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A Course in Applied Linguistics
M.A. in English Language and Linguistics

(Vocabulary)

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What is Vocabulary

Vocabulary is a complex concept with various measurement aspects. The fundamental question in vocabulary studies is "What is a word?" This leads to different answers depending on the inquiry. For instance, counting the length of a text or the speed of speech involves counting "tokens," which are individual occurrences of words, including repeated forms. When assessing the number of different words someone knows, "word types" are counted, where repeated words are not counted after their first occurrence. Word families, which include closely related word forms, are also introduced. The text provides insights into various units of counting in vocabulary studies, including tokens, word types, word families, and formulaic language, including core idioms, figuratives, and literals.

What vocabulary should be learned?

What vocabulary to focus on should be determined by two major considerations – the needs of the learners and the usefulness of the vocabulary items. The traditional way of measuring the usefulness of items is to discover their frequency and range in a relevant corpus. The most striking features of the results of a frequency-based study are:

- The very wide spread of frequencies, with some items occurring many, many times and some occurring only once.
- The relatively small number of words needed to cover a very large proportion of the tokens in a text.
- The very large number of low-frequency items that account for a very small proportion of the tokens in a text

How should vocabulary be learned?

- **Learning vocabulary from meaning-focused input (listening and reading)**

For non-native speakers to learn vocabulary effectively, they need to focus on understanding what they hear and read. They should encounter new words rarely, have plenty of exposure to the language, and pay attention to new words deliberately. Mixing casual learning with deliberate learning is beneficial. Casual learning builds up over time, but deliberate learning, with tactics like jotting down new words or asking for explanations, boosts vocabulary growth. Programs that encourage extensive reading and listening, like using simplified books and paying attention to new words, are great for learning vocabulary in language studies.

- **Learning vocabulary from meaning-focused output (speaking and writing)**

Deliberate vocabulary learning means actively working on new words, which is more effective than learning passively. It involves focused activities like using word cards, repeating words, and practicing in different ways to remember them better. This method helps students not just to recognize but also correctly use words in speaking and writing.

Deliberate learning is about setting clear goals, practicing regularly, and using specific techniques to connect words with their meanings. It is different from casual learning that happens naturally by reading or being exposed to words around. While both are important, deliberate learning accelerates vocabulary growth and ensures better understanding and retention of words in the long term.

- **Developing fluency with vocabulary across the four skills**

Fluency in language skills is crucial for effective communication in various tasks. It involves using familiar words, focusing on the message, and adding challenges to improve performance. Activities to boost fluency don't usually target specific vocabulary or grammar rules but aim to enhance communication in various language tasks. There are two main methods for improving fluency: repeated reading or timed speaking exercises, and exploring different ways to use a known word or phrase in different situations. This systematic practice helps build a strong and organized vocabulary system, enabling better control of the language and smoother navigation through different tasks, which is a significant goal in language learning.

- **Strategy development**

There are four main ways to understand and remember new words effectively: guessing from the text, studying word cards, understanding word parts, and using a dictionary. These methods are very helpful and work well for many words. To master these techniques, learners should practice them until using them becomes second nature. They are especially handy for common words and are crucial for less common ones. Since there are many rare words that don't show up often, teachers shouldn't spend time teaching each one. Instead, they should focus on training students to handle such words themselves

- **Learning from word cards and using word parts**

Making small vocabulary cards to learn words, even though it's seen as old-fashioned, is supported by research, especially when combined with mnemonic techniques like the 'keyword technique.' This method can improve learning by about 25% compared to just memorizing. The keyword technique helps connect a word's form to its meaning. For example, a Thai learner trying to remember the English word "fun" could link it to the Thai word for "teeth," which sounds similar. This link between words makes learning more effective and engaging.

- **Dictionary use**

Dictionaries can be monolingual, bilingual, or bilingualized, and are popular for their versatility. They aid in understanding receptive and productive reading, listening, and writing. However, many learners struggle with using dictionaries effectively, which requires understanding pronunciation symbols, grammar, and context. Dictionaries also aid in learning by exploring word meanings and connections, such as finding common meanings in definitions, finding related words, and creating mental images. Teaching these methods involves checking learners' existing knowledge, planning improvement, explaining their benefits, and tracking progress. These approaches work with numerous words and require attention from both teachers and learners.

Assessing vocabulary knowledge

Vocabulary tests can have a range of purposes:

- To measure vocabulary size (useful for placement purposes or as one element of a proficiency measure).
- To measure what has just been learned (a short-term achievement measure).
- To measure what has been learned in a course (a long-term achievement measure).
- To diagnose areas of strength and weakness (a diagnostic measure).

Vocabulary size and language proficiency

The relationship between vocabulary size and language ability can vary between languages. In English, having a larger vocabulary is linked to better performance in reading, listening, and formal tests. However, in a language like 'Simplish', where vocabulary is limited to 2000 core words and word combinations, mastering these words makes vocabulary learning easier. Even infrequent or long words are not a problem, as they are made up of familiar components. This makes vocabulary learning easier for learners of Simplish compared to English learners. Once they master core words, the concept of vocabulary size becomes irrelevant, allowing them to focus on understanding and creating new words as needed. This highlights the importance of vocabulary size and its impact on language learning in different languages.