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SECOND LANGUAGE VOCABULARY LEARNING AMONG ADULTS: STATE OF THE ART IN VOCABULARY INSTRUCTION

REBECCA L. OXFORD* and ROBIN C. SCARCELLA†

**University of Alabama, Tuscaloosa, AL, USA; and* †*University of California at Irvine, Irvine, CA, USA*

This article describes research on second language vocabulary instruction, with a focus on what motivates students, what they need, why knowing a word is a complex act, and which factors influence vocabulary acquisition (such as maturational constraints, frequency, attention, previous language background, and order of acquisition). In addition, the article outlines a research-based approach to vocabulary teaching based on four elements: analysis of needs, personalization, learning strategies, and variety.

INTRODUCTION

Vocabulary is not explicitly taught in many second language (L2) classes, and students are usually expected to learn vocabulary on their own without much guidance. In those instances when vocabulary is taught in L2 classes, it is often taught poorly or unsystematically—for example, by presenting word lists for memorization. Merely giving students lists of words to learn is certainly not effective vocabulary instruction. "Even though a significant amount of instructional time may be devoted to presenting, explaining, and defining terms, vocabulary instruction is often haphazard, arising without pre-planning and regardless of the activity" [Gass (1990: p. 95); for a similar view, see Gairns and Redman (1986)].

Research suggests that teachers should provide learners with systematic L2 vocabulary instruction, offer opportunities to learn vocabulary through context, help students learn specific strategies for acquiring words, and show students how to learn words outside of their L2 classes. This article describes the state of the art in L2 vocabulary instruction, especially for adult students. The two main sections of this article are: (1) research background on L2 vocabulary instruction, including student motivation and need, the complexity of knowing a word, and factors influencing vocabulary acquisition; and (2) a new research-based approach to L2 vocabulary instruction based on needs analysis, personalization, learning strategies, and varied activities.

RESEARCH BACKGROUND ON L2 VOCABULARY INSTRUCTION

This review of research covers student motivation and need, what it means to know a word, and factors affecting L2 vocabulary acquisition.

Student motivation and need

Many L2 learners mutiny over approaches which ignore vocabulary instruction or which expect students to learn vocabulary through osmosis. They recognize that vocabulary is central in language use and reasonably argue that their difficulty in both receptive and productive aspects of language use results from an inadequate vocabulary (Politzer, 1978; Levenston, 1979).

One of the most significant needs of learners is to increase their L2 vocabularies. Hatch (1983: p. 7) claims that:

> When our first goal is communication, when we have little of the new language at our command, it is the lexicon that is crucial. The words . . . will make basic communication possible.

Students are expected to understand and use a large number of words. Mackey (1965) reports that college students must understand approximately 60,000–100,000 words. The need to acquire vocabulary becomes increasingly obvious and important when learners face real conversation and authentic texts. L2 learners sometimes become overwhelmed with the task of capturing and taming the mass of vocabulary that surrounds them. Nyikos (1985) notes, while syntax and grammatical accuracy help convey the message, there is no message without the words. The implication for beginning language students in particular is that they must store much vocabulary in their long-term memory within a short amount of time.

The complexity of knowing a word

Knowing an L2 word involves not just the ability to recognise it when it is heard (what does it sound like?) and seen (what does it look like?), or to match it with its native language counterpart (what is its translation?). Knowing an L2 word also involves being able to use the word communicatively in the context of purposeful interaction. Just like grammar, vocabulary is not particularly useful when isolated and taken out of context; it is only useful when applied in real communication. Lexical knowledge includes knowledge of form (pronunciation, spelling, word derivations), position in grammatical constructions, collocations (co-occurring words), functions (frequency and appropriateness), and association (Nation, 1990; George, 1983).

Form. Knowing a word implies knowing its correct form. In spoken language, this means knowing how to interpret and produce the sounds of the word. In written language, this means knowing how to spell and interpret the letters which make up the word. In addition, knowledge of the lexical forms involves knowing how to combine elements to create other related lexical items. We learn the rules that enable us to build up different forms of a word. For instance, we learn that *singer, sing, sang,* and *sung* are all related.

