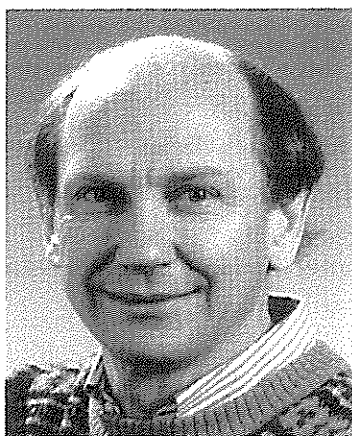


# People Places

## State of the Nation: An Interview with Paul Nation

by Averil Coxhead



*Professor Paul Nation is one of the most well-known and respected researchers and teachers in the field of vocabulary studies. He is the author of *Learning Vocabulary in Another Language* from Cambridge University Press. In this interview, he answers questions posed to him by teachers and researchers in Japan, New Zealand, the United Kingdom, and the USA on words and more.*

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- Paul Nation

1. *What is it about vocabulary that holds your interest so much?*

I got into vocabulary through the influence of staff I worked with when I first began working at Victoria University, particularly H.V. George and Helen Barnard. They were both from the British/Indian tradition like Michael West and gave a central place to vocabulary. It is a bit like a PhD thesis. The topic may seem a bit boring when you start, but once you get into it, it grabs you. I was grabbed early and never let go. That’s why it’s difficult to explain why I enjoy working in this area. I just love doing it.

2. *If you had to pinpoint one or two pieces of research that have had a profound effect in vocabulary studies, what would they be and why are they so important?*

I think West's *General Service List of English Words* has had a major influence on the design of grader reader schemes, dictionaries and courses. Nagy, Herman and Anderson's (1985) "Learning words from context" (*Reading Research Quarterly* 20: 233-253) study showed us the need for sensitive tests and I think multiple tests. This has meant that research on learning from context has been able to move forward so well. It is not easy to think of other landmark studies probably because vocabulary studies draws on research from a wide variety of fields and thus it is not easy for one study to change the field.

3. *What is the strongest argument for persuading students to spend at least some time on direct vocabulary learning?*

Ideally, I wouldn't use an argument. The best way to convince learners is to give them a little bit of instruction about how to do it and then make them do it. I do this with my MA students in my *Teaching and learning vocabulary* course. They have to learn fifty words of the survival vocabulary in a language they don't know. They do it because they have to do an assessed task on it. The task requires them to keep a record of their learning of these words. It blows their mind. They discover that they can learn a lot in a very short time. It usually takes them longer to make the cards than to learn the words. Having done it and seen the spectacular rates of learning, they are well convinced. I haven't done this with a class of learners in a proficiency course, but it should work as a way of convincing them.

I guess this is an indirect way of answering the question. The answer basically is that the effectiveness of the results of such learning is the most convincing argument. The research clearly shows this, but experience is more convincing.

4. *Has corpus linguistics fulfilled its potential in language classrooms?*

I think corpus linguistics still has much to offer. I know of teachers who get learners to do simple corpus work, such as turning a text into a frequency list. This has surprising and useful lessons for learners. When I think of recent corpus work that my students have done, Averil Coxhead, Karen Wang, and David Hirsh on the Academic Word List, Lynn Grant on idioms and Teresa Chung on technical vocabulary, it is easy to see how this research provides useful information for teachers and course designers. Lynn found that there are just over 100 true idioms in English and most are very low frequency. Teresa found that technical vocabulary makes up a much much larger proportion of text than we previously thought and learners can benefit from well directed attention to these words. There is still lots of corpus work going on that really informs what and how we teach.

5. *How do we incorporate phrases of various sorts into vocabulary study?*

From a learning perspective we can divide phrases into three types – core idioms, figuratives, and literal sequences. Each of these categories requires a different approach to learning. Core idioms like *by and large*, *red herring* cannot be understood from knowing the meaning of their parts. They need to be learned as whole units. There are not many of these and only a few of them are reasonably frequent.

Figuratives make up most of what people commonly call idioms. At first sight their parts do not make up the meaning of the whole unit.

*kill two birds with one stone*  
*give the green light*  
*the apple of my eye*  
*as good as gold*

However, once the meaning of the phrase is known, it is possible to see how the parts go together to make the whole. *He is the apple of*

*my eye* means “I am very proud of him”, “I like him a lot”. Knowing this, we can see that we could paraphrase the expression by saying “When I look at him with my eye(s), I see something that is very nice (like an apple)”. For many figuratives, it is possible with a bit of skill and effort to interpret the phrase without having met it before, for example *it’s as good as gold, this is just what the doctor ordered*.

Literal sequences can be understood from the meaning of their parts. From the perspective of a particular group of second language learners, it is possible to divide literal sequences into two groups – those that have a word for word equivalent in the first language, and those that do not. The reason for distinguishing these two groups is that those with first language equivalents need little learning as long as the words that make them up are already known. Those that do not have first language equivalents will not be difficult to understand, but will need to be noticed and remembered before they can be used in speaking and writing. Having deliberately noticed them will make later meetings with them easier to process.

These three types of phrases require different treatments - memorise core idioms, interpret figuratives, and remember literal sequences.

