Speakers at the symposium took the event’s title “Words Matter” as a starting point, but showed convincingly that words are by no means all that is important in lexical development. I had the benefit of reviewing draft versions of the speakers’ papers before attending the symposium, but it was interesting to see how the content of their ideas developed in their delivery of the plenary talks at the symposium, and in the workshop/discussion sessions which they facilitated in the afternoon. I will summarize here the main points made by the speakers and raised in the workshops and plenary question-answer session.

ADVANCED-LEVEL VOCABULARY (MICHAEL MCCARTHY)

McCarthy’s plenary talk looked at the notion of an “advanced level vocabulary,” what this might consist of, and how learners might be helped to develop their vocabulary at the upper-intermediate to advanced range.

McCarthy began by outlining criteria which might define the advanced level in vocabulary. He identified the key characteristics in this area as

- Extending personal vocabulary: What items make up the learner’s vocabulary knowledge, and does the learner show a capacity to develop this personal vocabulary autonomously?
- Using lexis appropriately and skillfully: What use can the learner make of the lexis which he knows?

For each of these criteria, we can ask, How does an advanced learner differ from a pre-advanced learner in this area? McCarthy mentioned examples from his own experience, for example, in learning Spanish, and emphasized that autonomy in developing one’s vocabulary should not be considered “independence” in the sense of working without help: on the contrary, the autonomous learner needs to know how to develop her vocabulary in interaction with other resources such as a dictionary or other people (cf. Palfreyman, 2002).

The size of one’s personal vocabulary is often seen as a key measure of vocabulary development, but this becomes increasingly problematic at advanced levels. McCarthy reviewed some of the previous work on word frequency and text coverage, which helps us to decide which words are most worth learning at lower levels. A relatively small basic vocabulary does much of the work in a typical English text: on average, about 83% of any given text will consist of forms of the most frequent 2,000 words in English, making these words clearly a “must” for early learners. The next 2,000 most frequent
words, on the other hand, make up only a further 5% of any given text: the return on learning less frequent words drops off so rapidly that McCarthy used the metaphor of a “continental shelf” to represent the depths facing the learner who wants to go beyond a basic vocabulary.

For the advanced learner, tackling this continental shelf is the key to expressing more subtle meanings. However, the advanced learner is faced with a “receding horizon” of learning: any given word beyond the basic vocabulary will be used or met relatively rarely. The more words you know, the less useful each word seems to be, and the more you read, the more you meet unknown words. The figures cited above for coverage of a text by frequent and less frequent words need to be seen in relation to thresholds for comprehension of a text. A vocabulary of even the most frequent 2,000 words facilitates understanding of 80% of the words in a typical text; but this still means that one in five words are unknown, which presents a serious obstacle to understanding of the text as a whole, and to strategic guessing of the unknown 20%. It seems that even understanding of 90% of the words in a text can be insufficient for full understanding of the text.

What then is the potential for learners to make rapid gains in extending their vocabulary? McCarthy mentioned two approaches which have been proposed. One is to live in an environment (e.g., by studying abroad) where the second language (L2) is used as a daily medium of interaction. Studies suggest that this may help the learner to learn 2,500 new words per year. Another approach is to specialize: to learn vocabulary around a particular subject, or to learn the vocabulary associated with a particular area of activity, such as Coxhead’s (2000) academic word list, which offers a relatively high-frequency vocabulary for the domain of “academic English.” McCarthy noted that specializing in this way seems to lead to overall proficiency gains as well.

If vocabulary size is problematic as a parameter for advanced-level vocabulary, what might be an alternative way to delimit this area and to set realistic goals for learning? One factor is the organization of one’s vocabulary, which could be facilitated by the use of information technology. Another criterion is depth of vocabulary knowledge. Although the advanced learner’s vocabulary might grow more slowly, the knowledge of these words may deepen in various ways. The learner may become more aware of the different meanings of a word, in terms of metaphorical meanings, finer subdivisions of meanings, and connotations of simple words, as well as the different associations which a word may form, depending on the sense in which it is used. Register is another area where awareness of a word’s use may deepen with more exposure to the language in authentic contexts. Knowledge of collocation may be informed by the use of computer analysis of large corpora to highlight patterns of usage, such as generate in conjunction with objects such as income or excitement. Semantic prosody refers to the positive, negative, or other correlations of lexical items such as prim.

