

# **Exploring Vocabulary**

Language in Action

**Dee Gardner**



Routledge Introductions to Applied Linguistics

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# Exploring Vocabulary

*Routledge Introductions to Applied Linguistics* is a series of introductory level textbooks covering the core topics in Applied Linguistics, primarily designed for those beginning postgraduate studies, or taking an introductory MA course as well as advanced undergraduates. Titles in the series are also ideal for language professionals returning to academic study.

The books take an innovative “practice to theory” approach, with a “back-to-front” structure. This leads the reader from real-world problems and issues, through a discussion of intervention and how to engage with these concerns, before finally relating these practical issues to theoretical foundations. Additional features include tasks with commentaries, a glossary of key terms, and an annotated further reading section.

Vocabulary is the foundation of language and language learning and as such, knowledge of how to facilitate learners’ vocabulary growth is an indispensable teaching skill and curricular component.

*Exploring Vocabulary* is designed to raise teachers’ and students’ awareness of the interplay between the linguistic, psychological, and instructional aspects of vocabulary acquisition. It focuses on meeting the specific vocabulary needs of English language learners in whatever instructional contexts they may be in, with a special emphasis on addressing the high-stakes needs of learners in academic settings and the workplace.

Dee Gardner also introduces a new Common Core List, constructed from two of the most well-known and contemporary corpora of English – the British National Corpus and the Corpus of Contemporary American English.

*Exploring Vocabulary* is an essential book for undergraduate and postgraduate students studying Applied Linguistics, TESOL, or Teacher Education, as well as any teacher working with English language learners.

Dee Gardner is an Associate Professor of Applied Linguistics and TESOL at Brigham Young University. He is the co-author of *A Frequency Dictionary of Contemporary American English* (Routledge, 2010).

# Routledge Introductions to Applied Linguistics

*Series editors:*

**Ronald Carter**, *Professor of Modern English Language,  
University of Nottingham, UK*

**Guy Cook**, *Chair of Language in Education,  
King's College London, UK*

*Routledge Introductions to Applied Linguistics* is a series of introductory level textbooks covering the core topics in Applied Linguistics, primarily designed for those entering postgraduate studies and language professionals returning to academic study. The books take an innovative 'practice to theory' approach, with a 'back-to-front' structure. This leads the reader from real-world problems and issues, through a discussion of intervention and how to engage with these concerns, before finally relating these practical issues to theoretical foundations. Additional features include tasks with commentaries, a glossary of key terms and an annotated further reading section.

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# Series editors' preface

## The Introductions to Applied Linguistics series

This series provides clear, authoritative, up-to-date overviews of the major areas of applied linguistics. The books are designed particularly for students embarking on masters-level or teacher-education courses, as well as students in the closing stages of undergraduate study. The practical focus will make the books particularly useful and relevant to those returning to academic study after a period of professional practice, and also to those about to leave the academic world for the challenges of language-related work. For students who have not previously studied applied linguistics, including those who are unfamiliar with current academic study in English speaking universities, the books can act as one-step introductions. For those with more academic experience, they can also provide a way of surveying, updating and organising existing knowledge.

The view of applied linguistics in this series follows a famous definition of the field by Christopher Brumfit as:

The theoretical and empirical investigation of real-world problems in which language is a central issue.

(Brumfit 1995: 27)

In keeping with this broad problem-oriented view, the series will cover a range of topics of relevance to a variety of language-related professions. While language teaching and learning rightly remain prominent and will be the central preoccupation of many readers, our conception of the discipline is by no means limited to these areas. Our view is that while each reader of the series will have their own needs, specialities and interests, there is also much to be gained from a broader view of the discipline as a whole. We believe there is much in common between all enquiries into language-related problems in the real world, and much to be gained from a comparison of the insights from one area of applied linguistics with another. Our hope therefore is that readers and course designers will not choose only those volumes relating to their own particular interests, but use this series to construct



a wider knowledge and understanding of the field, and the many crossovers and resonances between its various areas. Thus the topics to be covered are wide in range, embracing an exciting mixture of established and new areas of applied linguistic enquiry.

### The perspective on applied linguistics in this series

In line with this problem-oriented definition of the field, and to address the concerns of readers who are interested in how academic study can inform their own professional practice, each book follows a structure in marked contrast to the usual movement *from* theory *to* practice. In this series, this usual progression is presented back to front. The argument moves *from* Problems, *through* Intervention, and *only* finally to Theory. Thus each topic begins with a survey of everyday professional problems in the area under consideration, ones which the reader is likely to have encountered. From there it proceeds to a discussion of intervention and engagement with these problems. Only in a final section (either of the chapter or the book as a whole) does the author reflect upon the implications of this engagement for a general understanding of language, drawing out the theoretical implications. We believe this to be a truly *applied* linguistics perspective, in line with the definition given above, and one in which engagement with real-world problems is the distinctive feature, and in which professional practice can both inform and draw upon academic understanding.