Grammatical use. In addition, knowing a word entails knowledge of the specific grammatical properties which govern the use of words. That is, we learn the types of grammatical relations words may enter into and the grammatical constraints which underlie the use of words. For instance, we learn the plural forms of nouns. When learners do not understand the grammatical properties of the word *vocabulary,* they produce sentences like this: *I have a serious problem learning the vocabularies.*

Collocations. Knowing how to form *collocations* is another part of what it means to know a word. Collocations are words which often occur together in a specific order. Knowledge of collocations

enables learners to anticipate the words which surround a specific word. It enables them to say *I'd like a peanut butter and jelly sandwich* rather than *I'd like a jelly and peanut butter sandwich.*

Function. Function is another important aspect of lexical competence. L2 learners need to know how frequently words are used in specific situations. Some words, such as *student,* occur rather frequently, but others, such as *disciple,* occur infrequently and are restricted to specific contexts. Nation (1990) states that overusing low-frequency words has a comical effect and suggests that teachers apportion time to words according to their usefulness in authentic communication. Using words appropriately is also essential. As Richards (1985) points out, we adjust our vocabulary to meet the demands of the situation. Based on Chiu's (1972) work, Richards lists the following situational constraints governing the use of words: temporal variation (old-fashioned vs modern), geographical variation, social class variation, social role, field of discourse, and mode of discourse.

Academic words are particularly important for learners with advanced L2 proficiency who intend to enroll in a university or college. Such words do not normally occur in casual conversation.

Meaning. Knowing a word also means knowing its dictionary meaning. Normally the meaning of a word in one language does not directly correspond to its equivalent in another language. When we think of words such as *stagger, stalk, prance, stroll,* and *limp,* it is appropriate to think of a cluster of semantic features. All of these words refer to the same basic semantic feature, the action of alternating feet or walking, but they also have different features. These different features contribute to what is often called *shades of meaning.* For example, *stagger* adds a feature of unsteadiness, *stroll* adds a feature of leisureliness, and *prance* adds a feature of high stepping and pride.

A different aspect of meaning concerns word associations. Since words do not normally occur alone, out of context, when we learn a word, we learn associations between the word and other words in the language which occur in similar contexts. For example, *old* is related in some way to the words *new* and *young.*

Receptive and productive knowledge. Receptive knowledge of words includes and extends productive knowledge. One's receptive L2 knowledge is generally acquired before one's productive L2 knowledge. Teichroew (1982) examines various differences between productive and receptive knowledge, and concludes that these are not completely separate, distinct sets of vocabularies.

In this section, we have demonstrated the complexity of knowing a word. In addition, we have discussed the various components underlying lexical knowledge. In the section which follows we consider some factors affecting the acquisition of these components.

Factors affecting L2 vocabulary acquisition

Research shows that many factors affect L2 vocabulary development. These include maturational constraints, frequency, attention, previous language background, and order of acquisition. Each of these factors is discussed below.

Maturational constraints. While some aspects of the L2 are rather difficult for adults to learn, vocabulary is very learnable. This is because maturational constraints do not prevent adults from learning new vocabulary words. We constantly add new words to our vocabulary throughout our lives (Scovel, 1988; Long, 1991; Larsen-Freeman and Long, 1991). Unlike children who are conceptually unable to acquire some vocabulary words, adults are not constrained by cognitive development (Rosansky, 1975). For instance, adults easily understand the concepts underlying such words as *empty* and *full* and *before* and *after,* while young children have difficulty comprehending the meaning of such words.

Frequency. Palmberg (1987) argues that frequency may play a large part in determining which words are most readily accessible to L2 learners. There is evidence for this. For instance, Kachroo (1962), who counted the number of repetitions of words in an English textbook and tested his Indian students to see what words were learned, discovered that words that occurred 7 or more times in the textbook were known by most of the learners. The learners did not know over half of the words occurring only once or twice in the textbook. Other researchers have also found that the frequency with which learners are exposed to vocabulary words appears to affect the learners' acquisition of words [see, for instance, Crothers and Suppes (1967), and Saragi *et al.* (1978)]. We agree that the frequency with which learners are exposed to lexical items affects their acquisition of these items. Certainly, ensuring that students encounter words frequently in a variety of contexts is a key to helping students to extend their knowledge of the meanings, functions, and grammatical properties of words. However, we also believe that other factors have a powerful affect on lexical development in a second language.

Attention. Some psychologists believe that the amount of attention the learner gives to a word also determines whether it will be remembered. If these psychologists are correct, teachers who use interesting ways to draw the learner's attention to a word will be more successful than those who do not. Emotions directly affect attention. The learner's emotional response to the word certainly influences the learner's attention to and retention of a word. It takes learners relatively little time to remember words such as *sex* and *hell,* while other words take more repetitions (consider words like *nightstand, spool,* and *container*). Also, when learners hear words which are personally important to them, they remember them.

