

## Incorrect Assumptions about Vocabulary Acquisition: Impact on Textbooks and English Language Teaching

語彙の学び方についての誤った仮定:  
教科書および英語教育へ与える影響

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Vocabulary is a complex issue in second and foreign language (L2) acquisition and teaching. It is much more complex than most people believe. While most learners understand the importance of vocabulary in their ability to effectively communicate, many teachers and material designers have traditionally pushed vocabulary to the side and instead, focused on grammar. This is partly due to incorrect assumptions about what vocabulary really is and how best to teach and learn it and also because, “unlike grammar, which is a system of a limited number of rules, vocabulary is an open set of many thousands of items” (Laufer & Nation, 2014).

One example of the complexity of vocabulary regards the definition of the concept of ‘word’ and what it means to ‘know a word.’ Carter (2012) emphasized:

[The] definition of learning a word depends crucially on what we mean by a word, but it also depends crucially on how a word is remembered, over what period of time and in what circumstances it can be recalled and whether learning a word also means that it is always retained (p. 42).

Knowing a word is more than just knowing its definition (of which there are often many due to polysemy), but also involves knowing its frequency, coverage, connotation, register, spelling, usage, part of speech, pronunciation, collocations, and polysemous meanings. Aitchison (1987) calls words “slippery customers” since he believes that words have “fuzzy meanings that are essentially fluid with vague boundaries and fuzzy edges” (pp. 40-50).

All of this is significant since both language teachers and learners often connect an ill-conceived concept of what a ‘word’ is to their concept of ‘what vocabulary is.’ However, just teaching/learning the common belief of what constitutes a ‘word’ is not enough. If we focus too much on such incorrect conceptualizations, we could end up not fully teaching vocabulary.

Keith Folse (2007), in his book *Vocabulary Myths: Applying Second Language Research to Classroom Teaching*, covered a variety of learning myths – which he calls urban legend type beliefs – and in this paper we will look closely at six of these myths. We aim to show how these incorrect assumptions about vocabulary have impacted language textbooks and hence classroom teaching.

In preparation for this paper, we examined a variety of textbooks; used for teaching grammar, listening and speaking, reading, writing and English for specific purposes (such as TOEFL iBT Preparation). The explicit views of the textbook authors, as stated in their ‘information for the teacher’ sections at the beginning of the textbooks, were surveyed along with the messages conveyed in the content of the books (the exercises, tasks, activities, etc.), because what the author says in the ‘information for the teacher’ section is not always what is actually represented in the exercises, tasks and activities in the book.

At the end of the paper there is a brief checklist of points that should be taken into consideration when choosing textbooks.

## **Six Vocabulary Myths**

### ***Myth 1: Vocabulary is not as important as grammar***

#### *Summary of myth 1*

Grammar has long dominated L2 teaching, textbook design and curriculum. Folse (2007) asserted that traditionally vocabulary has received less attention in language pedagogy than writing, reading, listening, speaking, pronunciation, culture and, especially, grammar. However, he also stated that “arguably, vocabulary is perhaps the most important component in L2 ability” and explained how students “need vocabulary knowledge to function well in a language” (pp. 22-23). An earlier researcher, Wilkins (1972) stressed that, “While without grammar very little can be conveyed, without vocabulary nothing can be conveyed” (pp. 111-112). Even if you have perfect grammar and go to the store to buy something, unless you know its name, or at least the nouns and adjectives needed to paraphrase what it is, you won’t be able to ask for it. Folse (2007) is not surprised that vocabulary has such an inferior status since many language teachers believe that learning vocabulary is a matter of memorizing word lists and “vocabulary is seen as something that learners can pick up on their own as they continue to focus on grammar and sentence patterns” (p. 26).

#### *Textbook survey regarding myth 1*

Of the textbooks surveyed (55 different textbooks or 27 separate textbook series), only the resource, ESP and listening/speaking textbooks explicitly covered vocabulary through exercises or activities (as measured by directly mentioning the word ‘vocabulary’ in an activity and having activities that required the students to learn vocabulary words or collocations). The resource books were the best source of vocabulary activities. However, they did not give any rationale for the words they chose (such as frequency, level of difficulty, etc.). They were simply filled with ideas for activities and some had exercises that focused on vocabulary.

