerry Mugford, Margot McCamley, Judith Ellis, Margaurina, and Martin McMorrow, and all the readers.

#### **Prompts for discussion:**

1. What do you consider are the priorities for research into formal EFL vocabulary learning? And ESL?
2. Do you think Extensive Reading is a viable means of vocabulary expansion in typical FL contexts? Would on-line exposure and task be more accessible and as effective?
3. Do you think some tasks used in EFL vocabulary research are inappropriate: e.g. fill in the blanks; multiple-choice; write sentences with these words; etc.
4. Do you think levels tests should not only be language-specific, but context-specific (e.g. according to country).
5. Has this article/debate given you any new research ideas or changed any of your research priorities?

#### **On research into teaching/learning vocabulary**

To me, research into teaching/learning vocabulary is all about discovering how to properly teach students various ways to learn vocabulary, and to get them motivated enough to do it long-term without a teacher's intervention.  
(Glen Hill)

#### **On teaching vocabulary**

Mechanistically speaking, learning vocabulary to me includes the following:

- a) knowing how to search a dictionary beyond the first meaning one encounters
  - b) learning the pronunciation, not just the meaning one needs to know
  - c) learning how to guess at meanings through word structure (affixes and root words) and surrounding context
- (Glen Hill)

## **On the role of pronunciation**

Pronunciation is important because if you can't hear the spoken word correctly (or at least as close to correctly as possible to make it out), you will not know what to check in a dictionary if needed. You certainly won't know what is being spoken if a dictionary is unavailable. Most speakers of English in the world today are non-native speakers, so their pronunciation is not as clear as that of many native speakers who have clear accents.

(Glen Hill)

## **On research priorities**

One aspect of research, therefore, needs to focus on pedagogical aims. Another should be on improving motivation to start as well as to continue.

(Glen Hill)

What would be welcome would be (a) research exploring how learners themselves see how they develop over time their ways of learning vocabulary, what they notice works or doesn't work for them and why, and what shifting criteria they use as they go, and (b) research exploring how teachers have learnt vocabulary for themselves in different languages and what lexical landscapes their own language learning histories have moved through. I think those are two important parallel ways in which the gap between research and '(teacher)-learner application' might narrow. (Andy Barfield)

This is an area [phonology and vocabulary acquisition] I would like to know more about. In particular, such work would help teachers in my situation find other ways to help students work with vocabulary. (Myles Grogan)

## **On goals and challenges**

Getting students to realize that they need to study, showing them how to do it properly, giving them the motivation to continue -- all of these are my chief goals... (Glen Hill)

I feel that my most important challenge is convincing future teachers of the need to teach vocabulary. A second challenge involves encouraging students to increase their own vocabulary knowledge [...] Since independent learning is key to vocabulary development, I need to find ways to motivate learners in this aspect. Therefore, I would consider that the priorities for research into formal EFL vocabulary learning involves relating student 'investment' to results... [for example] the ability to undertake extensive reading, developing confidence when negotiating new texts, etc. (Gerry Mugford)

I have always believed that vocabulary learning and extension is a vital tool in student motivation. [...] From my experience, I have found that it is necessary to establish what students already know and for what purpose they are learning the language - is it social, is it academic - what part of

academia and so forth. [...] Training teachers to see this gap [between what students already know and what they don't] in learning is vital to student learning. (Margot McCamley)

The biggest challenge I face is getting students to speak. [...] Vocabulary is something I tend to try and slip in the back door. I use a lot of shadowing and graded reading to begin the process of learning, and the biggest vocabulary challenge is that students are simply not aware of the sound of English. It seems like students actively avoid what is (literally) alien to them. Much of the practice students have done before university has been written, with very little work on sound. The main Japanese university entrance test has only had a listening component for five or six years, and it would seem that the sound of English is still posing problems in language acquisition.

(Myles Grogan)

In my opinion, ironically, and in answer to Gerry, one of the areas least researched is actually the focus on vocabulary by teachers in classrooms. Part of the problem is that it is hard to control variables, which is what many researchers want to do, and partly because there is more focus on learning tendencies than on the possible effects of different pedagogic strategies. A major omission in the Nation article, and something mentioned by Margot, is the use of on-line/electronic dictionaries and the effects on learning.

