

# Vocabulary Education & Research Bulletin

Spring 2018

Volume 7, Issue 1

Greetings,

This is our first issue to accept a wider range of submissions. As announced at the Vocabulary Symposium, in addition to academic articles we are now accepting classroom activities related to vocabulary, book reviews, opinion pieces, and even reports and commentary. To start us off in this new category, **Magda Kitano** has written a commentary on her experiences attempting to determine which high frequency words Japanese university students do not know, and **Phil Bennett** reviews *Longitudinal Developments in Vocabulary Knowledge and Lexical Organization*. We look forward to making *The VERB* a forum for us all to share our ideas and experiences, so do take a moment to look around you and see if anything you are working on might be something you might want to share here. Of course reviewed academic articles are also still encouraged. See the call for submissions on page 11 for all of the details.

We are also sorry to have to say goodbye to Stuart McLean as co-editor. This will be his final issue. Thank you for all of your work on this publication, and we will be sad to see you go. For anyone interested in taking his place, there is a Call for Co-editor on page 11, so do drop us a line even if you are just interested in learning more about it.

Best wishes to everyone in the new school year, and we hope to see you all at the symposium in September!

The VERB editors  
Magda Kitano & Stuart McLean

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**Commentary****The High Frequency Word Gap:  
What Words Don't Students Know?**

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Testing tools based on word frequency such as *The New Vocabulary Levels Test* (NVLТ) (McLean & Kramer, 2015) and the *Eurocentres Vocabulary Size Test* (Meara, 1992) can assist teachers in recommending individual vocabulary study goals to students, in planning vocabulary modules of a class, and in determining the level of graded readers for extensive reading (Nation, 2013; Nation, 2008). However, several studies have found that even high scoring learners do not know all of the words in the high-frequency bands. Specifically, in Japan, McLean, Hogg, and Kramer (2014) found that students with both lower and higher vocabulary size scores on the *Vocabulary Size Test* (VST) had gaps in knowledge of high-frequency words.

If high-frequency words cover 74% of text and comprehension suffers without fluency in high-frequency words (Nation, 2013), these gaps need to be addressed. When putting such a program into action, though, questions arise. Specifically, which high-frequency words are our students missing? Are there commonly unknown words that could be used in class-wide lessons? To make a start at addressing these questions, I tried an experimental exercise at the start of the autumn 2017 semester somewhat similar to Barrow, Nakanishi, and Ishino's (1999) self-checking familiarity survey.

I work at a lower-middle level Japanese university, but students entering our international studies faculty are highly motivated to improve their English abilities. In my own classes, I have often started general English classes with *The Vocabulary Levels Test* (VLT) or *Eurocentres Vocabulary Size Test* in order to give students feedback on where to start their vocabulary learning, and have usually gotten near perfect scores from most of them at the highest frequency bands. But this year I tried a different tact with our required general English classes for second-year students. In the first week of classes, I passed out printed copies of the first 1000 words of the NGSL (Browne, Culligan, & Phillips, 2013). I asked them to look through the list and mark any words that they do not know with an X, and mark any words whose meaning they are unsure of with a triangle. This took 20 minutes of class time. These classes are divided by CASEC scores into six levels, two classes per level. Data was taken from the two lowest scoring classes (Level 1), and the two Level 4 classes.

With my previous experiences of near-perfect scores in high-frequency levels at this

school, I was expecting some of the students to find just a few words in each list. However, the actual results were completely unexpected: a very high number of words in total were marked as either unknown or unsure. Of 82 students, a total of 2700 words were marked – an average of 33 words per student.

There was no particular group of words chosen by most students, but words marked by over 20 students (Table 1) included those with a formal-written aspect to them such as *thus*, *further*, *consider*, and *significant*. But they also include words that would seem necessary on a daily basis such as *within*, *perhaps*, *although*, and *describe*. There were also words that one would expect to be known after at least seven years of English instruction such as *individual*, *political*, *require*, and *particular*. Words marked by fewer than 20 students also had some shocking inclusions, such as *knowledge* (11), *education* (11), *compare* (8), *surprise* (2), and even *mother* (1).

