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1 *Historical trends in second language vocabulary instruction*

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Introduction

Vocabulary is central to language and of critical importance to the typical language learner. Nevertheless, the teaching and learning of vocabulary have been undervalued in the field of second language acquisition (SLA) throughout its varying stages and up to the present day. SLA researchers and teachers have typically prioritized syntax and phonology as "more serious candidates for theorizing" (Richards, 1976, p. 77), more central to linguistic theory, and more critical to language pedagogy. This chapter will seek to show how vocabulary has been viewed, researched, and presented throughout the history of SLA. The purpose of this survey is to build a better understanding of the past and to indicate likely developments in lexical pedagogy in the future.

The Grammar Translation Method

The Grammar Translation Method was first introduced to teach modern languages in public schools in Prussia at the end of the eighteenth century. The primary goals of this method were to prepare students to read and write classical materials and to pass standardized exams (Howatt, 1984; Rivers, 1981). Like courses in classical Latin and Greek, this method used classical literature chosen for its intellectual content as materials; it was typically assumed that most students would never actually use the target language but would profit from the mental exercise. Students were provided detailed explanations of grammar in their native languages, paradigms to memorize, and bilingual vocabulary lists to learn; these prepared them for the regular task of translating long passages of the classics. Although the names of the Grammar Translation materials typically included the adjective "practical" (e.g., *The Practical Guide of the German Language* by T. H. Weisse), the word was not used to mean *useful* as we would use it today. Rather, it referred to the importance of *practice* (Howatt, 1984): Lessons typically consisted of a reading selection, two or three long columns of new vocabulary items with native-language equiv-

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alents, and a test (Rivers, 1981). Language skill was judged according to one's ability to analyze the syntactic structure, primarily to conjugate verbs.

It follows, then, that students using the Grammar Translation Method studied literary language samples that used primarily archaic structures and obsolete vocabulary. Students were exposed to a wide literary vocabulary (Rivers, 1981) that was selected according to its ability to illustrate grammatical rules, and direct vocabulary instruction was included only when a word illustrated a grammatical rule (Kelly, 1969). When vocabulary difficulties were addressed at all, their explanations depended largely on etymology. Latin and Greek roots or "primitives" were considered "the most accurate court of appeal on word meanings"; the ability to use etymology was respected as "one way of discovering truth" (Kelly, 1969, p. 30). The teaching of vocabulary was based on definition and etymology throughout the nineteenth century, at least in part because of the prevalent belief that the connection between etymon and derivative should be protectively preserved to avoid degeneration of the language. Bilingual word lists (*vocabularies*), used as instructional aids rather than as reference, were organized according to semantic fields and had been a normal part of grammars and readers since the mid-seventeenth century. During the period of Grammar Translation methodology, bilingual dictionaries became common as reference tools (Kelly, 1969). As more was understood about language families and the natural process of language change in the twentieth century, scholars began to emphasize the dangers of cognates, but this change in perspective was gradual.

The Grammar Translation Method was used well into the twentieth century as the primary method for foreign language instruction in Europe and the United States, but it had received challenges and criticism for many years. In the mid-1800s, the primary objection to the method was the neglect of realistic, oral language. This objection had implications for the role of vocabulary in language instruction. For example, the Frenchman François Gouin emphasized the acquisition of specific terms, especially of action words

> . . . that could be physically performed as they were used. . . . Within these situations, students would act out very detailed sequences of appropriate actions in relation to objects, stating aloud exactly what they were doing with what. (Rivers, 1983, p. 116)

He introduced words in semantic fields in the interest of teaching a verb's collocations along with the verb, always emphasizing that "general terms are . . . terms of luxury, which the language can upon necessity do without" (Gouin, 1892, in Rivers, 1983, p. 116).

Another challenge came from Thomas Prendergast, who objected to archaic vocabulary lists; in his 1864 manual, *The Mastery of Languages,*

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or, the Art of Speaking Foreign Tongues Idiomatically, he listed the most common English words, based entirely on his intuitive judgment. This effort to rank vocabulary according to frequency was seen as one of many fleeting and rebellious methods that failed to perform what it promised and consequently "didn't significantly influence language teaching" (Sweet, 1899/1964, p. 2). Nevertheless, Prendergast's judgments were deemed surprisingly accurate when compared to the lists compiled systematically by Thorndike and Lorge in 1944: of a total of 214 words, 82% of Prendergast's words were among the first 500 most frequent words on the list of Thorndike-Lorge (Howatt, 1984). Prendergast's list was an important innovation because it came at a time when simplicity and everyday language were scorned and before it was normal to think in terms of common words.

