

(Even) More-and Better-Help With Vocabulary

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It is well recognized that second language proficiency hinges on vocabulary knowledge. It is also well recognized that building a sizeable vocabulary in a second language is daunting. For example, good comprehension of non-simplified reading or listening texts has been estimated to require knowledge of over 7,000 words. That's a lot of words to be learned, even if it were "just" for receptive purposes. Even so, figures like these do not do full justice to the actual learning burden involved.

For one thing, the figures refer not to single word forms but to word *families*. For example, *argue*, *argues*, *argued*, *arguing*, *argument*, *arguments*, *arguable*, *argumentation*, *argumentative*, and *arguably* make up one word family. It cannot be safely assumed that if a learner knows one member of the family, its relatives will be understood as well. Not only does the learner need to recognize the root that is common to members of a single word family, interpreting the precise meaning of each member can be tricky. An *argument* in *My wife and I had an argument again* is rather different from its use in *There's a strong argument for task-based learning*. One might argue that knowledge of morphology and affixes can help learners work out the meaning of derivations. Unfortunately, such a word-part strategy is far from waterproof. For example, the prefix *in* will often denote something negative, as in *incompatible*, *indecisive*, and *invalid*, but analogical reasoning will put the learner on the wrong foot when interpreting *invaluable*.

As already exemplified by *argument*, the vocabulary learning challenge is augmented by the fact that most words have more than one meaning. Learning a word is thus not simply a matter of establishing one form-meaning connection; one form can correspond to different meanings. If those meanings are somehow connected (as in the case of *argument*), we are dealing with polysemy. *Why she got married to him is beyond me* and *The ball landed beyond the fence* appear to display quite different uses of *beyond*, but the former can nevertheless be shown to be related to the latter: if the ball is beyond the fence, it is out of reach; in a similar vein, her getting married to him is out of reach of your mental powers. Research shows that helping learners appreciate such connections between the different uses of polysemes helps them remember these meanings. Making such connections will not always be feasible, however, because a word form can also have different meanings that are not related in any obvious way (anymore), in which case we are dealing with homonymy. A student who knows the meaning of *course* in the study context (e.g., a course at university) may not automatically understand the use of the word in its "navigation" sense, as in *the ship set course for America* or in the figurative idiom *stay the course*.

As is apparent from the above examples, vocabulary knowledge extends beyond single words, too. With the advent of corpus linguistics, it has become abundantly clear that a lot of everyday language use consists of multiword units. Teachers are confronted with this "idiomatic"

dimension of language each time they give corrective feedback to students along the lines of, "There's no rule for this; it's just not said that way in [English]." What sounds idiomatic in one language often sounds odd in another, and may not be immediately obvious why some phrases (e.g., *time will tell*) have become institutionalized while others (say, *time will show*) have not. When students ask "why?" we tend to answer, "That's just the way it is." And yet, it turns out that it *is* often possible to provide an explanation: *time will tell*, for example, is clearly privileged by its alliteration (the repetition of the word-initial consonant). The stock of multiword units abounds with expressions that show alliteration or other catchy sound patterns that seem to have given them an advantage in the competition for standardization. Helping learners appreciate such "phonological" motivations for the lexical composition of multiword units has been shown to be beneficial for retention, too.

Help can be given to students also when they try to come to grips with that subset of multiword lexis that is probably most reputed for its elusiveness – figurative idioms. As an EFL learner myself, I was long convinced that the expression *jump the gun* referred to bravery. I took "the gun" to refer to a firearm, and the expression evoked an image of someone bravely trying to disarm a criminal. I only realized that I'd got the wrong end of the stick when I found out that "the gun" in the expression *jump the gun* is not of the killing type but of the type that signals the start of a race. I also used to think the phrase *follow suit* meant "being obedient to authority." I'd pictured men in suits. Of course, this interpretation was wide of the mark: "suit" in this phrase refers not to clothing but to playing cards, and the idiom means "doing the same thing as the person before you," generalized from certain card games where you have to play a card from the same suit as the previous player. We know from research that using mental pictures in learning idiomatic expressions makes the expressions very memorable. However, teachers and materials writers can help considerably by steering the learners toward a mental picture that is fully congruent with the actual meaning of the expression, and that helps the learners see that the meaning of the expression "makes perfect sense."

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