

**L**anguage Teaching and Testing

*Selected Works of Renowned Applied Linguists*

世界知名语言学家论丛（第一辑）

Series Editor: Rod Ellis

I. S. P. Nation

# 词汇学习与教学

## LEARNING AND TEACHING VOCABULARY: COLLECTED WRITINGS

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**世界知名语言学家论丛**

**第一辑**

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## 出版说明

“世界知名语言学家论丛(第一辑)”由上海外语教育出版社约请国际知名学者、英语教育专家 Rod Ellis 教授担任主编。丛书作者均为国际应用语言学领域耳熟能详的权威专家。丛书中的每一本聚焦应用语言学领域的一个特定主题,收录一位在该研究领域最有建树和影响力的语言学家一生中最重要经典文章,如:Rod Ellis:《语法学习与教学》;Paul Nation:《词汇学习与教学》;Charles Alderson:《语言测试》,等等。书中的每篇文章经由精心挑选,既有对某一领域理论主题的深入阐述,又探讨了对第二语言教学和测试颇具意义的话题;除了作者一生的代表性作品外,还有不少新作,体现了作者的思索过程和研究轨迹,也展示了应用语言学领域发展历程中理论和研究逐步完善的一个个精彩镜头。

相信本套丛书的出版定能为国内应用语言学研究提供一个新的平台,带来新的启示,进一步推动我国语言学研究的发展。

## Preface

This book is a collection of articles for the series *Language Teaching and Testing — Selected Works of Renowned Applied Linguists*. This series collects articles written by a number of leading applied linguists. Each collection focuses on a specific area of research in applied linguistics — for example, on grammar learning and teaching, vocabulary learning and teaching (this book), language testing, and task-based language teaching. The aim of each book is to bring together older and more recent articles to show the development of the author's work over his/her lifetime. The articles are selected to address both theoretical issues relevant to a particular area of enquiry and also to discuss issues of significance to the teaching or testing of a second language (L2). As a whole, the series provides a survey of applied linguistics as this relates to language pedagogy and testing.

Each book begins with an autobiographical introduction by the author in which he/she locates the issues that have been important in his/her lifetime's work and how this work has evolved over time. The introduction also provides an outline of the author's professional career. The rest of the book consists of chapters based on articles published over the author's lifespan.

Each book, then, will contain articles that cover the author's career (over thirty years in some cases). Not surprisingly there are likely to be shifts (and possibly contradictions) in the author's positioning on the issues addressed, reflecting the changes in theory and research focus that have occurred in the specific area of enquiry over a period of time. Thus, the articles will not necessarily reflect a consistent theoretical perspective. There

is merit in this. Readers will be able to see how theory and research have developed. In other words, each book provides a snapshot of the kinds of developments that have occurred in the applied linguistic field under consideration.

This book brings together a collection of articles on vocabulary. Paul Nation is one of the leading figures in the field of second language vocabulary studies. As his autobiographical introduction shows he has worked in this field throughout his professional life. His articles span a wide variety of areas of vocabulary studies, including how to plan and evaluate a vocabulary course, how to choose the vocabulary to teach, how vocabulary is learned, how it should be taught and how it can be tested. The articles cover a span of thirty years of Paul's work in this area. The book provides readers with a comprehensive account of L2 vocabulary studies and, like all the books in this series, addresses the interface between research and the practice of teaching or testing.

*Rod Ellis*  
Auckland  
March 2010

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*Chapter 1***Introduction**

This chapter shows how my interest in the teaching and learning of vocabulary began and traces some of the main ideas and influences behind my approach to vocabulary. It is written as I enter semi-retirement and this undoubtedly is reflected in the chapter.

I went to Victoria University of Wellington in 1960 at the age of sixteen and I have never left. As a student or staff member I have always had a connection with the university.

