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Vocabulary

In 1980, Paul Meara characterized vocabulary learning as a 'neglected aspect of language learning'. Researchers in the 1970s and early 1980s were drawn to syntax and morphology because of the way error patterns and developmental sequences of these features might reveal something about universals in languages and language acquisition. How different things are now! Just as Meara was commenting on the state of neglect, an explosion of research on vocabulary learning was beginning, and the acquisition of vocabulary has become one of the most active areas in second language acquisition research.

For most people, the importance of vocabulary seems very clear. As it has often been remarked, we can communicate by using words that are not placed in the proper order, pronounced perfectly, or marked with the proper grammatical morphemes, but communication often breaks down if we do not use the correct word. Although circumlocution and gestures can sometimes compensate, the importance of vocabulary can hardly be over-estimated.

The challenge of acquiring a large enough vocabulary for successful communication in a variety of settings has been the focus of much recent research. Every language has an astonishingly large number of words. English, which has built its vocabulary from a great variety of source languages, is variously estimated to have anywhere from 100,000 to one million words, depending in part on how words are counted. For example, some would treat 'teach, teacher, teaching, and taught' as separate words while others would count all of them as part of a single root word from which all the others are derived.

An educated adult speaker of English is believed to know at least 20,000 words. Fortunately, most everyday conversation requires a far smaller number, something more like 2,000 words. Similarly, although Chinese and Japanese have tens of thousands of characters, most are rare, and non-technical material can usually be read with a knowledge of about 2,000



characters. Even so, acquiring a basic vocabulary is a significant accomplishment for a second language learner.

As we saw in Chapter 1, children learn thousands of words in their first language with little observable effort. The task of learning a large vocabulary is quite different for second language learners. For one thing, they are likely to be exposed to far smaller samples of the language to be learned. The contexts in which second language learners encounter new vocabulary may not be as helpful as those in which children learn the first one or two thousand words of their first language. If they are older children or adults, the words they are exposed to may also be more difficult, referring to meanings that are not easily guessed from context. It is estimated that, in order to guess the meaning of a word even in a helpful context, one needs to know nearly all the other words in the text—a rare event for second language learners at most stages of acquisition. Although the two or three thousand most frequent words in English make up as much as 80–90 per cent of most non-technical texts, less frequent words are crucial to the meaning of many things we hear and read. For example, the meaning of a newspaper article about a court case may be lost without the knowledge of words such as 'testimony', 'alleged', or 'accomplice'.

The first step in knowing a word may simply be to recognize that it is a word. Paul Meara and his colleagues (2005b) developed tests that took advantage of this fact. Some of these tests take the form of simple words lists, and learners are instructed to simply check 'yes' or 'no' according to whether or not they know the word. Each list also includes some items that look like

English words but are not. The number of real words that the learner identifies is adjusted for guessing by a factor that takes account of the number of non-words that are also chosen. Such a simple procedure is more effective than it might sound. A carefully constructed list can be used to estimate the vocabulary size of even advanced learners. For example, if shown the following list: 'frolip, laggy, scrule, and albeit', a proficient speaker of English would know that only one of these words is a real English word, albeit a rare and somewhat odd one. On the other hand, even proficient speakers might recognize none of the following items: 'gonion, micelle, lairage, throstle'. Even our computer's spellchecker rejected three out of four, but all are real English words.

Among the factors that make new vocabulary more easily learnable by second language learners is the frequency with which the word is seen, heard, and understood. Paul Nation (2001) reviews a number of studies suggesting that a learner needs to have many meaningful encounters with a new word before it becomes firmly established in memory. The estimates range as high as sixteen times in some studies. Even more encounters may be needed before a learner can retrieve the word in fluent speech or automatically understand the meaning of the word when it occurs in a new context. The ability to understand the meaning of most words without focused attention is essential for fluent reading as well as for fluent speaking.

Frequency is not the only factor that determines how easily words are learned, however. Look at the words in List 1 and List 2. Which ones would you expect beginning second language learners to recognize and understand?

