

Interview with Paul Nation: The past, present, and future of second language vocabulary acquisition

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Tsuyuki Miura (Interviewer): Professor Nation, you've conducted a large amount of research, published a great number of articles, and written a comprehensive book in this field. Could you tell me how you got your initial interest in vocabulary? What has kept you in that particular area for such a long period of time?

Paul Nation: I'd like to think that the interest goes back even as far as Michael West in India, or what was then in Bangor. My teachers who got me interested in vocabulary were H. V. George and Helen Barnard, who taught in India. The traditions that they taught in were ones that gave a lot of importance to vocabulary. H. V. George, in particular, was interested in looking at vocabulary frequency, and he did early corpus linguistics work on verb form frequency. Helen Barnard wrote a course book, which was English for specific purposes, but with a very strong vocabulary focus. I think that their focus on vocabulary came from that Indian situation in which they taught, which was partly influenced by Michael West's work there. As a result, I became interested in vocabulary, and once you start, it's hard to stop (laughs).

TM: So you were strongly influenced by your teachers.

PN: Yes. I've seen an interesting article in which that person made a family tree of vocabulary studies in the US. The family tree went back to Edward Thorndike, the great educational psychologist, who worked on what became the *Teachers' Wordbook of 30,000 Words*. When you look at the major names in vocabulary studies in the US, after Thorndike, it was Edgar Dale, and after Dale, it was Jean Chall. Dale was Thorndike's student and Chall was Dale's student. It's sort of a teacher-student family tree.

TM: Then once you started, you just kept going?

PN: That's right. In those days, I started off by doing a project for a course I was studying. I thought I'd write a survey of studies on the teaching and learning of vocabulary. I thought

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maybe I'd find about 15 or 20 pieces of research, but to my surprise, I found around 100 or 200 pieces of research, many, many more than I expected. That was around 1975. Nowadays, it's almost impossible to read every piece of research which is written about vocabulary because the number has grown enormously. Now I've got a bibliography of at least 2,000 articles very strongly focused on vocabulary. It's almost getting into the stage now where it's too much for one person to be able to understand it all, or to read it all and to know it all.

TM: What recent research on vocabulary acquisition stands out to you as particularly important?

PN: It's very difficult to answer. I have to separate the research from the people who I've known and look at the research studies individually. You have people like Bata Lauer, who's probably the most productive experimental researcher in vocabulary as a second or foreign language. She's always looking to answer very practical questions by well-designed experiments. Then you have people like Norbert Schmitt. He's doing some of the old research again and doing it much better than that it was done in the past. We can get much more reliable and better explained results than we did before. Then you have Paul Meara, who's developing models and theories of how vocabulary is stored and organized in the brain, and this is very important. Then you even have more recent researchers, who're now starting to publish internationally. The one that stands out for me is Rob Waring in Japan, who's just published probably the best article on learning from a graded reader. If I want to pick one study which stands out, that would probably be the book-flood studies by Warwick Ellery and Francis Mangubhai. Even though they're not really vocabulary studies, the work they did on the effect of message-focused approaches to learning was really important research. Anyone who's a teacher of English as a foreign or second language should read the book-flood studies because they're just so important in language learning.

TM: Your 2001 book includes research that was conducted many decades ago, rather than focusing only on recent studies. Why is that?

PN: When you get older, you have to believe that something new is not necessarily better than something old (laughs). Some of the classic studies are still very good. Some of them, like West's General Service List (GSL), are outdated now, but so far, no one has made a better list than that. Partly because it hasn't been fashionable for

quite a long time to do research on word lists and to make word lists. And partly because it's a very big job. The people who want to replace the GSL have realized that it's a job which would take a person probably at least a year of fulltime work to do properly.

TM: Sounds like you have tried to make a new word list.