**Table 1. Words Marked as Unknown or Meaning Unsure by More than 20 Students (N = 82)**

Word	Unknown	Unsure
Thus	20	17
Individual	15	21
Involve	10	25
Political	8	25
Further	11	21
Provide	6	26
Determine	11	18
Evidence	12	16
Within	11	17
Regard	6	21
Significant	11	16
Describe	6	19
Perhaps	6	19
Attempt	9	15
Concern	5	19
Particular	3	21
Although	2	20
Particularly	6	16
Consider	6	15
Require	7	14

Another result worthy of note is that classes with a more serious classroom dynamic had a higher rate of average words marked per student. Comparing the two lowest level classes, one class had a very attentive class atmosphere yet had an average of 46 words per student marked. The rowdier class had an average of 30 words per student marked. This may indicate that the serious students took the time to contemplate each word, while the others may have had test fatigue, or simply did not give full attention to the activity from the beginning. Adding this to the findings of Alavi (2008) that high proficiency level learners tend to underestimate their vocabulary knowledge on self-assessment questionnaires while low proficiency level learners overestimate, we can assume that there are even more words unknown than come up in these results, noting that all participants in this exercise fall into Alavi's low proficiency bracket.

### **Discussion**

These results reinforce the necessity of dealing with high-frequency words directly regardless of the level of student or university (McLean, Hogg & Kramer, 2014; Nation, 2013; Nation, 2008). Having students mark unknowns on a list of high-frequency words can provide teachers with information about specific deficiencies, and can also aid students by resulting in a list of words to study. This activity will also give them a more tangible result than a test score number. Lower level schools and classes, however, may find that a testing situation provides more accurate results.

As to a common list of unknown words, wider testing across Japan using the full first 1000-word list may result in such. But as most universities are not top-tier, we may find that there are so many words worth reviewing that spending a good deal of class time on the full list in the first year of university may be indicated.

While serious gaps in knowledge of high-frequency words may be a problem that the secondary education system in Japan needs to rectify, until that happens university level programs do need to deal with the fact that our current students are lacking fluency in high-frequency words.

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## Book Review

*Longitudinal Developments in Vocabulary Knowledge and Lexical Organization*

Brigitta Dóczy and Judit Kormos.

Oxford University Press (January 7, 2016) 232 pages

ISBN 978-0190210274 (hbk)

Reviewed by Phil Bennett philbennett59@gmail.com

Just as vocabulary research itself has moved from a state of neglect to being a thriving strand of applied linguistic study (Meara, 1980; Nation, 2013), longitudinal investigations into lexical development that were once sorely lacking in the literature are now appearing ever more frequently (e.g., Ozturk, 2016; Webb & Chang, 2012; Zhang & Lu, 2014). Owing to the incremental yet non-linear nature of vocabulary learning, Schmitt (2010, p.155-158) argued that longitudinal studies and delayed post-tests are invaluable measures of lexical development, and the publication of *Longitudinal Developments in Vocabulary Knowledge and Lexical Organization* by Brigitta Dóczy and Judit Kormos is thus a welcome addition to the field.

By examining recurrent themes in the literature through the prism of development over time, the authors are able to offer fresh insights on lexical growth from both broad-scale perspectives as well as at the level of individual words and aspects of knowledge. Each chapter also offers a thorough review of the literature that relates findings from the last fifty years with insights provided by newly developed research methodologies. The book begins with a description of key concepts in vocabulary, including the well-known breadth/depth distinction and the notion of the mental lexicon and how it is thought to be organised. Also covered is the issue of how to define and group lexical items in a psychologically valid manner, with word families and lemma groupings being the two main candidates discussed.

Chapters two and three then in turn cover developments in vocabulary breadth and depth. In both chapters, literature reviews are supplemented with evidence from the authors' own studies into lexical development in two contexts, one with Hungarian high school students learning in an EFL setting with an emphasis on explicit vocabulary instruction, and the other with international students in a UK university EAP program in which vocabulary was typically learned incidentally. This provides a useful update of the state of the field with regard to vocabulary growth, and demonstrates the need for

replication studies and the building of consensus on methodologies and approaches to improve the generalizability of findings. The authors also comment on some related areas of study that influence word learning, such as the role of word characteristics in lexical acquisition and recent studies such as those by Crossley et al. (2013) that consider contextual factors alongside frequency of exposure in word learning. This helps to maintain a focus on the importance of the learning environment and serves as a reminder of the need to link research and practice.

The fourth chapter deals with developmental changes in the organization of the mental lexicon. A detailed history of the findings and challenges of word association tests is given, and the authors provide the results of their own studies, again comparing Hungarian secondary school learners and students in a university EAP program. The first investigation looked at changes in the organization of the mental lexicon over a sixteen-month period and the second used the Coh-Metrix program to compare word association responses over an eight-month period. The results of both studies suggest certain developmental patterns that take place as words are more strongly integrated into the lexicon; over time, there may be a gradual shift away from using L1 knowledge to incorporate lexical information towards greater links with L2 lexical items, and an early dependence on nouns to organize the lexicon may diminish over time. There was also increased usage of more abstract and less frequent words with greater proficiency. The results of the authors' studies presented in chapters two to four generally indicate greater gains for learners in the explicit learning condition over those learning vocabulary incidentally. However, while this does accord with many other researchers' findings (see Laufer, 2009), the authors could perhaps give more attention to the fact that the incidental-condition learners were at a higher level of proficiency and would therefore be less likely to show rapid gains, owing to the power-law effect of learning.