### Support to the Reader

Although it is not the intention that the text should be in any way activity-driven, the pedagogic process is supported by measured guidance to the reader in the form of suggested activities and tasks that raise questions, prompt reflection and seek to integrate theory and practice. Each book also contains a helpful glossary of key terms.

The series complements and reflects the *Routledge Handbook of Applied Linguistics*, edited by James Simpson, which conceives and categorises the scope of applied linguistics in a broadly similar way.

Ronald Carter  
Guy Cook

### Reference

- Brumfit, C. J. (1995). 'Teacher Professionalism and Research', in G. Cook and B. Seidlhofer (eds) *Principle and Practice in Applied Linguistics*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, pp. 27–42.

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The many vocabulary and technology experts, whose scholarly work has informed my thinking and advanced vocabulary research and education.

I dedicate this book to my wife, Terri, our children and grandchildren, and to my parents, Allen and Melba Gardner.



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# 1 Introduction

## Setting the stage

In recent years, many books and articles have been written about the role of vocabulary in English language education, particularly as it applies to academic settings, where the stakes are high in terms of both educational success and its natural corollary – occupational opportunity. You might be asking then, “why another book on vocabulary?” The short answer is simple – we know more now than we did a few years ago about many aspects of vocabulary acquisition and teaching, and the impact of high-powered technology has not only changed our understanding of what to teach, but it has also given us many more tools for accomplishing the task. For the longer, more detailed answer to the question, I invite you to study the chapters of this book, as we discuss together the vocabulary issues we face in our various language classrooms, the most useful interventions for dealing with these issues, and the current research and theories that support these conclusions.

This book is more than a review of literature on topics involving English vocabulary; it is an interactive book, designed to build knowledge through examples and experiences, as well as through traditional references to important and current research on the topics addressed. I ask you now to “buckle up” and “dig in,” because this is how true learning takes place, and it emphasizes the fact that the task of teaching English language learners (ELLs) is not simple and straightforward. My goal is to build your awareness of the vocabulary tasks facing our ELLs and to provide foundational concepts for dealing with these tasks in your various classrooms and tutoring experiences. I am not interested in presenting another easy-to-follow curriculum or a list of fun activities to build vocabulary, as there are plenty of resources available in these areas. Instead, I want you to know why these work or don’t work, what makes certain vocabulary issues simple or complex, how to analyze specific learner needs from a variety of perspectives, and how you can adapt or create resources and curricula to meet those specific needs.

In the beginning, I want to make my position about English vocabulary education very clear, so that we have a mutual understanding

of where we are headed together and why. My stance is informed by my many years of actual classroom experience with ELLs, my own experiences as a language learner, and my extensive study of vocabulary research from multiple disciplines, including Applied Linguistics, Second Language Acquisition (SLA), Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL), Reading Research, Cognitive Science, Educational and Classroom-Based Research, Educational Psychology, Teacher Education, Corpus Linguistics, Neurolinguistics, Language Assessment, Technology Enhanced Language Learning (TELL), Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL), Computational Linguistics, English for Specific and Academic Purposes (ESP, EAP), and Content-Based Instruction (CBI).

I feel that this multiple-perspective approach adds strength to my conclusions and suggestions, and allows me to give you as ELL teachers the most complete picture possible as I currently understand it, rather than the all-too-frequent narrow perspectives that often appear to be motivated by ideological, political, or personal preferences. While I draw on research and theory in every chapter, I promise not to load you down with heavy statistics or unnecessary jargon, but to synthesize and paraphrase for you what the fields are saying about a particular issue (my job) so that you can actually implement this into your teaching efforts (your job).