The Reform Movement

As already seen, although Grammar Translation dominated language teaching as late as the 1920s, it had been challenged on many fronts. In the 1880s its challengers had enough consensus and the intellectual leadership they needed from linguists such as Henry Sweet in England to establish the Reform Movement. Sweet insisted that previous reactions against Grammar Translation had failed because they were "based on an insufficient knowledge of the science of language and because they [were] one-sided" (Sweet, 1899/1964, p. 3). The Reformers emphasized the primacy of spoken language and phonetic training. *Fluency* took on a new meaning: the ability to accurately pronounce a connected passage and to maintain associations between a stream of speech and the referents in the outside world. The curriculum developed by Sweet is considered representative of the time (Howatt, 1984). His system began with the *Mechanical Stage,* where students studied phonetics and transcription, continued to the *Grammatical Stage,* where they studied grammar and very basic vocabulary, and then to the *Idiomatic Stage,* where they pursued vocabulary in greater depth. Stages four and five (*Literary* and *Archaic*) consisted of the study of philology and were reserved for university-level work. Sweet's lessons were based on carefully controlled spoken language in which lists of separated words and isolated sentences were avoided; only after thorough study of the complete text should grammar points or vocabulary items be isolated for instructional purposes.

> Although language is made up of words, we do not speak in words, but in sentences. From a practical, as well as a scientific, point of view, the sentence is the unit of language, not the word. From a purely phonetic point of view words do not exist. (Sweet, 1899/1964, p. 97)

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Perhaps the Reformers' most significant departure from the past in the area of vocabulary instruction was that words came to be associated with reality rather than with other words and syntactic patterns. To this end, vocabulary was selected according to its simplicity and usefulness. Sweet began to discuss the possibility of developing vocabulary lists based on statistical measures, though they were developed intuitively by consensus until the 1920s (Kelly, 1969). Sweet believed that practical words such as household items and articles of clothing were not only important to know, but also appropriately "dull and commonplace"; he warned that students might be distracted from learning by interesting materials (Howatt, 1984, p. 187).

The Direct Method

The Direct Method, the best known of several "natural" methods introduced toward the end of the nineteenth century, benefited from the debate that ensued during the Reform Movement, though it wasn't considered grounded in linguistic theory by Sweet and other intellectual leaders (Richards & Rodgers, 1986). Its name came from the priority of relating meaning directly with the target language without the step of translation. Developed in the United States by Sauveur and made famous by Berlitz, the Direct Method stated that interaction was at the heart of natural language acquisition. Its proponents used the target language as the language of instruction in small, intensive classes consisting of carefully graded progressions of question and answer exchanges. Everyday vocabulary and sentences were used. Reading was taught throughout the course and was "developed through practice with speaking" (Larsen-Freeman, 1986). Criticisms against the Direct Method included its oversimplification of the similarities between L1 and L2 and its lack of consideration of the practical logistics of the public classroom (Richards & Rodgers, 1986).

In Sauveur's 1874 teacher's manual, *An Introduction to the Teaching of Living Languages without Grammar or Dictionary,* he proposed two principles of language teaching that dictated vocabulary selection and instruction. The first principle was that teachers were only to ask "earnest questions" that elicited answers in which the teacher had genuine interest. Second, questions needed to be connected to one another in "such a manner that one may give rise to another" to provide the learners with the opportunities to learn from context (Howatt, 1984, p. 201). The vocabulary was simple and familiar: the first few lessons of the Berlitz English course, for example, were based on objects in the classroom, clothing, and parts of the body, followed by *to be* and common adjectives (*big, small, thin, thick,* etc.) (Howatt, 1984, p. 206). Concrete vocabulary

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was explained with labeled pictures and demonstration, while abstract vocabulary was taught through the associating of ideas (Rivers, 1983; Richards & Rodgers, 1986). Charts and pictures were used during this period, first in the classroom and then in language textbooks. Objects were also used to demonstrate meaning, and the term *realia* or *realien* appears to have been adopted at this time (Kelly, 1969). Many traditionalists never adjusted to the Direct Method and criticized it for being trivial. It never was adopted in the ordinary schools of America or Europe, but gained an extensive following through private language facilities such as the Berlitz Schools (Howatt, 1984).