In chapter five, vocabulary development is discussed in terms of the characteristics of learning and language exposure. The nature of intentional and incidental learning processes and explicit and implicit knowledge is discussed, along with key concepts such as noticing, input and output, and engagement. The complexity of these features, it is argued, imply that longitudinal developments in vocabulary learning should be examined from the perspective of Dynamic Systems Theory, which can allow for both acquisition and attrition as well as the interactions between lexical knowledge, the grammatical system, and the L1.

The sixth chapter of the book addresses individual differences in vocabulary development. The authors focus their attention mainly on the concepts of working memory and learner motivation. Working memory serves to support the levels of attention

required to process input and to increase the likelihood of linguistic stimuli being noticed. It can also help learners to integrate newly acquired knowledge with the emerging networks of information in long-term memory. Motivation in vocabulary learning is framed as a cyclical process prone to fluctuation and dependent on a self-regulating capacity in learners (Tseng & Schmitt, 2008).

The final chapter of the book considers the implications of research findings on classroom vocabulary teaching. Several general principles are discussed that reflect the conclusions of studies described in the earlier chapters, including the need to consider breadth, depth, and fluency in lexical development, the importance of incidental exposure and explicit instruction, the value of incorporating grammar knowledge and awareness of formulaic language into instruction, and the role that technology can play in supporting learning.

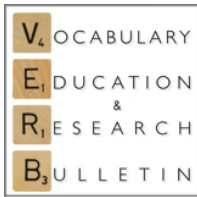
Overall, the book offers a very useful update on research in the field of lexical acquisition. The constant focus on longitudinal development, particularly over spans of more than one year, will hopefully provide impetus to future studies in a similar vein. One issue that some readers may find is that the emphasis on development over time entails a lesser focus on other paths of research. For example, there is little discussion of the limitations of the testing instruments used in some of the studies described. Another case worth commenting on involves the principles by which word forms are grouped for analysis. Arguments have recently been made for the word family being an overly broad grouping for all but the most advanced of learners (McLean, 2017; Pinchbeck, 2016), and it is a shame that this publication arrived too early to take account of such views, as the principle for grouping words has clear ramifications for studies in lexical development. While the limitations of word family groupings are discussed in section 1.3 of the book, some of the instruments described in subsequent chapters draw on word family-based lists for their item sampling. In fact, a study described in chapter three of the book presents the finding that knowledge of related word forms (i.e., word family members) is among the more difficult aspects of lexical knowledge to acquire, at least regarding productive skills.

This should not detract, however, from the value of the book, which serves as an update on lexical research findings and a summary of the state of the field from an important but easily overlooked perspective. While covering an impressive array of research from a variety of contexts, the authors also reveal the many areas where our understanding is based on a limited number of studies. Consequently, the book may serve as an inspiration for further investigations into lexical development.



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## SIG News

### Upcoming Events

**Temple University** Graduate College of Education's Distinguished Lecturer Series is featuring two vocabulary related seminars coming up soon:

**Teaching and Learning Vocabulary**  
-Prof. Paul Nation

Tokyo: June 30-July 1

Osaka: July 7-8

**Lexical Input Processing, the TOPRA Model, and Effective Vocabulary Instruction**  
-Dr. Joe Barcroft

Tokyo: July 14-15

Osaka: July 21-22

For more information: <http://www.tuj.ac.jp/tesol/seminars/index.html>

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**2018 Vocabulary Symposium** will be held in Tokyo. See the poster and call for poster presentations on pages 13-14 for more information.

Location: Meiji Gakuin University, Tokyo

Date: September 15, 2018

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**Vocab@Leuven**, the third in the Vocab@ series, has been announced and the call for abstracts is open.

Location: Leuven, Belgium

Dates: July 1-3, 2019

Official site: <https://vocabatleuven.wordpress.com/>

#### Call for VERB Co-editor

We are putting out a call for applications to work as VERB co-editor alongside Magda Kitano from the next coming issue this fall. The main responsibilities of a VERB editor include sending out calls for papers, managing the review process, and formatting and editing material for publication. If you are interested, please send us an e-mail at [jaltvocabsig.verb@gmail.com](mailto:jaltvocabsig.verb@gmail.com) no later than August 1, 2018.

