

# Strategies and Techniques of English Vocabulary Learning

## 英语词汇 学习策略与技巧

祖凤霞 / 著



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# 前 言

《英语词汇学习策略与技巧》(Strategies and Techniques of English Vocabulary Learning)是为广大英语学习者和英语教师以及英语词汇学习的研究者所编写的一部全新的词汇方面专著。

该书遵循理论与实践相结合的原则,结合英语作为外语学习(EFL)在我国实际情况,综合介绍了英语词汇学习的主要理论及当代英语词汇学习的最新趋势;分析总结了词汇学习的各种策略。在实践部分,该书论述了词汇学习的具体方法和应用技巧,为学习者提供了一条学习英语词汇的有效途径。

该书共分五部分。第一部分概括了英语词汇学习的发展历史和一些重要的学习理论;论述了母语在词汇学习中的作用以及当前词汇学习的最新趋势。第二部分总结归纳了英语词汇学习的策略,具体内容有:词汇策略的研究以及学习策略的种类;词汇学习与词典、阅读的关系;根据上下文猜测词义等。第三部分深入探讨了词汇学习的方法和步骤:首先阐述了词汇学习的意识,词汇知识,词义等;然后详细论述了如何学习、记忆新词。最后介绍了一种词汇学习的具体方法——词汇笔记本。第四、五部分是词汇学习的技巧和学习活动,以供学习者在实践中应用。

该书展现了近年来英语词汇学习研究的最新状况,总结归纳了词汇学习方面的重要理论,较全面地论述了词汇学习的具体方法。它既可以为词汇学习的研究者提供理论依据,也可以作为英语教师的教学参考书,它更是英语学习者学习词汇的好帮手。因此,该书集理论与实践于一体,自学、讲授皆宜。

作 者

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# Part One

## Theories of vocabulary learning

### 1. The general development in vocabulary learning

The learning of vocabulary has been a big issue for many years, and the debates have taken vocabulary in and out of fashion as an aspect of language. In the early decades of this century, vocabulary learning and research were eminently respectable. However, the status of vocabulary in the last 50 years has been relatively low. According to Carter and McCarthy (1988), during the period of 1945 to 1970 vocabulary teaching and learning were seen mainly as a problem of grading and selection, balanced by concerns of contrastive analysis and error prediction for target groups of learners.

By the mid 1970s, people began to have a growing concern with vocabulary teaching and learning, but the debates on the place of vocabulary were still based on the belief that vocabulary teaching and learning could advance through the incorporation of insights from lexical semantics.

From the last years of the 1970s till the 1980s, people began to have a combined interest in further studies of the lexicon itself and a more detailed look at the various needs of learners. The lexicon was beginning to be seen as a resource for communication, and productive language use in the communicative ideology. Therefore, vocabulary made

something of comeback under the influence of communicative teaching (Nunan, 1991). That vocabulary teaching and learning have come of age in the last decade is attested by the publication of several works entirely devoted to the subject.

The next trend in the development of vocabulary teaching and learning, as Carter and McCarthy (1988) point out, has been to assist the learner to learn, to engage the learner with the tasks. As they state, these significant pedagogical trends have gone further to provide advances in the applications of lexical semantics and lexicology in general to language teaching. Work in corpus analysis and computational linguistics has led to considerable interest in the importance of large chunks of language variously known as lexical items, lexical phrases, and prefabricated units. The works of Sinclair (1994), Nattinger and DeCarrico (1992), and Lewis (1993) represent a significant theoretical and pedagogical shift from the past. Most significant is the underlying claim that language production is not a syntactic rule-governed process but is the retrieval of larger phrasal units from memory, and this claim holds considerable implications for future research and pedagogy (Zimnevman, 1997).

Carter and McCarthy (1988) have summarized that vocabulary teaching and learning has come a long way from suffering neglect for a long time. Vocabulary pedagogy has benefited in the last fifteen years from theoretical advances, from the communicative trend in teaching, which has brought the learner into focus, and from developments in computers. Different theories in vocabulary teaching and learning have dominated and succeeded one another.

