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Studies in Language and Communication

David Hirsh (ed.)

Current Perspectives in Second Language Vocabulary Research

Peter Lang

Reflecting growth in research interest in second language vocabulary over the past 30 years, this edited volume explores the current themes and possible future directions in second language vocabulary research. The collection brings together review papers and quantitative studies, and considers vocabulary in the contexts of teaching, learning and assessment. Key themes explored in the volume include multidimensionality of vocabulary knowledge, the nature of word learnability, the interface between receptive vocabulary knowledge and productive vocabulary use, the partial-to-precise continuum of vocabulary knowledge, conditions favouring vocabulary learning and use, and the use of corpora to develop word lists to inform second language teaching. The themes presented in this volume reflect current thinking and research avenues at the interface between research enquiry and second language teaching practice.

David Hirsh is senior lecturer in TESOL (Teaching English to speakers of other languages) at the University of Sydney. His research focuses on vocabulary development, academic adjustment, and indigenous language revitalization. He has published in *Reading in a Foreign Language* and *Revue Française de Linguistique Appliquée*, and in the volumes *Teaching Academic Writing: An introduction for teachers of second language writers* (2009) and *Continuum Companion to Research Methods in Applied Linguistics* (2010). He is co-editor of *University of Sydney Papers in TESOL*.

Current Perspectives in Second Language Vocabulary Research



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DAVID HIRSH

Introduction

I have observed a steady increase over the past 20 years in the number of academics embracing an interest in second language vocabulary research, and this has seen a corresponding rise over this time in the number of higher degree research students identifying vocabulary as the focus for their research. This volume is the product of growing research interest in the contribution of vocabulary to second language acquisition.

In this volume, Hirsh reviews second language vocabulary research to date to identify current themes, and then considers possible future directions to guide novice and accomplished second language researchers in identifying suitable research topics in the area of vocabulary studies. Zhong explores the current model of second language vocabulary learning as multidimensional, taking account of learner variability in terms of partial-precise, receptive-productive, and depth dimensions (see Henriksen 1999), and in doing so offers a critique of assessment tools used to measure vocabulary knowledge. Lin sheds light on the importance of properties of word form in the process of learning L2 words (see Bogaards/Laufer 2004), reviewing the findings of studies into the role of orthography (word decoding, L1 cognates), morphology (affixes, derivatives) and word length (number of syllables) in L2 word learnability for specific L1 groups.

Lee and Hirsh adopt a quantitative approach to consider Laufer and Hulstijn's (2001) Involvement Load Hypothesis in the design of their comparison of the effects of quantity and quality of exposure to new words on vocabulary learning, with use of immediate and delayed post-test measures of word acquisition. Lin and Hirsh use quantitative data to measure the effect of explicit and incidental approaches to word learning on the quantity and accuracy of target word use in a subsequent writing task (see Lee/Muncie 2006).

Matsuoka presents an overview of corpus-based research aimed at identifying and compiling lists of the most frequent and uniformly dispersed words occurring in L1 academic texts for use in EFL contexts – a methodology based on the premise that L1 language use can serve as a model for L2 vocabulary learning. How such word lists could be used to inform EFL pedagogy and ELT materials design is also discussed.

The contributors identify themselves as TESOL researchers and share a concern for the teaching and learning environment. This shared concern has resulted in a volume with clear implications for teaching and learning, as informed by the recent TESOL literature and research findings. The contributors also share an awareness of the need to tailor the teaching and learning process to suit local needs, constraints and opportunities. Thus, they wish teachers (and their learners) to reflect on the significance of theory to their own teaching and learning environment, and adopt practices that are both informed by theory and sensitive to the local context.

It is hoped that this volume inspires prospective and accomplished TESOL researchers to reflect on existing theory as the starting point for defining important issues and current concerns, and then explore ways in which their own program of research could contribute in a meaningful, albeit modest, way to our developing understanding of the lexical component of second language acquisition.

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Section 1
The Research Field

DAVID HIRSH

Vocabulary Research: Current Themes, New Directions

1. Introduction

Prospective research students with an interest in second language vocabulary studies frequently ask me for a list of suitable topics as a starting point for developing their own research trajectories. I suggest they refer to a number of texts which have attempted to represent this field of research. These include Nation's (2001) *Learning Vocabulary in Another Language*, the introduction to Bogaards and Laufer's (2004) *Vocabulary in a Second Language*, Hirsh's (2010) chapter titled *Researching vocabulary* appearing in the *Continuum Companion to Research Methods in Applied Linguistics* and Schmitt's (2010) *Researching Vocabulary*. In addition, vocabulary research is regularly published in the leading TESOL and Applied Linguistics journals, with occasional special issues devoted to vocabulary research, and these are useful starting points for research-focused reading.

This chapter identifies some of the more prominent current themes in second language vocabulary research, and then moves on to present possible areas for future research, and in doing so brings the reader in touch with some of the key thinkers and their publications in this area of second language research.

