

The Word on Words: An Interview with Paul Nation

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Paul Nation is a Reader at Victoria University of Wellington in New Zealand. He has written numerous articles in the area of vocabulary acquisition and teaching. In 1990, he published *Teaching and Learning Vocabulary*. Norbert Schmitt interviewed him while he was in Japan presenting a seminar at Temple University, Osaka.

Norbert Schmitt: *There have been several extensive theories dealing with the grammar and syntax of English. In contrast with this, the area of vocabulary doesn't seem to have any comprehensive theory of organization or acquisition.*

Paul Nation: I agree that there isn't an overall theory of how vocabulary is acquired. Our knowledge has mainly been built up from fragmentary studies, and at the moment we have only the broadest idea of how acquisition might occur. We certainly have no knowledge of the acquisition stages that particular words might move through. Additionally, we don't know how the learning of some words affects how other words are learned. There are still whole areas which are completely unknown. I think this is true for vocabulary even in first language acquisition. There have been several theories of first language acquisition, semantic features being one example, but they still have not satisfactorily shown how vocabulary develops. It is still a very young field.

NS: *In your book Teaching and Learning Vocabulary you state that word lists aren't necessarily bad. In fact, you suggest that using word lists as a way of introducing new words and then following up with activities to elaborate on their meanings may be a good way to teach vocabulary.*

PN: This is one of the best researched areas of vocabulary learning and the findings of this research make it very clear that it is possible to make a great deal of progress in a very short time using such an approach. Teachers need to make their learners aware of how they can best make progress in this way, by introducing them to the strategies and techniques they can use to optimize word list learning. But it is important to keep in mind that this is simply a way of making a very quick start on increasing vocabulary. Since word lists present a fairly impoverished environment for learning, teachers must make sure that the learning does not stop there by providing lots of opportunity for the

enrichment of words initially learned from word lists and also for developing the fluency with which those items can be used and accessed. So list learning is only one part of a complete vocabulary program, but it is a way of getting a quick start in what otherwise would be a rather slow area of acquisition. We think native speakers acquire words at a rate of about three words a day. Second language learners who are going on to a course of higher study in a short time can't afford to learn at such a slow rate. List learning can be one of the accelerating factors which can help them learn at a much faster rate. I have been using the term list learning, but it is actually learning word pairs. There are advantages to putting the word pairs on cards instead of in a list: the order of the cards can be altered, the words can be learned receptively or productively, and the learner can make an effort to recall the meanings without seeing them.

NS: *Those last examples illustrate some ways of increasing the depth of processing in vocabulary learning. Do you think the depth of processing hypothesis is important for vocabulary acquisition?*

PN: I think the depth or levels of processing hypothesis is one of the most exciting ideas in learning that I've seen for a long time. In learning, the amount of effort is not that important; what is important is the quality of activity in the brain. In word list learning, if one side is covered, the mental activity which takes place is an attempt to recall something which has been seen before. That process is deeper than simply seeing both items, the English word and its first language translation, together at the same time. But there are much deeper ways of dealing with vocabulary than that.

One group of these techniques utilizes imaging. The keyword technique is one example of this where you try to create mental pictures of the language item. Although it can be very effective, I think the keyword technique has a face validity problem. It is very difficult to convince learners that they should study this way and even in my own learning I have found it difficult to consistently use keywords because of the mental gymnastics required to do it.

Another way to deeply process vocabulary is to relate words together with connections, such as causal connections. After a word has been initially learned, a student can put it into a sentence and then look for cause and effect links between that

word and others. Semantic mapping, which is getting a lot of attention in recent research, involves relating words of a text to each other in a diagrammatic map of the text ideas.

Teachers can promote deep processing of the material they present by using techniques like "What is it?," in which the teacher gradually describes the meaning of the word, incrementally revealing more and more information until the learners are able to guess what it is. Really, depth of processing shouldn't be seen solely as a vocabulary activity. It applies to all kinds of learning, not just language learning.

