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Book review

Vocabulary in the Foreign Language Curriculum: Principles for Effective Instruction

James Milton & Oliver Hopwood (2023). New York, Routledge, 216 pp.

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Vocabulary learning is crucially important for communication and it is an element of the language that should feature prominently in any foreign language curriculum if it is to be successful. There is now a mountain of academic literature on vocabulary learning and teaching and yet, strangely, this makes its way only imperfectly, if at all, into the practice of teachers, materials writers, and curriculum designers. This is probably the first book length treatment of how vocabulary should properly be fitted into an effective curriculum: how many words need to be taught, how many need to be learned, which words, how are they to be sequenced and spread across the curriculum, and how are words to be treated so the learner can become communicative? The writers of this book lay out the details that answer these questions. They have a secondary agenda, too, in doing this, which is to 'hold a mirror up to poor curriculum practice' (p.x) and to explain, so others may avoid the same mistakes, just how a poorly designed and ill-informed curriculum has so catastrophically damaged foreign language teaching in schools in England.

Milton and Hopwood organise their material into a Preface and 11 chapters in three sections. The Preface explains that successful vocabulary learning is, at root, all about numbers. Learners, to become communicative in a European foreign language, will need to learn thousands of words and the curriculum has to organise this. There is no short-cut.

The first section explains the background to this. Chapter 1 explains the huge growth in vocabulary research which could, and should, inform curriculum design and teaching practice. Chapter 2 provides a background and explains what vocabulary is. Teachers often know a lot more about, say, the grammar of the language they teach than its vocabulary. Chapter 3 details how vital vocabulary knowledge is for communication. It is probably the single most important element of learning that explains learner proficiency and progression. Chapter 4 considers how words are learned. The curriculum has to manage a lot more in vocabulary learning than the form and meaning link. Vocabulary knowledge is complicated and vocabulary teaching probably cannot all be managed by the teacher in class.

The second section provides the principal content of the book. How many words need to be taught and learned. Vocabulary size is linked to communicative performance. It can even be said (Alderson, 2005) that language proficiency is a function of vocabulary size. Milton and Hopwood provide numbers, linked to the CEFR hierarchy, of how many words are needed to attain communicative goals. They tabulate how many words need to be learned, how many taught, and likely learning time, at each CEFR level. This is information that curriculum designers should know and use and yet, until now, the vocabulary content of the curriculum seems to have been a matter of intuition, guesswork and

personal idiosyncrasy. Chapter 6 describes the selection of these words, which need to be spread across the frequency bands. This is required to provide both the range of topic vocabulary needed for communication, but also the number of examples for things like language structure to develop as an automatic system. This is modelled. Chapter 7, outlines and explains the errors in a number of vocabulary myths prominent in the English teaching system. Sadly, some of these myths are not new. The idea that grammar is far more important to the mastery of a foreign language than vocabulary, is an example. This is not true. But, additionally, the English system has created some of its own myths. The idea that you really do not need many words to be fully proficient, is one, and that you can be fully proficient with a lexicon of only highly frequent words, is another. The evidence to contradict these ideas is overwhelming and yet, in England, they form the basis of curriculum design.

The final section explains how a vocabulary curriculum can be put into practice, through the design and content of the textbook and teaching materials (Chapter 8), the contribution of the teacher (Chapter 9), and through a range of informal activities conducted outside the classroom (Chapter 10). Milton and Hopwood are aware that the teaching of words for communication requires inculcating a knowledge of depth and considerable automaticity. This requires exposure and practice that probably cannot be confined to the classroom. Finally, Chapter 11, draws attention to some of the implications and the potential pitfalls of a well-designed vocabulary curriculum. There is a potential danger, for example, in the curriculum becoming over-prescriptive and allowing neither teacher nor learner to individualise learning, where appropriate to reflect local and personal needs. A curriculum is necessarily prescriptive, of course, but Milton and Hopwood explain that the curriculum design they propose can accommodate some flexibility.

