

# **Some basic questions about vocabulary learning: how can research answer them?**

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The teaching and learning of vocabulary plays a major role in the foreign language classroom. In this paper, I examine selected issues in vocabulary learning and teaching in light of research evidence. Specifically, I argue that among the main problems learners face while acquiring lexis in a foreign language are the quantity of words they have to learn, the differential learnability of words and the activation of words they know passively.

## **I. Quantity**

Research has found that in English, 2000 word families are needed for conversation, 3000 to understand radio talks, and at least 5000 word families are needed in order to read newspaper texts and novels (Nation 2001, 2006). Some teachers maintain that learners can overcome various lexical gaps in comprehension if they have developed good guessing strategies which will assist them in inferring the meaning of unfamiliar words from context. But even good guessing strategies cannot always compensate for lexical deficiencies. In order for meaningful guessing to occur, at least 95% (preferably 98%) of vocabulary in a text has to be known in order to provide clues (Laufer 1997a). Besides, learners often guess incorrectly, when they think they know the meaning of a word that they try to guess, but in fact are confusing it with similar words, e.g. confusing 'comprehensive' with 'comprehensible', 'conceal' with 'cancel'. To understand 95% of text, learners should be familiar with the above mentioned figures of words. However, vocabulary size tests in different countries show that learners of English as a Foreign Language do not possess this kind of vocabulary. High school graduates know between 1500 and 3500 word families as measured by a test of understanding the meaning of words (Laufer 2000). Hence, one of the tasks of an EFL teacher is to try and increase their learners' vocabulary size beyond what is customary nowadays in many schools and colleges.

## **II. Learnability of words**

Practically, not all words can receive the same amount of time and attention in

class. Some words can be assigned for independent learning, while others will need the teacher's guidance and will require more practice than others.

One important criterion for selecting the words that will receive special attention is word learnability – the amount of learning effort needed to learn a word. It has been found that some words are more difficult to learn than others (Laufer 1990, 1997b). Among the various features of word difficulty, I will mention five here. The first three factors of difficulty are related to L1 – L2 difference, the other two are the result of confusions made within the L2.

#### *Lack of semantic overlap between words in L2 and their L1 equivalents.*

This is the case where a concept is lexicalized differently in different languages.

For example, *comfortable* and *convenient* are expressed by one and the same word in Hebrew (noah); *evaluate / appreciate / estimate* are translated by one word in Hebrew (leha'arich)

#### *Multiplicity of meaning of L2 words which does not exist in L1*

This is the case of homonyms (words with several unrelated meanings) which are not homonyms in L1, but have different words for the different meanings. Here are some examples of such words in English which have two different words in Hebrew.

*Lie* (lie down, not tell the truth)

*Abstract* (opposite of 'concrete', summary)

*Plant* (something that grows, factory)

#### *Lexical voids*

Sometimes a concept in L2 does not exist in L1. Hence there is no word to designate it. In such a case, learners have to acquire an unfamiliar concept together with a new word. For example, *cozy*, *quaint* are such voids for speakers of Hebrew.

#### *Synformy (similarity of form)*

Pairs or groups of words can be similar in sound, script, and morphology. (For definitions and classifications of synformy see Laufer 1988, 1990). Such words are very often confused by L2 learners. The following are examples of synforms.

*conceal/cancel/counsel*    *embrace/embarrass*    *cute/acute*    *lunch/launch*

*industrious/industrial*    *exhausted/exhaustive*    *economic/economical*

*sensible/sensitive/sensual*

### *Deceptive morphology.*

Words may look as if they were combinations of morphemes even though they are not. In such cases, learners tend to decompose them and misinterpret them accordingly. For example, *shortcomings* was interpreted by students *as short visits (short+comings)*, *discourse* *as in the wrong direction*, *infallible* *as something that cannot fall down*, *outgrow* *as grow outside*

### III. Activation of familiar vocabulary

Tests of passive and active vocabulary knowledge show that active vocabulary size is smaller than the passive vocabulary size. It develops more slowly and may reach a plateau beyond which further growth is questionable (Laufer 1998, Laufer and Goldstein 2004). This is not surprising since the amount of effort required to achieve active knowledge of a word is greater than that required for passive knowledge. To be able to use a word, learners have to know more than to understand its meaning. The additional information about a word that is necessary for its use has to do with the distinctions between a given word and some other related words and also with various patterns into which a word can enter. For example, learners have to be able to distinguish between related meanings of *evaluate* and *estimate*; *hurt* and *damage*. They have to know that the verb *want* can be followed by an infinitive (*want to eat*), but *stop* combines with a gerund (*stop eating*), that *prayer* combines with *say*, but *truth* with *tell*.

What can be done to help learners achieve active knowledge? When the foreign language is studied in a classroom context, input and interaction are limited and cannot constitute the main source of vocabulary development. Therefore, form-focused instruction is of crucial importance. Such instruction makes learners attend to the words selected by the teacher, via a variety of tasks. These can be of a communicative nature, or non-communicative. Both types are legitimate as long as they require the learners to do something with the word. Words could be practiced in isolation, in phrase/sentence context, and in discourse/text context. Since active knowledge entails a choice of a particular word and combining it with other words in connected speech or writing, of special importance are exercises in distinguishing between words that are often confused by learners and practicing various combinations into which a word can enter. An example of the first type of exercise is filling in

sentence blanks by choosing from several options of related words, e.g. *assure*, *insure*, *reassure*. An exercise belonging to the second type would be looking for possible collocations of a particular word. For example, some verbs that combine with *proposal* are *submit*, *accept*, *reject*.

Finally, words have to be rehearsed periodically in order to stay in memory. Such rehearsals can take the form of additional practice, or brief reminders of the word's meaning, its specific features and examples of use.

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