

ON ACQUIRING AN ADEQUATE SECOND LANGUAGE VOCABULARY

It is my observation that many English as a Second Language Programs are harming their students by dealing for too long only with simplified structures and simplified vocabulary. The result is that when the students leave our programs, they are actually far from being able to read unsimplified English which they are expected to read. The gap between the academic English they are now expected to understand and the simplified English they have been taught is too great.

For our ESL students, simplified English has been emphasized and vocabulary development neglected for some time. From the 1940's to the 60's, linguists stressed the importance of structure. Vocabulary learning was described by Charles Hockett as the easiest phase of language learning, which "hardly requires formal instruction."¹ This emphasis on structure was appropriate earlier in the 20th century, when students had been learning foreign languages by a grammar-translation method which flooded them with new vocabulary items and grammatical structures, but did not allow them time to assimilate much. The emphasis on simplification and structure was an improvement. If we simplify the language presented to our students, present language at a gradual rate, and give them sufficient practice to enable them to assimilate what they are learning, they can in fact learn to speak and write the simplified language pretty well. However, what happens to them if they are required to do unsimplified reading in English is illustrated by the following paragraph:

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1. Charles Hockett, *A Course in Linguistics* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1958), p. 266.

Many persons who "talk" with their hands are blunk. They have doubts about what they are saying, so they try to cover up by drolling a false parn of excitement and urgency. These same people are usually very gruk and may be overtalkative and speak too loudly. Hurbish feelings are belayed by the person who tries to keep all leeds to a monton; such a person is nep, porded, and lacking in self-ruck. Slussion is frequently trunded by a veeling wurd, zornish eye, and an inability to face other people directly. Blunkness and codision are shown in a number of leeds. A man may run his hand through his hair or over the top of his head if he is dork; a man or woman may frung the back of the neck. They are trying to tell themselves to galump. Jalup is kanted by a rantid loercion with one's modical abdurance. The woman or man who nardles with hair or keeps polluking clothing is arbushed and socially incrup. A woman may smooth out feluciary argles or blum at her skirt, and a man my blum at his tie or snickle his farn.²

The paragraph above contains a nonsense word for every word not included in Michael West's list of the 2000 most frequently-used words in English. Now 2000 words is a lot of words. West published a "minimum adequate speech vocabulary" of only 1200 words, with which he claimed students could express practically any idea they would need to express.³ The 2000 words in the West list would thus probably be a perfectly adequate *productive* vocabulary for a student to learn, but not an adequate *receptive* vocabulary (words which a student could understand in reading but which he doesn't necessarily use). The student who knows only 2000 words and attempts to read unsimplified English will have the same experience as the reader in reading the above paragraph: he will not understand about 20% of the words and will find the text practically incomprehensible.

Now, I do not wish to underemphasize the importance of an adequate productive vocabulary. ESL teachers must devote a good deal of time and effort to teaching one. In fact, it is extremely difficult for students to learn even one word in a foreign language. One reason for this is that one word usually has many meanings. Charles Fries estimated that, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the 2000 words in the West

2. Adapted from Jean Rosenbaum, "Let's Shake on That," in Lynn Quitman Troyka and Jerrold Nudelman, *Steps in Composition*, 2nd ed. (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1976), pp. 265-6.

3. In Michael West, *Teaching English in Difficult Circumstances* (London: Longman, Green, and Co., Ltd., 1960).

frequency list have an average of 21 meanings per word.⁴ Of course not all of these meanings would have to be learned by ESL students, but the current edition of the West list reports three to five common meanings for many of the words. Also, students must know in what idiomatic expressions and combinations a word can be used, what prepositions are required with certain words, what complements (infinitive, gerund, that-clause). Furthermore, to truly understand a word, a student must know the meanings of a number of near-synonyms so that he knows exactly when and when not to use it.

Thus it is clearly appropriate for students to spend considerable time learning how to use a relatively small number of words correctly. It is of course not a new idea that students should concentrate on a small number of very common words in learning a language. As early as 1588, Timothy Bright published an "island vocabulary" of 559 English words which could be used to cover the meanings of 6000.⁵ In this century, C.K. Ogden developed an 850 word list (Basic English) which he used to define 20,000 words in his *Basic English Dictionary*; West developed a "defining vocabulary" of 1500 words to define 30,000 in his *West Dictionary*; and Hornby used about 1500 to 2000 words to define 35,000 in his *Advanced Learner's Dictionary*. A student can obviously do quite a lot, and perhaps say or write almost whatever he wants to with a vocabulary of 2000 words. The importance of such a basic vocabulary is reflected in most ESL textbook series, which usually introduce 1500 to 2000 words in the first 3 years of English study.