This book, then, is an excellent, original and much needed work which provides principled guidance and structure in an area of curriculum design which is characterised by an absence of clear principle and idiosyncrasy (Catalán & Fransisco 2008), and by a 'strange nonchalance' (Dodigovich & Agustín-Llach 2020). It draws extensively on research to support its proposals. Some of this research is recent but much of it is not so it is strange that this material has not made its way, systematically, into teaching practice and curriculum design. Issues of the vocabulary sizes associated with CEFR levels, for example, have been in the domain of teachers for decades. The widely used *Swansea Placement Test* (Meara & Milton 2003), provides a hierarchy of vocabulary sizes linked to exams and CEFR levels, as do Milton and Alexiou (2009). As far back as 1980, Hindmarsh produced a list of about 4500 words and expressions linked to Cambridge FCE and CEFR B2 level. Yet, these numbers almost never transfer to curriculum design. This leaves teachers and learners, alike, in a limbo of ignorance as to how much vocabulary should be learned. But they could and should be told, and this book unambiguously provides this information.

For a book that might be seen as dry and academic, it is both engaging and interesting. The writers make good use of novel ways to illustrate their ideas and engage readers at every level of the language teaching profession. The S-curve of comprehension, for example (in Chapter 3) explains graphically how the relationship between vocabulary size and comprehension is not straight-line. While the idea that the more words a learner knows, the better they get, is broadly true, there are thresholds in place defined by critical mass. Learners will need to know at least 2000 words before they are likely to know sufficient words in any normal text to take the least understanding, and only after this will something like that straight-line relationship emerge. Learners will, and must, spend a lot of time learning vocabulary before communication can really emerge. The archery target graphics, in Chapter 6, likewise illustrate how the words that comprise curriculum content should ideally aggregate year on year and can, ideally, be spread across the frequency bands for best learning effect. The illustrations of what learners' lexicons should look like, as defined by frequency profiles, may well be new to teachers (and, sadly, to curriculum designers) but should help enormously in enabling them to understand what the vocabulary learning goal should be. Perfect knowledge of the most frequent

vocabulary bands is not, clearly, a requirement of intermediate levels of proficiency. Progress through the CEFR bands is much more a product of the growth in topical, infrequent vocabulary, than by a growth in structural vocabulary. This less frequent topical vocabulary is also what makes teaching materials varied and effective. Learners need both frequent, structural vocabulary and infrequent topical vocabulary for communication, of course, but not one to the exclusion of the other. The book helps define what successful vocabulary development looks like and what the curriculum should define to get the balance right.

In addition to illustrating the content of the curriculum, Milton and Hopwood take the trouble to help clarify some of the confusions in terminology over how words and word knowledge is acquired. Terms like implicit, incidental and informal learning are used frequently to help explain how elements of the vocabulary curriculum are learned, but every writer has a different idea of what these mean. Some elements of vocabulary clearly require explicit treatment. Learning a new word form and linking it to meaning requires explicit attention from the learner, probably helped by the teacher in class and in designated work outside class. The learners need to explicitly notice these things as a first step to committing them to memory and use. Other aspects of vocabulary knowledge may be different. Developing the automaticity of word knowledge that can lead to fast and fluent reading may not require that the learner is deliberately and explicitly attempting to get faster and faster. Practices like extensive reading will develop this, even if the reader has no learning focus. Teachers can be misled in what to expect from incidental learning because of the confusion over terminology and the writers bring order to this confusion.

There are many insightful features of this book that should become the standard work in its field. However, Milton and Hopwood have produced a work that is sufficiently comprehensive for it to be used more widely in teacher education, and it need not be restricted to the narrow confines of curriculum writers. Its background to what vocabulary is, how vocabulary is learned, the relationship between vocabulary and proficiency, and its use of research in the area, is well enough developed for the book to be used more widely as a general text for students and teacher trainers.

This book should be required reading for everyone involved in the foreign language teaching profession: teachers, teacher trainers, materials writers, exam writers, curriculum designers and of course educational policy makers. Vocabulary is so important in learning a foreign language, that defining the vocabulary content of teaching needs to be a priority and not, as it currently seems to be, an incidental and often ill-thought-through part of the process. It is worth emphasising the absence of any other text like this that is available, and how important it should be for the development of effective language teaching practice. Its precepts should be put into practice and, as the writers acknowledge, this will often lead to significant and wide-ranging changes in teaching and curriculum design. It is a paradigm-shifting treatment of the subject that *should* lead to a very different approach to curriculum creation where vocabulary is at the heart of the process and which should make these curriculums consistently effective. Milton and Hopwood's book is the most important contribution to the literature on language teaching in a generation.

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