

Vocabulary and Its Importance in Language Learning

This book is about vocabulary teaching, but it is necessary first to establish what *vocabulary* means to focus on teaching it. This introductory chapter reminds readers of the importance of vocabulary to language learning.

What Is Vocabulary?

Throughout this short book I hope to engage you, the reader, directly in thinking about English vocabulary and the teaching of it to students learning English as a second or foreign language. As you begin, please stop and answer the question asked in the header above.

REFLECTIVE BREAK

- My definition(s) of English vocabulary:

Your answer likely has something to do with the *words of a language*, which is perhaps how most people think of vocabulary, and that is correct because vocabulary does deal with words. Yet vocabulary is much more than just single words, as this book will demonstrate. Recent vocabulary studies draw on an understanding of *lexis*, the Greek for *word*, which in English “refers to all the words in a language, the

entire vocabulary of a language” (Barcroft, Sunderman, & Schmitt, 2011, p. 571). So it will probably not surprise you to learn that vocabulary also includes *lexical chunks*, phrases of two or more words, such as *Good morning* and *Nice to meet you*, which research suggests children and adults learn as single lexical units. Phrases like these involve more than one word but have a clear, formulaic usage and make up a significant portion of spoken or written English language usage. Also called *formulaic sequences* (Alali & Schmitt, 2012), they are central to English vocabulary learning and therefore worth teachers’ attention as they teach vocabulary (Lewis, 1993).

So vocabulary can be defined as *the words of a language, including single items and phrases or chunks of several words which convey a particular meaning, the way individual words do*. Vocabulary addresses single lexical items—words with specific meaning(s)—but it also includes lexical phrases or chunks.

The Importance of Vocabulary

Vocabulary is central to English language teaching because without sufficient vocabulary students cannot understand others or express their own ideas. Wilkins (1972) wrote that “. . . while without grammar very little can be conveyed, without vocabulary *nothing* can be conveyed” (pp. 111–112). This point reflects my experience with different languages; even without grammar, with some useful words and expressions, I can often manage to communicate. Lewis (1993) went further to argue, “lexis is the core or heart of language” (p. 89). Particularly as students develop greater fluency and expression in English, it is significant for them to acquire more productive vocabulary knowledge and to develop their own personal vocabulary learning strategies.

Students often instinctively recognize the importance of vocabulary to their language learning. As Schmitt (2010) noted, “learners carry around dictionaries and not grammar books” (p. 4). Teaching vocabulary helps students understand and communicate with others in English. Voltaire purportedly said, “Language is very difficult to put into words.” I believe English language students generally would concur, yet learning vocabulary also helps students master English for their purposes.

Aspects of Vocabulary Knowledge

The concept of a *word* can be defined in various ways, but three significant aspects teachers need to be aware of and focus on are *form*, *meaning*, and *use*. According to Nation (2001), the *form* of a word involves its pronunciation (spoken form), spelling (written form), and any word parts that make up this particular item (such as a prefix, root, and suffix). An example for word parts can be seen with the word *uncommunicative*, where the prefix *un-* means *negative* or *opposite*, *communicate* is the root word, and *-ive* is a suffix denoting that someone or something is able to do something. Here, they all go together to refer to someone or something that is not able to communicate, hence *uncommunicative*.

Nation (2001) stated that *meaning* encompasses the way that form and meaning work together, in other words, the concept and what items it refers to, and the associations that come to mind when people think about a specific word or expression. *Use*, Nation noted, involves the grammatical functions of the word or phrase, collocations that normally go with it, and finally any constraints on its use, in terms of frequency, level, and so forth. For *form*, *meaning*, and *use*, Nation (2001) declared there is both a receptive and productive dimension, so knowing these three aspects for each word or phrase actually involves 18 different types of lexical knowledge, as summarized in Table 1.

When teachers teach vocabulary to build students' knowledge of words and phrases, helping them learn any and all of these different components assists them in enhancing their English vocabulary knowledge and use. After you have looked through Table 1, please do the Reflective Break, which is to consider your students' particular strengths and weaknesses with English in terms of these three aspects of vocabulary knowledge.