(Anthony Bruton)

### **On the use of dictionaries**

I find dictionaries a total disadvantage, except for specific activities and for doing homework. I try to suspend the use of dictionaries in the classroom as much as possible because students tend to rely on them too much. (Margot McCamley)

### **On online/electronic vocabulary resources**

I was interested in the comment made by Gerry. It is difficult to get students to learn new words when they don't buy a dictionary, but they can use an on line dictionary. (Margot McCamley)

Japanese students have wonderful bilingual electronic dictionaries, but they are expensive, and as far as I've been able to judge, most students don't go beyond the first meaning they encounter. Lots of "translation software" essays crop up in my classes, but students just don't seem to realize what they write is not natural, and often contains words with wrong meanings. (Glen Hill)

[...] I was wondering if anyone has looked into the relative effectiveness of old-fashioned vocab cards (hand-written) versus all of the computer programmes/phone apps for vocab learning available now? I'm not convinced that typing a word leads to the same level of retention as writing it. I know from my experience of memorising foreign song-texts (e.g. Italian, Spanish and French, languages I don't speak) that the act of writing them down is essential for my retention. (Judith Ellis)

[...] Whether typing vs. handwriting the flashcards makes any difference remains to be seen (I'd suspect no difference), but what is more significant is how the cards are used. To do a proper comparison of these methods, I think the presentation format of the cards needs to be taken into account. That is, software nowadays will monitor responses and present cards more often when students make mistakes. Unless a student uses a particular system to mimic that, they will probably (ideally, anyway) just randomize their cards before each practice round and look at them all. (In itself, that is another variable, and I think Nation or someone else has already mentioned it to some degree. I think Nation may have talked about the obvious flaws in students using lists where the order does not change, causing students to remember words just because of the order they remember, not the meaning. (Glen Hill)

### **On vocabulary activities**

I am inclined to go to the glossary of the text if there is one, or create one if not, and work on activities around those, often word games - sorry games are a vital tool in learning - students need to have fun and I often make them group activities so they are learning, not me telling them the answer. (Margaurina)

[...] how we test vocabulary is very important. Some students/cultures are simply good test-takers without actual learning taking place. So, how do we get across to such students the value of learning the words themselves instead of merely passing the tests for a grade (which they might think is the whole purpose, whether the teacher's or their own)? We come back to the motivation concepts again. (Glen Gill)

Glossing at the back of texts provides meaning, but this means that students keep breaking into what they are reading for meaning and then do not develop fluency in reading. [...] glossing should be used as a means of teaching, but it should be used with care. That is to say, work with students on new vocabulary so they not only recognise the word or phrase, but also know how to use it. (Margot McCamley)

[...] the issue of whether [vocabulary exercises] actually can teach vocabulary and very often they assume various kinds of guessing skills. Of course select options can allow some kind of guessing system that can lead to the correct response, while supply questions (e.g. blank-filling), unless there are choices as well, obviously cannot. Then there is the consolidation as well – Schmitt makes the distinction between discovery learning and consolidation. [...] very often it is not clear if the purpose is teaching or testing. Testing vocabulary is another problematic issue. (Anthony Bruton)

From a research point of view there has been a trend, started by Batia Laufer, to compare inferencing outcomes and retention with more form-focused tasks such as making up sentences with words that are accompanied by definitions, for example ... or trying to fill in gaps with words with translations etc.. This research focuses on the involvement load hypothesis (Laufer &

Hulstijn, 2001) and form-focus to prove that form-focus tasks tend to result in better retention than inferencing/ enhancement. (Anthony Bruton)

[...] I use vocab cards in a different way. I use them in the classroom as a group activity, using sentences, or synonyms or antonyms as a secondary card and in group activities, students need to find meaning of the word or phrase. Students enjoy the activity. Then I do post activities with the class. I go a little further with vocab cards. Students develop their own dictionary of words, using extended forms of the word, and word family extensions. So students not only learn the one word but many more. And yes, simply by writing the word down extends their visits to the word, remembering recognition is not knowing meaning and meaning is not necessarily understanding how to use in a variety of contexts. Complex, language learning!

[...]

I have kept a language box too, where students identify the language they don't know, usually from what they have heard or read. Then they choose the words they want to work on - maybe 10 only a day and then they work on word families related to it...the glossing comes in here. The last activity might be to revisit these words somehow and then homework will ensue. (Margot McCamley)

### **On extensive reading**

Reading is something students can fit into their daily routine - eg on the bus, in bed etc [...] A small library of readers can be the basis of students learning to be proactive about their own learning and also realising that learning a language involves learning about themselves and the world (and vice versa). Graded readers, in particular, allow [students] to enrich their core vocabulary by encountering frequent words in various contexts - expansion, in this sense, is qualitative, more than quantitative, as learners increase their confidence, familiarity, automaticity of vocabulary they already sort-of know. (Martin McMorrow)

In my view, extensive reading is a vital tool in language learning. However, there needs to be a variety of texts, and a variety of categories. (Margaurina)

