

Preface

For years, second language learners have complained about their lack of vocabulary in their new language. During this time, experts in our field did not give much importance to vocabulary, as evidenced in the dearth of second language research studies on vocabulary. Instead, second language research dealt with syntax, motivation, contrastive analysis, or learning styles. However, since the mid-1990s there has been a mini-explosion of research on second language vocabulary issues such as student needs, teaching techniques, learner strategies, and incidental learning. Finally, we are arriving at some answers to key questions that both teachers and students have had about vocabulary for many years.

We know that vocabulary is important. One of the myths that I have heard over and over in my many years of teaching is that vocabulary is not a big deal. At numerous conference presentations and in numerous journal articles (and even in classes that I have observed), we were told that all you had to do was provide comprehensible input and as a result, the new language would somehow magically fall into place. Students were told to read for “gist,” to listen for the overall idea, and not to worry about “the details” too much. The problem was that the students themselves recognized that they could not really understand a large number of the words in the reading or listening passage and, hence, the meaning of the actual passage. Comprehensible input was therefore neither **comprehensible** nor **input**. The students recognized the true value of vocabulary in second language learning, something that our profession is finally beginning to address.

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not to teach words in isolation and instead were told that context was key, which is another of the myths about second language vocabulary. No one is denying that context is important in real communication, but if the learner does not know a large number of words, then there is no context to use for clues. Context clues in the real world are of limited value, especially if the learner does not know enough of the words in the clues themselves. Using context clues to figure out new vocabulary is a good coping skill; however, it is not a very efficient way for *second language learners* to learn a lot of vocabulary. This myth that promotes using context clues over learning lots of vocabulary is based on the overzealous comparisons of learning a first language and a second language.

One source of the lack of attention to vocabulary is that our field tends to be dominated by teachers and curriculum planners whose primary experience with a foreign language has been with English, French, German, or another language that is similar to English in many ways. In learning a second language, the learners' needs in terms of grammar, pronunciation, writing, and vocabulary will vary according to the first language. What I am talking about here goes far beyond simple contrastive analysis.

In terms of vocabulary, which is the scope of this book, different native languages present different issues when learning a second language. My initial second language study was of French and then Spanish. Later, I studied Arabic, Malay, German, and then Japanese. Though the actual memorization and other aspects of learning these languages were similar, learning vocabulary in French and Spanish was a very different experience from learning vocabulary in Malay but even more so in Arabic and Japanese.

As an English speaker learning French and Spanish, I found many cognates. For example, just about any English noun that ends in *-tion* will be the same word in Spanish but with *-ción*. Thus, without ever being exposed to the words in Spanish, I can predict that *edición*, *construcción*, and *manifestación* are actual Spanish words. In Japanese, however, even after six years of being a principal at a school and interacting in Japanese with students, teachers, and parents all day, I have no idea how to say these words in Japanese. To be sure, there are English cognates in Japanese, Malay, and Arabic, but their extent in these languages is far less than it is in Romance languages (or German).

As I studied Arabic, I learned not to translate the word *be* because in the present tense it does not exist. In Japanese, I learned to say “Tadaima” when I arrived home and “Itadakimasu” before I ate anything, but these words do not have a literal translation in English. In Malay, I learned to use different words for different types of bananas, and I learned to divide the day into *pagi*, *tengahari*, *petang*, and *malam* although these new words (and concepts even) did not really match up with the division of our English day into *morning*, *afternoon*, *evening*, and *night*. In sum, I had the opportunity to see that learning vocabulary in a second language sometimes presented new and different problems for L2 (second language) learners in addition to the normal problem of learning a lot of new information.

Why my interest in vocabulary? My interest in vocabulary started quite early. I was lucky enough to grow up in south Louisiana, an area where *beaucoup*, pronounced as boo-koo, was as much a part of my everyday English vocabulary as *neutral ground* (in general English: the medium between two sides of a street) or *etoufee* (in general English: a thick stew with seafood or meat). I learned early on that we talked funny, and a lot of this was due to our words.

My early exposure to foreign languages was limited to Spanish and French, and I was always fascinated by the way they sounded and why they sounded like that. If I woke up early enough, I could listen to some Cajun French on the handful of television channels that broadcast programs in Cajun French at dawn. However, a huge source of my interest in foreign languages was through another TV program, “I Love Lucy.” Lucy jokingly added an *-o* to English words, and suddenly she was speaking Spanish—albeit broken Spanish, but I did not know for many years that she was just joking.

In high school, my first foreign language experience was with Mrs. Emily de Montluzin, who really opened up my eyes to foreign languages. Each week we had a French vocabulary test. Vocabulary was emphasized through explicit teaching, and vocabulary was tested, and I learned not only the importance of vocabulary but also French vocabulary. Armed with words and good language skills, I was able to use this knowledge to improve my French. I used this same strategy with Spanish, then Arabic, Malay, German, and Japanese.

In teaching students in and from countries all over the world, I have seen them struggle and—for the most part—succeed in their learning process. Although the outside of the classroom was different—from tropical jungles in Malaysia to snow-covered mountains in Japan, to the desert in Saudi Arabia—students appreciate good instruction in vocabulary, which includes teaching words that students need to know, giving many good examples of the words, and holding students accountable for the words through appropriate practice activities and systematic testing. It is hoped that the material presented in this book will enable you to have a better understanding of how vocabulary works for L2 learners, L2 teachers, L2 curriculum designers, and materials writers.

Book Organization

The organization of this book is quite simple. An introduction section offers a brief summary of some basic concepts in second language vocabulary. The bulk of the book revolves around chapters representing each of the eight myths discussed. These myths are not presented in any special order, and their relevant discussions are not mutually exclusive. Because of this, you may see a study explained in depth for one myth, discussed briefly in another myth, and enumerated on a summary table of research in another. Each chapter begins with a section called **In the Real World** that describes an actual teaching situation. This is followed by a section called **What the Research Says**. Finally, each chapter ends with a list of pedagogical applications called **What You Can Do**. The book closes with a brief conclusion to the discussion.

The sole aim of this book is to connect in a straightforward way the growing body of second language vocabulary research with teacher actions in classrooms. As you read this book, see how many of the examples and descriptions in each of the myths you can relate to as either teacher or student. I sincerely hope that this research and the discussions will have an impact on the way you view the learning and teaching of vocabulary in a second language.

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