REFLECTIVE BREAK

- My impression of my students' strengths and weaknesses with English vocabulary:

Strengths	Weaknesses

Table 1. What Is Involved in Knowing a Word

Aspect	Component	Receptive knowledge	Productive knowledge
Form	spoken	What does the word sound like?	How is the word pronounced?
	written	What does the word look like?	How is the word written and spelled?
	word parts	What parts are recognizable in this word?	What word parts are needed to express the meaning?
Meaning	form and meaning	What meaning does this word form signal?	What word form can be used to express this meaning?
	concepts and referents	What is included in this concept?	What items can the concept refer to?
	associations	What other words does this make people think of?	What other words could people use instead of this one?
Use	grammatical functions	In what patterns does the word occur?	In what patterns must people use this word?
	collocations	What words or types of words occur with this one?	What words or types of words must people use with this one?
	constraints on use (register, frequency . . .)	Where, when, and how often would people expect to meet this word?	Where, when, and how often can people use this word?

Source: Adapted from Nation (2001, p. 27).

Each person's response here will vary because vocabulary knowledge is very personal. Some teachers are good at the grammatical functions of particular words or phrases, for example, and others have a strong knowledge of English word parts. I encourage you to begin with your students' strengths, because every person has some vocabulary knowledge that is relevant to English, even if it derives from his or her own native language. Aim to build on learners' strengths and also recognize various weaknesses. For example, many students read in English and thus may be adept at recognizing meaning in terms of concepts and referents, but if they have not heard the words and phrases they are reading, then they may be weak at recognizing them when they hear them spoken or weak at pronouncing them when they read something out loud. Sometimes students learning English as a foreign language (EFL) are weaker at recognizing particular constraints on vocabulary usage, such as the fact that only young people use a particular word or expression, which might be colloquial and not usually deemed appropriate in more formal contexts such as speeches. Yet if teachers are aware of their students' strengths and weaknesses in English vocabulary, then they have a place to start to expand students' knowledge and strengthen weaker areas.

Perhaps as you reflect on the information in Table 1 you find the task of teaching English vocabulary a little daunting. If so, you are not alone! There is much that teachers and students need to learn to understand and use words and phrases correctly in different situations. This book does not claim to cover it all but instead aims to help you understand important issues from recent vocabulary research and theory so that you may approach teaching vocabulary in a principled, thoughtful way. It will also help you reflect on vocabulary teaching in your particular context and ways that you might improve your vocabulary teaching.

Developing a Love for Vocabulary Learning

Because it is a changing, growing reality, English vocabulary is challenging. As Ur (2012) aptly stated, unlike grammar, "lexical items . . . are an open set, constantly being added to (and lost, as archaic words gradually go out of use)" (p. 3). Perhaps this situation is most evident with computer-related vocabulary, such as the *Internet*, *e-mail*, and

Web browser, which was not commonly used even 15 years ago. Now, though, everyone seems to know these items and how important such realities are to their lives and work. English vocabulary's expansion is exciting, but it also means that teachers and students alike need to be in the habit of learning vocabulary.

People can expand their English vocabulary knowledge in many different ways. As a native English speaker, I have been learning vocabulary for many years, but I am still a learner because English vocabulary changes and grows. Occasionally, I come across an unknown word or phrase (or a new usage for one I already know) in something in print or online, or that I hear on the radio or television. I will stop to consider what it might mean in that particular context, and make a guess. If I have a dictionary close by, I will check it for the word or phrase, or if I am at my computer I will check an online dictionary. Words and phrases fascinate me, and if new ones seem useful, then these vocabulary items are ones I may later use in my own speech or writing—even if it is to comment on this new vocabulary item! Whatever their personality and learning style, both teachers and students can develop a growing love for English vocabulary learning and naturally share a passion for words and phrases in any language.

REFLECTIVE BREAK

- What aspects of English vocabulary currently interest you?
- What two or three strategies for learning English words and phrases do you model and teach?

One resource that teachers may explore to model and teach English words and phrases is the Web site, <http://freerice.com/>, which calls itself “the world’s only vocabulary game that feeds the hungry.” Through the World Food Programme (WFP), this site allows those with Internet access to check their vocabulary knowledge using multiple-choice questions. For every correct answer 10 grains of rice are donated through the WFP to help feed the hungry. Your students can even practice listening to target words by clicking on an icon,

which can help with hearing and repeating the spoken form. You might bookmark this site and share it with your students.

Conclusion

English vocabulary is complex, with three main aspects related to form, meaning, and use, as well as layers of meaning connected to the roots of individual words (Nation & Meara, 2010). Teaching vocabulary is not just about words; it involves lexical phrases and knowledge of English vocabulary and how to go about learning and teaching it, which the next chapter explores.

REFLECTIVE BREAK

- What is something important you learned about vocabulary from this chapter?