Even as a young child, I always wanted to be a teacher. This is partly because in my small home town of Ohakune (population 1,500) there were not a lot of jobs on the menu, but it is also because I had teachers I admired. I went to university with a teacher's scholarship which paid my fees and a generous living allowance and obligated me to teach for the same number of years that I held the scholarship. I was the only person to go to university from my home town that year and there were no others studying in the university that I knew from school. I stayed in Weir House, a men's hostel near the university. This was very fortunate because it immediately provided me with ninety people I quickly came to know, and meant that I got involved in lots of things, most of which did not greatly help my study, but which were great fun. I have to admit I almost failed my first year at university. I got 27% for French reading knowledge, scraped a 50% pass for History, and got Bs for English and Psychology. I mended my ways in my second year, but it took me nearly a year and a half to figure out what

university was all about.

In my third year at university, the very first undergraduate course in descriptive linguistics was introduced in the university, and I enrolled in it. It provided a basic description of phonemics and phrase structure analysis. It was well organised and well taught and I really enjoyed it. As a result the next year, when I was studying for my Master of Arts, I enrolled in the newly-introduced course in transformational grammar. There were only three of us in the class, and the professor was only about two pages ahead of us in the book. At the end of the year we were told that there was a job available in the English Language Institute in the university. I was the only one to apply for it, and after an interview with the director, H. V. George, I was given the job as a junior lecturer.

At that time there were only about six or seven of us on the staff. During the academic year we did in-service teacher training for teachers from a very wide range of countries largely under the Colombo Plan. As I basically knew nothing about TESOL, I attended all the lectures given by H. V. George and helped run the associated tutorials. I learnt an enormous amount on the job. A lot of it was learnt by watching H. V. George teach. He was a natural teacher and I always used to carry a small notebook with me which I called my methods book and I used that to note down features that struck me about the way he taught. I still have the two notebooks. The final exam for the Dip TESL was a practical one. Each candidate had to do a piece of microteaching. This had the washback effect of making our course very practical.

The teachers studying on the course for the Cert TESL or Dip TESL came from Pacific island and Southeast and East Asian countries. They were all experienced teachers who came to New Zealand largely under scholarship from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in New Zealand to study for a year. I was younger than most of them, but they were all kind enough to be sympathetic towards me and help me in my teaching.

When the academic year was finished, the English Language Institute ran a pre-university course for foreign students. We taught on this course.

This was an excellent arrangement because it provided inexperienced staff like me with the chance to teach English. Experienced staff also had to keep their feet on the ground by showing that the things that they taught to teachers during the academic year had practical implications for language teaching. This meant that there was always a very strong connection between the teacher training that we did and the teaching of English to speakers of other languages. We not only taught about it, we also did it.

H. V. George was one of the big influences on my life. Before coming to New Zealand he had taught in Malaya, Iraq, and India. If the word “guru” was to be applied to anybody in our field, he was the most suitable person to apply it to. He had a very strong interest in what is now known as corpus linguistics, and just before coming to New Zealand had completed a very large frequency based count of the verb forms of English. This was done before the days of computers, and later computer-based research has largely served to confirm his findings. His arrival marked the beginning of corpus-based language study at Victoria University, and this tradition continues.

He was a very unconventional person. He ran a very egalitarian department and in spite of having to carry most of the substantial teaching himself, he always found time to talk things over. I thought he was great. We were allowed to get on and do the things that we thought we should do, and we always had his support. I remember doing a concordance-based study of the word “too”. I gathered the instances by getting each of the students on the course to find ten examples from books they were reading and to write each one on a slip of paper that I had provided. With his encouragement, we quickly got the first copy of the Brown corpus in New Zealand on computer tape, which we ran on the university’s newly installed mainframe computer.

I remember H. V. commenting one day that my colleagues and I were among the first group of people to enter the profession of TESOL directly from university study. Like most others in the field at that time, he had drifted into English language teaching largely without any directly relevant academic background. All of his learning had been on the job.

