Lessons from Western’s symposium on teaching and learning vocabulary in another language

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A one-day symposium on Teaching and Learning Vocabulary in Another Language was held at the University of Western Ontario on Friday 21st October 2016. Leading scholars and key researchers in the field of vocabulary studies discussed a wide range of second language (L2) vocabulary-related topics including (1) vocabulary learning through reading, (2) captioning and word learning, (3) corpus-based studies, and (4) phrasing aspects of language. In this report, we will summarize some key points from the symposium in order to provide teachers with up-to-date vocabulary research that can inform their teaching and make their teaching practice more effective and productive in L2 classrooms. In what follows, we will briefly review background knowledge relevant to the presentations and discuss pedagogical implications based on the presented studies.

Vocabulary Learning Through Reading

Aline Godfroid (Michigan State University) presented research on vocabulary acquisition through reading; her unique approach attempts to reveal how students learn vocabulary by tracking their eye movements while reading. This is done by having participants wear an eye tracking machine as they read texts from a computer screen. L2 learners, as opposed to first language (L1) learners, usually lack a sufficient amount of language input to fully develop the target language. Reading books is one solution to this problem, especially extensive reading (i.e., frequently reading graded readers for pleasure). Graded readers are books written for language learners using simple grammar and vocabulary so learners can learn the target
language while enjoying stories. Studies show that by reading a large number of graded readers, learners become better and more fluent readers, their writing improves, their listening and speaking ability improves, and they enrich their vocabulary. Extensive reading can even be conducted during classroom time. Four principles should be noted when adopting extensive reading activities: (1) choosing what they want to read; (2) reading appropriate books for their level; (3) enjoying reading; and (4) reading a lot. Reading may not bring about immediate results, but will benefit significantly over a long period of time. Graded readers are available from several publishers, such as Penguin Readers (http://www.penguinreaders.com) and the Oxford Bookworms Library (https://elt.oup.com/catalogue/items/global/graded_readers/oxford_bookworms_library/). For further reading, Bamford and Day (2004) provide a comprehensive guideline for implementing extensive reading in the classroom.

**Captioning and Vocabulary Learning**

Watching English language television programs has been a useful tool for English language learners, and research on watching television and vocabulary learning has grown in recent years to determine its benefits. The role of captioning in watching television, in particular, has been a main area of research with the hope of determining the following two assumptions: that providing captions for learners will be an effective way for increasing comprehension of television and that they will lead to increased vocabulary learning. Research evidence has accumulated to suggest that captions help learners to learn L2 words as well as understand videos (Montero Perez et al., 2013). In addition to the ongoing research focusing on vocabulary learning, Myrna Cintrón-Valentín, Lorenzo García-Amaya, and Nick Ellis (University of Michigan) proposed a large-scale research project exploring the effects of captioning
Ferran Gesa and Imma Miralpeix (University of Barcelona) investigated the effects of viewing television with captions on vocabulary learning for high-school learners of English. They found that students learned vocabulary when watching television (i.e., *I Love Lucy* and *Seinfeld*) with captions. They suggested that learners should have a certain level of vocabulary knowledge and listening skills in order to receive the best return from watching television. Not surprisingly, learners with poor vocabulary and weak listening ability may well experience great difficulties in watching television. We, therefore, need to ensure that students’ proficiency is sufficiently high so that they can benefit from watching television. This is possible by testing students’ vocabulary and listening ability before the class starts and selecting video materials at the right level for them. In testing vocabulary, checking the knowledge of words used in the video is one way. Another way is to test vocabulary size (i.e., the number of known words) using existing measures (e.g., New Vocabulary Levels Test; Webb, Sasao, & Ballance, under review; go to [http://vuw.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_6Wr5aUvXljAs6h](http://vuw.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_6Wr5aUvXljAs6h) for an online version of the test). Other resources and the description of each measure can be found in Schmitt (2010) and Meara and Miralpeix (2017).