List 1	List 2	List 3
Friend	Hamburger	Government
More	Coke	Responsibility
Town	T-shirt	Dictionary
Book	Walkman	Elementary
Hunt	Taxi	Remarkable
Sing	Pizza	Description
Box	Hotel	Expression
Smile	Dollar	International
Eye	Internet	Preparation
Night	Disco	Activity

All of the words in List 1 look easy because they are simple one-syllable words that refer to easily illustrated actions or objects. They are also quite common words in English, appearing among the 1,000 most frequent words. And yet, they are not likely to be known to students who have not had previous instruction in English or exposure to the language outside of school. Furthermore, there is nothing in the written form or the pronunciation of the words that gives a clue to their meaning. If students are to learn them, they must see or hear the words and connect them to meaning many times before they are well established.

On the other hand, some students who have never studied English might already know words in List 2, because they are part of an international vocabulary. With increasing internationalization of communications, many languages have 'borrowed' and adapted words from other languages. Students throughout the world may be surprised to learn how many words they already know in the language they are trying to learn.

The words in List 3 look difficult. They are rather long, not easily illustrated, and most are fairly infrequent in the language. And yet, many students would either 'know' them on sight or learn them after a single exposure. These words have a clear resemblance to their translation equivalent in other languages—not just romance languages with shared Latin origins. Words that look similar and have the same meaning in two languages are called COGNATES.

Thus, when students are learning a new language, frequency is not the only thing that makes words more accessible. The presence of cognates and borrowed words can also be exploited for vocabulary development.

On the other hand, students may have particular difficulty with words that look similar in the two languages but have different meanings. They may come from different origins or they may have evolved differently from the same origin. For example, the English verb 'demand' has a different meaning from its French cousin *demande*, which means 'request' or 'ask a question', even though they developed from the same Latin verb.

Teachers should not assume that students will always recognize borrowed words or cognate words in their second language. Some cognates are identical in form and meaning, while others may require some knowledge of how spelling patterns are related in the two languages (for example, 'water' and *Wasser* in English and German). Even with different spellings, words are likely to be easier to recognize in their written form than they are in the spoken language. Learners may need guidance in recognizing them, as illustrated in the following question, asked by an eight-year-old in a Quebec hockey arena: *Hé coach, comment on dit coach en anglais?* ('Hey, coach. How do you say *coach* in English?'). And after a moment's reflection, English

speakers may realize that they know both speciality items in a Japanese restaurant that calls itself 'Sushi and Bisusteki.'

Some second language theorists have argued that second language learners, like children learning their first language, can learn a great deal of vocabulary with little intentional effort. Stephen Krashen (1985, 1989) has asserted that the best source of vocabulary growth is reading for pleasure. There is no doubt that reading is an important potential source of vocabulary development for second language learners as it is for first language learners. However, there are some problems with the notion that vocabulary growth through reading requires little effort. Bhatia Laufer (1992) and others have shown that it is difficult to infer the meaning and learn new words from reading unless one already knows 95 per cent or more of the words in a text. In addition, as we have seen, learners usually need to encounter a word many times in order to learn it well enough to recognize it in new contexts or produce it in their own speaking and writing. As we saw in Chapter 1, Dee Gardner (2004) has shown how rare certain types of words are in narratives. Thus, students who read mainly fiction may have little chance of learning words that are essential for their academic pursuits. Research on vocabulary learning through reading without focused instruction confirms that some language, including vocabulary, can be learned without explicit instruction (see Chapter 6). On the other hand, Jan Hulstijn and Bhatia Laufer (2001) provide evidence that vocabulary development is more successful when learners are fully engaged in activities that require them to attend carefully to the new words and even to use them in productive tasks. Izabella Kojic-Sabo and Patsy Lightbown (1999) found that effort and the use of good learning strategies, such as keeping a notebook, looking words up in a dictionary, and reviewing what has been learned were associated with better vocabulary development.

Even with instruction and good strategies, the task is daunting. What does it mean to know a word? Grasp the general meaning in a familiar context? Provide a definition or a translation equivalent? Identify its component parts or etymology? Use the word to complete a sentence or to create a new sentence? Use it metaphorically? Understand a joke that uses homonyms (words that sound alike but mean different things, such as 'cents', 'sense', 'scents')? Second language learners whose goal is to use the language for academic purposes must learn to do all these things.