Previous language background. Knowledge of the competencies underlying vocabulary in one's first language (L1) affects the production and comprehension (and perhaps development) of these competencies in the L2 [for studies related to transfer and vocabulary, refer to Meara (1988), Kellerman (1979, 1983), and Adjemian (1983)]. Meara's (1988) study suggests that the L1 and L2 vocabulary are not stored independently and do not function as separate units. The L1 affects all aspects of L2 lexical production and comprehension, such as form, meaning, function, and appropriateness. However, wholesale transfer does not often occur, since transfer interacts with a number of other variables, including L1 and L2 proficiency, age, and linguistic complexity.

Order of acquisition. L2 learners tend to acquire simple words which have few meanings and functions before they acquire complex words which have many meanings and functions (Robinson, 1988). Learners tend to acquire the meanings of lexical *prototypes* before they acquire the meanings of lexical *non-prototypes* [see, for instance, Ijaz (1985, 1986), Tanaka (1987), Harley (1983), and Takahashi *et al.* (1988)]. Prototypes are best examples or best-fit members of a

conceptual category (Rosch, 1973; Rosch and Mervis, 1975). The prototype is what the listeners first think of when they hear the word. If bright blue is considered a prototype, then turquoise, navy blue, gray-blue, and other shades of blue are considered non-prototypes. If kitchen table is considered a prototype, then coffee table, work table, and other types of tables are considered non-prototypes.

The following instructional approach is based upon the research on lexical development in an L2 discussed above. This research will take on increased significance in the discussion which follows.

NEW RESEARCH-BASED APPROACH TO L2 VOCABULARY INSTRUCTION

In this section, we present a new research-based approach to vocabulary instruction. We compare this approach with traditional approaches and present principles which guide vocabulary teaching (see Table 1 for a summary of this comparison).

Table 1. A comparison of research-based approach and traditional approach to L2 vocabulary development

Research-based approach	*Traditional approach*
Teachers carefully consider the words students need to know (needs assessment).	Vocabulary instruction is haphazard. Teachers present words which students do not know as these words are identified in the course of instruction.
Instruction is tailored to the individual student's learning styles, needs, goals.	All students receive the same instruction.
Learners are taught how to continue to improve their vocabulary on their own.	The teachers may leave vocabulary learning to the students, but they do not teach students how to improve their vocabulary on their own.
Emphasis is placed on vocabulary learning strategies.	No effort is made to teach students strategies for learning vocabulary.
Vocabulary words are taught through a variety of contextualised and partially contextualized activities. Decontextualised activities are used in very limited situations.	Vocabulary words are primarily taught through decontextualized activities.

Needs analysis

In this approach, teachers carefully consider the words students need to know through needs analysis. Needs analysis includes; (1) an examination of the language called for in specific theme- and task-based lessons: (2) a consideration of those variables which affect the acquisition of vocabulary words; and (3) an understanding of the learners' immediate personal needs, such as getting an apartment and shopping, as well as academic needs, such as using specific textbooks, lectures, or instructional television programs. Only those words which students are expected to understand and/or use frequently or which serve as particularly good models or examples are taught.

Personalized instruction

In contrast with traditional approaches, in this approach instruction is tailored to the student's learning styles, needs, and goals. Students play an active role in teaching themselves vocabulary, and instructors personalize vocabulary instruction for their students. On a regular basis, students experience a set of unknown words in a meaningful context. They are required to figure out and to use these words in meaningful, fully communicative ways. They are also encouraged to read extensively so that they encounter familiar words in varied and unknown contexts, and develop a rich conceptual knowledge of words. In addition, they are given training designed to increase their awareness of what it means to know words and the processes involved in learning new words. This training helps them to master vocabulary words on their own later on.

Vocabulary learning strategies

Unlike traditional approaches, this approach places considerable emphasis on vocabulary learning strategies. These strategies make learners more independent of the teacher and serve as useful tools that can be used both inside and outside of class. Guided practice with these strategies encourages students to use strategies and gives learners the skill to use them effectively.