In the EFL context in China, the traditional grammar-translating method had been practiced for many years, and the learning of the language meant the learning of grammar and vocabulary. As Cortazzi and

Jin (1996) point out, Chinese approaches to language teaching and learning have a long-standing concern with mastery of knowledge, which is focused on the four centers: *the teacher, the textbook, grammar, and vocabulary*. Grammar and vocabulary are explained and transmitted; students engage heavily in memorizing hundreds or even thousands of words each year. However, some formal instruction in vocabulary learning appears to be largely ineffective to the acquisition of lexical knowledge, and as a result, it is difficult for students to achieve high proficiency in the target language, even though they spend a lot of time and effort on their study.

Therefore, it is suggested that when teaching and learning vocabulary, the following questions should constantly be asked by teachers and learners.

(1) How many words provide a working vocabulary in a foreign language?

(2) What are the best words to learn first?

(3) In the early stages of learning a second or foreign language, are some words more useful to the learner than others?

(4) Are some words more difficult to learn than others? Can words be graded for ease of learning?

(5) What are the best means of retaining new words?

(6) Is it most practical to learn words as single items in list, in pairs or in context?

(7) What about words which have several different meanings? Should they be avoided? If not, should some meanings be isolated for learning first?

(8) Are some words more likely to be encountered in spoken rather than written discourse? If so, do we know what they are?

## ☞ 2. The major principles of vocabulary learning

### ※ 2.1 Core vocabulary

Carter (1987) in his book *Vocabulary* explains the notion of core vocabulary. He puts it this way, 'In the domains of Lexis, core items are generally seen to be the most basic or simple. Teachers and learners should have been among the first to attempt to define a basic core vocabulary for initial language learning purposes' (ibid. :33). He goes on to argue that it is important to recognize the significance of core vocabulary because it cuts across and to an extent incorporates other binary structuring categories, such as spoken and written, grammatical and lexical.

In McCarthy's (1990) opinion, the idea that there might be a core or basic vocabulary or words at the heart of any language is quite an appealing one to language educators for if we could isolate that vocabulary, then we could equip learners with a survival kit of core words that they could use in virtually any situation. However, McCarthy also argues that the question of how language learners perceive the coreness of words is a different one and there are likely to be problems with cognate words which may be false friends.

Carter (1987) himself also realizes the problems of core vocabulary, he says, 'one central problem is that of the relationship between core vocabulary items and their learnability and teachability' (ibid. : 186). In EFL learning context, the problem is more obvious. Firstly, it is very difficult for non-native English teachers and learners to find and isolate the core or basic vocabulary of the target language. Secondly, it is equally difficult for learners to master the coreness of the words. And thirdly, the idea of core vocabulary may limit the development of vocabulary knowledge of advanced learners.

## ※ 2.2 Word lists

Considerable attention has been paid to the issue of a minimum adequate vocabulary list such as West's *A General Service List*, which is based on semantic and frequency counts. This view assumes that teaching learners the words they are most likely to encounter frequently is the most cost-effective way of building a functional vocabulary.

Another view expressed by McCarthy (1990) about word lists is that the most frequent words in any language will be the most useful one for learners of that language and therefore the best to start off with, in order to give the learner a basic set of tools for communication. However, McCarthy also points out that 'frequency is not as simple a matter as it looks, nor is it likely that any syllabus or course book want slavishly to stick to what frequency lists tell us' (ibid. : 66). Therefore, he suggests that frequency lists need to be approached with caution and careful analysis.

Nunan is more critical about word lists, he says 'there is no close correspondence between frequency and learnability at all' (Nunan, 1991: 121). Getting learners to undertake the time-consuming task of memorizing long lists of word could probably contribute little to the actual learning of vocabulary.