Pragmatics

Pragmatics is the study of how language is used in context to express such things as directness, politeness, and deference. Even if learners acquire a vocabulary of 5,000 words and a good knowledge of the syntax and



morphology of the target language, they can still encounter difficulty in using language. They also need to acquire skills for interpreting requests, responding politely to compliments or apologies, recognizing humour, and managing conversations. They need to learn to recognize the many meanings that the same sentence can have in different situations. Think of the many ways one might interpret an apparently simple question such as 'Is that your dog?' It might precede an expression of admiration for an attractive pet. It might be an urgent request to get the dog out of the speaker's flower bed. Similarly, the same basic meaning is altered when it is expressed in different ways. For example, we would probably assume that the relationship between speaker and listener is very different if we hear 'Give me the book' or 'I wonder if you'd mind letting me have that book when you've finished with it'.

The study of how second language learners develop the ability to express their intentions and meanings through different speech acts (for example, requesting, refusing, apologizing, etc.) is referred to as interlanguage pragmatics (Bardovi-Harlig 1999). For a long time, most of the research in this area focused on learners' use of pragmatic features. For example, studies were done to describe the ways in which learners expressed speech acts such as inviting and apologizing in relation to differences in their proficiency level or their first language background. Other studies have examined learners' ability to perceive and comprehend pragmatic features in the second language and to judge whether a particular request is appropriate or inappropriate in a specific context.

Since the early 1990s more research has directly investigated the acquisition of second language pragmatic ability. This includes longitudinal and cross-sectional studies describing the acquisition of several different speech acts. One that has been the focus of considerable attention is 'requesting'. Requests are an interesting pragmatic feature to examine because there are identifiable ways in which requests are made in different languages as well as differences in how they are expressed across languages and cultures.

In a review of longitudinal and cross-sectional studies on the acquisition of requests in English, Gabriele Kasper and Kenneth Rose (2002) outline a series of five stages of development. Stage 1 consists of minimal language that is often incomplete and highly context-dependent. Stage 2 includes primarily memorized routines and frequent use of imperatives. Stage 3 is marked by less use of formulas, more productive speech and some MITIGATION of requests. Stage 4 involves more complex language and increased use of mitigation, especially supportive statements. Stage 5 is marked by more refinement of the force of requests. The five stages, their characteristics and examples are given below.

Stage 1: Pre-basic

Highly context-dependent, no syntax, no relational goals.

Me no blue.
Sir.

Stage 2: Formulaic

Reliance on unanalysed formulas and imperatives.

Let's play the game.
Let's eat breakfast.
Don't look.

Stage 3: Unpacking

Formulas incorporated into productive language use, shift to conventional indirectness.

Can you pass the pencil please?
Can you do another one for me?

Stage 4: Pragmatic expansion

Addition of new forms to repertoire, increased use of mitigation, more complex syntax.

Could I have another chocolate because my children—I have five children.
Can I see it so I can copy it?

Stage 5: Fine tuning

Fine tuning of requestive force to participants, goals, and contexts.

You could put some blue tack down there.
Is there any more white?

Learning how to make and reject suggestions has also been extensively investigated. Kathleen Bardovi-Harlig and Beverly Hartford (1993) investigated rejections and suggestions with native and non-native speakers of English in academic advising sessions at an American university. They observed differences between the way in which native and non-native speakers communicated with their professors as they discussed their course elections. These differences contributed to their greater or lesser success in negotiating their academic plans. For example, the non-native speakers tended to take on a passive role and did not initiate suggestions compared with the native speakers who initiated a great deal. There was also a tendency in the part of the non-native speakers to reject suggestions made by the advisor in ways that the advisors might find rude or inappropriate. For example, they would reject an advisor's suggestion to take a particular course by saying 'I think I am not interested in that course', instead of saying 'My schedule conflicts with that course', or 'I think this other course would better meet my needs', which was more typical of native-speaker rejection responses. The non-native speakers were also much less adept than the native speakers at using mitigation—language that can be used to soften a rejection or gently make a suggestion. For example, native speakers were observed to say 'I think I would like to take this course', whereas the non-native speakers said 'I will take that course'. Over a period of four and a half months, the researchers observed progress in some aspects of the non-native speakers' pragmatic ability. For example, they took a more active role in the advising interactions. They provided reasons for rejecting suggestions that the advisors were likely to perceive as more credible or acceptable. Even so, they continued to experience difficulty in mitigating their suggestions and rejections.