Interestingly, of all the ESP (TOEFL) and listening/speaking books, only one book favored vocabulary over grammar (as measured by the number of activities in each category, per book). This unique book was a listening/speaking book titled *Real Talk 1: Authentic English in Context* (Baker, 2006) and the author actually never even mentioned grammar in the ‘to the teacher’ section of the book. Instead, she explained in more detail how vocabulary is incorporated into the textbook through the listening/speaking exercises as well as the vocabulary preview and review exercises that are incorporated into each unit. All the other books, however, put grammar in a higher position than vocabulary. For example, of the five ESP TOEFL books surveyed, only two of them covered vocabulary in any specific way. One textbook, *The Complete Guide to the TOEFL Test, iBT Edition* (Rogers, 2007), had lists of frequency words from A-Z that appear on the exam. The other, *Delta’s Key to the Next Generation TOEFL Test, Advanced Skill Practice for the iBT* (Gallagher, 2006), had a two-page segment about prefixes and stems. What is truly interesting is that every ESP TOEFL book had an appendix about grammar that was at least 10 pages in length, while only two books covered vocabulary other than through ‘context.’

As for the other textbook types, the reading/writing texts talked about learning vocabulary in context and the grammar texts assumed a lot of vocabulary knowledge. However, neither type mentioned vocabulary instruction nor had any explicit vocabulary activities or exercises. The only type of exercise in the reading books was a question or two about the meaning of a specific word in a ‘post-reading’ question. There were no lists of words needed to understand a text or anything of this nature that might help the students to expand their vocabulary knowledge in any way other than through context (which relies on the students noticing the words; something that does not always happen). As for the grammar textbooks, the only vocabulary exercises were tiny lists of semantically organized words that appeared for the sole purpose of prompting the students with vocabulary, assumed to already be known (thus, no focus on vocabulary learning), to use when creating sentences for grammar practice.

So, it appears that many of the authors considered vocabulary to be of low importance, yet every one of the books covered grammar to some extent. Thus, the textbook survey confirmed this vocabulary myth to be alive and well.

#### *What we can learn from the textbooks surveyed*

Teachers need textbooks that incorporate vocabulary in order for students to build this very important aspect of language learning.

#### ***Myth 2: Using word lists to learn vocabulary is unproductive***

##### *Summary of myth 2*

Myth 2 says that learning L2 words via word lists is unproductive. Most researchers however, refute this claim. Lists are not only useful, but also allow for large quantities of new vocabulary to be learned efficiently and quickly (Folse, 2007, p. 39). Word lists are one of many tools that can be used to learn vocabulary and he continues, saying that vocabulary lists are helpful for students “who need help in tackling the tremendous task of learning enough vocabulary to be able to communicate in their new language” (pp. 36-37). Thus, he

advocates a ‘vocabulary flood’ for beginning learners since these are the students who will “probably benefit the most from words that are presented in lists” (p. 39).

Yet, Folse also points out that “learning a word – that is to say, knowing a word – involves knowing many different kinds of things about that word” and, thus, he believes that learning lists of words with translation or with a synonym or simple definition can be seen as only a solid first step (p. 41). Therefore, we can conclude that having lists of words in a textbook could be a very good first step in the learning process as long as there is lots of recycling of the words in the book through a variety of exercises and tasks. Folse goes on to say that it is important to not overly rely on word lists because reliance to a large extent on any method or approach, including word lists, is not a good idea (p. 45). He believes that every learning strategy should be used in moderation.

#### *Textbook survey regarding myth 2*

Folse commented that, “perhaps as a result of the more communicative approaches to language teaching, lists have fallen out of vogue and have disappeared from textbooks” (p. 39) and, our textbook survey supported his statement. It appears the textbook authors have little confidence in lists as a means of acquiring vocabulary.