PN: I tried to help Norbert Schmitt replace the GSL. I tried to make my own list from the British National Corpus because it is one of the largest well-organized corpora of English. I wanted to see if whether using that list would be a way of making a new GSL. But it became clear after I made the first 3,000 words that that wasn't the way to do it. One of the reasons for that was that the corpus didn't represent the needs of second or foreign language learners. It represented formal, adult, British language. That raised once again very important questions like if you're going to replace the GSL, what sort of corpus would you base your frequency count on, and how would you organize that corpus and choose the material to go into it. Those are difficult questions that I don't know the answer to. Those are just some of the things which come out.

TM: What kind of vocabulary activities do you find yourself constantly coming back to?

PN: I probably get a little bit hung up too much on deliberate learning because there is a prejudice against it. The communicative approach has tended to emphasize that things should be picked up as you go along. Yet there's over a hundred years of research that shows that deliberate learning is very effective. I keep coming back to that because I want people to see that it's a question of how you balance deliberate learning with message-focused learning so that you can get the best of the two approaches. The other one is learning through graded reading. There's quite a lot of prejudice against that, too. Some people think that using simplified material is somehow inferior to using material written for native speakers—but not in Japan, fortunately. Some of the stronger supporters of extensive reading programs using simplified readers are working in Japan.

TM: Let's talk about the current Japanese context. Firstly, some research has shown that many Japanese high school students are probably exposed to less than 10,000 running words of English per year. In addition, the Japanese Ministry of Education has set the minimum target for vocabulary learning as approximately 2,700

words through the 6 years of secondary school. What do you think about those numbers?

PN: Clearly 10,000 running words a year is not nearly enough because that would represent probably about two level 1 or level 2 graded readers a year. That's a ridiculously low figure because the research on graded reading indicates that learners should be reading at least one graded reader every two weeks. From that perspective, it should be closer to 200,000 running words a year. That's not unrealistic because that's input which is not dependent on English teachers. Also, the 2,700 word goal for six years is not an efficient goal in the sense that given that amount of time, you'd expect more to be learned. However, if they knew almost 3,000 words of English by the end of the sixth year of study, and if they could make reasonable use of those words, that would be an enormous step.

TM: I've brought two English textbooks with me today that are widely used in Japanese secondary schools. A common feature of these books is that some vocabulary is glossed below the reading text. What is your opinion about studying words in this way?

PN: Using text as a basis for deciding the sequencing of vocabulary is quite a good idea because it avoids interference problems, and it establishes a relationship between vocabulary in use and the decontextualization of vocabulary. One of the major problems with it is a principle that teachers can apply to almost any lesson. That is, when you do a piece of teaching, you should ask yourself, "Does this teaching make tomorrow's lesson easier or not?" Not today's lesson. The problem is that the words which stand out are likely to be unfamiliar words which are peculiar to that text. If you give attention to those words, you're helping today's text, but probably not helping very much with tomorrow's text. There can be two purposes for a glossary. One is to draw attention to important things—the things that you want the learners to learn. Another purpose of a glossary is to deal with the words which are important for that text, but that you don't want to pay attention to as a teacher. When teachers look at these texts, they really have to think, "What's the purpose of this particular listing of words with their meanings?" Is this there so that I can get on with the important things?" or, "Is this something I should give some attention to?" One way to make that decision is to go back to the principle of, "Does today's learning make tomorrow's learning easier or not?"

TM: Most English textbooks in Japan don't include activities that specifically aim at enhancing students' vocabulary knowledge. Do you think that's a problem?

PN: Not necessarily, because I don't think there has to be vocabulary activities after a text. The problem with activities after a text is that it's giving the responsibility for vocabulary learning to the course book writer. In the ideal situation, the responsibility for vocabulary learning should be with the learner. The learner should be working out what the important words to learn are and how they should go about learning them. A vocabulary exercise after the text is something useful but only one step in the learning of the vocabulary, so I don't get very excited about having or not having vocabulary exercises. Another thing would be that it's possible to design things like comprehension questions with a vocabulary learning goal in mind. That seems more important to me because the course book makers can build in several foci to the activities that they design. There are many ways to make vocabulary part of a course. One way is that the teacher or the course designer has a plan how vocabulary can be helped to be learned, and this is worked into the activities. I'm not a religious fanatic who wants to make everything vocabulary (laughs).

