

# Learning Vocabulary in Another Language

I. S. P. Nation

Second Edition

CAMBRIDGE APPLIED LINGUISTICS

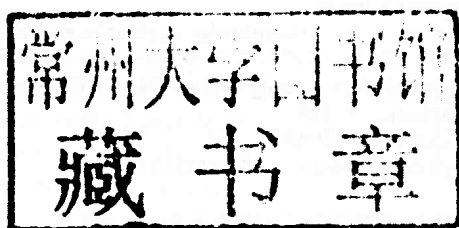
Series Editors: Carol A. Chapelle and Susan Hunston

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*I. S. P. Nation*

*Victoria University of Wellington*



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## Series editors' preface

Over ten years ago, when the first edition of *Learning Vocabulary in Another Language* was published, vocabulary learning was characterised by the then series editors as an area studied by only a few pioneers, Paul Nation being one of them. In part due to the tremendous impact of the first edition of Nation's book, today research and teaching of second language vocabulary learning is no longer the preoccupation of just a few. On the contrary, throughout applied linguistics, vocabulary, formulaic expressions, word patterns and lexical bundles are centre stage in the study of how learners develop the ability to make meaning. With the importance of the lexical dimension of language development recognised, the research basis for understanding vocabulary teaching and learning has grown to be substantial. A second edition of Paul Nation's seminal work was needed.

The second edition of *Learning Vocabulary in Another Language* possesses the same qualities that made the first edition so popular. It is organised around issues relevant to readers needing a solid understanding of vocabulary in order to improve practices in second language vocabulary teaching and assessment. For example, chapters outline the goals of vocabulary learning, teaching and explaining vocabulary, vocabulary and listening and speaking, as well as vocabulary and reading. The book presents and interprets a comprehensive pool of research on second language vocabulary acquisition, and in so doing it provides research-based recommendations for practice. Relevant research appears across the domains of linguistics, second language acquisition, assessment and technology; Nation has culled the pertinent findings to address important questions such as whether or not learners actually acquire new word meanings from context and how learners use dictionaries. The style of writing is direct and engaging for readers at a range of levels. The book begins with the basics (that is, knowing a word), and it builds to the real world challenges educators face, such as assessing vocabulary knowledge and use, and developing the vocabulary component of a language course.

We are very happy to welcome this new edition of *Learning Vocabulary in Another Language* to the Cambridge Applied Linguistics Series.

Carol A. Chapelle and Susan Hunston

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# Introduction

This book is about the teaching and learning of vocabulary, but the teaching and learning of vocabulary is only a part of a language development programme. It is thus important that vocabulary teaching and learning is placed in its proper perspective.

## Learning goals

Vocabulary learning is only one sub-goal of a range of goals that are important in the language classroom. The mnemonic LIST is a useful way of remembering these goals that are outlined in Table 0.1. L = Language, which includes vocabulary; I = Ideas, which cover content and subject matter knowledge as well as cultural knowledge; S = Skills; and T = Text or discourse, which covers the way sentences fit together to form larger units of language.

Although this book focuses on the vocabulary sub-goal of language, the other goals are not ignored. However, they are approached from the

Table 0.1 *Goals for language learning*

General goals	Specific goals
Language items	pronunciation vocabulary grammatical constructions
Ideas (content)	subject matter knowledge cultural knowledge
Skills	accuracy fluency strategies process skills or subskills
Text (discourse)	conversational discourse rules text schemata or topic type scales

viewpoint of vocabulary. There are chapters on vocabulary and the skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing. Discourse is looked at in Chapter 6 on specialised uses, and pronunciation, spelling and grammar are looked at in relation to vocabulary knowledge in Chapter 3.

## **The four strands**

The approach taken in this book rests on the idea that a well-balanced language course should consist of four major strands (Nation, 2007; Nation and Yamamoto, 2011). These strands can appear in many different forms, but they should all be there in a well-designed course.

Firstly, there is the strand of learning from comprehensible meaning-focused input. This means that learners should have the opportunity to learn new language items through listening and reading activities where the main focus of attention is on the information in what they are listening to or reading. As we shall see in the following chapter, learning from meaning-focused input can best occur if learners are familiar with at least 98 per cent of the running words in the input they are focusing on. Put negatively, learning from meaning-focused input cannot occur if there are lots of unknown words.

The second strand of a course is the strand of meaning-focused output. Learners should have the chance to develop their knowledge of the language through speaking and writing activities where their main attention is focused on the information they are trying to convey. Speaking and writing are useful means of vocabulary development because they make the learners focus on words in ways they did not have to while listening and reading. Having to speak and write encourages learners to listen like a speaker and read like a writer. This different kind of attention is not the only contribution that speaking and writing activities can make to language development. From a vocabulary perspective, these productive activities can strengthen knowledge of previously met vocabulary.

The third strand of a course is one that has been subject to a lot of debate. This is the strand of language-focused learning, sometimes called form-focused instruction. There is growing evidence (Ellis, 2005; Williams, 2005) that language learning benefits if there is an appropriate amount of usefully focused deliberate teaching and learning of language items. From a vocabulary perspective, this means that a course should involve the direct teaching of vocabulary and the direct learning and study of vocabulary. As we shall see, there is a very large amount of research stretching back to the late 19th century which shows that the gradual cumulative process of learning a word can be given a strong boost by the direct study of certain features of the word.

