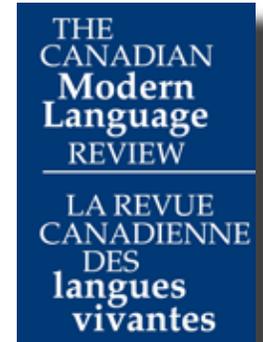




**The Canadian Association of
Second Language Teachers**

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**The Canadian Modern
Language Review**



Present the:

LINKING SECOND LANGUAGES RESEARCH AND PRACTICE SERIES

In this Issue:

The effects of pre-learning vocabulary on reading comprehension and writing

Research study by Stuart Webb*

Examination of the effect of pre-learning vocabulary on students' reading comprehension and writing

(*) Webb, S. (2009). The effects of pre-learning vocabulary on reading comprehension and writing. *The Canadian Modern Language Review*, 55 (3), 441-470.

Reflect - What experiences do I bring to reading the research?

1. When I teach vocabulary do I consider what I want my students to do with it - understand it and/or use it in writing for example? If so, does my instruction differ according to its purpose?
2. How do I prepare my students to understand a reading passage?
3. How do I support my students to use varied vocabulary in their writing?

What experience do the researchers bring to conducting the research?

Introducing Stuart Webb

Stuart Webb has taught English as a foreign language in China and Japan. He is currently a senior lecturer and the MA programme director in the School of Linguistics and Applied Language Studies at Victoria University of Wellington. His research interests include vocabulary studies, and extensive reading and listening. He has published in journals such as Applied Linguistics, Language Learning, Studies in Second Language Acquisition, and TESOL Quarterly.

A conversation with Stuart Webb, author of *The effects of pre-learning vocabulary on reading comprehension and writing*

Where did you conduct your research? With whom?

The research was conducted with university students learning English as a foreign language (EFL) in Japan. It was important to carry out the research with students who all had the same first language because this allowed translations to be used in the word pairs (word in first language with same word in learned language). This meant that collecting the data in an EFL context would be best because in an ESL context students would likely have a number of different first languages.

One other aspect of the design that was important here was that the participants were tested on their knowledge of vocabulary using the Vocabulary Levels Test. This test provides a good indication of which words students know and this in turn indicates what vocabulary learners may be able to understand and use. I think this is always a good test to use in research to allow readers to get a reasonable indication of what the students know, and can and cannot do.

What were you trying to find out?

An earlier study that I did indicated that if learners can learn the form and meaning of words then they may also learn a lot more about these words. This occurs because they may transfer their knowledge of first language words to the second language words. This suggests that by simply learning the form and meaning of second language words, students may gain a great deal of knowledge. This study aimed to look at whether the knowledge gained through learning from word pairs would allow students to understand sentences containing the words and use the words in sentences. Often there is an assumption when teaching form and meaning that students may be able to then understand and use taught words, but this is not necessarily so. Most teachers can probably relate to the situation where students have learned many words in an EFL context but they cannot use many of them. This research aimed to look at what students can do if they can link second language form and first language meaning. The other aim was to look at how the direction of learning (receptive or productive) affected comprehension and use.

How did you gather your information?

I used tests that I created to collect the data. I had already created and used the tests that measured vocabulary knowledge by asking the students to provide translations of words. The picture description where students wrote a sentence using the provided pictures as stimuli and the true/false test based on sentences using the target words were new. In retrospect, I think I should have used word cards (flashcards with word in one language on one side and in the other language on the other) rather than word pairs in the learning conditions because research has shown that word cards are more effective.

What did you do with the data?

A challenge with the data was how to score the picture description test. It was important to have clear criteria on scoring so that the scoring was consistent. Having a second person also do the scoring was important to show reliability in scoring. I entered the test data into a statistical computer program called SPSS to see if any differences were due to how the words were learned or due to chance.

How would you summarize what you found?

I think the results show two things that are important. First, learning from word pairs is a very effective activity because it may allow students to understand and use words. Second, the direction of learning is important. If we learn in the receptive direction (look at the second language form and try to recall the first language meaning) then this will have a greater effect on comprehension than learning in the productive direction (look at the first language meaning and try to recall the second language form). Learning in the productive direction will have a greater effect on using words than learning in the receptive direction.

What practical messages come from this study?

1. Pre-teaching vocabulary using word pairs may be an effective way of improving comprehension and the use of taught words in writing.

The study provides support for the considerable amount of research that demonstrates that paired-associate learning (learning from word pairs or even better word cards) is effective. Learning from word cards is fast in relation to many vocabulary learning activities, and effective. There is limited time for teaching vocabulary in the classroom so teaching learners how to use word cards and making them aware of the potential learning through using word cards has value.

2. It is important to consider the direction of learning when we teach vocabulary.

It makes sense that receptive learning would have a greater effect on receptive knowledge than productive knowledge and vice versa. In the classroom most learning is receptive. Reading and listening activities, looking up words in dictionaries, and explaining unknown words are all examples of receptive learning. There is simply not enough time to have students use all target words in the classroom and this is going to result in greater gains in receptive knowledge than productive knowledge of words. This means that if we want our students to be able to use words effectively we need to make sure that we provide them with opportunities for productive use of taught words.

Making students aware of which type of knowledge they gain from the way that they learn is also a good idea. Many students consider the ability to use words as a key criterion of whether they are successfully learning. Explaining the importance of productive learning may help to motivate them to try to use recently learned words inside and outside of the classroom to help them meet their language learning goals.

What next?

1. What do I want to learn more about? How can I do that?
2. How could the information from this article impact your focus on vocabulary in the classroom?
3. How could you support your students to use the suggested strategies independently?

Additional Research Articles

- Carlo, M., August, D., McLaughlin, B., Snow, C., Dressler, C., Lippman, D. et al. (2004). Closing the gap: Addressing the vocabulary needs of English-language learners in bilingual and mainstream classrooms. *Reading Research Quarterly*, 39, 188–215. This study conducted with Grade 5 English language learners found that vocabulary instruction that provided multiple contexts for students to learn the spelling, pronunciation etc. of words had a positive impact on their test performance, which in turn may indicate improved reading comprehension.
- Lee, S.H. (2003). ESL learners' vocabulary use in writing and the effects of explicit vocabulary instruction. *System*, 31, 537–561. This research was conducted by the intermediate/senior participants' English as a second language teacher who found that once the students had pre-learned the vocabulary they were much more apt to use it in their writing.
- Snellings, P., Van Gelderen, A., & De Glopper, K. (2004). The effects of enhanced lexical retrieval on second language writing: A classroom experiment. *Applied Psycholinguistics*, 25, 175–200. This article describes the results of a study conducted with 103 Dutch Grade 9 students who were learning English. The researchers found that the students used more of the target words in their writing when they had done varied preparatory tasks focusing on the meaning and spelling of the words.