

# Bridging a Gap on Knowing a Word Challenges and Suggestions for Vocabulary Learning in China

Lu Li<sup>1,\*</sup>, Xiang Ji<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> School of Social Science and Public Policy, KING's College London, Stamford St, London SE1 9NH, England

\* Corresponding author. Email: lu.l.li@kcl.ac.uk

## ABSTRACT

The mastery of vocabulary greatly influences learner's English proficiency in four main language skills and learning efficiency of further study. Nation proposes three criteria for knowing a word, which includes nine subcategories [1]. However, most Chinese teachers still focus on the meaning and spelling of words when measuring learners' language competence. This article firstly demonstrates these nine subcategories and gives insights to Chinese teachers on language teaching. Then, this article lists the three most common challenges that Grade-one learners in primary school might face. To address these challenges, four suggestions are discussed, which include using direct teaching appropriately, using tools to enhance word associations, frequent recurrence, and meaning-focused production. Subsequently, it is beneficial to applying these concepts and suggestions into Chinese English class to improve vocabulary learning performance.

**Keywords:** Vocabulary learning, Criteria for knowing a word, Direct teaching, Retrieval, Meaning-focused productive use.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Vocabulary knowledge plays a vital role in language learning. The incompetence of vocabulary significantly hinders learners' comprehension, communication, and study progression therein. Since vocabulary is fundamental building blocks of a language, they are essential to one's performance in listening, speaking, reading and writing. As defined by Laufer and Nation, the term *word* is "a base form with its inflected and derived forms, i.e., a word family" [2]. Although teachers and learners acknowledge and embrace the significance of vocabulary, the understanding of word knowledge remains indistinct. Moreover, vocabulary persists as the main and largest obstacle for Chinese English learners. This article starts with an introduction of Nation's three types of word knowledge [1]. Following that, it is going to address a specific group of Chinese learners. Then, I shall discuss three common challenges that learners may encounter in vocabulary learning. Finally, I shall provide four suggestions to empower teachers in overcoming the challenges.

## 2. UNDERSTANDING OF 'KNOWING A WORD'

Vocabulary learning is basic and crucial to second or foreign language acquisition. Teaching vocabulary itself is not a simple and straightforward task as it is not only about addressing meanings, pronunciations and spellings like most people may assume, it is a far more complicated process. Nation proposes two general concepts in vocabulary knowledge: receptive and productive [1]. *Receptive knowledge* involves recognising and understanding the meaning of words in listening and reading. *Productive knowledge* refers to the use of word form to sharing ideas in speaking and writing using accurate words. In addition, Nation suggests a deeper explanation of word knowledge, which includes word form, word meaning, and word use [1]. The distinct classification of word knowledge has the potential to improve not only teachers' vocabulary teaching but also learners' English proficiency in all areas.

### 2.1. Word Form

Word form involves three aspects: spoken form, written form, and word parts. These three form-learning

aspects coincide with language-focused learning, which is a member of *four strands* [3]. Nation suggests that implicit learning is a more effective way to learn word form, which means instinctive inputs without conscious learning [1], such as picking up words from listening and reading.

### 2.1.1. Spoken Form

The spoken form of a word refers to its pronunciation. In terms of receptive knowledge, learners can recognise and understand words through listening. In the case of productive knowledge, learners can use words to verbally convey their thoughts and ideas. According to Nation, mnemonical and phonological strategies are great ways to improve speaking proficiency [1]. The first accretes short-term memory, while the second contributes to long-term memory. Furthermore, Schmitt claims that the similarity between the first language (L1) and the second language (L2) of a learner in the phonological system the spoken form learning, and its influences need to be acknowledged during the teaching process [5]. Nation and Ecke also mentioned this aspect in their study [1] [6].

### 2.1.2. Written Form

The written form refers to the orthographical knowledge of a word. In terms of receptive knowledge, it requires learners to identify and comprehend the word when reading. Regarding productive knowledge, learners need to spell the word properly in writing. The written form of a word can be memorised either as a whole word or by sound-letter representation. Mastering written form places a crucial role in the ability to spell and read. Poor spelling may limit vocabulary size and affect further reading ability. Vice versa [1].

### 2.1.3. Word Parts

Word parts involve the knowledge of word stems and affixes. Mastering word parts can facilitate language learning in two respects. Firstly, affixes and stems contribute to an efficient strategy for learners to remember new words. Secondly, recognition of affixes and stems enable learners in associating new words with previously learned words in the same word family, which can reduce the possibility of attrition [1] [4] [5]. As a result, one of the efficient teaching strategies of word parts is to deliberately teach the most frequently used affixes and encourage learners to practice them in reading and writing.