One of the first things that he did after being appointed to the job of director of the English Language Institute was to arrange for the appointment of Helen Barnard who he knew from his experience in India. He wanted her to write a set of booklets for the English Proficiency Program, and as soon as she arrived she started doing that. The result was the first English course book published by the newly created Newbury House, *Advanced English Vocabulary*. Helen was a remarkable person. She was tall and of rather frightening appearance, but she was one of the sweetest and gentlest people I have known. She was a vocabulary enthusiast, and I picked up a lot of my enthusiasm from her. *Advanced English Vocabulary* was the mainstay of our English Proficiency Program both before and after it was published. I remember trialling her lessons during the summer course. We wrote a pre-test of the vocabulary for the week and a weekly post-test. There was a strong deliberate vocabulary teaching focus on the course, and the very clear goals generated a real sense of purpose in the program. I think the book sold well, particularly in the United States. When Rupert Ingram who had founded Newbury House visited New Zealand to meet with Helen I met with him too, and showed him the draft of a book I was working on called *Teaching and Learning Vocabulary*. He was interested in it and gave me some very useful advice that I have always tried to follow, "Try to answer questions that teachers ask."

### **My first overseas teaching experience**

After two years of teaching at the ELI, I had a chance to teach part-time for one year at a teachers' college in Jogjakarta in Indonesia for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs while I did research for my misconceived and never-to-be-completed PhD. The Ministry saw it as a cheap way to begin an aid project for the teachers' college. The pay was minimal, and although I may have had the designation of foreign expert, I certainly had none of the privileges. I loved it. Jogjakarta was by far the most interesting place I have ever lived in.

After about three months of living in a small one room "pavilion" and

eating at cheap restaurants ( and having virtually continuous stomach problems ), I moved in with an American PhD student<sup>1</sup>, Roger Long, in a couple of rooms in a Prince's compound. This sounds more grand than it really was. Our neighbours were extremely poor and lived off the charity of others. Our water was carried from the well in the compound, and we had enough electricity to run about three light bulbs. I had brought a stereo set with me, and if we turned it on, we had to turn off the light bulbs first, otherwise we would blow the fuse.

Roger's research was on shadow puppet performance, *wayang kulit*. This meant that he had to record a large number of performances. Each performance lasted around nine hours, starting at about nine o'clock at night and ending at about six in the morning. This performance was carried out by one man, the *dalang*, accompanied by a gamelan orchestra. By a fortunate coincidence, Roger and I had bought the same brand of tape recorder (an Akai), and so he could use my battery to replace his when it ran out during the performance. We went along together to the performances which were remarkable occasions and are some of my fondest memories of Indonesia. There was also a dancing school in the compound, and in the morning we would wake to the sound of gamelan music drifting in.

As well as teaching a couple of courses on language teaching methodology at the teachers' college (IKIP Negeri Jogjakarta), I also taught one English class at a junior high school (SMP II) just along the street from the teachers' college. Both in the teachers' college and junior high school, conditions were basic. The blackboards were painted with ordinary black paint and were hard to write on. There were no copying facilities. By about 11 a. m. it was so hot that both teaching and learning were difficult. The walls of the classrooms were concrete for the bottom half and woven bamboo for the top half. The noise from one class easily affected the adjoining class. This meant that teaching had to be well adapted to the teaching conditions. The students were great and the staff were very kind and supportive. I enjoyed the teaching and it had the very positive effects of making me grateful for any small teaching aids that were available, and

making me less reliant on such aids.

At the end of that year in Indonesia, I went to Thailand to get married, and we then returned to New Zealand. I was then re-employed at the ELI, this time as a lecturer, and after a couple of years we went back to Indonesia to the same teachers' college on another Ministry of Foreign Affairs contract. This then was truly the beginning of my academic career, because I then began to publish and seriously do research.

One of the first articles I wrote was called "Teaching vocabulary in difficult circumstances" (Nation, 1975). This title was deliberately chosen as homage to Michael West who had written a book called *Teaching English in Difficult Circumstances* (West, 1960) based on his experience of teaching English in Bengal (now Bangladesh). By that time, I had read a lot of West's work on vocabulary and reading, and was working my way through the journals available then to build up a collection of language teaching techniques. I put all these together in an unpublished collection called *Language Teaching Techniques*. I was determined to gather every language teaching technique and got very close to doing that. This collection has continued to be a major source for the other books and articles I have worked on.