The Reading Method/Situational Language Teaching

The 1920s and 1930s saw the birth of the Reading Method in the United States and Situational Language Teaching in Great Britain. The Reading Method was aimed primarily at the development of reading skills, a response in part to the 1929 Coleman report, which cited serious deficiencies in the foreign language reading skills of American students (Rivers, 1981). Similarly, in Great Britain, Michael West stressed the need to facilitate reading skill by improving vocabulary skills. Beginning with his thesis at Oxford in 1927 and continuing for more than forty years, he criticized direct methodologists for stressing the importance of speech without providing guidelines for selecting content:

> The Primary thing in learning a language is the acquisition of a vocabulary, and practice in using it (which is the same thing as 'acquiring'). The problem is *what* vocabulary; and none of these 'modern textbooks in common use in English schools' have attempted to solve the problem. (West, 1930, p. 514)

He stated that foreign language learners did not have even a basic thousand-word vocabulary after three years of study, for three reasons: (1) their time was spent on activities that were not helping them speak the language; (2) they were learning words that were not useful to them; and (3) they were not "fully mastering" the words they were learning (West, 1930, p. 511). West's recommendation was to use word-frequency lists as the basis for the selection and order of vocabulary in student materials. In 1930 he recommended the use of Thorndike's word-frequency list; in 1953 West published *A General Service List of English Words*. Even though this list is old (the headwords have not changed since 1936), it is still considered the most widely used of high-frequency word lists. In fact, publishers and examining boards still quote West's 1953 list despite the existence of more updated lists compiled with the help of computer technology (Meara, 1980).

At the same time, British linguists H. E. Palmer and A. S. Hornby,

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considered leaders of the Situational Language Teaching movement, were influential both in the United States and in Great Britain; their initial aim was to develop a more scientific foundation for the oral methods made popular by direct methodologists. They believed language should be taught by practicing basic structures in meaningful situation-based activities; speech was the basis and structure that made speech possible. In their reaction to the ungraded speech imposed upon learners in the Direct Method, Palmer and Hornby stressed *selection, gradation,* and *presentation* of language structures (Richards & Rodgers, 1986, p. 33). Many language programs were published during this period, reflecting the perceived need for systematic gradation of language in language courses (Faucett, 1933; Ogden, 1930; Palmer, 1916, 1921, 1924). For the first time, vocabulary was considered one of the most important aspects of second language learning and a priority was placed on developing a scientific and rational basis for selecting the vocabulary content of language courses. The combined research of Palmer and Michael West led to the development of principles on vocabulary control; their attempts to introduce a scientific basis for vocabulary selection were the first efforts to establish principles of syllabus design in language teaching (Richards & Rodgers, 1990).

The audio-lingual method

The audio-lingual method (or the structural approach, as it was called by its founders) was developed by American structural linguists during World War II, when governmental and institutional support was available for the teaching of foreign languages. Perceived by founder Charles Fries as a new approach to pedagogical grammar rather than as merely a new method, the audio-lingual method was originally used in the English Language Institute at the University of Michigan. Fries's 1945 *Teaching and Learning English as a Foreign Language* described the new approach as a practical interpretation of the "principles of modern linguistic science" (Fries, 1945, p. v). This approach suggested that most problems experienced by foreign language learners concern the conflict of different structural systems. With grammar or "structure" as its starting point and the belief that language learning is a process of habit formation, the audio-lingual method paid systematic attention to pronunciation and intensive oral drilling of basic sentence patterns. Students were taught grammatical points through examples and drills rather than through analysis and memorization of rules. The course, as proposed by Fries, consisted of three months of intensive study of the essentials of English structure.

With the major object of language teaching being the acquisition of

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structural patterns, vocabulary items were selected according to their simplicity and familiarity. New words were introduced through the drills, but only enough words to make the drills possible (Larsen-Freeman, 1986). The assumption seemed to be that the structural frames could be "fleshed out with words at a later stage when students were more certain of their lexical needs in particular situations" (Rivers, 1983, p. 118).