However, in foreign language learning context, word lists may be the most adopted method in vocabulary learning. Many students learn vocabulary by memorizing a list of words with only one or two meanings, and with no examples of the usage at all, and some of them even try to memorize dictionaries according to word sequence. Regarding to the learning of word lists, the problem, particularly for non-native English teachers and learners, is to choose which meaning of the word to teach or learn, because each word has more than one meaning according to different contexts. Another problem in the teaching and learning of word lists

is to choose which list to teach or learn, because there are different word lists and different word list has different frequency and word order. One word list cannot meet the needs of different learners.

### ✻ 2.3 Vocabulary in context.

Nunan (1991) advocates learning vocabulary from context. He claims that language reflects the contexts in which it is used and the purpose to which it is put. Language is also best encountered and learned in context. He suggests that instead of learning lists of decontextualised vocabulary items, learners should be encouraged to develop strategies for inferring the meaning of new words from the context in which they occur, and taught to use a range of cues, both verbal and non-verbal to determine meaning.

A similar strategy to learn the word in context has been proposed by Nation (1990), with particular reference to reading. It involves the learner in seeking clues to meaning by guessing, following a number of steps which lead from the form of the word itself, to its immediate context, and then to its operation in the surrounding context.

Nation suggests that the most important strategy in vocabulary teaching and learning is guessing the meaning of the unknown words from context.

Carter and McCarthy (1988) comment that Nation sees the guessing skill as central to reading comprehension. But guessing word meaning by use of contextual clue is far more difficult. To consistently make good guesses, learners should know about 98% of the words in a text.

Another view which argues for not solely focusing on inferring words from context is expressed by Sokmen (1997). He argues that firstly, acquiring vocabulary mainly through guessing words in context is likely to be a very slow process. Secondly, inferring word meaning is an error-

prone process.

Learning vocabulary through context may be the major way of increasing vocabulary knowledge. However, if learners do not have enough exposure to large amount of reading, especially, authentic material reading, and if they have not developed good reading habits, and most important, lack of the training in guessing from context, learning vocabulary through context may not be the effective way of learning vocabulary.

## ✳ 2.4 Lexical syllabus

Due to the development in use of computers for analyzing linguistic corpora, Willis (1990) presents *The Lexical Syllabus*, which takes lexis as the starting point of learning English. He believes that the patterns and meanings associated with the commonest words of English would afford a basis for syllabus specification, which would provide learners with good coverage. Willis proposes that the commonest and most important, most basic meanings, together with common patterns in English are those meanings expressed by the most frequent words in English. Given this, Willis assumes that word frequency would determine the contents of the course.

The approach to lexical syllabus, which is talked above highlights the common uses of words, is a very common ideal, and the mastery of them is rewarding in practice. However Lewis (1993) points out that Willis' word-based syllabus has three problems.

(1) The most frequent words are frequently items previously regarded as structural and ironical, words of low semantic content.

(2) The word-based syllabus introduces words with both their highly frequent and much rarer meaning together.

(3) Multi-word lexical items are under-valued and under-exploited.

In EFL teaching and learning context, there are more problems. The difficulty for EFL teachers and learners is how to select the most common patterns and meanings of the words, and it is also very difficult for students to generalize the whole from a very limited vocabulary corpus. In addition, the lexical syllabus has the same problems as word lists and frequency counts.

## ✽ 2.5 Lexical fields

Lexical fields are larger groupings of hyponym, which offers another organizing principle for vocabulary teaching and learning. Aitchison (1987) gives the theoretical support to the idea of lexical fields. He says 'words cannot be dealt with in isolation, we need to consider how they are stored in relation one another' (ibid. : 62), and people almost always select items from the semantic field of the original word, because words from the same semantic field are closely linked and easy to recall.

Learning words in lexical fields may be a very useful method for EFL students, who have a great problem in memorizing and storing words. They used to memorize isolated words lists or even dictionaries, which are pointless or seem ridiculous. It is important for them to learn how to organize and store words in word fields.