6. *Is the use of word families when counting words misleading, making people think we need less words than we actually do?*

The short answer is yes. The longer answer is that we have to match the unit we count – word family, lemma, type – to the purpose of the counting. If we look at the receptive skill of reading, I think that the word family is a reasonable unit. This is because we can reasonably easily infer the meaning of most unknown family members of a word where we know the root word or related words and the rules of English word building. If we are interested in the productive skill of speaking, then the lemma and perhaps the type is the most suitable unit. This is because we actually need to

use the words and put them in a suitable grammatical and collocational context. Most corpus linguists would argue for the type being the unit of counting in this case, though I and some others are happy with the lemma which is the root word and its closely related inflected forms of the same part of speech.

In terms of word counting using frequency lists and text coverage however the differences are probably not as great as they might at first seem. The reason is that in most word families, there is usually one member which is far more frequent than the others and whose frequency accounts for the greater proportion of the total frequency of the family.

7. *Students in New Zealand schools do not seem to make much progress when measured by the Vocabulary Levels Test. What other tools could teachers be looking at?*

There are two issues here. The first is the use of the test in New Zealand schools or in schools where English is a second and not a foreign language. The second is the interpretation of the results of the test.

One of the teachers studying in our MA programme had given the vocabulary levels test to a group of his secondary school students. He said he thought most of them were native speakers of English. Their scores on the Academic Word List level were low, less than 15 out of 30. I was surprised at this because my belief had been that young native speakers of English increased their vocabulary size by around 1,000 word families a year, and this can be considered a conservative estimate. I went to the school and with each learner individually went through the AWL section of the test that they had previously sat. Initially I used the procedure of getting them to read each of the six words in a block aloud, and then to read the definitions aloud. I did this to check if their low scores were affected by their reading skills. One learner had trouble with irregularly spelled words like *foreign*, but when asked she could explain its meaning. I

then covered up the two bottom definitions and, and focusing only on the top definition got the learner to read through the six words trying to find a match with the definition. Initially there was a hasty incorrect response, to which I said try again. When they chose the correct answer I praised them and we carried on. If they got all three in a block correct I said "Great. You know all of those." Sometimes an answer was incorrect because they had a homograph in mind, for example *seal* where they were thinking of the marine mammal and the test was looking for the verb "close completely".

Each learner got most of the AWL section correct. Using the previous results of the test, the school had just set up a programme to teach the AWL words to the students. It was clear from the later responses of the individuals that they already knew most of the words and that their poor scores on the test were the result of several factors. The most important was probably their attitude to taking the test. They did not take it seriously and probably did it quickly without giving it much attention. Secondly, many of them had had bad experiences with tests before and lacked confidence in their own ability. Thirdly, there was a lack of test taking strategies. The vocabulary levels test uses a matching format and the items within each block are unavoidably interdependent. If you get the first one wrong and that wrong answer is the correct answer for another item in the block, then it has a double effect. So with the six choices there is a need to consider each choice. It helps if each block is approached in a systematic strategic way. Fourthly, there is a problem with the test itself. The test items do not have a context, so the test-taker is not guided to a particular polyseme or homograph. Fifthly, a few of the AWL words, particularly with the senses given in the test may be unknown to 15-16 year old native speakers of English, or may not be their first choice of a meaning. What was clear to me from this brief piece of work with some learners was that we need to check whether our tests and measures are giving us valid information. Ideally this checking would not only be in the form of pilot

studies, but by checking with the individuals who sat the test as soon as possible after the sitting.

So, the first caution is make sure the person sitting the test really is a non-native speaker of English, and secondly make sure they are taking it seriously.

Now to interpreting the test. Each word in the test represents about thirty three other words. That is, the test is a sample from a variety of one thousand word levels with thirty items at each level representing the 1000. So, if someone increased their score by ten words, that means that they probably increased their vocabulary knowledge by three hundred or more words. The normal rate of increase for a native speaker making full use of the language is probably around 1000 words a year. If second language learners are not getting lots of exposure to the language, they need to do some deliberate word study to build up their rate. They need to do this anyway to try to catch up with the native speakers who had several years start on them.

The second part of the question implies that there is something wrong with the test. This reminds me of a story. A guy just bought a Rolex watch. He was told how accurate it was and that it would never lose or gain time etc. He got home and showed it proudly to his family. Then looked at his watch which showed 5:30 and turned on the TV. Immediately he heard "This is the six o'clock news". He said, "Which one of you kids has been fiddling with the TV set?"

8. *What are you working on at the moment?*

I am working on two large related vocabulary projects. One is making word family lists for the first 14,000 or so words of English using the lists from the British National Corpus. The other is to make a computerised test of total vocabulary size that could be used with both native-speakers and non-native speakers. The test is a multiple-choice format using simple sentence contexts for the tested words. Once the test is made I hope to start getting some good figures for young native-speakers' vocabulary size and growth.

9. *What areas of research are crying out for more work to be done?*

Extensive reading is getting more attention now than it has had for a few years. There needs to be more hard research on it to balance the justified fervour with which it is promoted. A lot of work also needs to be done on particular teaching and learning activities to see what is happening when they are used and how they contribute to learning. Finally our knowledge of native speakers' vocabulary size is based on largely faulty research. It would be good to get some well researched data on vocabulary size and growth.

10. *Have you had a good time?*

Wrong tense. I am having a great time. Most of it is largely because I work in such a great university department with very supportive colleagues and I have very keen students. Also being part of an international network of vocabulary scholars is very rewarding.

*Paul, thank you for never letting go in the search for more understanding of vocabulary learning and for generously sharing your insights with students, researchers and teachers in many, many places in the world. Kia kaha. Averil.*

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