The grammar, resource, ESP TOEFL, and listening/speaking textbooks included word lists but did so subtly. None of the reading/writing books included lists. For example, in the grammar texts, word lists only appeared sporadically, without a vocabulary label, and the main focus was grammar. Furthermore, every time the words were introduced, they were done so in semantic sets such as, ‘measure words’ like cup, quart, pound, gallon, teaspoon, and pint, as in *Grammar Dimensions: Form, Meaning and Use* (Babalamenti & Henner-Stanchina, 2007).

Of the resource texts, all had some type of word list but, as with myth 1, there was no rationale for how or why the words in the word lists were selected. In regards to the ESP TOEFL books, only one book, *The Complete Guide to the TOEFL Test, iBT Edition* (Rogers, 2007), had actual word lists, which were ironically placed within the reading section of the book (p.188). This contrasts with grammar, which had its own section in the appendix. This further exemplifies the points from myth 1 about the comparative status of vocabulary. As a nice touch, the book included a rationale for why these words were included (frequency of appearance on the TOEFL exam).

Lastly, regarding the listening/speaking books, word lists existed but they were usually only six to ten words at a time and the students were almost always asked to either learn words from a semantic set or put them into a semantic set. For example, the activity might ask the student to write all the color words as in *Expressions: Meaningful English Communication* (Nunan, 2001), to write down all the expressions for apologies/excuses, or to work with a partner to guess what’s wrong with the other person when studying words related to illness, as in *Basic Tactics for Listening* (Richards & Trew, 2011). Folse however, asserts that semantic sets hinder learning because they cause confusion. He prefers word lists that are in

thematic sets and used in tasks so, while these books do include some word lists, they are not necessarily organized in an ideal fashion.

#### *What we can learn from the textbooks surveyed*

Material designers should, first of all, include word lists in their textbooks and they should also provide a rationale for the lists. Next, they should organize vocabulary items in the word lists in a way that relates to the topics or tasks being presented. Furthermore, when creating these word lists, the authors should consider such things as vocabulary frequency, coverage, context, collocations, the students' purposes for learning, follow-up activities, and how to recycle the words. Lastly, we should remember word lists are simply a solid first step that still needs to be incorporated into other activities (Folse, 2007, p. 45).

#### ***Myth 3: Presenting new vocabulary in semantic sets facilitates learning***

##### *Summary of myth 3*

The easiest way to organize the words in a textbook and, seemingly the most intuitive and logical, is to group the vocabulary by kind, that is, in semantic sets (Folse, 2007, p. 47). Semantic sets are common, probably because they are easy to write, and have long been believed to facilitate vocabulary acquisition, with students being told to rehearse vocabulary using these semantic sets. However, research has shown that semantic sets hinder and impede learning (ibid, p. 47). Tinkham (cited in Folse, 2007, p. 52) found that students have more difficulty learning new words presented in semantic clusters than they do learning semantically unrelated words. Also, Waring (cited in Folse, 2007, pp. 53-54) found that it took learners about 50% more time to learn related word pairs than unrelated pairs. Lastly, Olsen (cited in Folse, 2007, pp. 53-54) found that similar vocabulary taught together (e.g., sea-see) may have caused learners errors. This semantic organization of word lists is problematic and needs to be addressed by material designers and teachers.

##### *Textbook survey regarding myth 3*

Folse (2007) points out that teachers need not look far to find vocabulary that is arranged in semantic sets, in all proficiency levels (p. 49), and the vast majority of the vocabulary lists in the textbooks surveyed were arranged in semantic sets. For example, in *Touchstone Book 4* (McCarthy, McCarten & Sandiford, 2014, p. 15), an advanced level listening/speaking textbook, there is a unit about personal tastes and a "building vocabulary" exercise with lists of clothing product descriptions such as baggy, flared, fitted, short-sleeved, and long-sleeved. Lists of colors and clothing materials such as suede, cashmere and silk also appear. While *Touchstone* makes a good attempt at teaching vocabulary by incorporating many vocabulary type activities throughout the book, the initial introduction to new words is always in semantic sets. The same holds true for books 1, 2 and 3.

