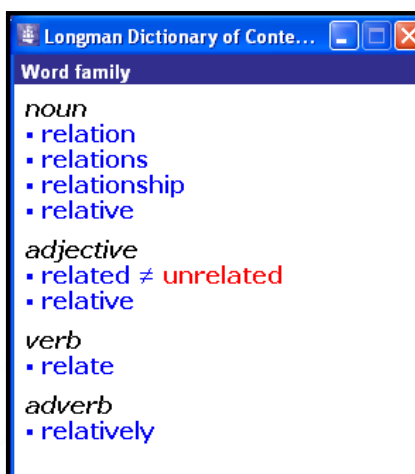


## Are learners getting the knowledge they need?

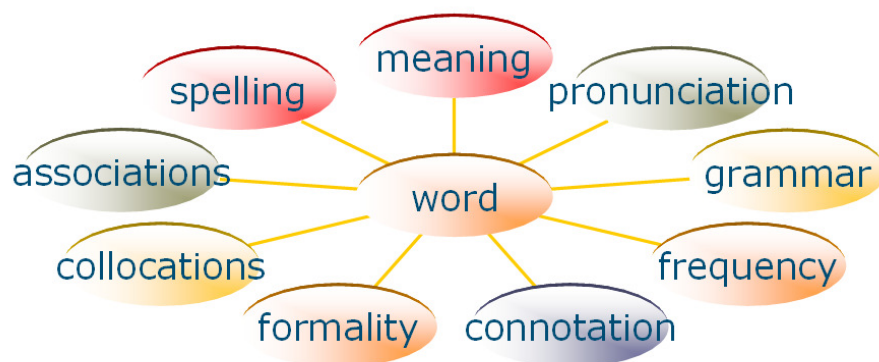
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Research on learning L2 vocabulary has flourished over the past two decades, so it is an opportune time for language teachers and materials writers to take stock of these findings to identify areas where research can fruitfully feed into teaching practice. Although there a number of areas where research and practice could come together, this article will focus on two in particular – how much vocabulary learners need to know and what learners need to know about words in order to use them.



Although a number of recommendations for vocabulary size have been given in the past, the most recent estimates come from the work of Paul Nation (2006). His review of several important corpora has resulted in estimates of learners needing 6,000 -7,000 word families to understand spoken discourse and 8,000-9,000 word families to understand written discourse. A word family consists of both the inflected and derived forms of words so overall a learner who knows 8,000 word families would know around 35,000 individual word forms. These figures are far higher than the English vocabulary learning requirements for school leavers and university graduates in many countries with the gap ranging from 4,500 to 7,000 words (See Schmitt, 2008). Clearly, there is a need for learners to be exposed to more word types than they currently are in their classrooms.

In the paragraph above, I have casually spoken of learners “knowing” a word, but even a concept as basic as this requires some unpacking. It is common for learners to think that once they have learned the meaning, spelling and pronunciation of a word, that the job of learning that word is done. However, when we consider what learners need to know about a word in order to use it appropriately in productive communicative situations, we can readily see that making a link between form and meaning is simply the first step in vocabulary learning.



# NEW Total English

Using a word productively requires learners to know the form of the word and the grammatical behaviour of that word. In addition, they must be aware of constraints on word use due to register, collocation, frequency and connotation.

## THESAURUS

**force sb to do sth** to make someone do something they do not want to do - used when a person or a situation does this : *She was forced to marry him. | The bad weather forced us to stay indoors.*

**make sb do sth** to force someone to do something, especially using threats or violence: *The men made us lie down on the floor.*

**put pressure on sb** to keep trying to force someone to do something by making them feel that they should do it: *Don't put pressure on your child to study all the time.*

**compel** to make you feel that you must do something, or to officially force someone to do something: *I felt compelled to leave. | No one can compel you to do it.*

Notice the differences in grammatical behaviour of these synonymous phrases.

One area where research highlights a gap in learner knowledge is that of word families. It might seem fair to assume that if a learner knows the noun *system*, she will also know the adjective *systematic*. However, a study of advanced learners by Schmitt and Zimmerman (2002), showed that learners tended to have only partial productive knowledge of word families; verb and noun forms were most likely to be known. They concluded that there was a clear need for explicitly teaching words in families to ensure that students had productive control over all members of a family when needed. In a recent review of vocabulary research, Schmitt (2008) concludes that knowledge of meaning, form and grammatical properties can all benefit from explicit teaching. He goes on to state that the remaining aspects of word knowledge which are dependent on context of use may best be learned through a combination of explicit awareness raising and implicit learning through extensive exposure. Whether students are learning words explicitly or implicitly, research is consistent in highlighting the importance of meeting words multiple times for both initial learning and for consolidation of learning (Zahar, Cobb and Spada, 2001).

