New Publications ... Nuwe Publikasies

Reviews

Michael McCarthy

Vocabulary. London: Oxford University Press, 1990. (Paperback, 173pp.)

This is the newest title in O.U.P.'s series: *Language Teaching: A Scheme for Teacher Education*. The series has been divided into three sub-series: "Language Knowledge", "Modes of Behaviour", and "Modes of Action". *Vocabulary* is the second title to appear in the "Language Knowledge" component. The aim of this innovative series is "to engage language teachers in a process of continual professional development" by providing clear explanations of the main principles and theories behind language teaching and by setting teachers a number of tasks to help them evaluate this information critically and "apply it to their own knowledge, experience, and classroom practice".

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Few language teachers would dispute the need for a publication on vocabulary as part of this series. As the author notes in his introduction:

> It is the experience of most language teachers that the single, biggest component of any language course is vocabulary. No matter how well the student learns grammar, no matter how successfully the sounds of L2 are mastered, without words to express a wide range of meanings, communication in an L2 just cannot happen in any meaningful way. And yet vocabulary often seems to be the least systematized and the least well catered for of all the aspects of learning a foreign language.

The book is divided into three sections. Section One considers the theoretical, descriptive, and psycholinguistic models of the vocabulary of English. It focuses on semantic relations among words, how words are organized in the mind, and how words are patterned in speaking and writing. Aspects such as collocation, sense relations, semantic fields, homonymy and polysemy, and metaphor are introduced by way of a series of practical tasks aimed at helping teachers discover lexical relations themselves. In the chapter on "Vocabulary in use", the author considers whether there is such a thing as a "core vocabulary", "... for if we could isolate that vocabulary then we could equip learners with a survival kit of core words that they could use in virtually any situation ...". He also discusses possible ways in which the mind might cope with vocabulary: how input is achieved, how vocabulary is stored, and how it is retrieved when needed. In his discussion of vocabulary as data for learning, he considers the frequency with which words occur and in which contexts they occur, in an attempt to explain why certain texts are perceived as easy or difficult by language learners.

Section Two, entitled "Demonstrating Vocabulary", addresses the problem of selecting *which* words to teach. Criteria for selection include frequency and range of words, their learnability, and learners' needs. Once vocabulary has been selected, ways of presentation have to be considered which reflect some form of organization. The author focuses on teaching vocabulary in the framework of topic, meaning, form, and contextual relations, i.e. register and discourse. From the teacher's point of view, consideration is given to pre-teaching (preparation for the introduction of new words in a lesson), form and meaning (grouping words according to similarity in form), and input, reinforcement, and uptake. The questions posed are: how much vocabulary should be introduced, how much repetition is needed, what are the best ways of memorising new words, and when can new vocabulary be said to be learnt? A separate chapter is devoted to how learners interact with the teacher and other learners in the process of assimilating vocabulary. The author also considers which types of reference works are most effective in providing learners with the information they need in an accessible form, and then examines workbooks and activities built around the skills needed to use such works productively.

Section Three, entitled "Exploring Vocabulary", investigates vocabulary problems in the classroom. The tasks set in this section concern the gathering of data for vocabulary learning, the behaviour of teachers and learners in relation to vocabulary learning, and the use of materials and reference resources. A few examples of these tasks will illustrate their practical nature. Tasks include using English newspapers and magazines for the teaching of word-formation principles; using sets of written rules for games such as table-tennis or card games to illustrate the notion of lexical density, and the use of realia to explore the problems associated with teaching lexical sets. The emphasis in this section is on classroom practice: teachers are invited to explore for themselves the relevance of theory, to involve the learner in such explorations, and to evaluate the activities in their own teaching situation.

This publication is a welcome addition to the series, for vocabulary has certainly been a neglected aspect of research in second language teaching and learning. The tasks set throughout the book are both stimulating and practical, and make use of the insights gained in previous sections to enable teachers to apply them in the classroom. There are some cases where the reader might wish that, when specific questions form part of the task, the answers had been provided say in an addendum, for some of the questions posed are deceptively simple.

The book succeeds in giving an overview of the theory relating to how vocabulary is organized, learned and stored, and suggests ways in which the teacher can help students transform a mass of words into an organized resource. The teacher who uses this book well will certainly gain an insight into how to present this important aspect of language most effectively as part of the interactive language learning process.

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