Folse (2007) recommends "thematic presentations of new words" because research indicates that this type of presentation aids retention of new vocabulary (p. 56). While this is certainly harder to plan, it allows the students the opportunity to learn more efficiently and effectively. However, he also points out that semantic sets can be useful for reviewing words. The problem is when semantic sets are used to learn new vocabulary (p. 56-58).

### *What we can learn from the textbooks surveyed*

We need to be careful when selecting textbooks because we can't just look into a book, see word lists and assume it covers vocabulary. Instead, we need to analyze not only the words being presented but also how they are organized. Are they organized in semantic sets? Is this organization used when the book is reviewing the vocabulary or when it is introducing the vocabulary?

### **Myth 4: Guessing words from context is an excellent strategy for learning L2 vocabulary**

#### *Summary of myth 4*

While native speakers frequently learn new words from context, it is problematic for L2 learning because “the luxury of multiple exposures to words over time and in a variety of meaningful contexts is denied to second and foreign language students. They need prodigious amounts of information within an artificially short time” (Martin, 1984, pp. 130-131). L2 learners are deprived of time and multiple exposures in a variety of contexts to the target vocabulary item, so it is difficult for them to acquire new words by this means alone.

Several studies have revealed that inferring meaning from context is less effective than more intensive or explicit forms of instruction for L2 learners. Schatz and Baldwin (cited in Folse, 2007, pp. 74-75) showed that “context clues in the real world are not as prevalent or useful as thought” and, Hulstijn, Hollander and Greidanus (1996) demonstrated that “learners ignore words that are not relevant for the particular reading goal” (p. 327). An important part of vocabulary learning is noticing and thinking about the meaning of a word. However, Hulstijn, Hollander and Greidanus remarked that, “learners are just as likely to infer a wrong meaning as the correct meaning.” This adds an extra wrinkle to the effectiveness of the ‘vocabulary in context’ concept that so many reading textbooks rely upon. Nation (2015) asserts,

Vocabulary learning occurs because certain mental conditions are created which encourage learning. Essentially, vocabulary learning depends on the number of meetings with each word and the quality of attention at each meeting. The more meetings, the more likely learning is to occur. The deeper the quality of the meetings, the more likely learning is to occur (p. 136).

#### *Textbook survey regarding myth 4*

Every book type surveyed had a ‘guessing words from context’ type strategy. The reading and grammar books used this strategy almost exclusively while the other book types used it as just one of many vocabulary learning strategies.

The *Longman Introductory Course for the TOEFL Test: iBT* textbook (Philips, 2006) assumes that students can rely on context based strategy to find the meaning of target words and did not teach any frequently occurring vocabulary items, unlike *The Complete Guide to the TOEFL Test, iBT Edition* (Rogers, 2012).

The grammar and reading books, *Developing Reading Skills* (Markstein, 1994) and *Themes for Today: Reading for Today Series* (Smith & Mare, 2015) use vocabulary-in-context type training strategies as their primary means of new vocabulary development. The most common type was a cloze vocabulary exercise that required the students to fill-in-the-blanks, using word prompts from ‘the box above.’ There was no explicit instruction of the definitions of the vocabulary items and the items in ‘the box above’ were always single words, which is problematic. However, as the research studies cited above show, this type of strategy is not necessarily the best or most effective way to introduce vocabulary because it is based solely on context (not to mention being based on the idea that all vocabulary items are single words, which is also false when we take collocations into consideration). Also, the perceived benefits of learning through more explicit teaching of vocabulary outweigh those of the context strategy. The key points here are that a teacher should “teach context clues, but not at the expense of explicit teaching of vocabulary” (Folse, 2007, p. 122) and that a teacher should “teach the use of context clues as a good reading strategy, but recognize that learners cannot rely on this compensatory strategy for vocabulary growth” (p. 83).

