



The Journal of Asia TEFL

<http://journal.asiatefl.org/>

e-ISSN 2466-1511 © 2004 AsiaTEFL.org. All rights reserved.



Book review

How vocabulary is learned, by Stuart Webb & Paul Nation, Oxford, 2017, 322 pp., ISBN 978-0-19-440355-9.

This is an excellent book in the field of vocabulary teaching/learning. The two authors (Stuart Webb and Paul Nation) have published extensively on vocabulary learning/teaching, providing a solid empirical basis. This new book builds on Paul Nation's (2001) canonical work *Learning Vocabulary in Another Language* and adds more updated research evidence. It has a clear structure and is written in reader-friendly language, with all jargon clearly explained and exemplified. The intended readers are language teachers (in-service or pre-service), educators, university lecturers, undergraduate or postgraduate students who are interested in teaching or researching vocabulary.

The introduction effectively guides the reader in determining their area of interest. Chapter One conducts a detailed analysis of vocabulary items at different frequency levels, which serves as the foundation for advising teachers on how to select vocabulary items to teach in general. Chapter Two focuses on what needs to be learned in order to understand and use vocabulary knowledge. A range of vocabulary aspects, such as form, meaning, form-meaning connection, sounds and spelling mapping, collocations, reception vs. production, etc., are described and exemplified. Chapter Three outlines basic approaches to vocabulary learning by differentiating a classic pair of lexical items: deliberate/intentional and incidental learning. Chapter Four expounds the essential psychological conditions related to the mental processing and attention level of the target vocabulary that are needed for learning/retention to occur. These four chapters provide readers and teachers with a clear rationale of how vocabulary should be selected, processed and retained, largely from a cognitive-psychological point of view, with solid research evidence.

The remaining six chapters are of a practical nature and devoted to the implications of the theoretical underpinnings expounded in the previous four chapters. Chapter Five presents a wide range of vocabulary learning and teaching activities, covering all four language skills in different modes. For each suggested activity, the input/output strand, goal, learning conditions, research evidence, and further reading are provided. Chapter Six deals with specific learning contexts in which vocabulary is used, ranging from the ESL/EFL contexts at the macro level to small/large class size issues at the micro level. Chapter Seven sets the spotlight on one important learner factor, namely, vocabulary learning strategies. Chapter Eight shifts the reader's attention from classroom vocabulary learning activities at a micro level to the design of effective vocabulary learning programmes at a macro level by dealing with a balanced implementation of meaning-focused input, meaning-focused output, language-focused learning and fluency development. Chapter Nine provides useful resources for facilitating vocabulary learning or teaching, including established word lists, vocabulary tests, and corpus-based teaching/learning resources. Chapter 10 summarises the key information covered in this book with the guidance of 10 questions that are likely to be raised frequently by teachers.

This book provides a comprehensive synthesis of research on vocabulary in the past few decades. Key theoretical concepts are clearly presented to readers who are subsequently scaffolded to understand the implications of theories in vocabulary learning/teaching in various contexts. Apart from a careful

explanation in plain language, useful activities/exercises are provided to help readers digest and consolidate the learning of the concepts/theories. For example, by assigning words into different frequency levels as specified in Activity 1.1 (p. 9), readers can gain a better understanding of the importance of frequency levels and how to select vocabulary items to be taught to students. These carefully designed activities are also very useful for teaching undergraduate or postgraduate courses which include lexical studies or vocabulary learning/teaching. Another distinctive feature of this book is that it is accompanied by abundant useful resources listed in either appendices or the website (www.oup.com/elt/teacher/hvil). These extra resources can be further explored by readers if they are particularly interested in some concept(s) or section(s) of the book and desire for a deep understanding.

The main goal of this book is to provide practical guidance to readers (mainly in-service or pre-service teachers) as to what the important ideas/key issues are involved in vocabulary teaching and learning, and how to design an effective vocabulary learning programme. The theoretical foundation of vocabulary learning and teaching has been clearly explained and general guidance/principles provided for the design of vocabulary learning programme. However, it is felt that it would be more helpful to readers if a few concrete examples of vocabulary learning programmes were provided to help them better understand how to apply the guidance and principles in programme design. In addition, although a wide range of classroom-based vocabulary learning/teaching activities are provided, it would be better if more fun elements were integrated into these activities to enhance learners' interest and engage them fully in the learning process.

Despite a couple of points which are largely minor, this book is a rich resource for language teachers and educators who are interested in knowing how to design vocabulary learning/teaching programmes. This book also serves as an excellent textbook for teaching undergraduate or postgraduate courses on lexical studies or vocabulary pedagogy.

Reference

Nation, I. S. P. (2001). *Learning Vocabulary in Another Language*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Qing MA

Department of Linguistics and Modern Language Studies, The Education University of Hong Kong,
Hong Kong, SAR China
E-mail: maqing@eduhk.hk