### **My basic philosophy about vocabulary**

I view grammar as the engine of language, giving it order and structure, and vocabulary as the fuel of language, without which nothing meaningful can be understood or communicated. Both are crucial, and there is actually a great deal of overlap between the two as we will see in later chapters. My specific attention to vocabulary in this book stems from the simple fact that words and phrases of English present such a formidable challenge in English language education because of their sheer numbers (estimates now in the millions – Crystal, 1995), their multiple and context-dependent meanings, the difficulties associated with determining which ones to emphasize in which instructional settings, and how to actually teach them. The four foundational tenets of my approach to vocabulary education that will guide the remaining chapters are:

- 1 “All vocabulary is not created equal”– i.e. some words show up everywhere in English and perform mainly grammatical functions (*the, a, and, of, to, etc.*); some are more technical and lower frequency, but carry most of the meaning of a given communication (*reciprocal, photosynthesis, mitosis, sarcophagus, etc.*); some are composed of multiple words (*in order to, in addition to, on the*



*other hand, pop the question, kick the bucket, chew out, etc.*); some have multiple meanings (*run, break, chip, etc.*). Additionally, vocabulary is acquired by each learner on a word-by-word basis, not as whole frequency levels, bands, or tiers of words, although such groupings are often useful in describing the relative frequency of vocabulary input.

- 2 “We must take our ELLs from what they know to where they need to go” – vocabulary learning does not take place in some sort of mental vacuum; rather, it is a constant interaction between existing knowledge and new knowledge. To assume otherwise is a logical fallacy. It is therefore crucial to understand what learners already know and what they need to know in order to be effective vocabulary teachers.
- 3 “Vocabulary instruction should focus on both forms and meanings” – the best methods for connecting word forms with their meanings must be known by teachers, taught to students, and practiced by both. I emphasize here that without knowledge of word forms (oral and/or written) there can be no access to meaning, and, conversely, without meaning to attach to, knowledge of word forms is essentially useless. Vocabulary instruction must therefore support both. I simply do not believe in a form-meaning dichotomy, or that one should be emphasized over the other.
- 4 “Time is of the essence” – ELLs generally do not have the luxury of becoming exposed to essential target-language vocabulary through natural encounters over long periods of immersion the way they did in their native languages. Therefore, it is crucial that language professionals find ways to expedite the vocabulary learning process for their learners, especially in high-stakes settings, such as in school and the workplace. I also assert that the issues surrounding English vocabulary knowledge are not trivial; in fact, they often have profound consequences for many learners of English who must attain high levels of proficiency in the language in order to compete in academic and occupational settings. As their teachers and prospective teachers, I hope you will find this textbook current, illuminating, and practical, as we explore together how we can effectively and efficiently manage our ELLs’ acquisition of English vocabulary in whatever instructional contexts we may find ourselves.

## Guiding questions

These philosophical positions also have practical corollaries. I offer these here in the form of fundamental guiding questions that I believe all teachers of English vocabulary should be asking on a regular basis:

- 1 “What English?” – we must determine which of all the possible registers (genres) of the English language our learners most need to be familiar with, and the specific themes and topics within those registers. Do they need social English or science English, business English or medical English? Do they need to read novels or textbooks or safety signs? Do they need speaking and listening skills or reading and writing skills, or both?
- 2 “What Texts or Tasks?” – based on (1) above, we must find (or produce ourselves if necessary) relevant texts or tasks (written and/or spoken) that can be used as (a) the actual contexts for aiding in the vocabulary acquisition process; (b) the sources for determining important vocabulary to teach and learn; and (c) the means for assessing learners’ vocabulary acquisition.
- 3 “What Vocabulary?” – we must analyze the actual vocabulary in the texts and tasks chosen in (2) above. In other words, we must engage in the art of linguistic investigation in order to know which words to emphasize and their particular characteristics, thus avoiding the all-too-frequent problem of teaching English as a general language, rather than as a specific, needs-based language.
- 4 “What Background Knowledge?” – we must determine what vocabulary knowledge (spoken and/or written) our ELLs already possess in both their first language (e.g. Spanish, Chinese, Korean), the target language (e.g. English), and any other language (e.g. French, Dutch, German).
- 5 “What Curriculum?” – we must determine the most efficient and effective instructional methods for bringing learners’ vocabulary knowledge (4 above) to at least the minimum threshold levels necessary for negotiating the vocabulary (3) in the texts and tasks (2) that they need to comprehend and/or produce (1).
- 6 “What Strategies?” – in this whole process, we must always teach ELLs strategies for dealing with additional unknown words not covered in (5), and for becoming autonomous, life-long learners of vocabulary, no longer dependent on the classroom or the teacher for their future vocabulary learning.

### The Three Realities of Vocabulary

In my experience, I have found that most approaches to vocabulary training and research tend to emphasize one of three main aspects of the vocabulary equation. I refer to these as the “Three Realities of Vocabulary”:

- 1 The Psychological Reality, or *what is happening in the minds of actual learners* – i.e. what vocabulary ELLs already understand, how they learn new vocabulary, how they mentally deal with and