For a long time, it was assumed that second language classrooms could not provide appropriate input for learning how to realize many speech acts. This was particularly the case with structure-based approaches to teaching and in particular, in teacher-fronted classrooms where the dominant interaction pattern was 'teacher initiation–learner response–teacher feedback'. In communicative, content-based, and task-based approaches to second language instruction, there are more opportunities not only for a greater variety of input but also for learners to engage in different roles and participant organization structures (for example, pair and group work). This enables learners to produce and respond to a wider range of communicative functions. Furthermore, research on the teaching of pragmatics has

demonstrated that pragmatic features can be successfully learned in classroom settings and that explicit rather than implicit instruction is most effective (Kasper and Rose 2002). This is particularly good news for foreign language learners who do not have extensive exposure to conversational interaction outside the classroom. Thus, the question is no longer whether second language pragmatics should be taught but rather how it can be best integrated into classroom instruction.

Phonology

Grammar has been the focus for second language teachers and researchers for a long time. As we saw, vocabulary and pragmatics have also received more attention in recent years. However, we know less about pronunciation and how it is learned and taught. Pronunciation was a central component in language teaching during the audiolingual era. Several techniques for teaching pronunciation were developed at that time and most of them focused on getting learners to perceive and to produce distinctions between single sounds (i.e. SEGMENTALS) in minimal pair drills (for example, 'ship' and 'sheep'). When audiolingualism and behaviourism fell into disfavour and were replaced by other views of learning, the teaching of pronunciation was minimized if not totally discarded. Evidence for the critical period hypothesis suggested that native-like pronunciation was an unrealistic goal for second language learners, particularly older learners (see Chapter 3). It was argued, therefore, that instructional time would be better spent on teaching features that learners might learn more easily, most specifically grammar. When communicative language teaching was first introduced in the late 1970s, little attention was given to the teaching of pronunciation. When it was included, the emphasis was on rhythm, stress, and intonation (i.e. SUPRASEGMENTALS), areas considered more likely to affect communication (Celce-Murcia, Brinton, and Goodwin 1996).

Although research on the teaching and learning of pronunciation is not as extensive as that in other language domains, there is theoretical and empirical work to help us understand the processes involved in phonological development in a second language and the factors that contribute to it. Contrastive analysis has helped to explain some aspects of first language influence on second language learners' phonological development. We can all think of examples of these from our own experiences or those of our students. Japanese and Korean learners of English often have problems hearing and producing *l* and *r* because these sounds are not distinct in their language. Spanish speakers will often say 'I e-speak e-Spanish' because Spanish words do not have consonant clusters beginning with *s* at the beginning of a word. French speakers may place stress on the last syllable of a

word because French usually stresses the last syllable. Few languages have the *th* sounds that are frequent in English. Learners may substitute similar sounds from their first language (for example, *t* or *d*, *s* or *z*). Sometimes, however, learners overcompensate for sounds that they know are difficult. Thus, learners may pronounce a *th* (as in *thin*) where a *t* belongs. Such errors are similar to the overgeneralization errors that we saw for grammatical morphemes. That is, if they replace earlier 'correct' pronunciation of *t* or *d* sounds, they may represent progress in learners' ability to notice and produce the *th* sound.

The relationship between perception and production of sounds is complex. Evelyn Altenberg (2005) developed a series of tasks to explore Spanish speakers' perceptions and production of English consonant clusters at the beginning of a word. In one task, they had to say whether certain invented words were possible 'new English words'. The learners were quite good at recognizing what English words are supposed to sound like. They accepted pseudowords like 'spus' and rejected those like 'zban', even though both words would be unacceptable as 'new Spanish words'. She found that they could usually write (from dictation) pseudowords with initial clusters such as *sp* and *sm*. However, in their own production, these same learners might still insert a vowel at the beginning of words such as 'spoon' and 'smile'.