## 2.2. Word Meaning

Word meaning has various definitions amongst scholars. For example, Schmitt defines *meaning* as the interrelationship between a word and its concept [5],

while Nation suggested that word meaning includes not only the meaning of a single word, but also the related meaning between members of a word family [1]. Therefore, Nation categorises word meaning into three sub-aspects: form and meaning, concept and referents, and associations [1].

### 2.2.1. Form and Meaning

Form and meaning involve perceiving a connection between word form and word meaning, rather than regarding them separately. In terms of receptive knowledge, learners can associate the meaning when encountering its word form in listening and reading. For productive knowledge, learners can use accurate word forms to express precise ideas and thoughts in speaking and writing. Hulstijn has specified that the efficiency of lexical knowledge relies on the ability to connect a word's form to its meaning [7]. And that ability can be strengthened by reoccurring practice [1].

### 2.2.2. Concept and referents

Concept and referents refer to the comprehension of the core meaning and the overall meaning of the word. Most high-frequency words can be interpreted differently according to the context they are being used. It is difficult and unnecessary to memorise all the meanings of a word to utilize it in the right context. Nation suggests that teaching the core concept of a word is a far more effective way for learners to acquire its meanings and reduce the vocabulary learning burden [1].

### 2.2.3. Associations

Associations can be described as semantic correlations between words within the meaning system. A similar concept called "sense relations" is also proposed by Schmitt [5]. The most common example is synonymy and antonymy. In addition, there are some other semantic relationships, such as word family, lexical set, subordination, and superordination. Knowing associations benefits learners in their language studying, which includes improving their abilities to understand the meaning of new words, faster retrieval of word form or meaning, and systematic organisation of word knowledge.

## 2.3. Word Use

The third category of word knowledge is word use. Word use emphasizes the rules of word choices, which is different from Nation's strand of meaning-focused output [3]. The latter focuses on producing word form to convey meaning. There are three sub-aspects: grammatical functions, collocations, and constraints on use.

### 2.3.1. Grammatical Functions

Grammatical function refers to the use of a word in a sentence precisely and appropriately. The grammatical knowledge at the word level involves many aspects, such as speech, word class, and inflectional and derivational knowledge. Since lexical choices fundamentally build the sentence structure, it is a significant component in vocabulary and language learning. The learning burden of grammar may be decreased if grammatical rules between L1 and L2 are similar.

### 2.3.2. Collocations

Collocations are a group of words that are used frequently together in the language. As one of the vocabulary relationships, it is related to proper comprehension and the use of vocabulary. The broader definition of collocations is close to the term *formulaic language* proposed by Schmitt [8]. Collocations can assist learners to achieve a higher level of proficiency in vocabulary learning and facilitate fluency and it also provides numerous comprehensible examples for supporting grammar learning. However, not all collocations can reduce the learning burden. Collocations that cannot be easily recognized from the meanings of their components impose a heavier learning burden on learners, especially on Chinese learners, whose L1 does not share semantic similarities with English. Despite that, Aitchison insists that the collocational links seem to be robust once they have been built, so learners need to practice collocations in vocabulary acquisition [9].

### 2.3.3. Constraints on Use

The last aspect of word use is constraints on use. The usage of some words is closely related to specific registers and occasions; others are comparatively neutral. Hence, knowing a word also requires learners to have firm vocabulary knowledge of constraints on use to avoid misuse. Nation suggests that observations and comparisons are effective means to learn constraints of word knowledge [1].

## 3. THE SPECIFIC GROUP OF LEARNERS

The following challenges and suggestions in this article are primarily aimed at a specific group of Chinese learners, Grade-one students in primary school, who have been exposed to English learning since kindergarten. Although it is not their first time to encounter English in Grade 1, insufficient English learning time together with traditional language teaching methods – rote-learning – result in poor proficiency in English. Moreover, English as a foreign

language in China means that the input and output of the language mostly happen in a classroom environment.

## 4. CHALLENGES AND SUGGESTIONS

### 4.1. Challenges in Vocabulary Learning

There are three prevailing challenges for Chinese young learners in vocabulary acquisition. The first is low efficiency in learning new words. Most Chinese Grade-one learners don't possess the equivalent amount of English vocabulary as their native language, which will frustrate learners in their attempts to communicate thoughts in English, resulting in low motivation and efficiency in English learning.

The second challenge is that forgetting results in stunted vocabulary acquisition. Forgetting occurs not only to newly mastered words, but also to well-acquired words which are seldom used. The forgetting of well-mastered words can also be termed as *attrition*, as Schmitt explained that lexical knowledge seems to be more likely to be forgotten than other linguistic knowledge, which makes it difficult for beginners to improve vocabulary learning [5].