In Fries's 1945 text, he introduced the chapter on vocabulary learning by quoting Edward Sapir: "The linguistic student should never make the mistake of identifying a language with its dictionary" (Fries, 1945, p. 38). Fries suspected that language learners oversimplified the role of isolated words. He attributed the oversimplification of vocabulary issues to three false assumptions about the nature of language. First, it is falsely assumed that words have exact equivalents in different languages; Fries argued that the only words that convey exactly the same meaning from one language to another are highly technical words. Second, it is assumed that a word is a single meaning unit; in fact, Fries pointed out that English words usually have from fifteen to twenty meanings. The third false assumption is that each word has a "basic" or "real" meaning and that all other meanings are either figurative or illegitimate. Fries spent a considerable amount of time in this introductory document arguing against these false assumptions and illustrating the fact that words are linguistic forms: "symbols that derive their whole content and their limitations of meaning from the situations in which they are used" (Fries, 1945, p. 43).

It was thus suggested during this period that learning too much vocabulary early in the language learning process gives students a false sense of security. Wilga Rivers reflects this view in *Teaching Foreign Language Skills,* first published in 1968:

> Excessive vocabulary learning early in the course gives students the impression that the most important thing about learning a language is accumulating new words as equivalents for concepts which they can already express in their native languages. They often fail to realize that meaning is expressed in groups of words and in combinations of language segments, and that the meaning of an individual word is usually difficult to determine when it is separated from a context of other words and phrases. Traditional vocabulary lists rarely provide contexts of this type. Students are thus unprepared to use the words they have learned as isolated units in any approximation to authentic communication. (Rivers, 1968/1981, p. 254)

She went on to recommend practice with morphological variations and syntactic structures using well-known vocabulary so that students would not be distracted from concentration on the target structures. She recommended that new vocabulary be introduced first in high-interest oral activities and that words be reused extensively in order to aid long-term retention. As will be seen shortly, Rivers altered this view in later publications.

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Freeman Twaddell, a colleague of Fries, echoed Fries's concern that language learners often overvalue word knowledge and equate it with knowledge of the language; he suggested that teachers and theoreticians have reacted against learners' exaggeration of the role of vocabulary by downgrading it and have consequently overemphasized the role of grammar (1980). The ramifications of this view have been seen in curriculum and teaching materials that treat lexical items as the means by which to illustrate grammatical topics rather than as items with communicative value in themselves. Twaddell notes that the result is that, unlike L1 children who have more words than they can express in sentences, adult learners have "an infantile vocabulary and an adult mentality" (Twaddell, 1980, p. 442). His recommendation for addressing this problem is not to abandon the primacy of grammatical structures in the process of teaching a language, but rather to teach skills of compensation: "guessing word meanings and tolerating vagueness."

Communicative language teaching

A major transition in linguistic theory was triggered by the publication of Noam Chomsky's *Syntactic Structures* in 1957. This work introduced the assumption that language is represented in the speaker's mental grammar by an abstract set of rules that is most clearly reflected in a speaker's unconscious intuitions about language, and least reflected in his or her conscious beliefs and statements about the use of language (Chomsky, 1965). Chomsky maintained that language existed in the individual quite apart from communicating needs, and labeled the internalized (unconscious) mental grammar of a language *competence,* and the actual use of it *performance.* At the same time, though, he paid little attention to the nature of language use in real communication. His work was a revolutionary reminder of the creativity of language and a challenge to the behaviorist view of language as a set of habits. In reaction against the Chomskyan notion of an autonomous linguistic competence, Dell Hymes introduced the concept of *communicative competence,* which, while not rejecting Chomsky's model, gave greater emphasis to the sociolinguistic and pragmatic factors governing effective language use. *Communicative competence* is defined as the internalized knowledge of the situational appropriateness of language (Hymes, 1972).