Michael Rodgers (Carleton University) presented his research on the effects of captioning on vocabulary acquisition of university learners of English. Although captioning did not affect learning significantly, he reported that watching one episode once a week over 10 weeks does contribute to learning L2 words. He found
that approximately 6 words were learned in total. Learning 6 words over 10 weeks may lead us to conclude that watching television appears to be less efficient than traditional ways of vocabulary learning using word lists or word cards. However, watching videos provides a valuable source of input not only for learning vocabulary but also for learning many other aspects of linguistic and non-linguistic knowledge. For example, through watching videos, learners may develop the ability to use target words in a contextually appropriate manner as well as the knowledge of their word meanings. Such contextual knowledge is less likely to be acquired through traditional learning methods (e.g., learning with word cards). We would recommend adopting both traditional/deliberate learning methods and context-based learning instead of relying on one or the other. As an example, teaching target words and engaging learners with deliberate learning (e.g., word card learning and then testing their knowledge) before a subsequent television viewing activity will likely increase the amount of learning. Such a pre-teaching activity raises students’ awareness of the target words so that they can notice the words used in context and learn them more easily.

Elke Peters (KU Leuven University) compared the effect of L1 subtitles and L2 captions on vocabulary learning with two groups of learners: secondary-school learners and vocational-school learners of English (see Peters, Heynen, & Puimège, 2016 for greater details of this study). She found that her participants presented with L2 captions gained more vocabulary knowledge (i.e., pronunciation & spelling) compared with those presented with L1 subtitles. In other words, providing L2 support instead of L1 support may increase the chance of learning vocabulary while watching television. We normally think that L2 captions may be more beneficial for learning than L1 subtitles because students rely too much on L1 subtitles and pay less
attention to spoken L2 input. One exception may be the case where we teach low-proficiency learners, since L1 support is necessary for those who cannot read and understand L2 subtitles easily. It is, however, worth noting that despite the low-proficiency of learners in this study (i.e., vocational-school students), they benefited from watching with L2 captions. Therefore, the use of L2 captions should not be limited to the group of higher-proficiency learners, it may also be effective for beginning learners, when keeping other considerations (e.g., difficulty of video content) in mind.

**Corpus-based Vocabulary Research**

Corpus research has been recently viewed as an essential tool for vocabulary research. A “corpus” can be defined as a principled collection of words and expressions representing a certain variety, style or genre of language use in the real world (e.g., newspaper, movies, etc.). It is an electronically stored database which allows us to analyze and search for a typical language use. A well-known large-scale corpus is the British National Corpus (BNC) comprising 100 million English words used in British contexts in the 1990s. More recently, the largest corpus of the American variety of English is the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA). Marlise Horst (Concordia University) explored how language teachers would collaborate and build a new corpus using Wikipedia as a source of linguistic data. Her work is encouraging and a useful step forward, but corpus research overall has yet to infiltrate practical L2 learning contexts to the extent that it should. Research in this section along with Horst’s study helps to bridge the gap and provides useful implications for the use of language corpora in teaching and learning vocabulary.

Tom Cobb (Université du Québec à Montréal) re-examined the usefulness of a
common method of analyzing learners’ vocabulary use (i.e., lexical frequency profiling) and introduced a finer-tuned version of the method which might be more practically appealing to L2 teachers. Most researchers agree on the general assumption that we learn words heard or seen frequently (i.e., high-frequency words) before other words that are less frequently encountered (i.e., low-frequency words). Based on this general principle, word frequency has been viewed as an essential index for analyzing L2 vocabulary development. Lexical frequency profiling (LFP) has, to date, served as a long-standing way of analyzing learners’ language production since the initial attempt by Laufer and Nation in 1995. LFP uses corpus-based frequency lists provided in text-analysis software such as Cobb’s Lextutor (available at http://www.lextutor.ca/vp), which classifies an entered text of learners’ production according to different frequency levels (e.g., the most frequently occurring 1,000 words, 2,000 words, 3,000 words, and up to 25,000 words) and the Academic Word List (Coxhead, 2000). LFP, in this sense, can serve as a practical tool to measure learners’ productive vocabulary. For instance, teachers can ask learners to write short essays several times over a course and conduct informal assessment of learners’ vocabulary use in writing. When learners rely heavily on the most frequent 1,000 words, teachers can explicitly suggest that they should use more words from lower-frequency lists (e.g., get => obtain or gain). Similarly, when the focus of instruction is on learning academic discourse, teachers can encourage learners to use more academic words, referring to the data from the LFP analysis.