The third challenge is the imbalance between receptive and productive knowledge in vocabulary learning. In other words, learners might be able to recognize and understand a word in listening and speaking, but not able to recall or reproduce it. The phenomenon of tip-of-tongue [10] is one such example. This is understandable given that productive learning is more difficult than receptive learning [1].

To address these challenges efficiently, four potential suggestions for teachers will be discussed. My goals are to help beginners expand their vocabulary size, then develop their productive skills in word use.

### 4.2. Suggestions

#### 4.2.1. Using Direct Teaching Appropriately

According to Nation, the basis of direct teaching comprises three crucial cognitive processes contributed to remembering a word, which is noticing, retrieving, and creative use [1]. Direct teaching is not recommended for L1 learning due to its inefficiency; however, it is helpful for L2 learners, particularly for EFL learners, since it can accelerate the vocabulary learning process. Moreover, direct instruction can accumulate learners' vocabulary in a relatively short period, since Chinese learners only have limited English exposure in daily life comparing with English as a second language (ESL) learners. Additionally, Schmitt also claims that direct teaching enables learners to acquire a certain vocabulary size, which facilitates the following learning processes to occur [5]. Additionally,

the first 2000 words in the General Service List of English (GWL) account for almost 80% of all words in texts [1]. In conclusion, it is particularly beneficial to explicitly instruct learners on the most frequently used vocabulary.

When direct-teaching vocabulary to L2 learners, there are three important cautions to keep in mind. Firstly, teachers should keep a balance between the four strands [3] to ensure they do not exceed 25% of overall class time on formal language teaching. Second, direct teaching is useful for some, such as word sense aspects, but incidental learning is needed for learners to improve their language skills. Finally, high-frequency words should be taught using direct instruction. Since most high-frequency terms have a variety of interpretations, learners should study a basic core meaning and then move on to other definitions. As R. Ellis also points out, excessive information creates challenges for learners to memorize and identify vocabulary that they have learned [11]. In conclusion, it seems that direct teaching is beneficial for L2 learners by offering a fast increase in vocabulary knowledge; however, teachers should note these cautions to impact vocabulary learning more methodically.

#### *4.2.2. Using Tools to Enhance Word Associations*

Word associations can facilitate learners' vocabulary learning. With the increasing vocabulary size, teachers should help students to establish relationships between words. Word associations can boost and diversify word knowledge on the one hand [1]; on the other hand, they can reduce word attrition, as associated knowledge [5] creates stronger memories. In addition, Meara persuasively argues that such attrition does not directly lead to vocabulary loss in the vocabulary network [12]; it only weakens the structures of association, which can be retrieved easily by reactivating them using associated words [8].

Synonymy, antonymy, word families, and word superordination and subordination are the most common semantic relationships for young Chinese beginners. Teachers are encouraged to use graphical diagrams such as network diagrams, Venn diagrams, tree diagrams, and flow maps to help students to connect the associations between words. Word associations need to be practised after being introduced, especially when learners reach a certain level in their language learning. If new words with close semantic or formal relationships are learned simultaneously, it creates a significant learning burden for learners to digest. Nation and Schmitt also make compelling arguments in support of this position [1] [5].

#### *4.2.3. Frequent Recurrence*

Retrieval, the second of Nation's cognitive processes, is the rationale for repeated recurrence [1]. In reading or listening, repeated recurrence of vocabulary provides learners chances to recognize word forms and then retrieve word meanings, which is called receptive retrieval. On one hand, it is difficult for learners to acquire the entire knowledge of a word instantly. Therefore, it is better to focus on its form and core meaning when introducing new vocabulary for the first time. It is recommended to learn and facilitate other parts of word knowledge through subsequently incidental learning, as it is a gradual process. On the other hand, attrition is an inevitable part of language learning. Baddeley claims that the speed of forgetting frequently occurs instantly after learning and then slow down gradually [13]. Receptive retrieval can be enhanced efficiently in reading and listening. For example, regarding reading, learners are suggested to read the same story many times, or read a serialized story, as the intervals between reading generate an excellent chance for receptive retrievals. In terms of listening, it is recommended that teachers present target vocabulary after hearing them, rather than before, which can create spaced repetition and stimulate better retrieval.

#### *4.2.4. Meaning-focused Production*

The rationale of meaning-focused production is based on Nation's three cognitive processes: noticing, retrieving, and creative use [1]. It is also one of the four strands that contribute to the consolidation of previously acquired vocabulary information [3]. According to the depth of memory hypothesis, the more often a learner encounters, retrieves, and employs a word, the better chances for the learners to remember that word [3]. To that end, meaning-focused development plays a critical role in vocabulary learning to bridge the divide between receptive and constructive information, not just because it can boost learners' proficiency of the spoken language, but also because productive knowledge is less prone to be attrited than receptive knowledge [3].