An essential insight that emerged from this period is that communicative competence incorporates linguistic competence in the sense of linguistic creativity and that language learning is quite different from the previously held model of habit formation. The result was a complete change in the direction for language instruction; the focus in language

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teaching changed to communicative proficiency rather than the command of structures. This shift has been manifested in communicative language teaching, a broad term used to refer to many specific methods. In general, communicative language teaching strives to "make communicative competence the goal of language teaching and to develop procedures for the teaching of the four language skills that acknowledge the interdependence of language and communication" (Richards & Rodgers, 1990, p. 66). Communicative methods have the common goals of bringing language learners into closer contact with the target language (Stern, 1981) and of promoting fluency over accuracy. Rivers described her perception of this shift in 1983 when she referred to the insufficiency of the *skill-getting* practices of the audio-lingual methods alone without the *skill-using* opportunities of real communication:

> One failure in the past has been in our satisfaction with students who performed well in pseudo-communication. We have tended to assume that there would then be automatic transfer to performance in interaction (both in the reception and expression of messages). (Rivers, 1983, p. 43)

In the argument for fluency over accuracy, Rivers has exhorted language educators to pay more attention to words, considering carefully how to help learners communicate meaning, "even before they can express discriminatingly fifteen ways to ask that the door be opened" (Rivers, 1983, p. 120). Similarly, Widdowson (1978) has claimed that native speakers can better understand ungrammatical utterances with accurate vocabulary than those with accurate grammar and inaccurate vocabulary. Nevertheless, vocabulary has not been the focus of attention in communicative language research or methodology. Instead, attention has been turned more toward the appropriate use of communicative categories (cf. Van Ek, 1976; Wilkins, 1972), and toward language as discourse (cf. Widdowson, 1979).

The use of communicative categories began with British linguist David Wilkins's 1972 analysis of communicative meanings; his proposed categories subsequently became the basis for the communicative syllabi adopted by the Council of Europe. Wilkins demonstrated that there are two systems or categories of meaning involved in communication: notional categories (concepts such as *time, quantity, space,*) and functional categories (acts such as *requests, denials*) (Wilkins, 1972). It has been suggested that since notional and functional syllabi have been based on thematic and situational criteria, their content has been determined more by semantics than by syntax (Laufer, 1986). Nevertheless, little explicit attention has been given to vocabulary in either theoretical or methodological publications about notional and functional syllabi. Wilkins summarized his view of the role of vocabulary in language instruction directly in his 1974 work, *Second-Language Learning and Teaching:*

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> . . . the ability to refer to concrete and conceptual entities is as fundamental to language as is the capacity provided by the grammar to relate such entities to one another. Knowledge of a language demands mastery of its vocabulary as much as of its grammar. . . . Just as the grammatical meaning of a linguistic form can be established only by reference to the grammatical system of which it is a part, so lexical meaning is the product of a word's place in the lexical system. (Wilkins, 1974, pp. 19–20)

He suggests that the only way to master this lexical system is the same as that recommended to master the syntactic system: the learner must experience considerable exposure to the language.

This view that lexical systems of languages must be addressed in their complexity has also been suggested by the American linguist Edward Anthony:

> A given referent is empirically bonded to more than one lexical word, and any one of such lexical units may be bonded to more than one referent. . . . A user of English is provided with culturally determined patterns of behavior which enable him to share his experience with others belonging to the same culture and subject to the same patterns of behavior. (Anthony, 1973, p. 13)

Anthony's suggestion for addressing the intricacy of lexical knowledge is to address words within their cultural context, to avoid oversimplification, and not to rely on translation as a factor in a teaching approach, a teaching methodology, or as a classroom technique. Communicative methods reflect these concerns in various ways, such as by basing course content on activities that are contextualized, by focusing on the discourse level rather than the sentence level, and by providing students with opportunities to develop strategies for interpreting and using the language as it is actually used by native speakers (Larsen-Freeman, 1986).

In the preparation of communicative materials, frequency counts have been largely displaced by subjective assessments of the usefulness of words (cf. Van Ek, 1976) because of several problems associated with frequency counts. Those who recommend the use of frequency lists suggest that the first 1,000 to 2,000 words make up a "beginner's vocabulary." However, the problems include the following: (1) the most important words for language learners do not always appear in the first or second thousand words (e.g., *stupid* and *behavior* do not appear in the first 3,000 words of Thorndike and Lorge's 1944 list); (2) the order of words in a frequency list does not always indicate the best order in which to teach words (e.g., *his* is the 74th word in one list and *hers* is the 4151st word; included in the first 1,000 words of Thorndike and Lorge's list are *issue* [*v*], *stock,* and *Chicago*); and (3) word-frequency lists disagree according to the types of texts being analyzed (Nation, 1990). As a result of such problems, word-frequency lists appear to contradict an underlying assumption of communicative approaches: Since vocabulary develop-

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