In McCarthy’s afternoon workshop session, discussion centred on practical applications of these concepts to language instruction. Participants discussed which level certain vocabulary-use strategies and areas of knowledge are appropriate for. It was noted that awareness-raising of collocation is a key goal at lower levels, so that learners can move
beyond questions, such as “what does do mean?” to a more nuanced awareness of how words express meaning in combination. Materials design was another concern of participants in the workshop, especially the ways in which materials can give learners access to corpus data without overloading them.

CHUNKS AND CLUSTERS (RON CARTER)

Carter’s plenary talk built on the notion of an advanced vocabulary, extending the concept of vocabulary from words to clusters and collocations. He emphasized the range of phenomena which come under the heading of “lexical chunks.” Although such chunks may be formulaic, corpus data sometimes reveal that they are not fixed in their use in the way that they are often thought to be. For example, the phrase “pay an arm and a leg” is extended in spoken English to other financial metaphors, such as “charge an arm and a leg.” Similarly, proverbs are often alluded to in an abbreviated form: for example, the phrase “silver lining” is much more frequently used than the traditionally cited proverb “every cloud has a silver lining.” The advanced learner needs to know which collocations can be varied, and in what ways.

Carter drew on data from a corpus of spoken English, which illustrates key points in relation to lexical chunks. In terms of frequency, lexical chunks in spoken English are on a par with frequent single words: the top 20 two-word clusters, for example, are as frequent as single words such as small, early, and fun. McCarthy emphasized the discourse functions of lexical chunks. High-frequency chunks such as you know and I mean are used in quite distinct ways from the literal meaning of know and mean. Chunks can call for confirmation that the listener shares a particular perspective (e.g., you know what I mean), or they can frame sentences to express hedging, politeness, or “face” (e.g., Do you think…). They can also express vagueness (e.g., things like that). Carter pointed out the strategic nature of using vague language: An advanced learner must know how to deploy these chunks to construct speaker-listener relationships, to express pragmatic meaning and to jointly construct a view of the world, as well as to express referential meanings.

Carter emphasized that lexical chunks are a key part of the competent user’s vocabulary, and as such, they deserve a more significant place than they traditionally have in reference books, such as dictionaries. He considered the argument that teaching chunks assumes that learners want to sound like native speakers, when this may not be the case. However, the role of the teacher may be seen as helping learners to understand and exercise choices in language use, which includes at least an awareness of the meanings which are expressed by chunks which are heard or read.

Chunks are a key component of fluency in language. They can contribute to fluent production, but only if they are produced in a natural manner: if chunks are used slowly, disfluently, or as single words, they lose the interpersonal effect which is so vital to their use. This suggests that learners need to be helped to automatize the production of chunks, so that a chunk is processed psycholinguistically as a single item; and Carter
pointed out that, in doing this, awareness-raising may well need to be supplemented by the use of controlled practice such as drills.

Carter’s afternoon workshop session tackled issues of concern to participants, such as the place of chunks in course books (both currently and potentially). Another interesting point raised was how we can build on students’ knowledge (if not awareness) of chunks in their first language (L1). There seems to be some potential for transfer of competence and strategies in this area. The notion of “native speaker competence” as a viable goal for language learning was also discussed.

**VOCABULARY ASSESSMENT (CHRISTINE COOMBE)**

Coombe provided a valuable overview of issues in vocabulary assessment. Vocabulary assessment can help us to determine students’ knowledge, before and after a course of study; to give feedback to the learner; and to assess whether learning has taken place. Students are concerned with the formidable task of mastering thousands of lexical items, while teachers are concerned with how this learning can be supported, whether through focused learning of vocabulary, or learning from context. The washback effect of vocabulary assessment is significant: students believe that vocabulary is important for their learning, and assessment can motivate students to try to develop their vocabulary knowledge.

One approach to vocabulary assessment is to assess students’ knowledge of key words (e.g., high-frequency vocabulary). This often involves discrete point formats, using items from word frequency lists, and test items which are amenable to objective analysis. However, this may have a negative washback effect, leading to a restricted, superficial type of learning: lexis, as McCarthy and Carter show, is more than words, and vocabulary competence is more than just “knowing” the meaning of a word. Moreover, in real-world language use, context can compensate for unfamiliarity with specific lexis.

Read and Chapelle (2001) identify various aspects which may vary between vocabulary assessment instruments: assessment may be discrete or embedded as part of a skill (typically, speaking, writing, or reading); it may be selective (focusing on specific items of vocabulary) or comprehensive (covering all words in a text); responses may be based on reference to context or not. Computer analysis of vocabulary frequency has now led to measures such as Nation’s vocab levels test (Laufer & Nation, 1999) and Paribakht and Wesche’s vocabulary knowledge scale (e.g., Wesche & Paribakht, 1996).