Nation proposes two interactive exercises to increase vocabulary knowledge using meaning-focused production: the first is information conversion activities, in which learners are asked to convert images, graphs, or maps into the spoken text; the second is split-information tasks, in which learners are asked to describe different cards to retrieve the missing information [1]. In addition, Webb and Nation suggest task-focused interaction with information gap between learners [14]. This is an efficient activity of meaning-focused production, since it entails meaning negotiation, and modifies output during the interaction, which is termed as *effective tasks* by Laufer and Hulstijn [15].

## 5. CONCLUSION

This article firstly introduced Nation's three main types of word knowledge [1]. The nine sub-aspects of word knowledge are correlated, so it is significant for teachers to have a deep understanding of their concepts and know how they work in the context of language teaching. The main challenges for Chinese young learners are how to learn new vocabulary efficiently, how to overcome forgetting, and how to facilitate receptive knowledge to productive knowledge. To address these challenges, the first suggestion for the teachers is to teach high-frequent words explicitly to expand learners' vocabulary and then to introduce word associations to foster students' understanding of the relationships of acquired vocabulary. Moreover, teachers should create a frequent repetition environment for students to practice receptive retrieval, which can facilitate long-term memory. The final suggestion is meaning-focused production, which is an efficient way for students to improve productive retrieval. The categories of word awareness established by Nation provide teachers with insights on how to teach vocabulary to beginners [1]. This paper suggests that teachers and learners can benefit from applying these concepts into their teaching and learning process to improve vocabulary learning performance. As previously stated, some sub-aspects of word knowledge overlap to some extent. I hope that future studies might focus on the differences in each sub-aspect to figure out how these differences affect the overall outcomes.

## AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS

Lu Li conducted literature reviews and wrote this article. Xiang Ji discussed the suggestions with Lu Li to provide a better proposal to overcome those three challenges based on her teaching experience, and she proofread this article. Both authors contributed to the final manuscript.

## REFERENCES

- [1] P. Nation, *Learning vocabulary in another language*, Cambridge University Press, 2001.
- [2] B. Laufer, P. Nation, Vocabulary size and use: Lexical richness in L2 written production, *Applied Linguistics*, 16(3) (1995) 307–322. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1093/applin/16.3.307>
- [3] P. Nation, The Four Strands, *Innovation in Language Learning and Teaching*, 1(1) (2007) 2–13. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.2167/illt039.0>
- [4] N.C. Ellis, *Vocabulary acquisition: The implicit ins and outs of explicit cognitive mediation*, Academic Press, 1994.
- [5] N. Schmitt, *Vocabulary in language teaching*, Cambridge University Press, 2000.
- [6] P. Ecke, Parasitic vocabulary acquisition, cross-linguistic influence, and lexical retrieval in multilinguals, *Bilingualism: Language and Cognition*, 18(2) (2015) 145–162. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1017/s1366728913000722>
- [7] J. Hulstijn, Mnemonic methods in foreign language vocabulary learning: Theoretical considerations and pedagogical implications, in: *Faculteit der Geesteswetenschappen (Eds.), Second Language Vocabulary Acquisition*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2012, pp. 52–71. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1017/cbo9781139524643.015>
- [8] N. Schmitt, *Researching Vocabulary A Vocabulary Research Manual*, Springer, 2010.
- [9] J. Aitchison, *Words in the mind: an introduction to the mental lexicon*, Blackwell, 2003.
- [10] R. Brown, D. McNeil, The "tip of the tongue" phenomenon, *Journal of Verbal Learning and Verbal Behavior* 5(4) (1966) 325–337. DOI: [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0022-5371\(66\)80040-3](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0022-5371(66)80040-3)
- [11] R. Ellis, Modified Oral Input and the Acquisition of Word Meanings, *Applied Linguistics*, 16(4) (1995) 409–441. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1093/applin/16.4.409>
- [12] P. Meara, Modelling vocabulary loss, *Applied Linguistics*, 25(2) (2004) 137–155. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1093/applin/25.2.137>
- [13] A.D. Baddeley, *Human memory: theory and practice*, Erlbaum, 1990.
- [14] S. Webb, P. Nation, *How vocabulary is learned*, Oxford University Press, 2017.
- [15] B. Laufer, J. Hulstijn, Incidental vocabulary acquisition in a second language: The construct of task-induced involvement, *Applied Linguistics*, 22(1) (2001) 1–26. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1093/applin/22.1.1>