#### *What we can learn from the textbooks surveyed*

Textbooks need to use a variety of vocabulary learning strategies and not rely solely on guessing vocabulary based on context. However, this strategy should not be ignored because it has its place as a reading strategy (Folse, 2007, p. 83). Basically, teachers should continue to teach context clues and understand the critical limitations of context clues, but not in lieu of vocabulary itself (ibid, p. 120).

#### ***Myth 5: The best vocabulary learners make use of one or two really good specific vocabulary learning strategies***

##### *Summary of myth 5*

Acquiring as much vocabulary as possible is extremely important, but what is the best strategy to acquire this vocabulary? Gu (2003) defines the term learning strategy as:

A series of actions a learner takes to facilitate the completion of a learning task. A strategy starts when the learner analyzes the task, the situation, and what is available in his/her own repertoire. The learner then goes to select, deploy, monitor, and evaluate the effectiveness of this action, and decides if s/he needs to revise the plan and action (p. 3).

However, what many learners would like to know is which learning strategies are the most effective, and why.

Good learners of language actually use several strategies, but the exact combination of these strategies varies from learner to learner. Research has found that the best vocabulary learners are those who have a plan of study and who apply this plan consistently (Folse, 2007, p. 87-99). Folse recommends the ‘keyword method’ because it appears to work for long-term retention. It is a “two-stage process that uses mnemonic devices and interactive imagery to facilitate vocabulary acquisition in L2” (p. 93). While some criticize this method (Sternberb

for example) due to amount of effort that it takes, Folse argues that it is supported by solid SLA research.

However, Folse (2007) also states that no strategy is better than another. Instead, he advocates that learners should use a variety of vocabulary learning strategies and they should use these strategies consistently. He says, “it does not seem to matter so much what students do with new vocabulary provided they do something and that they do it consistently” (p. 91). Yet, from the perspective of textbooks, what is really important is that teachers and material designers teach a variety of strategies so that students can pick up on the strategies that work best for them. Therefore, what matters is that the students are educated about the vocabulary learning strategy possibilities and this is the job of teachers, material designers and, even, students alike.

#### *Textbook survey regarding myth 5*

Of all the books surveyed, only a handful of the resource textbooks and only one series of the speaking/listening textbooks incorporated ‘vocabulary learning strategies.’ None of the other book types, including the ESP TOEFL books, had any mention of vocabulary learning strategies (outside of indirectly mentioning ‘vocabulary in context,’ but there was no mention of this being an actual vocabulary learning strategy).

The resource books did a good job of presenting a variety of strategies for learning vocabulary. One prime example was *Discussion Starters: Speaking Fluency Activities for Advanced ESL/EFL Students* (Folse, 1996), which had a large variety of strategies for learning vocabulary.

*Touchstone* was the only speaking/listening textbook series that covered strategies and it included them in all levels (books 1 through 4) and was very consistent in its approach. *Touchstone - Student’s Book 4* advises the students to, “Make a flip pad for the new verbs you have learned in this unit. Write each new verb in a sentence. Every time you have a spare minute, learn a verb!” (McCarthy, McCarten & Sandiford, 2011, p. 10). There is one quite serious problem with the text though, in that this is the only strategy recommended and they do the same exact strategy at the end of every unit.

#### *What we can learn from the textbooks surveyed*

Teachers, learners and material designers need to become aware of learning styles and strategies through strategy instruction. Folse (2007) asserts, “textbook writers need to dedicate more space for strategy training” (p. 97). If we, as teachers, want to empower our students to become more independent language learners, we need to show them a variety of strategies for learning, more than just how to guess based on context. Craik and Lockart found that “the more processes involved in the learning of a word the superior the retention and recall” (cited in Carter, 2012, p. 45).



**Myth 6: Teachers, textbooks, and curricular cover L2 vocabulary adequately***Summary of Myth 6*

Of all the myths covered so far, this is the easiest to summarize because the entire paper so far constitutes a summary of this myth. Put simply, teachers, textbook and curriculums do not cover L2 vocabulary adequately. Folse (2007) stressed, “most of us do not have to look very far to find that vocabulary is not covered enough in our curricular, materials and courses; vocabulary is not covered well enough” (p. 130).

