The psycholinguistic and corpus-based research concerning the core issue of vocabulary has received significant attention over the past two decades. Although the research on vocabulary cannot be equated with the breadth of research on syntax, the central role of vocabulary in language learning, both theoretically and practically, has received much attention. In addition, the pedagogical application of vocabulary research and activities has undergone much discussion (e.g., Hiebert & Kamil, 2005; Nation, 2008; Nation & Gu, 2007; Nation & Webb, 2011; Zimmerman, 2009; Ur, 2012). Recently, there has been a surge in publications on researching vocabulary in terms of both pedagogy and practice. Teaching Vocabulary, Lessard-Clouston’s new book, written in accessible language, is a noteworthy and thought-provoking work. It can inform experienced teachers who want to probe more deeply into the area of vocabulary as well as novice teachers who want to apply theories derived from vocabulary research within classroom practices.

Teaching Vocabulary is composed of a brief overview and five chapters. Each chapter starts with a pertinent pre-reading question, which is then answered within the respective chapter, and ends with a column labeled ‘Reflective Break’, which provides an opportunity for the reader to reflect on related vocabulary research and its pedagogical applications.

The first chapter, “Vocabulary and Its Importance in Language Learning,” and the second chapter, “Understanding Vocabulary: An L2 Perspective,” primarily summarize decades of mainstream vocabulary research, which provides procedural guidelines and explanations for understanding L2 vocabulary. The third chapter, “Research into Practice: Tips for Vocabulary Teaching,” presents a theory-to-practice approach to help English teachers
interact with vocabulary teaching materials and reflect on their teaching practices and curriculum development. In this Lessard-Clouston points out that textbooks seldom address vocabulary sufficiently (p. 21) and the importance of deliberate vocabulary learning (p.22). The fourth chapter, “Getting to Know Your Students and Their Vocabulary Needs,” is concerned with understanding students from the perspective of their learning needs. The espoused approach provides a platform for teachers to develop a practical vocabulary teaching course and a better way of understanding and satisfying the learners’ needs (p.25). The author’s consistent inclusion of simple exercises sheds lights on understanding how the learners’ needs are assessed and how the teaching materials for vocabulary instruction are developed. The fifth chapter, “Putting It Together: Vocabulary Teaching Guidelines,” successfully contributes note-worthy studies of Nation’s four strands (p.32) and Zimmerman’s word consciousness approach in the pedagogical application of vocabulary (p.34).

*Teaching Vocabulary* can be recommended for many reasons. One is that although the text has only 46 pages, it refines and clarifies the very concept of “vocabulary” in a principled and thoughtful way. In this manner, teachers will find it helpful, whether they are developing curriculum materials or updating their knowledge of current theory, or simply looking to improve the way they conduct vocabulary assessments.

Another useful feature of the book is its review of current vocabulary research, from work on the concept of vocabulary, learner levels, vocabulary testing and assessment, vocabulary knowledge, and the theory-to-practice approach. All is simplified and written in plain language. The book’s pedagogical implications and concrete ideas may be easily understood by English teachers so they can apply the knowledge in practice.

Teachers who are conducting needs-based vocabulary programs will also benefit from reading this book. It provides detailed methods for determining students’ receptive vocabulary knowledge level (p.24) and offers insights on what vocabulary teachers should focus on based on students’ vocabulary level (p.26).

Unfortunately, Lessard-Clouston does not cover all the issues one might expect discussed in such a serious volume. For example, while the text presents one chapter on analyzing the
learners’ needs and the importance of learning vocabulary, it fails to address in detail what such learners might employ in the way of strategies (Nation, 2008), even though these are major determinants in learning vocabulary. In addition, because the author convinces us that the text should be used as a guide for practical application of vocabulary, his very omission of what Nation calls ‘contextualization’ (2001) makes the book less than sufficiently inclusive.

These problems aside though, as a teacher and researcher in vocabulary, I can benefit tremendously from the lists of vocabulary research resources and the teaching guidelines and procedures presented in this book. Therefore, I strongly recommend it to any practitioner looking for an efficient guide to new ways to apply the theory of vocabulary to practical classroom practices and to those who want to supplement existing curricula in the hope of building a needs-based vocabulary-teaching program.

References


About the Author

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