Clearly with so much to learn, vocabulary deserves to occupy a substantial part of any teaching and learning programme. However, a review of some recent studies shows that vocabulary may not be getting the attention it needs in language textbooks and classrooms.

Brown (2011) examined how textbooks approach the teaching of word knowledge. He analysed textbooks at three different proficiency levels (beginner to intermediate) from six different publishers and found that the form-meaning link received the most attention across all six books, roughly half of all of the attention given to vocabulary learning. There was much less consistency in the treatment of other aspects of word knowledge. No textbook provided sustained activities that targeted all of the aspects of word knowledge. This implies that students may not be receiving exposure to all of the different aspects of word knowledge even in an awareness-raising capacity. It also means that an important opportunity for recycling vocabulary through a range of word knowledge-related activities is being missed.

# NEW Total English

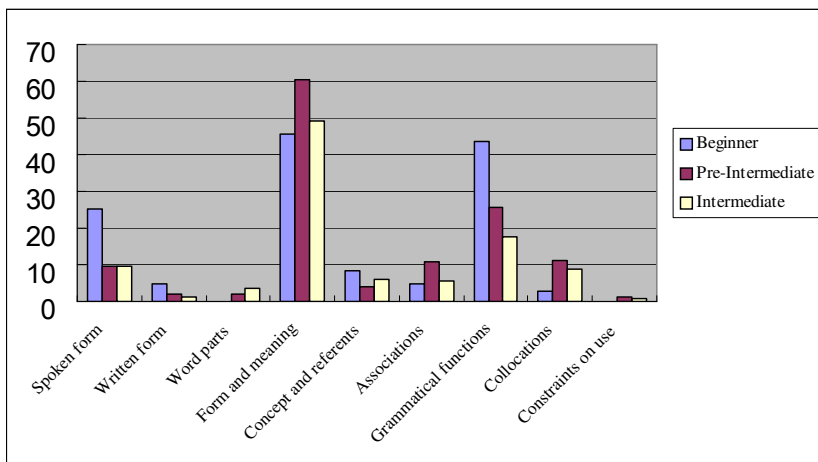


Table 1: The proportion of activities targeting word knowledge across all textbooks

After textbooks, the teacher is probably the next best resource in the classroom for introducing new vocabulary and providing important information on its meaning and use. Horst, Collins and Cardoso (2009) carried out a study that investigated the attention given to vocabulary by classroom teachers. They analysed 118,000 words of teacher talk from three different teachers over four lessons each and found that the teachers also prioritized meaning over all other aspects of word knowledge. Out of 786 language-related episodes in the classroom talk, over 70% were concerned with teaching meaning, 25% were concerned with form (pronunciation, spelling or morphology) and only 3% with collocation. Other aspects of word knowledge were not addressed. Although the omission of some aspects of word knowledge by these teachers can be explained by the age (12) and proficiency level (low intermediate) of the learners, there still appears to be plenty of scope for teachers to give more attention to a wider range of word knowledge than is currently the case.

The last study I'll report on here focuses on the students themselves. Walters and Bozkurt (2009) investigated the use of vocabulary notebooks by a group of Turkish university students. In this study, the students were required to record 20 new words per week in a vocabulary notebook for self study. The teacher actively encouraged the development of word knowledge by introducing different aspects of word knowledge for a sample of the words and the students were responsible for finding similar information for the remaining words to add to their notebooks. The teacher also provided classroom time for students to exchange information from their notebooks and to test each other on the new words. There was a marked difference in the learning of the target vocabulary between students in the class that kept vocabulary notebooks and two classes where students were not asked to keep the notebooks. The students who kept notebooks made greater gains in both receptive and productive knowledge of the target words and made greater use of the target vocabulary in the weekly compositions students were expected to write. Students also benefited from improved dictionary skills. However, students in this short study depended on the teacher's involvement to maintain their motivation to keep the vocabulary notebook.

# NEW Total English

This brief review of vocabulary research highlights the fact that task of learning vocabulary does require effortful attention from learners. The task itself is larger than what many teachers and learners may have previously thought both in terms of the number of words that need to be learned and amount of knowledge needed to use words productively. Teachers, textbook writers, and dictionary developers all have an important role to play in supporting learners as they tackle the vocabulary knowledge challenge.

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