Let us imagine then that our ESL or EFL students have acquired, after three years of study (or a shorter time in a more intensive course), a vocabulary of 2000 words. This is an important achievement, but I would remind the reader that the students at this point are far from having acquired an adequate receptive or reading vocabulary. We could say that they have successfully completed phase one of their language learning, and are now ready to go on to phase two, the *transition* from reading simplified to reading unsimplified English. Unfortunately, for many ESL students there never is a phase two. They are dumped from phase one directly into phase three (reading unsimplified English) and left to sink or swim. Many obviously sink.

4. Charles C. Fries, *English Word Lists: A Study of Their Adaptability for Instruction* (Ann Arbor, Mich.: The George Wahr Publishing Co., 1950).

5. Fries, pp. 1-3.

If we are going to include a serious phase two, or a *transition stage* in our ESL programs, we need to know what an adequate receptive vocabulary for reading unsimplified English would be. It is, of course, not necessary to know every word one will ever encounter in English. It is quite possible to fail to understand a word and still to understand the sentence or paragraph it is in, or even to deduce the meaning of an unknown word from its context. West suggests, however, that one should not encounter more than 25 unknown words per 1000 words of text (one word in 40, or one in every three or four lines of text), a guideline which J.A. Bright and G.P. McGregor (who have extensively taught ESL in Africa) say works in practice.⁶

In the reading text at the beginning of this paper, nonsense words were substituted for words not included in the 2000 word West list. If we use substitutes only for words not included in the most frequent 10,000 words of the Thorndike-Lorge list of 30,000 words, the passage comes out like this:

Many persons who "talk" with their hands are insecure. They have doubts about what they are saying, so they try to cover up by creating a false atmosphere of excitement and urgency. These same people are usually very emotional and may be overtalkative and speak too loudly. Hurbish feelings are revealed by the person who tries to keep all gestures to a minimum; such a person is shy, porded, and lacking in self-esteem. Depression is frequently indicated by a slumping posture, zornish eye, and an inability to face other people directly. Tenseness and apprehension are shown in a number of gestures. A man may run his hand through his hair or over the top of his head if he is bald; a man or woman may clasp the back of the neck. They are trying to tell themselves to relax. Distress is revealed by a constant loercion with one's physical appearance. The woman or man who fiddles with hair or keeps adjusting clothing is embarrassed and socially insecure. A woman may smooth out imaginary wrinkles or tug at her skirt, and a man may tug at his tie or finger his farn.

In the above paragraph, there is one unknown word per 38 words of text, the readability ratio suggested by West. It is annoying when one encounters an unknown word, but the passage is clearly comprehensible. This suggests that about 10,000 words (not necessarily the first 10,000 on

6. J.A. Bright and G.P. McGregor, *Teaching English as a Second Language* (London: Longman, 1970), p. 20.

the Thorndike-Lorge list, which has been criticized for its literary bias and its neglect of spoken English) would be an adequate receptive vocabulary. In fact, since the 2000 words in the West list include more "lexical learning items" than the first 3000 words of the Thorndike-Lorge (T-L) list⁷ (because the T-L list counts as separate items such related words as *abandon* and *abandoned*), perhaps 10,000 words on the T-L list really represents only about 7000 separate words. How then could a student acquire a receptive vocabulary of 7000 words?

One model is a program of instruction considered educationally sound by many secondary schools in Africa.⁸ The students are expected to arrive at secondary school with a vocabulary of about 1500 to 2000 words (which they have acquired in perhaps three years of primary school English study).

In their first year of secondary school ("the plateau reading stage") the students read books at the 2000 word level. They are expected to read a total of 60 short books, 14 to be read by everyone in the class and an additional 46 to be chosen by each individual student and read in the library. The books would probably be about 100 pages long, two would be read each week in the 30 week school year, and book reports would be submitted on every book.

In their second year, the students make a "transition" from simplified to unsimplified reading, using short books with vocabulary in the 3-7000 word range in the T-L list, of which they read 50, 14 read by everyone in the class and an additional 36 by each student in the library. Again book reports are submitted.

In their third year ("the free reading stage"), the students read eight or nine books which are written in unsimplified English. The books include such titles as *Animal Farm* by Orwell, *The Old Man and the Sea* by Hemingway, *Lord of the Flies* by Golding, but not "the classics."

