

Pre-workshop information and readings

Many researchers and teachers agree with Henry Sweet's oft quoted observation that, "the real intrinsic difficulty in learning a foreign language lies in that of having to master its vocabulary" (Sweet, 1899). This is due to the number of items that must be learned in order to communicate successfully in a language. Laufer and Nation (2012) argue that the task is both quantitative, in terms of the amount of words, and qualitative, in terms of the use of those words. While in the past many argued that vocabulary was not as important as grammar in second language (L2) teaching and learning, since the 1990s there has been a renewed focus on vocabulary and its role in successful second language interaction. The importance of vocabulary in acquisition has been connected through empirical evidence to the successful communication of the L2 learner, to the ability of the learner to convey meaning, and to the learner's level of grammatical knowledge (Barcroft, 2012; de Groot, 2011; Schmitt, 2008; Zimmerman, 1997b).

In this workshop we will discuss some of the many aspects of L2 vocabulary learning that have been explored empirically. We will consider answers to the following questions:

What is vocabulary learning?

The most important established characteristic of L2 vocabulary learning is that it is not the same cognitive process as first language vocabulary learning (de Groot, 2011). In this workshop we will consider how these two processes differ, as well as how our understanding of L2 vocabulary learning can inform classroom practice.

What does it mean to know a word?

There are many types of word knowledge. These include, but are not limited to: form-meaning connections, referential meanings, antonyms, synonyms, hyponyms, collocational information, syntactic information, morphology, phonology, frequency, and appropriate pragmatic context (de Groot, 2011; Doughty, 2003; Jimenez, 2010; Laufer & Nation, 2012). Many of these types can be further subdivided according to passive and productive abilities. We will discuss which types of word knowledge come first and what we can expect from students according to amount of exposure to a novel L2 word. We will also focus on how L2 word knowledge can be measured.

How should vocabulary be taught in the classroom, at all levels of proficiency?

Some believe that the majority of L2 vocabulary learning occurs outside of the classroom and not intentionally (Hulstijn, 2003). However, research has shown that instruction can and does have a positive effect on vocabulary learning (Milton & Donzelli, 2013). Many outcomes from previous research can also serve as concrete recommendations for L2 instruction (Barcroft, 2012). We will review previous research outcomes that can inform instructional methods and expectations for learning. Finally, we will discuss vocabulary instruction and learning in advanced L2 classrooms and abroad.

Readings & Discussion Questions

Reading 1:

Milton, James & Giovanna Donzelli. 2013. The lexicon. In J. Herschensohn & M. Young-Scholten (eds.), *The Cambridge Handbook of Second Language Acquisition*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. (p. 441-460)

Note: The authors use the term “uptake” to indicate what many refer to as “intake.” (pg. 442, 450)

In this chapter, Milton and Donzelli provide an overview of what we know about the relationship between vocabulary knowledge and successful language use.

Questions:

1. The authors state that there are many ways of gaining vocabulary knowledge. Have you noticed this in your own language study and that of your students?
2. How do you think you learn new words?
3. Why is the presence of meaningful input not enough for vocabulary learning?
4. There are many types of vocabulary knowledge (pg. 445). How can you target these types of knowledge with classroom activities?
5. Think about your students and how they learn vocabulary. Does your experience in the classroom align with the predictions and descriptions given by these authors?

Reading 2:

Nam, Jihyun. 2010. Linking Research and Practice: Effective Strategies for Teaching Vocabulary in the ESL Classroom. *TESL Canada Journal* 26(1), 127 – 135.

Nam states that the field lacks, “examples of how to put various research findings into practice” (pg. 128). In this article, the author provides several classroom activities that “bridge the gap” between research and teaching.

Questions:

1. Do any of the research findings that Nam summarizes surprise you?
2. How do these findings fit (or not) with your experience learning and teaching vocabulary?
3. Are there any concrete takeaways from this article that you feel you can use in your teaching?
4. Would you use these activities in your classes? How?