Webb, Stuart and Paul Nation. (2017) *How Vocabulary is Learned*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. ISBN 9780194403559, 322p.

Reviewed by Paul Pauwels (KU Leuven)

In this volume in the Oxford Handbooks for Language Teachers Series, two major players from the Wellington (NZ) school of vocabulary teaching and learning aim to introduce teachers to the major research findings and to structure these into a coherent pedagogical approach.

The book starts off with twelve key questions on which the readers are invited to reflect and which will be addressed at regular intervals throughout the book: what is the teacher's role; what is the student's role; why do some students make greater progress; how much classroom time should be spent on vocabulary; how many words should students learn at a time and how often; how much vocabulary should students learn per year; what is the best way to group vocabulary; how should teachers select vocabulary activities; when is meaning-focused input appropriate in the classroom; is there value in language-focused learning; is it useful to provide L1 translations; to what extent are words taught by teachers ever really known by students. This ties in with the interactive format of the book (and the more recent volumes in the series): each chapter contains a number of activities such as analyzing vocabulary materials, analyzing learning activities... that are answered in a key at the end of the chapter, plus a number of more open-ended reflection questions. Some of the latter are probably most useful when the book is used as a handbook in a teacher training programme since they are often speculative or are aimed at eliciting teachers' opinions.

The first chapter asks which words should be learned. For Webb and Nation, frequency is the decisive criterion, especially in early stages of language learning. High frequency vocabulary occurs proportionally much more often (Zipf's law) so that knowledge of 2000 word families allows the learner to understand approximately 90% of spoken and written texts. Hence, these words "have the greatest value for language learning [and] so deserve attention in the classroom" (p.14). Depending on the learning goals of more advanced students, some low frequency vocabulary – technical or academic vocabulary – can also be studied deliberately. Throughout the chapter, the reader is introduced to the major frequency lists, to the vocabulary thresholds that have been established through research, and to central concepts like word family, lemma, coverage, and multi-word unit. The activities in the chapter seem to be intended to use frequency data to challenge the teachers' intuitions about which words are worth learning. The chapter ends with a section on the frequency-based Vocabulary Levels Tests. It explains how the test has been constructed and how the scores should be interpreted, and suggests that the test can be used to set learning targets.

Chapter two deals with the learning burden of words - a concept that has been mentioned by several researchers but that, with the exception of Laufer (1997) has rarely been discussed in depth. The distance between the learner's first language (L1) and the foreign language (L2) is a major factor, but there are other intralinguistic factors that play a role. Webb and Nation discuss five aspects: form-meaning correspondence, form characteristics, collocational patterning, receptive and productive use and the way words are presented in intentional learning. Relatedness between languages is seen as facilitating learning and decreasing the learning burden: cognates are easier to learn, recognizable morphology helps interpret meaning, and similar writing and pronunciation systems make words more easily recognizable or memorable. In contrast with Laufer, the authors seem to overlook sources of confusion, such as false friends or misleading morphological clues. The authors do not recognize the problematic nature of polysemy and hold with Charles Ruhl's (1989) argument that language users only need to know the core meaning and can make sense of new meanings using general principles of pragmatic inferring. Here, as elsewhere in the book, the authors seem to place a

lot of faith in language learner's ability to infer meanings (either contextually, or on the basis of morphological clues). Patterning restrictions (collocation, idiom) are seen as increasing the learning burden, although there may be a mitigating influence of sound patterning for many figurative expressions (Boers and Lindstromberg, 2009). If learners have to acquire productive knowledge, this increases the learning burden. The practice of presenting words in sets may also increase the learning burden as it may result in interference – the research is still limited, though. The authors conclude with a number of suggestions to deal with differences in learning burden: items with a high learning burden are candidates for explicit teaching, but priority should be given to developing knowledge of systematic aspects of the language.

Chapter three starts with a discussion of vocabulary size and growth but mainly focuses on the different views on incidental and intentional learning. Estimates about L2 vocabulary growth range from around 500 lemmas per year to about 2000 word families during a school career. Webb and Nation's conclusion that "many EFL learners never manage to learn the 2000 most frequent word families" (p.47) may be true from a global perspective, but it is definitely not true in many European contexts. The discussion of the respective value of incidental and deliberate learning is thorough and nuanced. The authors point out that Krashen's input hypothesis fails to take into account the relatively limited exposure in most nonnative contexts, and survey a number of well-researched strategies to increase the effect of exposure such as extensive viewing, combining spoken and written input, ensuring multiple encounters and enhancing input. The chapter concludes that incidental learning may be more efficient at more advanced levels.