2. Current themes

One important theme in second language vocabulary research is measurement of second language vocabulary knowledge. This has been driven by recognition of the impact of learner vocabulary size on the quality of language comprehension and use, and by interest in tailoring programs of study to suit the specific needs of groups of language learners. Vocabulary tests have been developed to measure the quantity of vocabulary knowledge, reporting 'vocabulary size' (see Laufer/Nation 1995; Laufer/Nation 1999; Meara/Fitzpatrick 2000; Nation 1983) and to measure the quality of vocabulary knowledge, reporting 'depth of knowledge' (see Haastrup/Henriksen 2000; Meara 1996; Read 1993, 1998, 2004).

The development of such assessment tools has given rise to a series of studies measuring learners' vocabulary knowledge and learners' vocabulary growth in terms of size (e.g. Nurweni/Read 1999; Zhong/Hirsh 2009) and in terms of depth (e.g. Qian/Schedl 2004).

A second important theme in second language vocabulary research is the nature of word knowledge, with lines of enquiry investigating the dimension of receptive to productive knowledge (see Laufer 1991, 1998; Lee/Muncie 2006), and the dimension of partial to precise knowledge (see Barcroft 2008; Barcroft/Rott 2010; Henriksen 1999). Wesche and Paribakht's (1996) Vocabulary Knowledge Scale is an attempt to measure second language vocabulary knowledge in a way which takes account of its multidimensional nature.

Another important theme in second language vocabulary research is the process of learning, with an interest in the effect of incidental and explicit forms of learning, and an interest in the effect of learner involvement. Cases are presented in the literature for developing vocabulary knowledge incidentally through exposure to comprehensible input (see Nagy/Anderson/Herman 1987; Krashen 1989) and through explicit instruction focusing on target vocabulary (see Laufer 2001). A case is also presented for engaging learners deeply in the process of vocabulary learning (see Joe 1995; Newton 1995), giving

rise to the concepts of *task-induced involvement* and *deep processing* evident in Laufer and Hulstijn's (2001) Involvement Load Hypothesis.

A further important theme in second language vocabulary research is the identification of the most suitable words for language learning based on how words appear in texts written for native speakers of English. Word lists have been developed which have guided ESL learning (see Thorndike 1921; Thorndike/Lorge 1944; West 1953), informed the development of specialised word lists (see Coxhead 2000; Coxhead/Hirsh 2007), and provided lexical categories for analyzing word use in texts (see Hirsh/Nation 1992; Matsuoka/Hirsh 2010).

3. New directions

There has been significant research interest to date in describing and measuring vocabulary knowledge, and yet there remains work to be done in this area. One area worthy of future attention is understanding better the nature of vocabulary learning, particularly in terms of transfer of word knowledge from receptive to productive use, and identifying ways of measuring this transfer (see Zhong, this volume, for a review of this area). Related to this is a need for improved understanding of the concept of partial word knowledge, as opposed to precise word knowledge, and how this relates to the likelihood of a word being used productively (see Lin, this volume, for a review of this area).

There is also a need for improved understanding of the concept of 'depth' of vocabulary knowledge in terms of measurable differences between learners in how well they know individual words (see Henriksen 1999 for more on this topic area). In addition, there is scope to explore in more detail Meara's model of productive knowledge measurement based on ecological sampling of animal species numbers (see Meara/Alcoy 2010) in an attempt to accurately account for and measure the productive lexicon.

Vocabulary is dealt with in research as separate word forms, as semantic family groups, in the company of other words (i.e. collocation).

tions and concordance tables), and as recurring multiword sequences or 'lexical bundles' (see Biber 2006). In a related area, there is a developing interest in the concepts of connected words, semantic maps and semantic networks (see Meara 2009), and in the lexical effect of knowing one word on the learning of others (see Laufer 1990). The view of vocabulary knowledge as a complex network provides a starting point for considerations of how to describe and capture the interrelatedness of word knowledge in a way which accounts for observed patterns of vocabulary learning and vocabulary use.

I expect that, in the coming years, there will be more interest in the process of vocabulary loss (see Meara 2004), and how this is influenced by choices learners make in their continuing involvement with the target language following completion of a program of language learning. This would reflect the expected rise of importance of autonomous and self-directed learning in the context of improved online and interactive digital learning environments.

4. Final words

Thoughts about the number of words learners require have been shaped over time by changing ideas about the purpose of second language learning. The search for effective approaches to vocabulary development needs to consider the overall purpose of language learning for the learners involved, as this will guide teachers in setting appropriate vocabulary learning objectives and designing an appropriate program to encourage meaningful vocabulary learning.

The search for effective approaches to vocabulary development also needs to consider the opportunities provided for vocabulary learning in and out of the classroom environment, and to identify ways to assist learners in maximising those opportunities. There is the possibility now for teachers to develop vocabulary lists suited to their learners through development of a specialised corpus (see Ward 1999), and the possibility for teachers to identify reading material

suited to their learners through lexical analysis of a range of texts (see Hirsh/Coxhead 2009). There is also the possibility for learners to access online resources to report on their use of vocabulary in writing and to investigate how specific words appear in texts written for native speaking audiences (see Cobb n.d.).

The expansion in second language vocabulary research has provided teachers with empirical data and assessment tools to inform their decisions about what words to teach and how to embed vocabulary learning into the broader program of language learning. It is important to keep in mind, however, that words need a context in order to develop into language, and as the vocabulary size of learners increases, so should the complexity of the language they are engaging with and producing.

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