

Current Trends in Second Language Vocabulary

—Norbert Schmitt, University of Nottingham

Vocabulary is back. Of course it never left language classrooms, but there was a time during the audiolingual and early communicative periods where it certainly did not attract the amount of research attention one might expect for such a basic linguistic building block. However, the 1990s saw so much work being done on vocabulary that even dedicated specialists could not keep up with it all. The decade culminated with no fewer than four major books on the subject: *Second Language Vocabulary Acquisition* (Coady & Huckin, 1997), *Vocabulary: Description, Acquisition, and Pedagogy* (Schmitt & McCarthy, 1997), *Vocabulary: Applied Linguistic Perspectives* (Carter, 1998), and *Exploring the Second Language Mental Lexicon* (Singleton, 1999).

When doing background reading for an introductory textbook on vocabulary, I worked through a great deal of this diverse vocabulary research and discerned a number of key directions beginning to emerge. I will highlight three here that I feel will become especially important in the coming years. (For more details and fuller referencing, see Schmitt, in press.) The first is the notion that vocabulary is learned incrementally. Everyone already knows this, but it is amazing how little effect this insight has had on vocabulary research. Most studies set some criterion at which a word is con-

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sidered known, and then proceed to make dichotomous known/not known judgements. In fact, most words are likely to exist in a state of partial knowledge. For example, even if a word can be pronounced and/or spelled and one meaning sense is known, the ubiquitous polysemy in English dictates that there are likely to be other meaning senses, some of which may not be known. In addition, lexical knowledge like collocation, register constraints, and intuitions of frequency are only acquired after massive exposure, and so are also unlikely to be fully mastered. What is required is more research tracking the acquisition of individual words over time. Such longitudinal studies could im-

prove our understanding of the acquisition stages words go through, how receptive mastery eventually becomes productive mastery, and what degree/kind of knowledge is necessary for words to be fluently used in discourse. Some work in this area includes development of a scale attempting to measure these lexical acquisition stages [the Vocabulary Knowledge Scale - VKS] (Paribakht & Wesche, 1993), and two longitudinal studies that I have done (Schmitt & Meara, 1997; Schmitt, 1998).

The second direction stems from the first. If most vocabulary is likely to be only partially known, then vocabulary tests ideally need to be able to measure this incomplete knowledge. Most vocabulary tests have been designed to measure how many words are known (vocabulary size) by using formats that give a correct/incorrect result, such as multiple-choice items. While these are clearly useful, some attempts have been made to measure the quality of knowledge about target words. These attempts have taken two approaches. The first is developmental in nature and tracks vocabulary items through stages of acquisition. The second describes how well the various components of lexical knowledge are known (e.g. spelling, meaning, and collocation). Vocabulary tests using these approaches are still in their infancy, but once further refined and validated, they should provide us with much richer descriptions of our learners' lexicons. If this proves to be the case, then vocabulary tests may once again become an important component of tests of overall language proficiency. (See Read 1997, in press, for more on this area.)

The third direction may be the most important. Increased computing capacity and improved software has finally allowed us to explore the lexical patterning in discourse. Some of this has always been obvious in the guise of multi-word units such as idioms and phrasal verbs. The fact that certain words tend to co-occur together in texts (collocation, e.g. blonde hair; sticky situation) is also widely known. But Nattinger and DeCarrico (1992) have shown that lexical patterning extends further than this. They illustrated that lexical phrases are widespread in language, being primarily the linguistic realizations of functional language use. In other words, people need to do many things in the world on a recurring basis, such as tell a joke or story, and so certain language sequences have been

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institutionalized to represent these functions. Thus the lexical phrase "Have you heard the one about ..." has the functional use of introducing an amusing anecdote. In the last few years, John Sinclair has found that lexical patterning extends into discourse even beyond the level of lexical phrase. In fact, he has found it to be so widespread that he now suggests that lexical patterning is actually the major basis for the structural organization of language, rather than the more traditional view of generative grammar plus semantics (Sinclair 1996, 1998). This is a very new idea, but one which I am sure will have a fundamental effect on the way that language is conceptualized and taught.

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to one another. Both Berg and Reynolds's studies looked at outcomes only, the students' text. But with a limited focus, a large number of texts can be studied and the results generalized to similar populations.

I use these examples to stress the importance of multiple approaches to research. Two of these papers are in press if you would like to read them. Cathrine Berg's will be coming out in *Journal of Second Language Writing* and Linda Harklau's in an edited volume by Eli Hinkel called *Culture in Language Teaching and Learning*. Jim Purpura, the Chair-Elect, is organizing the Academic Session for next year. He has decided to keep the quantitative/qualitative format as well and has organized a colloquium on research on learning strategies.

I would like to end by thanking Sara Weigle for continuing to produce this newsletter for another year and Jim Purpura for agreeing to serve as Chair-Elect. And I would also like to thank everyone who served as discussion group leaders at the last TESOL Convention. From what people told me, these were well attended and although the time allotted for them was not very long, the discussions were productive and lively. A related issue that was discussed in New York was the lack of workshops in our IS. In addition to papers and discussion groups, I would like to suggest that members propose workshops in which they can demonstrate research methods and techniques in a two-hour, as opposed to 30-minute, session. These would not represent new methods necessarily, but would serve an outreach function.

One final note: we decided at our meeting in New York to do something proactive this year. We discussed proposing a dissertation award to TESOL. I am in the process of writing a proposal to the Awards Committee. If you have any comments on such an award, please let me know.

—Charlene Polio, Michigan State University

Charlene Polio, Chair of the Research Interest Section, is an Associate Professor in the English Department at Michigan State University. Charlene's current research focuses on the teaching of writing to second language learners and she is particularly interested in research methods as they are applied in studies of L2 writing.