TM: Could you say more about the learners' responsibility to learn vocabulary?

PN: This is the autonomy movement. It really comes down to the idea that if people don't take interest and responsibility in their own learning, the learning probably doesn't mean very much. Depending on teachers to do it all is not what learning is about. It's an idealistic goal, but it's one that we should always be trying to reach.

TM: Many teachers feel that by the time good students in Japan graduate from high school, they know a fairly large number of English words, but have not effectively developed strong connections among those words. The students often have great difficulty dealing with contextualized listening and reading texts, and speaking or writing with fluency.

PN: You know, I agree with that.

TM: One of the causes of this problem may be that many students intensively study vocabulary using commercially published vocabulary building books for the purpose of succeeding on university entrance examinations. I brought one of the best-selling vocabulary books today

to show you. It has a reading part, Japanese translation, and the vocabulary list. What do you think of these kind of books?

PN: This goes back to my main idea of the four strands of a language course. These books focus to a large degree on deliberate learning, the language-focused learning part of the course. That's fine. Every course should have that. These books probably do it quite well. If I was reviewing these books, I'd be looking for things like, "Has the vocabulary been selected properly?" or, "Has consideration been given to the various frequency levels?"

TM: This vocabulary is specifically selected by the frequency on past entrance examinations.

PN: Oh, I see. That's a slightly funny corpus to base choices on (laughs). The vocabulary which is listed in the index looks OK, but it's certainly going well beyond the third or even fourth thousand words. Even so, there are some very useful words here. I don't have any problems with deliberate learning, but that shouldn't make up more than about 25% of the course. The other 75% of the course should be learning through message-focused or meaning-focused input, practicing meaning-focused output, and fluency development. As you rightly mentioned, the problem is fluency. Certainly, if you're only learning a little bit of a language, it's really important to learn a little bit to a high degree of fluency. When learners are learning in secondary school, I don't mind if the vocabulary learning goals are 2,700 words or even 2,000 words, if those 2,000 words could be used really fluently and well at the end of the 6-year period. I'd be absolutely happy with that. So, I think the books are a good idea. Learning with the Japanese translation is a good thing. There's plenty of research to show that.

It's important that, when you look at the learning situation in any country, you don't get too critical about it. If things have been going on for a long time, you need to see how you can use that to good purpose and how to make it nicely balanced. Saying this is a lot of rubbish, throwing it away, and starting with something else is not the way to bring about change, and to get people on to your side. In Japan, people have had years and years of experience of teaching and learning English, and they've worked out things which are effective for some of the goals that they have. You've got to take those things, see their value

and put them as part of a bigger picture. I think that that's the way to make progress.

TM: What directions do you see the field moving in in the coming years?

PN: That's a really hard question. Some of my students now are doing some really good research that I'm quite pleased with and proud of. Some are researching, for example, technical vocabulary, others are looking at the effect of different learning activities on what is actually learned, and seeing whether different activities result in different kinds of knowledge. Someone is looking at the nature of learning activities much more closely, to see how the design of activities affect what can be learned. And I hope someone else in the future would be looking closely at vocabulary size and how much you need to know in order to do certain things.

TM: How about yourself? What would you like to see researched more?

PN: My personal big research project at the moment is trying to design a test of vocabulary size. I can see that project answering questions like how do vocabularies grow? I'll start looking at native speakers' vocabulary growth. But every time I do a little bit more research on it, I find that it's more difficult than I thought it was (laughs). That's where my interest lies. But that's an old-fashioned interest from the 1920s, 30s, and 40s and still probably not fully back in fashion. But, as you said earlier, you should respect age, not see it as a disadvantage (laughs).

TM: Do you have any plans to write a new book?

PN: Maybe in a year or two, I'd like to write a book about vocabulary growth, but I'm still a long way from being able to do that yet. Generally, I write books for myself because I want to understand and know, and to write a book is a way which forces you to systematically understand and know something.

TM: I'm looking forward to the new book. Thank you very much for an interesting talk today!

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