Geoffrey Pinchbeck (University of Calgary) explored the optimal approach for using corpora to make word lists for learners of English. One of the uses of corpora for language education is to create word lists by examining how frequent words are. With the word list, students can focus on learning words that are often encountered
and useful in various situations, instead of spending time on less frequent words. For teachers, word lists are very useful for designing language curriculum; we can plan language courses in which learners can learn frequent and important vocabulary first. However, many earlier word lists are mainly made from written corpora (e.g., newspapers and journals), which might not represent appropriate vocabulary for learners. The results of his research suggested that designing word lists should be based on the spoken corpora (i.e., subtitle corpora of TV/movies). For beginner or elementary level L2 learners, who benefit the most from having word lists to select vocabulary to learn deliberately (e.g., using flash cards), it might be useful to develop word lists derived from a large corpus consisting of the spoken English of movies and television programs. This also supports the argument for using TV series and movies as learning materials. Watching TV series may effectively teach learners how to speak in English for their everyday life.

Farahnaz Faez (Western University), Sima Paribakht, Diana Inkpen (University of Ottawa), and Ehsan Amjadian (Carlton University) have been examining the effectiveness of using computer software for extracting technical terms and multi-words from corpora. The usefulness of technical vocabulary has been recognized in Content-Based Language Teaching (CBLT) where learners acquire English ability by learning academic subjects through using English as a means of learning (see Lightbown, 2014 for further details). Conducting CBLT, subject-specific vocabulary (e.g., technical terms) is essential to understanding the content. Those specific terms, however, often have specific meanings in the field, so learners sometimes encounter difficulty understanding and remembering them (e.g., acute angle, whole numbers, etc.). If learners know important technical terms, (1) they can prepare for the classroom by remembering the important words with their L1
translations beforehand and (2) reviewing the important words after class. As teachers, if we know those terms, we can focus on teaching them and assess their understanding of the content by checking learners’ understanding of the technical terms. Faez and her associates reported that, so far, computer applications are not as accurate as human judges. While waiting for computers to start extracting technical terms, we can use pre-existing subject-specific word lists (e.g., for Engineering, Hsu, 2014; for Business, Hsu, 2011; and for Applied linguistics, Vongpumivitch, Huang & Chang, 2009. Please note that sometimes word lists are available as appendixes in supplementary materials).

Learning the Phrasing Aspects of Language

L2 learning is not merely learning translations of first language counterparts, because this would generate bizarre language use, inappropriate word choice, pauses to consider the L2 translation, and in the worst case scenario, failure to convey meaning. For example, the Japanese phrase 強い雨 “strong rain” naturally translates to heavy rain in English. Choosing the right combination (e.g., heavy instead of strong in the above example) can be quite a difficult task for L2 learners. Therefore, L2 learners need to learn how to use target words with other words that are patterned with those target words. This phrasing aspect of language has attracted considerable attention in recent years. It goes by many names: collocations, patterns, chunks, constructions, multiword combinations, formulaic language, and so forth. Competency in using formulaic language is crucial for L2 language learners who want to use a target language just as native speakers do, with accurate grammar and fluency. However, acquiring this competency is usually challenging for L2 learners. Studies in this section examine approaches to facilitating collocation learning and the mechanism of the acquisition of language patterns.
Frank Boers (Victoria University of Wellington) presented research on collocation-focused exercises. One approach to fostering L2 learners’ formulaic language is deliberate learning, which is learning collocations through engaging in language activities. Boers and his colleagues evaluated the effectiveness of different exercises that are commonly seen in EFL/ESL textbooks and workbooks. He reported that students learned more collocations when they made fewer errors as opposed to when they made more errors in language exercises (Boers, Dang, & Strong, 2016). In the classroom, we should design activities that help learners make few or no errors. For instance, it is helpful to provide learners with a list of many phrases (e.g. *take medicine*), instead of just words (e.g. *medicine*). With such a list, learners can choose appropriate collocations by comprehending their meanings and can use them in proper combinations. This may be more effective than providing a list of individual words, with which learners have to guess how to use each word with other words (e.g. learners might say “I will drink medicine” and remember it, believing it to be a correct pattern). As for workbook-type activities, a fill-in-the-blank-exercise that asks learners to choose an appropriate collocation from a list of several options is a good activity. We can also apply this to communicative activities by providing a list of phrases that learners can use for interacting with peers. This will help learners use each word in an appropriate combination.