It is widely believed that the degree of difference between the learner's native language and the target language can lead to greater difficulty. The evidence supporting the hypothesis comes partly from the observation that it takes learners longer to reach a high level of fluency in a particular second or foreign language if that language is substantially different from the languages they already know. For example, a Chinese-speaker faces a greater challenge in learning English than does a speaker of German or Dutch. Language distance affects pronunciation as well as other language systems. Theo Bongaerts (1999) collected speech samples from many highly proficient speakers who had learned Dutch in their adulthood and who came from a wide variety of first language backgrounds. When native speakers of Dutch were asked to judge these speech samples, only those learners who spoke a language that was closely related to Dutch (for example, English or German) were judged to have native-like accents. None of the speakers whose first languages were more distant from Dutch (for example, Vietnamese) were judged to have native-like pronunciation.

There has been little research to document the developmental sequences of individual sounds in second language phonological acquisition. Furthermore, while there is evidence for similarity in the acquisition of some features of stress and rhythm, it is also clear that the learner's first language plays an important role. Other factors such as the amount and type of exposure to the target language and the degree of use of the first language

have been identified as influential contributors to pronunciation. Thorsten Piske, Ian MacKay, and James Flege (2001) have reported that longer periods of exposure to the second language can lead to improved pronunciation. They also found that adults who continue to make greater use of their first language may have stronger accents in the second language. As noted in Chapter 3, learners' ethnic affiliation and sense of their identity are also related to some of the choices they make about how they produce the sounds and rhythms of a second language.

Few studies have investigated the effectiveness of pronunciation instruction, but the results of recent studies suggest that it can make a difference, particularly if the instruction focuses on suprasegmental rather than segmental aspects of pronunciation (Hahn 2004). Tracey Derwing and her colleagues (1998, 2003) carried out a series of studies on how intelligible learners were judged to be. They found that learners who received pronunciation lessons emphasizing stress and rhythm were judged to be easier to understand than learners who received lessons focused on individual sounds. Even though the learners who received instruction on individual sounds were more accurate in their use of those sounds, this did not seem to increase listeners' perception of the intelligibility of their speech to others. Findings like these support the current emphasis on suprasegmentals in pronunciation classes.

One of the controversial issues in pronunciation research is whether intelligibility rather than native-like ability is the standard that learners should strive toward. Studies of relationships between English native speakers' perceptions of foreign accent, their perceptions of comprehensibility, and their actual ability to understand non-native utterances show clear relationships among all three. However, it is also evident, as Murray Munro and Tracey Derwing (1995) suggest, that the presence of a strong foreign accent does not necessarily result in reduced intelligibility or comprehensibility. Of course, evidence like this does not change the fact that foreign accents sometimes cause listeners to respond negatively to second language speakers. Jennifer Jenkins (2000, 2004) and Barbara Seidlhofer (2004) are among the many who argue for the acceptance of language varieties other than those spoken in the language's 'country of origin'. People increasingly interact with speakers who have learned a different variety of the same language. Even so, in some situations, accent still serves as a marker of group membership and is used as the basis for discrimination. Many second language learners, particularly those who have achieved a high level of knowledge and performance in other aspects of the target language, may be motivated to approximate a particular target language accent in their pronunciation. Others view this as irrelevant to their goals and objectives as users of the second language.

Research related to the teaching and learning of pronunciation is gaining more attention. What is clear, however, is that decontextualized pronunciation instruction is not enough and that a combination of instruction, exposure, experience, and motivation is required. Furthermore, as we learned in Chapter 3, achieving native or near-native pronunciation ability is an accomplishment not experienced by most second language learners.

In Chapter 6 we will focus on the second language acquisition of learners in classroom settings. First, however, we will look at the classroom itself. In Chapter 5, we will explore the many ways in which researchers have sought to understand the classroom environment for second language acquisition.

Sources and suggestions for further reading

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