Coombe noted that the trend in one particularly widely applied assessment instrument, the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL), has been toward embedding vocabulary testing into other skills. In the 1995 TOEFL, one word was tested per reading passage; in the computer-based TOEFL there is a similar approach, although in a different format (the learner clicks on a synonym); in the latest internet-based TOEFL, vocabulary is mentioned only in relation to the skill of writing.
THE OLD VOCABULARY, THE NEW VOCABULARY, AND THE ARAB LEARNER (TOM COBB)

Although Cobb was unfortunately prevented by unforeseen circumstances from attending the symposium, the content of his paper provides powerful local relevance to the debate on vocabulary for learners in the Gulf Region as well as users of other languages which are noncognate with English.

Cobb considers first some models of vocabulary learning which were used in developing language programs in the Gulf Region in the 1970s and 1980s. Lexis was seen as dependent on grammar, making vocabulary seem a secondary consideration rather than a driving force in language development and use. Models of reading and vocabulary were appropriated from literature on the learning of L1 reading, leading to an overemphasis on “top-down” reading processes and strategies for coping with gaps in vocabulary knowledge. For Arabic speakers with little access to Indo-European cognates in their first language and with a reading culture different from that of high-SES (socioeconomic status), young native speakers of English learning to read in their own language, approaches based on these concepts typically produced poor results, with learners having an inadequate vocabulary for comprehension of typical English texts even at a low level. Subsequent research with Arab learners by Cobb and others has given greater insight into some previous assumptions about vocabulary and reading development. First, guessing the meanings of new words in context is not necessarily an easy skill: lack of familiarity with L1 cognates, as well as a threshold effect (roughly 95% of the words in a text need to be understood in order to guess the meaning of the other 5%), can make guessing a difficult and unreliable strategy. Second, some reading processes are not universal across languages: Arabic readers and English readers show quite different response patterns to language-neutral strings of characters, showing their different strategies in recognizing words. Third, Cobb challenges EFL pedagogues to turn from pointing out characteristic weaknesses of Arab learners to building on the strengths which Arab learners show in, for example, inferring meaning from context beyond the sentence level.

Cobb traces how developments in vocabulary curriculum design and teaching have, in several cases, begun with EFL professionals’ attempts to address challenges faced in the Arab world, and later become recognized as more widely applicable. The use of frequency lists to focus vocabulary teaching on maximally useful words, for example, was pioneered by teachers at the American University of Beirut in the 1970s and has subsequently become a guiding principle in vocabulary materials and syllabus development worldwide. Similarly, the use of information technology to facilitate presentation, review, assessment, and sharing of lexis was developed by Cobb and others to help learners in Oman, and is now one of the most promising new directions in vocabulary teaching. Computer network technology offers new possibilities for guiding learners in dealing with the “continental shelf,” referred to by McCarthy at this symposium.
The questions and answer session which concluded the symposium focused mainly on issues related to lexical chunks and assessment, reflecting the content of the day’s sessions. I will summarize very briefly the issues raised, which are all significant for the future of vocabulary teaching.

The discussions of lexical chunks in the symposium have centred primarily on spoken English—what about chunks in written English? There will certainly be chunks in writing too, but rather than making hasty assumptions that we know what is a “written chunk,” we should examine corpora of written English to see what kinds of chunks are common in (particular genres of) writing.

Classroom assessment of vocabulary (as opposed to in tests): It is important that vocabulary assessment (like assessment of other areas of language) is done by a variety of means, which may include discrete tests, analysis of written production, and assessment of strategies for dealing with vocabulary.

How to assess chunking: We should expect some continuity with established testing (e.g., multiple-choice questions, gap fills), but in order to introduce a discourse perspective and real co-construction of meaning, more interactional testing is needed: in terms offered by Aston (1988), we should aim not only for an information gap but for an interaction gap, which promotes purposeful, authentic, and engaged interpersonal communication between learners and others.

How a lexical focus is different from audiolingualism: The key developments in recent work on vocabulary are, first, that we are using real data (notably from corpora of authentic English) and that there is a focus on language awareness rather than simply use: learners are encouraged to think, “What are these chunks for, and what can I do with them?”

Further details on research on vocabulary learning strategies of Japanese learners (Schmitt, 1997): This research studied strategies at different ages. Younger learners tended to use more concrete, individual strategies (such as repetition); in later years, at high school and university, they favoured more conceptual strategies (e.g., using mind maps) and more social strategies (e.g., asking a friend or teacher).
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