## ✽ 2.6 Lexical phrases

Nattinger and Decarrico (1992) describe lexical phrases as 'chunks' of language of varying length, phrases like *as it were*, *on the other hand*, and so on. These language 'chunks' are multi-word lexical phenomena that occur more frequently and have more idiomatically determined meaning than language that is put together each time. These phrases include short, relatively fixed phrases, long phrases or clauses, each with a fixed, basic frame, with slots for various fillers. And each is asso-

ciated with a particular discourse function, such as expressing time: *a month ago*, or relationships among ideas: *the higher the X, the higher the Y*.

Some people propose the lexical phrases because they believe that one common pattern in language acquisition is that learners pass through a stage in which they use a large number of unanalyzed chunks of language or prefabricated language in certain predictable social contexts. They consider lexical phrases to be important for language learning.

#### 2.6.1 Features of lexical phrases

Lexical phrases are defined as form/function composites, lexicogrammatical units that occupy a position somewhere between the traditional poles of lexicon and syntax: they are similar to lexicon in being treated as units, yet *most of them consist of more than one word*, and many of them can, at the same time, be derived from the regular rules of syntax. Lexical phrases differ from other conventionalized or frozen forms such as idioms mainly in that they are used to perform certain functions of greeting, expressing time, relationships, and expressing comparative relationships among ideas.

#### 2.6.2 Categories of lexical phrases

Nattinger and Decarrico (1992) divide lexical phrases into four groups according to the four structural criteria: polywords; institutionalized expressions; phrasal constraints; sentence builders.

##### 1) Polywords

Polywords are short phrases which function very much like individual lexical items. They can be both canonical and non-canonical. They allow no variability. They are continuous. Polywords are associated with a wide variety of functions, such as expressing speaker's qualification of the topic at hand, relating one topic to another, summarizing, shifting topic, and so on.

Examples :

<b>canonical</b>	<b>non-canonical</b>
for the most part	so far so good
by the way	all in all
at any rate	by and large
so to speak	once and for all
strictly speaking	as it were

## 2) Institutionalized expressions

Institutionalized expressions are lexical phrases of sentence length, usually functioning as separate utterance. They are mostly canonical. They are invariable. They are mostly continuous institutionalized expressions and proverbs, aphorisms, formulas for social interaction, and all of those chunks that a speaker has found efficient to store as units. They are used for quotation, allusion, or direct use. Some of these may be general phrases used by almost everyone in the speech community, while others may be more idiosyncratic phrases that an individual has found to be an efficient and pleasing way of getting an idea across. They are mainly continuous, but at times are discontinuous.

Examples :

<b>canonical</b>	<b>non-canonical</b>
nice meeting you	be that as it may
have a nice day	long time no see
give me a break	what, me worry?

## 3) Phrasal constraints

Phrasal constraints are short-medium-length phrases. They can be both canonical and non-canonical. They allow variation of lexical and phrasal categories. They are mostly continuous.

Examples:

**canonical**

a \_\_\_\_ ago

to \_\_\_\_ up

as I was \_\_\_\_

as far as I \_\_\_\_

**variations**

a day ago, a year ago

to tie this up, to wrap this up

as I was saying, as I was mentioning

as far as I know, as far as I can tell

**non-canonical**

**variations**

Adv. with \_\_\_\_

the \_\_\_\_ er the \_\_\_\_ er

down with the king, away with all politicians

the sooner the better, the busier the happier

4) Sentence builders

Sentence builders are lexical phrases that provide the framework for whole sentences. They contain slots for parameters or arguments for expression of an entire idea. These phrases can be both canonical and non-canonical. They allow considerable variation of phrasal and clausal elements. They are both continuous and discontinuous.

Examples:

**canonical**

I think that. . .

Not only. . . but also. . .

My point is that . . .

2.6.3 Functions of lexical phrases

According to Nattinger and Decarrico (1992), there are four functions of lexical phrases. They are: conversational maintenance; conversational purpose; social interactions, necessary topics, and discourse devices. Social interactions include lexical phrases that are markers describing social relations. Necessary topics are those topics about which learners will be asked, or ones they will need to talk about frequently. Discourse devices are those lexical phrases that connect the meaning and structure of the discourse.