## **The VERB Call for Papers**

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*The VERB* welcomes submissions related to vocabulary research and education.

**Short papers** are peer reviewed, and may require rewriting and resubmission for acceptance. They must not exceed 1000 words, excluding references and titles. Short papers fall into the categories of completed research, ongoing research, and teaching and learning in practice.

**Other submissions** encouraged are classroom activities related to vocabulary, book reviews, opinion pieces, and event reports and commentary. All submissions are expected to adhere to APA 6th edition formatting guidelines.

Deadline for next issue: **August 31, 2018.**

For submissions and all correspondence: <[jaltvocabsig.verb@gmail.com](mailto:jaltvocabsig.verb@gmail.com)>

Latest information: <https://jaltvocab.weebly.com/publications.html>

The following are guidelines for short paper submissions (please include these sections):

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<b>Completed research:</b>	<b>Ongoing research:</b>	<b>Teaching and learning in practice:</b>
* Background	* Background	* Theoretical framework
* Aims	* Aims	* Sample population
* Methods	* Methods	* Procedure
* Sample	* Sample	* (Preliminary) Results
* Results	* (Preliminary) Results	* (Preliminary) Conclusions
* Conclusions	* (Preliminary) Conclusions	* Future directions
* Future directions	* Future directions	

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\*\*If you are thinking about submitting, however your article doesn't fit into one of the above categories, please email us at the above address and let us know what you would like to submit and we can work it out.

## ***Vocabulary Learning & Instruction* Call for Papers**

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The Vocabulary SIG's *Vocabulary Learning and Instruction* (VLI) journal is calling for submissions for an upcoming issue. Submissions will be published online upon acceptance, and combined into an issue later this year.

VLI accepts long-form research papers (2000-7000 words) and brief reports, summaries, and commentaries (2000-3000 words) related to vocabulary acquisition, pedagogy, assessment, and lexical networks.

As an open journal, content is indexed on Google Scholar and made freely available on the internet without paywalls. Authors are free to also make their work available on sites such as academia.edu and researchgate.

All submissions are subject to a 2-step peer-review process:

A) Editors review manuscripts to ensure basic requirements are met, and that the work is of sufficient quality to merit external review. This process typically takes 1-2 weeks, at which point authors are informed of the outcome.

B) Submissions which meet these requirements are sent out for blind peer review by 2-3 experts in the field. This process takes approximately 1-2 months. Following external review, authors are sent copies of external reviewers' comments and notified of decisions (accept, accept pending changes, revise and resubmit, or reject).

Please see <http://vli-journal.org/submissions.html> for details



## 2018 Vocabulary Symposium

Presented by the JALT Vocabulary SIG

Meiji Gakuin University, Shirokane Campus, Main Building  
1-2-37 Shirokanedai Minato-ku, Tokyo

9:30AM – 5PM, Saturday, September 15, 2018

### Session 1: Vocabulary Learning and Assessment

With Jenifer Larson-Hall as discussant

- Tim Stoeckel
- Raymond Stubbe
- Shusaku Kida
- Magda Kitano & Katsuhiko Chiba

### Session 2: Vocabulary and Corpus Linguistics

With Yukio Tono as discussant

- Shin Ishikawa
- Geoff Pinchbeck
- Michael McGuire
- Brent Culligan

with **Poster Presentations** and free lunch

Admission:

¥2000 (General Admission)

¥1500 (JALT Members)

Dinner ¥3000 (From 5:30)



# 2018 JALT Vocabulary SIG Symposium

## Call for Poster Presentations

Meiji Gakuin University, Shirokane Campus, Tokyo  
September 15, 2018

In order to ensure a strong audience, no symposium sessions will run concurrent to poster presentations. Proposals for poster presentations will be accepted under two general categories:

1. Ongoing vocabulary related research
2. Vocabulary teaching and learning in practice

**Submission:**

Please e-mail 1) your name, 2) presentation title, and 3) a brief outline of your proposed topic (approximately 300 words), to <jaltvocab[at]gmail.com>

**Deadline: Sunday, May 7, 2018**

Abstracts should follow one of the two following formats:

**Ongoing research format:**

- Background
- Aims
- Methods
- Sample
- Preliminary results
- Preliminary conclusions
- Future directions

**Teaching and learning format**

- Theoretical framework
- Sample population
- Procedure
- Preliminary results
- Preliminary conclusions
- Future directions

Accepted poster presenters will be invited to submit written, extended synopses of their presentation for publication (500 – 1500 words) in an upcoming issue of VERB.