The fourth chapter presents a revised version of Nation's framework of vocabulary learning conditions. The three-stage framework of *noticing*, *retrieval* and *creative use* (Nation, 2013) has been elaborated into a five-stage one where creative use is replaced by *varied encounters* (receptive), *varied use* (productive) and *elaboration*. In the framework, the stages are combined with *repetition* and *quality of attention (incidental or deliberate)*; the result is a matrix with 10 slots, which can be used to categorize learning activities. *Repetition* sits a bit awkwardly in the matrix (table 4.1) since it works on another level; table 4.2, where example activities are put in the matrix by way of illustration shows some cross-classification, esp. in the incidental learning category. The chapter provides a clear and concise review of the research on repeated encounters (incidental or deliberate) and discusses a number of learning activities that further illustrate each parameter separately. The chapter concludes with the advice (after Boers et al. 2014a, b) to give deliberate attention to collocations because they are difficult to learn incidentally. The main argument is that the frequency of collocations is lower than the frequency of their component parts, and that repetition in incidental input will therefore be too low to be effective. This is certainly true of transparent collocations like 'make a mistake' or 'take your time'. But it is questionable whether this means that all collocations are per definition less *salient* than their component parts. Although 'take office', for example, is clearly much less frequent than its component parts from the point of view of the language as whole, it will mostly be encountered in a specific context of discussions of post-election events – and in that context it may have a degree of salience as a typical expression, and be learnt incidentally.

Chapter five, with its 50 pages by far the longest of the book, is devoted to a discussion of 23 language learning activities with a vocabulary focus. Some are traditional vocabulary activities, like semantic mapping or using flashcards, others are general language learning activities that can be given a vocabulary focus, like task-focused spoken interaction, ten minute writing, information transfer or writing with feedback. Each activity is first characterized using a short menu providing information about the programme strand (referring to Nation's Four Strands principle that is more fully discussed in chapter eight), learning goal, learning conditions (in terms of the framework of

chapter four), research evidence and further reading. This is followed by a more elaborate description, a section named lexical information describing the focus of the activity and where it comes from, an analysis of the learning conditions and a number of suggestions to enhance the vocabulary focus of the activity. Of the 23 activities, five are marked as 'not researched': information transfer, comprehension questions, ten minute writing, dictation, and writing with feedback. Here, the authors ignore the elaborate literature on feedback and on conditions improving uptake from feedback (see Ellis and Shintani 2014:271ff for a survey). Most of the activities or suggestions in the chapter have been tried and tested, but activities like speed reading, or ten minute writing, or specific suggestions like re-reading books (p.93) are not as convincing.

The next chapter on 'learning vocabulary in different contexts' was a bit disappointing in parts. Some of the different 'categories' of learners or learning contexts (EFL, ESL, children, small vs large classes, proficiency levels) obviously interact, and separating them out in this case does not necessarily lead to a better insight. The analysis of the EFL context falls short because it starts from a number of presuppositions that do not hold in all (E)FL-contexts: exposure is not always limited, especially not where English is concerned; the lack of immediate benefit is not always a given, as EFL-learners may need English professionally; and there is not always an imbalance between deliberate learning and other types of language learning. The sections on 'large' and 'small' classes mainly contain general pedagogical advice, as does the short section on 'teaching vocabulary when time is limited'. In the section on 'learning at different levels of proficiency' a note on 'false beginners' (i.e. EFL-learners who have had some exposure before they start formal EFL training – as is quite common in Europe) might not have gone amiss.

Since there are simply too many words to be taught in class, learners should be equipped to become autonomous learners. In chapter seven, the authors argue convincingly that students should be trained in using strategies – and this involves more than just telling or showing them how to. The six 'key strategies' that are put forward contain two general approaches (finding ways to encounter/use L2 outside the classroom), two ways of determining meaning (guessing from context, using dictionaries) and two deliberate learning activities (learning word parts, using flashcards). The authors provide teachers with arguments to convince learners of the value of extensive reading and extensive viewing, and provide a number of practical suggestions to motivate students to look for communication opportunities. Guessing from context, using dictionaries and using flashcards are well-established practices, but, as the authors rightly point out, students still need training to be able to use them well. That morphological knowledge can be useful in inferring meanings of partly familiar words or in remembering words is beyond doubt, but Webb and Nation take this one step further and advise explicit study of frequent affixes and stems. They may be overstating the case at times, and it is questionable if some of the glosses they provide for specific affixes or stems (de- = opposite, -ism = theory of; mit = send, pre = take) are really helpful in guessing or learning 'decode', 'omit' or 'comprehend'.

In introducing the idea of a vocabulary learning programme in chapter eight the authors emphasize (p.179) that there "is not a big distinction between planning a language course and planning a vocabulary learning programme". As a general framework, Nation's Four Strands framework tries to strike a balance between the input-based learning (Krashen), output-based learning (Swain), more traditional form focused approaches and a fluency focus (Skehan). The vocabulary programme consists of the combination of frequency to guide the selection of vocabulary, and the variation between the strands. In the end, it is not completely clear whether the authors are suggesting that the complete syllabus should be lexicon (and frequency) driven. This idea of a lexical syllabus is not without critics; Ellis and Shintani (2014:75ff) provide a nuanced account.