*Textbook survey regarding myth 6*

In conclusion to all the myths and our comments about each above, it is obvious that this myth is indeed a myth. Vocabulary is not covered adequately in our textbooks.

*What we can learn from the textbooks surveyed*

One solution is to use resource books to supplement textbooks. These books, coupled with an imaginative and aware teacher could produce a classroom that has an adequate focus on vocabulary. Textbooks though, are often “a source of training for teachers and play an important role in spreading ideas across the English language teaching profession” (Zimmerman, 2014) so we hope that textbooks will begin to reflect the findings of second language acquisition research.

Using the information learned from the survey we made a checklist for choosing L2 textbooks. The list is based on how vocabulary is ‘taught’ in the text and covers a majority of the myths regarding vocabulary acquisition and teaching. This checklist should be a good starting point and resource for anyone who wants to be more analytical of textbooks in terms of how they cover vocabulary.

**Checklist for Choosing L2 Textbooks Based on How Vocabulary is Covered**

1. Does the textbook cover vocabulary learning in any way shape or form? <i>(If not, skip all other questions and don't use this book!)</i>
2. Does the textbook favor grammar to vocabulary and, if it does, is it rationalized with good reasons? <i>(Remember, grammar is important too.)</i>
3. Does the textbook present new vocabulary or assume the students already know it (thus, not teaching new vocabulary at all)? <i>(Especially relevant for grammar books)</i>
4. Does the textbook explain the rational for how and why the vocabulary included was selected?
5. Does the textbook take into consideration criteria such as frequency, coverage, connotation, etc. when selecting what words to include?
6. Does the textbook give advice about how to teach vocabulary in the ‘to the teacher’ section of the textbook?
7. Does the textbook give a theoretical rational based on SLA research for how to teach the vocabulary items presented?
8. Does the textbook explain the complexities of what ‘knowing a word’ entails?
9. Does the textbook use word lists?

10. If the textbook uses word lists, is there a rationale for why these items were included?
11. If the textbook uses word lists, are they used for most major activities? (or just some)
12. Are the word lists organized according to semantic sets? ( <i>Remember, semantic sets are not good for when initially presenting new vocabulary</i> )
13. Are the word lists organized according to thematic sets? ( <i>Remember, thematic sets are good for presenting new vocabulary</i> )
14. If the textbook uses word lists, are there activities/exercises/tasks that follow and incorporate the vocabulary items ( <i>Remember, processing vocabulary is important</i> )
15. Does the textbook include collocations or just single words? ( <i>Remember, not all vocabulary items are single words</i> )
16. Does the textbook explain the rationale behind how and why these particular collocations were selected?
17. Does the textbook recycle vocabulary in meaningful ways?
18. Does the textbook cover a variety of vocabulary learning strategies?
19. Does the textbook explain the rationale behind these strategies?
20. Does the textbook use consistency when presenting strategies or just jump from one to the other. ( <i>Remember, consistency is important</i> )
21. Does the textbook favor 'vocabulary in context' as the main strategy?
22. Does the textbook both present vocabulary and have the students practice it?
23. Do the activities in the textbook push the student to process the vocabulary?
24. Does the textbook include a tutorial for the student about how they should use their dictionaries? Is this information based on SLA research?
25. Does the textbook include a tutorial for the teacher about what kind of dictionaries students should be allowed to use and in what context? Is this based on SLA research?

### ***Conclusion and Implications for Further Research***

In conclusion, most ESL/EFL textbooks do not systematically deal with vocabulary. In fact, most don't even deal with it at all and hopefully, the checklist presented here helps teachers to better select textbooks based on how vocabulary is covered.

In terms of implications for further research, we would like to see ongoing research conducted on textbooks used in Japan to measure how much they change in relation to vocabulary teaching. Vocabulary teaching is important, perhaps more so here in Tottori Prefecture, as students do not have many language resources in their immediate environment. However, do our textbooks and teaching practices reflect this importance?

Words have a central place in culture, and learning words is seen by many as the main task (and obstacle) in learning another language (Carter, 2012, p. 47).

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