The issue that is rarely raised is that in FL contexts, students are reading in two languages (the FL and their L1), whereas in SL contexts they are typically reading in one (the L2). The other point is that in FL contexts students may need to read English particularly for information not available in their L1, but most students are not going to read 'for pleasure' in the FL [...] (Anthony Bruton)

### **On vocabulary level tests**

I think the tests should be graded and they should be generic so they can be used across country, because when it comes to learning in the classroom, the teacher and the curriculum will define the country aspect of language learning. (Margot McCamley)

Level tests are what language schools often use to put students into the appropriate class. It is mainly about what vocabulary they know and in some cases how to use it. Often level tests are like placement tests and are used interchangeably. TOEIC, IELTS, TOEFL are totally different tests but while they serve the purpose of stating what level a student is at, and this is usually related to TOEFL and IELTS, they are also used to ascertain whether a person can enter a country or whether they can enter tertiary education. TOEIC has a different focus in that it may relate to study and sometimes used for the purpose of recruitment or promotion or salary increase. (Margot McCamley)

As for uses, well, they can be used for placements, but also for gauging reading vocabulary for graded reading, and also for monitoring vocabulary development, even though they might not be that sensitive. (Anthony Bruton)

However, one point I wanted to add is that in global English there might be vocabulary that is culturally more frequent in one place than another. For example, Brits might use 'mugs', but people in other places not. In Spain a lot of different types of fish are eaten and appear on menus - some of these fish Brits would find hard to name, etc. The other point about Spanish speakers, for example, is that a lot of 'difficult' words for NS English-speakers are not difficult if they are Latinate for Spanish learners. (Anthony Bruton)

### **On changes after reading the article**

I was so interested to read the articles related to Involvement Load Hypothesis and Vocabulary learning. It was something I had not heard of and yet, as I read, I found I had already applied some of the findings in my classroom in terms of glossing and vocabulary learning, particularly when it related to words students would seldom use as discussed in the Martinez-Fernandez paper. The Involvement Load Hypothesis and Vocabulary learning by Yaqubi et al was a little dense and I had not enough time to study it fully to comprehend the findings. However there were some interesting results on low-level proficiency learners and how the simplicity of task did not necessarily relate to language retention. The question related to that was would I change my research topic on this. Probably not, but I would work with results to see how it applies to language learning - do some classroom research. (Margot McCamley)

### **A few more references**

A Slideshare presentation on vocabulary teaching / learning, by Martin McMorrow

It includes ten interesting vocabulary activities and several useful references.  
<http://www.slideshare.net/martinmcmorrow/vocabulary-activation-manatesol-5214340>

Academic English  
<http://martinmcmorrow.podomatic.com/>  
Lextutor  
[www.lexutor.ca](http://www.lexutor.ca) (Tom Cobb)

Loginostics  
[www.lognostics.co.uk](http://www.lognostics.co.uk) (Paul Meara)

Academic Word List which is an additional list of Academic Vocabulary - See A. Coxhead in TESOL Quarterly 34/2 (2000).

Laufer & Nation on a test of controlled productive ability in Language Testing, 16 (1999).

A few flashcard websites:

- Quizlet

<http://quizlet.com/>

- Cobocards

<http://www.cobocards.com/>

- Flashcard Machine

<http://www.flashcardmachine.com/>

### **Suggestions for improving the article discussion week**

Perhaps spending 2-3 days on a question would allow for more in-depth discussions and potentially finding more avenues for people to explore in their own situations. (Glen Hill)

There should be a clear focus on discussing the article. (Glen Hill)

[Here are a few questions we could have discussed]:

1. What research is there that could help us approach teaching vocab more effectively?
2. Does the research actually help us? Does it achieve what it sets out to do?
3. How can we put it into practice as part of our methodology?
4. (potentially) What research needs to be done? e.g. Can we formulate questions, develop tests which involve us in the research process? (Judith Ellis)

Comments on the readings. I think in order to comment, it is vital that time is given for people to read additional texts offered as a primer on the topic, eg Involvement Load Hypothesis and Vocabulary Learning and other texts that I found on the subject on the internet. It would be useful to get the topic and the questions which give us time to research them prior to discussing through SIG. (Margot McCamley)

I also agree with Margot that further reading is essential, time permitting. I also had a look at the Involvement Load Hypothesis by Yaqubi et al - thanks for motivating me, Margot - and for me it raised as many questions as it answered. I'm not convinced by the rating of cognitive load to different tasks given in the article, and I imagine there's more going on when students learn than just their three processes. [...] For example, just the act of writing a word

down in print (e.g. in their gap-fill activity) may potentially lead to greater retention (linking into motor memory or visual memory, or both). If this is the case, then it is a variable that needs to be controlled for in any testing. (Judith Ellis)