While in Indonesia, Gerry Meister and I set up very successful extensive reading programs for our classes, Emmy Quinn and I wrote and published a speed reading course written within the 1,000 word level (Quinn and Nation, 1974), Gerry and I wrote and published two graded readers (now fortunately out of print) set in Indonesia, I adapted a reading course for Oxford University Press, and I wrote several articles that W. R. Lee was kind enough to publish in the *ELT Journal*. At the same time I supervised several theses and these also resulted in publications. This productivity was largely due to what the Indonesians call "tidur siang", otherwise known as siesta or the afternoon sleep. I would go to the teachers' college at around 7 a. m. and teach. Classes would end around 1 p. m. and I would go home and eat and then have my tidur siang. By 4 p. m., I was ready for action again, and this was when the research, reading and writing were done. In effect, I had two fresh starts to the day. As

always I was strongly supported by my wife as we struggled to raise a child with no parents or family nearby to call on for help and advice.

While teaching at the government teachers' college, I set aside one day a week to teach at the Catholic teachers' college called Sanata Dharma. Father Ernst Bolsius and Father van der Scheuren had been responsible for helping me meet up with Roger Long on my previous stay, and teaching at Sanata Dharma was an interesting contrast to the government teachers' college. One of my former students and colleagues there, Johannes Bismoko, later took over a substantial role in the running of the college.

When I returned to the government teachers' college in 2008 for a brief visit, it was pleasing to see that a large proportion of the staff was made up of our former students.

My time in Indonesia made me very conscious of the need to give teachers practical advice which will work within the considerable constraints of their teaching situation. It also made me confident that I could do work that was publishable.

## **New Zealand and Thailand**

After three years in Indonesia, we returned to New Zealand. I had read Earl Stevick's (1959) article in the journal *Language Learning* called "Technemes and the rhythm of class activity". This article put forward the interesting argument that you could tell if a change you had made to a technique made it a different technique by looking at the reaction of the students. If the change caught their attention, then you had a new techneme (a significantly different technique). This analytical approach to teaching techniques really appealed to me, and I started analysing the large collection of techniques that I had gathered to see if there was some underlying system which could be made to describe and to create new techniques. The resulting article was called "Creating and adapting language teaching techniques" (Nation, 1976), and in various forms this approach to looking at teaching techniques has appeared in several subsequent articles that I have written. I see a connection between this analytical approach and



my tendency to look for principles rather than to adopt methods of language teaching. After a couple of years of teaching on the Dip TESL, I had the opportunity to go on another aid project, this time to Thailand. As it meant that we could be near my wife's family, this was a very attractive job. During our two years in Bangkok, I worked at the Department of Technical and Economic Cooperation (DTEC). This government organisation handled relationships with aid donors and had a language institute as part of it which prepared Thai civil servants to pass the English proficiency tests needed to take up a scholarship to do academic study in universities in England, Canada, Australia, the United States, and New Zealand. There was no teacher training involved and the program consisted of 12 week intensive English courses. It was a very successful program and the entry test to the program allowed us to predict with a reasonable degree of success the likelihood of a student passing the IELTS or TOEFL tests at the end of the course. The staff was a mixture of "foreign experts" including some Peace Corps and Canadian volunteers, and local Thai staff. The students were all adult government employees who were generally highly motivated. If they studied well, they would have a chance of gaining a graduate degree in an overseas university, and this would enhance their promotion chances.

Some of the staff positions were funded by the British Council, some by the Australian government, and mine by the New Zealand government. I learned a great deal about curriculum design during my time at DTEC, although I did not realise that then. I visited ex-students around Thailand, and had plenty of opportunity to write. Most of the articles written at this time were strongly technique-based, and usually arose out of teaching. We wanted to stay for a third year in Thailand, but when I asked the university in New Zealand for another year's leave, they quite reasonably pointed out that I had been employed by them for around 10 years and had only spent about five of those years in New Zealand.

H. V. George had retired after our return from Thailand and the new director of the English Language Institute was Graeme Kennedy. Graeme was a very capable administrator and a first-class academic. His goal was to make the English Language Institute a more integrated part of the university,