By far the most useful strategy is *guessing from context.* L2 learners need to be taught when to ignore words that they do not understand, and when to guess the meanings of words from contextual cues. Sternberg (1989) suggests that native-speaking students can be taught to look for the following types of contextual cues to guess the meaning and function of an unknown word, and we assert that these cues are equally useful to L2 learners:

(1) *temporal cues:* regarding the duration or frequency of a word:
(2) *spatial cues:* regarding the location of a word, including possible locations where a word can be found;
(3) *value cues:* regarding the worth or desirability of a word;
(4) *descriptive cues:* regarding the properties of a word (for example, its size, shape, color, odor, feel);
(5) *functional cues:* regarding possible purposes of a word, actions the word can perform, potential uses for a word;
(6) *causal cues:* cues regarding causes of a word;
(7) *class membership cues:* cues regarding one or more classes to which a word belongs; and
(8) *meaning cues:* cues regarding the meaning of a word, including antonym cues, synonym cues, recognition of appositives as definitions, and repetition and paraphrase cues.

Such cues can be taught to both L1 and L2 learners. It is worth spending considerable class time teaching students to guess the meanings of unknown words until learners have mastered this strategy, and Nation (1990), Cohen (1990), and Oxford (1990) suggest practical guidelines for doing so.

However, teachers must recognize that the cues given above can be differentially helpful to students, depending upon a number of variables, including the location of the unknown word and of the cue in the text, and the complexity of the unknown word and surrounding text. If the learners cannot understand the surrounding text, it is unlikely that they will be able to use cues to figure out the meaning of a given word. Hence, Dubin (1989) cautions teachers to test out a word's guessability before encouraging students to guess from context.

Our strategies for learning vocabulary also include paraphrasing, using word parts, and mnemonic activities. Oxford (1990) and Cohen (1990) provide a number of useful suggestions for helping learners discover the strategies which best enable them to acquire vocabulary.

Variety of activities

The research-based approach offers a wide variety of activities which are used with thought, depending on the learning goals and learning styles of the students. Adapting some ideas from Oxford and Crookall (1990), we categorize activities into types for handling vocabulary instruction. These types include: decontextualized, partially contextualized, and fully contextualized. The first of these should have limited use in language classrooms, as will easily be seen. The other two hold promise and should be applied carefully, taking into consideration those variables which affect lexical acquisition (discussed above).

Type A: decontextualized. Decontextualized activities for vocabulary are those that remove the word as completely as possible from any communicative, meaningful context that might help the learner remember the word. Three activities fall into this category: word lists, flashcards, and dictionary use.

Word lists do not involve any direct instruction by the teacher. In general, such lists are divorced from any meaningful context. These lists typically organize words by parts of speech or in alphabetical order. L2 teachers sometimes tell students to "learn" the word lists but provide no training on how to do this and offer few visual cues. Because of the many native languages and cultures represented in L2 classes, word lists typically cannot provide any native language referent. Many researchers state that word lists are useless for vocabulary learning (Carrell, 1984; Hudson, 1982; Swaffar, 1988). However, word lists may help some learners in some situations. Rote memorization of word lists is popular in some cultures from which L2 students come, particularly Asian cultures. Also, word lists may give students some independence from the teacher (Cohen, 1990). They enable student to "learn" a great number of word forms in a short amount of time, which can be particularly useful when students study for vocabulary sections of standardized tests. But learners rapdily forget words memorized from lists in most cases.

Teachers can improve upon totally decontextualized word lists in a number of ways. For instance, they can ask their students to select the words they want to know and to define these words. As Swaffar (1988) notes, if learners themselves decide which words are important to memorize, the words will have greater salience for the learners, and the rate of retention will be higher. In addition, teachers can encourage students to organize words by theme or topic. Such thematic lists might be considered partially contextualized. Finally, teachers can regularly collect their students' word lists and respond to them. This procedure ensures that the students are learning the most common meanings and are using the words correctly.

Flashcards are popular with some students, although their degree of context is minimal. The flashcard activity involves three components: writing down (copying) the new word on the front of a card, writing the word's meaning on the back (along with any examples), and then using the card to become familiar with the new word and its meaning. The flashcard represents a glorified word list broken into units of one word or phrase. The copying component, assuming the student makes the flashcard rather than buying it commercially, might provide a small amount of

kinesthetic benefit to those students whose learning style preference involves movement. (This same benefit is found for copying words into columns on folded sheets, another favorite practice of L2 learners.) Shuffling and moving flashcards can also be helpful to some kinesthetic learners. Enhancement activities to improve the use of flashcards include sorting flashcards into piles of similar words, taping flashcards to objects the words represent, taping pictures to flashcards, or arranging flashcards on a flat surface to form a semantic net of related words. Teachers might routinely collect and respond to the flashcards to ensure that the students are learning the correct word forms, meanings, and grammatical properties of the words.