NS: *One of the distinctions that has come out of statistical word count research is that between high frequency words which are very common, and low frequency words which occur relatively rarely. Do these two groups of words call for different teaching approaches?*

PN: The high frequency/low frequency distinction is basically a cost/benefit distinction. It first states that words can be divided into two general frequency groups and then asks if the cost of the effort required to learn those and the cost of the effort required to teach them is worth the benefit in terms of text coverage coming from this effort. With high frequency words, the answer is clearly yes. With low frequency words there is a much lower benefit for the same cost of learning. Therefore, the two word frequency groups require different teaching strategies in order for the teacher's effort to be rewarded in the same way for low frequency words as it is for high frequency words. With low frequency words, you get the most effect from giving attention to strategies. Now the most important strategy is guessing from context, because this is the strategy which eventually leads to vocabulary learning not interrupting reading. It also leads to independence from teachers and dictionaries, in addition to being a strategy which can be applied successfully in a very large number of cases.

A second strategy is using word parts as a way of helping to remember words. Now it is very important that the word parts are not used to guess the meanings of words, but they should be used to help remember words that are learned. These word parts in most cases are just prefixes and they are usually quite sufficient to aid memory. In a way, the use of word parts to help remember words is the best example of the keyword technique. In it, you take the target word in the second language, think of a keyword in the first language which partially shares its form, and then relate the meaning of those two words in a mental picture. When

you use word parts, you are doing the same thing. But this time it is real, not concocted. When you break a word in the second language into parts, those parts can function like keywords, except that they are already in the second language and are really related to the meaning of the word. Just as a keyword in the first language stems from previous knowledge, so do word parts, because you know them either from previous learning of those parts or from other words which contain them. So combining these two together is the best possible way of applying the keyword technique.

A third important strategy is using deep processing techniques to learn words in isolation. Examples are things like keywords, learning from cards, and others mentioned earlier.

Of course, there are many advantages to be gained from teachers training their learners in the use of these kinds of strategies. But from the teachers' point of view, these strategies carry the most importance when it comes to low frequency words, because learners can benefit far more per time spent learning vocabulary strategies than being directly taught low frequency words. Now you shouldn't understand from this that I am saying that learners shouldn't be learning low frequency words. Learners need to learn them, but it is a waste of teaching time to spend it focusing on them. It is much better for the teacher to train the learners in strategies to cope with and to learn low frequency words.

NS: *Even native speakers do not know every English word or all senses of meaning for the polysemous words they do know. What implications does this have for the teaching of nonnative speakers?*

"...learners can benefit far more per time spent learning vocabulary strategies than being directly taught low frequency words."

PN: Most nonnative speakers think that native speakers have total word knowledge, and they are rather alarmed when they find that a native speaker doesn't know the name of a male or female rabbit for example. But in fact this is the case. Vocabulary size among native speakers differs quite considerably. Even native speakers with large vocabularies have very unclear ideas of the meanings of quite a large number of words. I think that teachers have to be just as toler-

ant with nonnative speakers in this regard as they would be with native speakers. At the same time, it is essential to have a high set of standards for knowledge of high frequency words, since they are so important and productive. Teachers should always be prepared to spend time clarifying learners' knowledge of those words, extending the application of them in whatever way possible. So there are implications for second language learners, but we can't let them go too far, because we can't be too liberal with the high frequency words.

NS: What are some of the important current and future directions in vocabulary research?

PN: There are several directions. The number one area that I am interested in is vocabulary size. I really want to see good research being done on how native speakers' vocabulary develops. What are the factors affecting the growth of a native speaker's vocabulary? All of the previous research in this area hasn't been that good and many misconceptions still exist. Secondly, I am also very interested in teaching and so I want to see how normally used teaching procedures can be best designed to bring about vocabulary learning. That's an area which I think is very important.

Of the vocabulary research areas that other people are looking at, one of the most interesting is that of learning vocabulary from reading. This research deals mainly with guessing from context, and also the various factors which affect that. The more research there is into guessing from context, the clearer it becomes that this is a much more complicated operation than we ever thought before. The conditions under which guessing takes place can have a very strong effect on the type of learning that occurs. This is also true for the relationships

between the purpose of reading and learning. I think continued research will help clarify some questions, but it will also show how complicated this area really is.

I tend to be a bit old-fashioned, and I think there is a tendency to look down on some of the research that was done earlier this century on vocabulary frequency and vocabulary statistics. A lot of people feel that this is rather old hat now and not terribly relevant. But I think that the messages that people like Michael West were giving us about the importance of vocabulary control as an aid to learning, and the way in which word frequency can affect the acquisition of vocabulary, are still very important lessons. We shouldn't forget the lessons of the past in the interest of the new research directions of the future.

Reference

Nation, I.S.P. (1990). *Teaching and learning vocabulary*. New York: Newbury House.

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