Chapter nine surveys different resources for vocabulary learning: word lists, vocabulary tests, computerized flashcards, corpora and concordances, lexical profilers, and resources for incidental learning. The focus is on how these resources can be used at different levels of proficiency. According to the authors “perhaps the most important resources for beginners and students who are learning a language for specific purposes are word lists” [because] “they provide a shortcut to improving performance in all skill areas” (p. 195). The chapter contains practical information about different high frequency, academic and multi- word lists. It discusses five diagnostic tests – either recently developed (Picture VST, Guessing from Context Test, Word Part Test) or updated (VLT, VST) by the Wellington school. While the section on resources for incidental learning from written input mainly consists of an argument for graded readers, the section on resources for spoken input (TV, film, TED talks) provides more specific pedagogical advice.

The final chapter retakes the twelve key questions that were raised in the introduction, and tries to provide a research-based answer to each. The teacher’s role is specified as consisting of nine actions: selecting words, raising awareness of the vocabulary learning programme, deliberate teaching of vocabulary, choosing materials containing target vocabulary, designing activities to create opportunities for vocabulary use, including fluency development, measuring progress, training students in learning strategies and evaluating and modifying. The role of the student can be summarized as taking responsibility for their learning inside and outside the classroom. The answer to question four (how much classroom time should be spent on vocabulary), is not very informative: according to the Four Strands principle 1/4th of the total time spent on vocabulary should be spent on deliberate learning, but there is no attempt to put this in the broader perspective of the overall time spent learning the language. Question eight introduces Nation and Webb’s (2011) Technique Feature Analysis as a tool to assess and select vocabulary activities – and one wonders why this was not used in chapter five. Question twelve (to what extent are taught words really known by students) may have been a bit ambitious; the question is not really answered, but the authors show that it may be difficult to find out since the information from tests only provides a partial view of word knowledge.

The book concludes with a four part appendix containing the Essential Word List (Dang and Webb, 2016), the updated Vocabulary levels test (Webb et al., 2017), a list of useful word stems (Wei and Nation, 2013) and the intermediate section of the Word Part Levels Test (Sasao and Webb, 2017), followed by a glossary and references to useful websites.

In sum, it is clear that this book contains a wealth of up to date insights in vocabulary teaching, and information about recent materials and tools. It will certainly prove very useful for EFL/ESL-teachers, but teachers of other foreign languages will find that quite a few of the specific tools are not useful or available for their language. That there is this bias is not surprising, given the amount of research into EFL as compared other FLs. At the same time, the authors do not always acknowledge the existing variety of (E)FL-contexts, which means that their presuppositions about what is given, or how (quickly) students learn may not always hold.

References

- Boers, F. & Lindstromberg, S. (2009). *Optimizing a lexical approach to instructed second language acquisition*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Boers, F., Lindstromberg, S. & Webb, S. (2014). Further evidence of the comparative memorability of alliterative expressions in second language learning. *RELC Journal*, 45(1), 85-99.
- Boers, F., Demecheleer, M., Coxhead, A. & Webb, S. (2014). Gauging the effects of exercises on verb-noun collocations. *Language Teaching Research*, 18 (1), 54-74.

Dang, T.N.Y. & Webb, S. (2016). Making as essential word list for beginners. In I.S.P. Nation, *Making and using word lists for language learning and testing*, 153-167; 188-195. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.

Ellis, Rod and Natsuko Shintani. 2014. *Exploring Second Language Pedagogy through Second Language Acquisition Research*. London and New York: Routledge.

Laufer, Batia. 1997. 'What's in a word that makes it hard or easy: some intralexical factors that affect the learning of words'. In: Schmitt, Norbert and Michael McCarthy. *Vocabulary. Description, Acquisition and Pedagogy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 140-155.

Nation, Paul. 2013. *Learning Vocabulary in Another Language*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Nation, I.S.P. & Webb, S. (2011). *Researching and analyzing vocabulary*. Boston, M.A.: Heinle Cengage Learning.

Ruhl, Ch. (1989). *On Monosemy: a study in linguistic semantics*. Albany: State University of New York Press.

Sasao Y. & Webb, S. (2017). The Word Part Levels Test. *Language Teaching Research*, 21 (1), 12-30.

Webb, S., Sasao, Y. & Ballance, O. (2017). The updated Vocabulary Levels Test: Developing and validating two new forms of the VLT. *International Journal of Applied Linguistics*, 168 (1), 33-69.

Wei, Z. & Nation, I.S.P. (2013). The word part technique: a very useful vocabulary teaching technique. *Modern English Teacher*, 22 (1), 12-16.

<https://doi.org/10.1075/itl.00015.pau>

ITL-International Journal of Applied Linguistics 169:2 (2018), pp321-327. Issn 0019-0829 e-issn 1783-1490

© John Benjamins Publishing Company