Introduction to the New Pitt Series in Vocabulary

The importance of the knowledge of vocabulary has been well established in the field of second language teaching and learning in the last ten years and is reflected in both scholarly research and textbooks. In this context, the English Language Institute at the University of Pittsburgh is known for its popular eight-volume series *Words for Students of English* (University of Michigan Press). In the years since the series was first published, we have learned more about how vocabulary is learned and taught (e.g., Coxhead, 2001; Folse, 2004; Hulstijn & Laufer, 2001; Nation, 2001; Paribakt & Wesche, 1997). The faculty at the English Language Institute have been considering new ways to address learners' challenges in acquiring vocabulary. The result of our research and experience is a new series, *Academic Vocabulary Building*. This series weaves together three sets of knowledge: (1) the results of recent research from applied linguists and psycholinguists, (2) the rich classroom experience of the Institute faculty, who together have many decades of practical classroom ESL experience, and (3) the data gathered from our online student database and corpus studies that have informed us of which words students need to know more deeply.

Which Words?

The applied linguistics research on corpora has provided a better idea of which words students need to know (Cobb, www.lextutor.ca; Nation, 2001). In an important study, Coxhead (2001) identified 570 word families in the social sciences and humanities. We focus on those word families in this series because although the 1,000 and 2,000 most frequently occurring words in English account for about 80 percent of words in any text, the 570 academic word list families account for a further 3.9–8.5 percent of words in a newspaper or an academic text. Therefore, if learners know these words, this knowledge will contribute a great deal to their overall comprehension of spoken and written texts.

What Parts of a Word?

What does it mean when we say a student knows a word? Of course, there is much more to knowing a word than its simple form and a meaning or concept. At a minimum, knowing a word means knowledge of its form, meaning, syntax, and morphology. This knowledge also includes register, appropriateness, and cultural content (Levelt, 1989; Nation, 2001). We have, therefore, expanded on form-meaning tasks to include work on the morphology, syntax, and collocations of the words.

Exercises That Teach Vocabulary

Our materials are designed to help students learn all aspects of word structure and meaning. We know that frequency is very important in word learning (Ellis, 2001, 2002), so we have ensured that the words are used in a variety of exercises and forms. We then lead the learner through a process of lexical building that begins with form-meaning recognition, continues through recognition of the internal structure of words, and ends with learner-centered production.

Each unit contains sections that attack various components of word learning. First, each chapter opens with a chart of focus words and their various morphological forms. The chart familiarizes the students with the range of common forms of each word. The next step is the first stage in establishing form-meaning mappings: Each word is listed with a definition, along with two example sentences. In each set of definitions, we present the vocabulary on the theme of the unit and provide at least two morphological variants to begin the morphological input enhancement goals of the series. This step provides the first semantic and syntactic context for each word.

The lists and definitions are followed by exercises that concentrate students' attention on establishing form-meaning links. These exercises consist of practice opportunities that require multiple retrievals to promote label-to-concept links and begin awareness of derivational and inflectional variants. Follow-up exercises focus on collocations, and the final exercise in each chapter is a practice quiz. Additional exercises (available for teachers online) focus on meaning and derivational and inflectional awareness and production.

Several exercises are designed to promote production. Although Folse (2006) has suggested that fill-in-the-blank exercises are more time effective for teachers, others suggest that productive meaning-generating output is essential for deeper learning of vocabulary (Hulstijn & Laufer, 2001), including the involvement load hypothesis, which suggests that deeper processing leads to better learning.

By the time a student has finished a unit, he or she should have had both receptive and productive practice with the form, meaning, morphosyntax, and collocational properties of each lexical item. We hope you find these materials useful, and we look forward to hearing from teachers and learners who use the books.

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