Issues in Vocabulary Acquisition

Based in part on Decarrico, J (2001) *Vocabulary learning and Teaching*, in Celce-Murcia, M. (ed.) Teaching English as a Second or Foreign Language,Heinle and Heinle

Some Background Knowledge

- Historically traditional teaching methods focused on grammar and neglected vocabulary as a teaching focus (Structualism, ALM)

    -thought was that vocab will somehow "take care of itself"

- Changes in teaching approaches in late 1970s led to increase focus on vocab

    -Hymes' (1972) notion of "communicative competence" broadened Chomsky's nativist approach to language acquisition, but still vocab was given a back seat to functional language use.

- As computer-aided research became more available in the 1980s and '90s, research into vocab acquisition increased greatly

    -vocab use

    -lexical units in discourse

    -differences between spoken and written use of vocab

- More recently, psycholinguistic studies have also begun to shed light on cognitive processes such as memory, storage, and retrieval of lexical items

Some Current Issues

- Implicit (incidental) learning: learning vocab from context, monolingual dictionaries (strong version of the communicative approach)

- Explicit learning aims to build a large receptive and productive vocabulary base through active teaching of vocab.

> 2000 words seems to be a solid base
> -"General Service List of English Words" (1953/1995)
> -75% of what we regularly see and hear
> -learners expect to learn vocab
> -certain groups of learners need more vocab

- Pre-reading vs. while-reading, vs. post-reading vocabulary activities
-pre-reading vocabulary should be limited, encourage using context to sensitize learners to new vocab.

-while-reading activities should be short so as to be a un-disruptive to the reading process as possible (unless the objective is to disrupt!)

-post-reading activities should consolidate knowledge of content through use of new/targeted vocab items.

Teaching Techniques and Activities

Explicit Learning
- Appropriate for core vocabulary (the "2000 list")

- Avoid teaching isolated words, or having students memorize lists

- Targeted vocab items from a text should tend to be general in nature rather than content-specific for that text

- Teach word families
  -morphological
    -same stem, various affixes (past, 3p.sg., gerund, etc., negative "in-")
  -semantic
    -word association techniques
    -semantic mapping
  -thematic

- Promote deep understanding of vocab by having students manipulate the words in different ways.
  - -above examples
  - -seeing and using vocab in a variety of contexts
  - -using vocab in games

Implicit Learning

- Appropriate for lower frequency words

- Promote multiple exposures to same words
  - -book flood

- Use multiple authentic texts on same topic

Idioms

- Fixed expressions

- Meaning can't be derived from analysis of expression
  - -"The cat's out of the bag"
  - -"Don't spit your dummy"
- Typically learned through a combination of memorization and use in meaningful context.

Lexical phrases

- Differ from idioms in that LPs are associated with particular discourse functions such as expressing time, greetings, relationships between ideas, or condition.

- Fixed expressions
  -"by the way"
  -"you don't say"

- Quasi fixed expressions
  -"a ____ ago"
  -the *x-er* the *y-er*
  -

Collocations

- Appropriate for higher level learners
  -Aid in consolidating vocab already known and partially known

- Aid in reducing "non-nativeness" of learner speech

- One word is often restricted in the range of other words it can occur with. (c.f., "rotten" fish, wood, apple, But: rotten orange? rotten steak?)

- Help define the semantic area of a word

- Syntactic collocations
  -allow learners to generalize combinations of parts of speech
    -noun/verb/adj + prep
    -verbs which normally occur with animate agents
      "bite", "see"
    -verbs which normally require a human agent
      "talk", "rationalize"
    -agents which take a limited range of possible verbs
      "the plane…"; "the snowperson…"
  -contrastive collocations (L1 and L2)
    -"sleep tight" vs. "sleep fast" (German)

-"run a business" vs. "drive a business" (Polish)

-"draw a line" vs. "pull a line" (Japanese)

-etc.

- Activities

-Word match activity after seeing target words in context

She has a(n) { keen, smart, amazing, sharp, pointed, great, superior } wit

job	work	labor	occupation
position	task	employment	profession

a. That job requires hard physical ____

b. In today's __ market, computer skills are important

c. I'll meet you for dinner after __ today

d. You need to concentrate on the ____ at hand.

e. What line of ____ are you in?

f. her chosen ____ is carpentry

g. He was promoted to a supervisory __

Learner Strategies
- Guessing meaning from context
- Mnemonic devices
- Vocabulary notebooks

Using Dictionaries
- Learners need to recognize when and when not to use a dictionary
  -Use dictionary when:

-an unknown word appears several times in the same text, seems to play a role in overall meaning, and the general meaning can't be guessed from context, part of speech, etc.

-encourage more advanced learners to use ==mono-lingual dictionaries (learner dictionaries or native== speaker dictionaries)

-teach dictionary skills
    -check part of speech
    -check all meanings, not just the first entry

-Otherwise, guess, ignore, etc. See procedures for this in A&F, pp. 144-145.

• Research implies that, in some cases, dictionary use plays a minimum role in understanding in classroom-based reading, especially in test situations.