Ordinary *dictionary-lookup* is a third decontextualized activity. Looking up words while reading sometimes helps improve comprehension, but some learners tend to look up every word and avoid guessing based on the context. Swaffar (1988) cites studies indicating that access to dictionaries or glosses (lists of target language words and their translations) fails to improve reading performance. Relying on a dictionary as the primary way to increase vocabulary does not work, because good learners do not think about the definition of individual words as they read (Hague, 1987; Stahl, 1983). Beginning and intermediate L2 learners often use bilingual dictionaries, but dependence on these dictionaries can cause trouble (Baxter, 1980). Monolingual dictionaries are typically designed for native users of the language, but publishers have developed monolingual dictionaries for L2 students, especially in ESL. These dictionaries give detailed guidance on grammar, pronunciation, and usage; have definitions written in a controlled, simplified vocabulary; and even provide examples of words in context (Carter, 1987). These particular monolingual dictionaries are partially contextualized rather than totally decontextualized. However, even these dictionaries are problematic for advanced learners. This is because they provide only the typical meanings and functions of words, and advanced learners are ready to acquire atypical meanings and functions which are often useful in specific academic contexts.

Type B: partially contextualized. In the proposed research-based approach, teachers use a number of partially contextualized activities for L2 vocabulary instruction: word groupings, word or concept association, visual imagery, aural imagery, keyword, physical response, and semantic mapping. Each of these activities provides some degree of context. Word grouping and word association are in many ways similar in that they involve linking words and meanings without using special visual and aural aids.

Word grouping involves dividing a longer word list into shorter lists by classifying words according to a given attribute: for instance, parts of speech (all nouns or adjectives), topic (health words), language function (apologies), and feelings (likes or dislikes). Labeling the groups often help. Semantic fields (Crow and Quigley, 1985) and semantic grids or semantic features analysis (Hague, 1987; Carter, 1987; Harley, 1983; Stieglitz, 1983; Van Buren, 1975) are special adaptations of word grouping (see Table 2 for an example).

Two problems related to word grouping must be underscored. First, word grouping is limited, because it does not usually show the specific relationships among the words in the group, althogh it does at least provide a context by linking related words. Second, there is experimental evidence that, for some groups of students, teaching two semantically related words together at the same time may make words twice as difficult to learn. These learners have difficulty keeping the words separate and not mixing them up. For instance, if the teacher presents the words *new* and *old* to

Table 2. Example of a semantic grid

	Features of transportation							
	Has motor	Has wheels	Needs a ticket	Uses gas (petrol)	Uses electricity for motion	Goes by air	Goes on land	Goes on water
Transportation mode								
Automobile/car	+	+	−	+	−	−	+	−
Bus	+	+	+	+	−	−	+	−
Bicycle	−	+	−	−	−	−	+	−
Train	+	+	+	−	−	−	+	−
Airplane	+	+	+	+	−	+	−	−
Subway	+	+	+	−	−	−	−	+
Sailboat	−	−	−	−	−	−	−	+
Motorboat	+	−	−	+	−	−	−	+

learners at the same time, some learners (but not all!) confuse the terms and have difficulty keeping the terms straight. The ability to learn semantically related words at the same time probably depends on learning style. Nation (1990) and Cohen (1990) suggest that teachers present words that are loosely related (for example, those which are associated with a given topic or theme) rather than words that are directly related (for instance, synonyms and antonyms). They also suggest teaching the second item of a directly related pair only after the first item has been learned thoroughly.

Word association (also called *elaboration*) involves making associations between the new word and any words already in the learner's memory. Associations can be simple or complex, as long as they are meaningful to the student. Associations, therefore, provide a meaningful context, although a limited and not fully communicative one. Unlike children, adults and older adolescents are often capable of generating their own associations. For example, given the new word *knowledge* students can come up with already familiar words such as *books, school,* and *thinking.*

Visual imagery and *aural imagery* offer a different kind of context based on the physical senses. *Visual imagery* links a picture—in the mind or on paper—with a new word. It helps learners package information more efficiently than if only words were used (Bower, 1970; Higbee, 1979; Nyikos, 1987; Shephard, 1967). For instance, a student will find it easier to remember the word *table* when seeing a picture of a table along with the word. Even abstract words can be taught through visual imagery. For instance, the abstract word *evil* can be associated with pictures such as a sinister person holding a gun. *Aural imagery* links the new word with information in the memory by means of rhymes, acronyms, or any other auditory means. Students with a visual learning style use visual imagery, while autidory style students prefer aural imagery.

