A review of current research on second language vocabulary learning

What this research was about and why it is important

Learning vocabulary is an essential part of mastering a second language. The review highlights the pedagogical lessons that can be learnt from the available research on vocabulary learning.

What the researcher did

In this narrative review the author selected to review as much of the research literature on language learning as possible, focussing on the most recent.

What the researcher found

•Vocabulary learners face a substantial, two-fold learning challenge: 1) Learn a large number of words (**vocabulary size/breadth**), and 2) Learn a number of aspects about each word, e.g. spelling, pronunciation, how it is used (**depth of vocabulary knowledge**).

•Words need to be met many times and in many different contexts in order to be learned, to consolidate the meaning and enhance depth of vocabulary knowledge. Approaches therefore need to be long-term and build in opportunities for revisiting and recycling target words.

•Vocabulary learning programmes need two components: an **explicit intentional learning component** and a component based around maximising exposure to **incidental learning**.

•The most effective activities within the explicit component are ones that a) actively engage the learner with the target words, b) maximise repeated exposure and recycling of the target words, and c) give consideration to developing both meaning and depth of vocabulary knowledge.

•Incidental learning from reading is better for enhancing knowledge of words which have already been met, than for the learning of new words.

•Incidental learning from listening is low, however, it is better when there is a variety of speakers and voices. Yet. listening is useful as a supplement to reading, as this is superior to reading only in promoting vocabulary learning.

•An extensive reading programme is one way to incorporate incidental learning into a language learning programme, with graded readers being recommended for developing learners and authentic materials being appropriate for more advanced learners.

•The most effective way of improving incidental learning is by reinforcing it afterwards with intentional learning tasks (e.g. post-reading activities focussing on the target words as opposed to comprehension questions). Intentional and incidental approaches are thus not only complimentary, but positively require each other.

•Training learners in how to guess from context helps learners benefit further from extensive reading, as does giving learners information about unknown words in the text (glossing) with learners preferring this information to appear in the margin / at the side of the text.

•Using the L1 is beneficial in quickly establishing the meaning, avoiding misunderstandings and leads to better learning (e.g. L1-L2 translation pairs, rather than L2- picture pairs).

Things to consider

•Learners need large vocabularies to use a second language, and so high vocabulary targets need to be set and pursued.

•To facilitate adequate vocabulary learning, all four learning partners (students, teachers, material writers and researchers) need to contribute to the learning process.

•The overriding principle of maximising sustained engagement with the target vocabulary appears to underlie all effective vocab learning.

•Schmitt suggests a four-strand framework of meaning-focused input, meaning-focused output, language-focused learning and fluency development as a way of integrating intentional and incidental learning.