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Norbert Schmitt  
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# Vocabulary in Language Teaching

*Norbert Schmitt*

University of Nottingham



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To Ron Carter, Mike McCarthy, Paul Meara, and Paul Nation for taking  
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## *Series editor's preface*

There is a curious absence in the curriculum of many MA TESOL degrees and similar courses for second and foreign language teachers. Although such courses typically include required courses on grammar, phonology, and discourse analysis, vocabulary is often dealt with only incidentally in the preparation of language teachers. Yet as Schmitt demonstrates in this lucid and fascinating account of the role of vocabulary in second language learning and teaching, lexical knowledge is central to communicative competence and to the acquisition of a second language. Vocabulary and lexical units are at the core of learning and communication. No amount of grammatical or other type of linguistic knowledge can be employed in communication or discourse without the mediation of vocabulary. Indeed, vocabulary and lexical expressions can sustain a great deal of rudimentary communication without much support from other aspects of the language system. Understanding of the nature and significance of vocabulary knowledge in a second language therefore needs to occupy a much more central role in the knowledge base of language teachers. This book convincingly reasserts the significance of vocabulary within applied linguistics.

As Schmitt illustrates, approaches to the study of the nature of vocabulary and lexical knowledge in a second language have had a long history, though the status of vocabulary in teaching has tended to reflect preoccupations elsewhere, at times almost disappearing from view as scholars and applied linguists turned their attention to other dimensions of language knowledge. Recently, however, vocabulary has assumed a more prominent status prompted by corpus studies and awareness of the role of lexical units in learning and communication. Schmitt is one of an active group of scholars that includes Nation, Carter, Meara, and McCarthy, whose research has put vocabulary at the forefront of contemporary applied linguistics research. In this book he reports on the current status and findings of this extensive body of research. His presentation, however, is for an audience of teachers and others interested in the applications of such research to language teaching.

The book provides a comprehensive overview of the role of vocabulary in language use, language teaching, and language testing, and it offers an

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original and insightful analysis and survey of the subject. Vocabulary is shown to include much more than knowledge of single words. The nature of vocabulary knowledge and learning is revealed from the research of Schmitt and many other scholars, as are the ways in which corpus studies are changing our understanding of how vocabulary is used in discourse and its relation to other dimensions of linguistic knowledge including phonology and grammar. Schmitt treats a complex subject with masterful clarity, highlighting the applications of research to classroom teaching, testing, and materials design. Teachers, researchers, graduate students, and others interested in issues related to vocabulary and language teaching will therefore find much to interest them in this book. The detailed examples and activities found in the discussion tasks and appendixes provide practical exemplification of the issues discussed. Readers will hence find that *Vocabulary in Language Teaching* not only offers a rich picture of the nature of vocabulary and its role in second language programs, criteria by which to make judgments about issues in the teaching and testing of vocabulary, it also prepares them to be better able to respond to issues related to the teaching and learning of vocabulary by second language learners.

Jack C. Richards

## *Preface*

This book is for language teachers and other people who would like to know more about the way vocabulary works. It attempts to provide the background knowledge necessary for practitioners to make informed choices about vocabulary teaching and testing. In most chapters, key ideas are first discussed, and then the pedagogical implications of those ideas are explicitly stated in an *Applications to Teaching* section. Thus, the overall theme of the book is making research and theory accessible enough to be of use in informing best classroom practice. As such, I have written this book to be much more than a “how-to-do-it” manual. By the time you finish it, you should be aware of the major issues in the field and should be equipped to read more advanced writings on them if you so wish. To encourage this, I have included a *Further Reading* section in each chapter that suggests appropriate follow-up readings. I have also included a relatively large bibliography to provide leads for further exploration of issues.

The structure of the book can be divided into three sections. Chapters 1 and 2 provide some linguistic and historical background. Chapters 3 to 7 are the “heart” of the book, describing the various kinds of knowledge a person can have about a word, how vocabulary behaves in context, and how it is acquired. Chapters 8 and 9 focus on pedagogy, enlarging on issues in teaching and testing vocabulary. At the end of each chapter are *Exercises for Expansion*, which are designed to help you consider some of the key issues in more depth. As their purpose is to help you formulate your own views stemming from an interaction of the information in this book and your own experience, there are generally no “right” or “wrong” answers, and thus only a few exercises have an answer key. The value of the exercises comes from developing answers that make sense for you.

I have tried not to assume any prior knowledge about lexical issues in this book, but do assume that you will have some general linguistic background. For example, I assume that you know what *nouns* and *affixes* are. Without this assumption, the book would become too cluttered with basic definitions to be coherent. Important terms concerning vocabulary are

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printed in italics and are defined or described in the surrounding text. At all times, I have tried to make the text as direct and accessible as possible.

Vocabulary is a big topic area, and a number of perspectives are possible. A point worth remembering when reading this book is that the material contained within is not totally unbiased, and that it reflects my personal experience and research. I have tried to present an account of the field that is as broad and balanced as is possible under length constraints, but accept responsibility if my perspective highlights issues other than those you would have chosen.

Norbert Schmitt

## *Acknowledgments*

It is difficult to decide on whom to acknowledge in a book like this, for so many people have influenced my thinking about language and linguistics in general, and vocabulary in particular. I am grateful to the Derelicts for early and continuing inspiration. Bob Bini, Rick MacDonald, and Philomena Victorine led me to Japan, where my career in English language teaching began. Friends from Temple University, Japan, helped me think about what effective language teaching is really about. My students at the University of Nottingham have given me useful feedback on earlier versions of much of the material in this book. Special thanks go to friends who have taken time to comment on portions of this book: Ron Carter, Averil Coxhead, Mike McCarthy, Paul Meara, Rosamund Moon, Paul Nation, John Read, Diane Schmitt, John Sinclair, and Cheryl Zimmerman. Others who have helped shape this book by supplying material or inspiration include Mickey Bonin, Jim Coady, Andrew Cohen, Nick Ellis, Steven Gaies, Debbie Goldblatt, William Grabe, Birgit Henriksen, Margot Haynes, Tom Huckin, Jan Hulstijn, Ramesh Krishnamurthy, Batia Laufer, Bill Nagy, Sima Paribakht, Jack Richards, David Singleton, Rob Waring, Mari Wesche, Dave and Jane Willis, and many others too numerous to mention. As always, my wife Diane has helped me to discover what is important, both in life and in Applied Linguistics. Finally, thanks to the four men who have done the most to open my eyes to the magic of vocabulary. It gives me great pleasure to call them my friends, and it is to them that this book is gratefully dedicated.