At the end of three years of secondary school, or a total of six years of English language study, the students are supposed to be able to read unsimplified English. If they have acquired receptive knowledge of 100 words from each of the 50 books they have read in their second year of high school, they will have increased their vocabulary from 2000 to 7000 words, and if they have learned 330 words from each of the nine books of their third year (which means learning about two words per page in a 150

7. *Ibid.*, p. 26.

page book), they will now have a receptive vocabulary of 10,000 words.

What about our ESL programs in the United States? Do we do an adequate job of teaching vocabulary? I suspect not. In many ESL programs, students begin by taking low level courses for a few semesters in which very little emphasis is placed on reading. Perhaps they read a few simplified readers, but not enough to learn well a basic vocabulary of 1500 to 2000 words. In other words, they do not even successfully complete "phase one" of vocabulary learning. They then take a few intermediate/advanced courses in which they begin to concentrate on writing. They read a few intermediate or advanced readers at this stage, perhaps adding another 600 words to their vocabularies. Such a program is obviously inadequate for students who will have to read unsimplified English and be tested on their comprehension in American colleges.

How can ESL programs prepare students to read unsimplified English? First of all, reading should be introduced early and students should be given a good deal of reading at all levels. Developing vocabulary and reading skills takes time and extensive practice. Students can begin with simplified readers at the under 2000 word frequency level. Collier-Macmillan, Longman, Oxford, and other publishers all have quite a few excellent books of this sort available.

Many ESL students, upon arriving at college (at least in the City University of New York), are unfortunately still at only a low intermediate level of English proficiency. Such students need to read a number of books (let us say seven—one every two weeks in a 15 week semester) at or below the 2000 word level to solidify their grasp of a basic English vocabulary. They then should work on reading at the intermediate/advanced level for two or three additional semesters, reading again about seven books each semester, and increasing their receptive vocabulary to about 8000 words. I am assuming that they will be doing discussion, writing, and vocabulary exercises to facilitate learning, and acquiring receptive knowledge of about 300 words from reading each book, which would mean in a 100 page book learning receptively three words per page; of course, it would be very helpful to have some good research done on rates of acquiring receptive vocabulary. At the intermediate/advanced level, students could read slightly simplified books, such as the Longman Bridge Series (which

8. *Ibid.*, pp. 61-63.

include words up to the 7000 frequency range on the Thorndike-Lorge list), or unsimplified readers with short reading selections (four-five pages) followed by reading and vocabulary exercises.

Exactly how reading is to be taught can vary from college to college. I would recommend having a sequence of three reading courses, separate from speaking-writing courses, in which students would read at least seven books a semester, perhaps working intensively on some books in class, and doing the others primarily at home or in a reading lab or library. The lowest level reading course should be only for ESL students, as native Americans do not have the same degree of difficulty with vocabulary. Perhaps in the intermediate/advanced courses, ESL students could be combined with remedial native American students.

Whether or not programs offer separate courses in reading, they should have reading labs or libraries where students should be required to read at least seven books a semester, handing in comprehension questions, exercises, summaries, etc., for each book. To set up a reading lab, Bright and McGregor recommend having for *low level students* 20 books at the 1500 word level, 100 at the 2000 word level, and 20 at the over 2000 level; for "*transitional students*" 20 books at the 2000 word level, 100 at the 3-7000 word level (books with short unsimplified readings could be substituted for this type), and access to unsimplified books in a larger library; for the "*free reading stage*" plenty of light fiction, detective stories, historical novels, adventure stories, science fiction, and magazines and material related to other school subjects. It would be desirable to have several copies of each book and it would cost at least \$2000, and perhaps \$4000 to establish such a reading lab. If money were not available from schools, perhaps federal grants could be obtained for this purpose.

Although I feel that students should have separate reading classes, I nevertheless strongly feel that reading also has an important place in the "writing class." My own method of teaching writing is to read an essay or article, discuss it, noting the main idea and overall organization, and then discuss and write about ideas generated by the text. I am convinced that this method produces much better results than spending a great deal of time on grammar drills in class. In fact, reading and writing teachers are dealing with very similar skills and the lack of contact and communication between them in many programs is unfortunate.

In summary, we ESL teachers have been carefully nurturing our students' ability to produce language, but have been neglecting the

receptive side of learning. We have been encouraged to do so by linguists who emphasize structure and by curricula which tell us that our students need read only one book a semester. Our students pay the price of this neglect when they graduate from our programs with an inadequate amount of English for functioning in the real world. It will not be easy to restructure our programs in order to teach reading and vocabulary effectively, but this is what must be done.