Stuart Webb (Western University) investigated the effects of different modes of input on multiword combination learning. One of his approaches to assisting students’ learning of formulaic language is through reading graded readers with audio support. Webb’s study revealed that the students learned more multiword combinations through reading-while-listening compared to reading or listening alone. His study
pointed to the potential facilitative effects of audio support, with which learners can easily perceive multiword combinations holistically and learn them as a single unit. Regarding classroom application, we can provide graded readers with audio created by publishers (e.g., Oxford Bookworms series: www.oup.com/bookworms). TV series with subtitles can also serve as learning materials. One of the teachers’ roles in the language classroom is to act as an input provider. For example, reading books to learners while interacting with them may be a way of adjusting the difficulty of input, which actually enhances that input. By doing this, learners are exposed to a large number of target collocations while using two modes of input: reading and listening. This can be done with TV series as well; we can pause a video to explain certain parts that can be difficult for learners.

Nick Ellis (Michigan University) gave a presentation about a series of studies examining language patterns and how we acquire them. Nowadays, many researchers believe that we acquire language by observing how language is used in each situation. For instance, the verb *give* is used in a specific pattern with other words; [subject] *give* [object1] [object2] (e.g. *He gave me a flower*). However, when toddlers hear *give me a pen*, they do not think about the rule of how *give* should be used with other words. Rather, they learn this as a chunk. After that, they start hearing various types of input, such as *give me your book* or *give him the present*. Through understanding what each phrase means in a given situation, they can acquire patterns like *give me* [object] or *give* [object1] [object2]. In the end, they can acquire the ditransitive verb pattern: [subject] [verb] [object1] [object2] (e.g. *I’ll buy you a coffee*). Native speakers of English and competent learners can understand that this pattern has a meaning in itself, which can be interpreted as [subject] causes [verb] for [object1] to receive [object2]. For example, when you hear *he spugged her*
a book, you can guess the meaning of the non-word *spugged*, which can be assumed to be a verb that expresses some sort of transfer (e.g., “she received a book from him”). This idea of acquiring language by observing how it is used is called usage-based learning (see Ellis, Römer, & O'Donnell, 2016, for further details of Ellis’ latest research). Research in usage-based learning suggests that we should provide learners with a large amount of language input in situations where learners can see how language is being used. Learning words alone is not as effective as learning words in patterns within contexts. Being exposed to the input in a meaningful situation will teach learners how each language item is used and will help them acquire natural language patterns automatically. As discussed above, reading graded readers or watching TV series can also create a learning environment where learners acquire language within meaningful situations. In order to develop their L2 competency, we need to bear in mind that learners have to have a large amount of input within contexts, while at the same time we cannot neglect deliberate vocabulary learning.

**Concluding Remarks**

The symposium was thought-provoking and offered insight into the latest research on vocabulary. We believe these presentations can inform pedagogy, which is why we are sharing them with you here. Some final takeaways for the classroom include (1) having students read graded readers, (2) utilizing TV programs as teaching materials, (3) adding captions when introducing TV watching, (4) using lexical frequency profiling to assess learners’ productive vocabulary in speaking or writing, (5) assisting learners in making fewer errors during vocabulary exercises so as to maximize the effectiveness of learning collocations, and (6) using audio support together with reading materials for better collocation learning. Background
information about each study was limited due to lack of space. For those who may want to learn about vocabulary acquisition more comprehensively, we recommend *How Vocabulary is Learned* (Webb & Nation, 2017). We hope that our report on vocabulary learning will contribute to bridging the gap between research and practice.

**References**


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