The fourth strand of a course is the fluency development strand. In the activities which put this strand into action learners do not work with new language items. Instead, they become more and more fluent in using items they already know. A striking example of this can be found in the use of numbers. Learners can usually quickly learn numbers in a foreign language. But if they go into a post office and the clerk tells them how much the stamps they need are going to cost, they might not understand because the numbers were said too quickly for them. By doing a small amount of regular fluency practice with numbers (the teacher says the numbers, the learners write the figures), the learners will find that they can understand one-digit numbers said quickly (1, 7, 6, 9) although they have trouble with two-digit numbers said quickly (26, 89, 63, 42) or three-digit numbers (126, 749, 537, 628). A little further practice will make these longer numbers fluently available for comprehension. If a course does not have a strong fluency strand, then the learning done in the other three strands will not be readily available for normal use.

In a language course, these four strands should get roughly the same amount of time. That means that no more than 25 per cent of the learning time in and out of class should be given to the direct study of language items. No less than 25 per cent of the class time should be given to fluency development. If the four strands of a course are not equally represented in a particular course, then the design of the course needs to be looked at again.

These four strands need to be kept in mind while reading this book. Where recommendations are made for direct vocabulary learning, these should be seen as fitting into that 25 per cent of the course which is devoted to language-focused learning. Seventy-five per cent of the vocabulary development programme should involve the three meaning-focused strands of learning from input, learning from output and fluency development.

The four strands apply generally to a language course. In this book we will look at how vocabulary fits into each of these strands. It is worth stressing that the strands of meaning-focused input and output are only effective if the learners have sufficient vocabulary to make these strands truly meaning focused. If activities which are supposed to be meaning focused involve large amounts of unknown vocabulary, then they become language focused because much of the learners' attention is taken from the message to the unknown vocabulary. Similarly, fluency development activities need to involve little or no unknown vocabulary or other language items, otherwise they become part of the meaning input and output strands, or language-focused learning.

## **Main themes**

A small number of major themes run through this book, and these are first dealt with in Chapters 2, 3 and 4. Firstly, there is the cost/benefit idea based on the results of word frequency studies. Its most important application is in the distinction between high-frequency and mid- and low-frequency vocabulary and the different ways in which teachers should deal with these types of vocabulary. The cost/benefit idea also applies to individual words in that the amount of attention given to an item should be roughly proportional to the chances of it being met or used again, that is, its frequency.

Secondly, there is the idea that learning a word is a cumulative process involving a range of aspects of knowledge. Learners thus need many different kinds of meetings with words in order to learn them fully. There is to date still little research on how vocabulary knowledge grows and how different kinds of encounters with words contribute to vocabulary knowledge. In this book, knowing a word is taken to include not only knowing the formal aspects of the word and knowing its meaning, but also being able to use the word.

Thirdly, there is the idea that teachers and learners should give careful consideration to how vocabulary is learned, in particular, the psychological conditions that are most likely to lead to effective learning. Because these conditions are influenced by the design of learning tasks, quite a lot of attention is given to the analysis and design of vocabulary-learning activities.

## **The audience for this book**

This book is intended to be used by second and foreign language teachers. Although it is largely written from the viewpoint of a teacher of English, it could also be used by teachers of other languages.

This book is called *Learning Vocabulary in Another Language* partly in order to indicate that most of the suggestions apply to both second and foreign language learning. Generally the term **second language** will be used to apply to both second and foreign language learning. In the few places where a contrast is intended, this will be clear from the context.

## **The first and the second editions**

"I've got the first edition. Is it worth buying the second edition?" – this is a question I expect to be asked, so here is my answer.



Yes. Most of the changes in the second edition are the result of a large amount of research which has appeared since the first edition was published in 2001. By my rough calculation, over 30 per cent of the research on vocabulary that has appeared in the last 110 years was published in the last eleven years. Teaching and learning vocabulary, particularly for foreign and second language learners, is no longer a neglected aspect of language learning. So, if you don't buy the second edition you will be out of date by eleven years and at least 30 per cent of the field. On a rough estimate, at least one-fifth of the book is new material.

There were also errors in the first edition, largely because of a lack of research on the relevant areas. Some of that research has now been done, much of it by my students, colleagues and friends, and a few people who fit two or all of those categories.

I am also pleased to note that my thinking has changed on some issues in the teaching and learning of vocabulary, largely as a result of research findings and my own experience and thinking. These include the idea of mid-frequency vocabulary, largely as a result of research on word lists and testing native speaker vocabulary size. I also now feel that I am beginning to understand what collocations are. I am also becoming more sceptical of the value of vocabulary teaching, largely because of its necessarily limited scope and limited effectiveness.

When working on this second edition, I often wondered if the field of teaching and learning vocabulary is now so vigorous and large that it is beyond the scope of any one book and certainly one person. If you have already bought this book, then I hope I am wrong and you have got your money's worth.

## Changes in the second edition

One of the changes in Chapter 1 is because of Chung and Nation's (2003, 2004) research on technical vocabulary. In the first edition I got this completely wrong, saying that about five per cent of the running words in a technical text would be technical vocabulary. In fact research showed that it was closer to 20 to 30 per cent of the running words. The second major change in Chapter 1 is as a result of the development of the lower-frequency word family lists based on the British National Corpus. At the time of writing, these lists now go up to the 24th one-thousand word lists, and the development of these lists has meant that we can do much more detailed analysis of texts and their vocabulary demands, as well as develop more soundly based vocabulary size tests. This research has highlighted the idea of mid-frequency words (Schmitt and Schmitt, 2012). At the time of writing