Originally developed to teach vocabulary to L2 learners (Atkinson, 1975), the *keyword method* combines visual and aural imagery and is useful for many types of learners. In this method, learners try to create images of new words. The more striking and unusual (even bizarre) the images, the stronger the mental linkages will be. Learners also look carefully at the words they want to learn to see if the shapes or sounds of the words provide a way of making strong aural associations with their translations [see Oxford (1990) for suggestions for using the keyword method].

Physical response (Asher, 1966) involves physically acting out a new L2 expression, thus

providing a certain measure of context. This technique is appropriate for teaching concrete nouns and action verbs but is more problematic for teaching abstract expressions. Kinesthetic (movement-oriented) learners enjoy physical response activities for vocabulary learning.

Of all the partially contextualized activities. *semantic mapping* might be the most useful. It draws upon word grouping, word association, and visual imagery. Semantic mapping involves making a graphic arrangement of words in terms of their relationships. The kev concept or term is highlighted in the middle, and lines or arrows link it with subsidiary words. For example, the word *happiness* is in the center of the map, and spread out from the center are lines linking *happiness* with *vacation, parties, family, skiing, friends,* and so on. Unlike word grouping and word association, semantic mapping not only puts words into groups but also visually shows the conceptual links among the words (Hague, 1987).

Type C: fully contextualized. Practicing the four language skills of reading, listening, speaking, and writing in authentic communication activities provides complete context. That is, when students read or listen to real texts, participate in conversations, and write purposeful messages or essays, what they are doing is completely meaningful and therefore fully contextualized. For instance, students can acquire large numbers of new words through frequent and regular reading and interaction with native speakers. This is incidental (indirect) learning of vocabulary. We believe that the learning of words through written and oral contexts constitutes a major factor contributing to L2 vocabulary development. Such contexts serve to illuminate the meanings of unfamiliar words. Regular, sustained reading, in particular, seems to be an effective way to promote large-scale L2 vocabulary growth. Extensive reading leads to multiple encounters with words in a variety of meaningful contexts—encounters which often help students establish ties between new words and prior knowledge (Nagy and Herman, 1987). However, vocabulary also develops when learners are routinely exposed to a rich oral environment.

As Oxford and Crookall (1990) demonstrate, incidental or indirect vocabulary learning through L2 use is essential for language development, but, for most adult learners, direct vocabulary instruction is also beneficial and necessary. This is because students cannot usually acquire the mass of vocabulary they need just by meaningful reading, listening, speaking, and writing. For long-term retention and use of a large amount of vocabulary, additional support is usually helpful—the kind of support provided especially well by direct instruction.

Such instruction has the following characteristics. It provides students with multiple exposure to instructed words in meaningful contexts, it gives rich and varied information about the instructed words (not just definitional information), it establishes links between the instructed words and the students' own experience and prior knowledge, and it requires active involvement on the part of the learners. In addition, it employs activities such as word grouping, word association, imagery, and semantic mapping. Teachers supplement these activities by teaching students strategies which help them to learn vocabulary independently.

We have presented a research-based approach vocabulary instruction, summarized as follows:

(1) Vocabulary words are taught through contextualized activities. Students are encouraged to read extensively, for example.

(2) Vocabulary is also taught through partially contextualized activities.
(3) Decontextualized activities are used in very limited situations.
(4) Learners play an active role in increasing their own vocabulary. Instruction emphasizes helping learners build their vocabulary.

CONCLUSION

Vocabulary instruction is ignored in may L2 classes, on the assumption that students themselves will simply find ways to memorise words without any help. This is a disservice to our students. Learning vocabulary can be much easier if we assist students by providing some instructional scaffolding, such as the partially contextualized activities described above. Fully contextualized practice is helpful, but it is not enough. Decontextualized activities are less useful, unless some degree of context or meaning is added, making these activities partially contextualized.

In this approach, there is a place for both indirect and direct vocabulary instruction. Both provide learners with the specific types of assistance which promote language development. Indirect instruction typically occupies much more time in vocabulary learning than direct instruction and provides learners with exposure to the forms, functions, and meanings of lexical items through meaningful communication. However, direct and systematic vocabulary instruction also has a significant place and supports the L2 learners' own efforts to acquire vocabulary both inside and outside of class.

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