I. S. P. NATION, LEARNING VOCABULARY IN ANOTHER LANGUAGE

Since the writing of his first book, Teaching and Learning Vocabulary, in 1990, Nation has both witnessed and contributed to a growing amount of research and writing about the teaching and learning of vocabulary. As a result, his latest publication, Learning Vocabulary in Another Language, synthesises this work in a way that is informative and inspirational for a wide readership of researchers, teachers and other professionals. Comprehensive in its coverage and well supported by reference to experimental research, case studies and teaching experience, the book focuses on what it means to ‘know’ a word; how best to teach words and collocations; vocabulary in L2 listening, speaking and writing; specialised lexicons; vocabulary learning strategies; strategies for inferring the meaning of unknown words in context; chunking and collocation; vocabulary testing; and course design for vocabulary development.

The book describes what vocabulary learners need to know in order to be effective language users, and explains how teachers can help learners optimise the time they invest in the learning of vocabulary, in both class time and out-of-class time. The range of empirical research surveyed in the book is quite considerable and should satisfy both the student and the professional reader. Additionally, as Long and Richards suggest in their Preface (p. xiii), it ‘makes a substantive contribution to an area now recognised as of central importance for grammarians, acquisition specialists, language teachers and language learners alike’. For each of these readers, the book will be one that is frequently consulted. In many respects, it meets the requirements of a reference handbook, and parallels could be drawn between it and the frequently-cited The Study of Second Language Acquisition by Rod Ellis (1994).

Nation begins the book with a consideration of vocabulary learning goals before introducing the central themes that underpin the eleven chapters. The Introduction places vocabulary teaching and learning in the wider context of what is involved in teaching and learning a second or foreign language. For instance, it refers to vocabulary in relation to the four skills (reading, writing, speaking, listening) and to vocabulary knowledge in relation to pronunciation, spelling and grammar. Secondly, the introductory pages explain how the approach taken in the book is based on the belief that a balanced language course should consist of four major strands:
• Learning from comprehensible meaning-focused input, through listening and reading activities;
• Learning from form-focused instruction, through an appropriate amount of deliberate teaching and learning of language items;
• Learning from meaning-focused output, through speaking and writing activities;
• Fluency development – important so that vocabulary is readily available for normal use.

The introductory section concludes with a short discussion of the major themes running throughout the book. Based on the results of word frequency studies, Nation considers first of all the cost-benefit approach to vocabulary learning. Here he explains how teachers should deal with high frequency and low frequency vocabulary and how time spent on learning individual words should be in relation to the frequency with which learners will encounter or use a particular word. The second theme concerns the cumulative process involved in learning a word, namely, learning its formal aspects as well as its meaning and use. The third theme focuses on how vocabulary is learned. In particular, it addresses the psychological conditions that contribute to effective learning and explains how such conditions are influenced by the design of learning tasks.

Each of the eleven chapters is divided into a series of headings and sub-headings that relate to the type of questions that teachers frequently seek answers to. For example, Chapter 1, on the goals of vocabulary learning, discusses a number of key questions: How much vocabulary do learners need to know? How many words are there in the language? How many words do native speakers know? How much vocabulary do you need to use another language? The same question-based structure informs the structure and organisation of other sections of Chapter 1. The section on high frequency words, for example, asks four questions: How large is this group of words? What are the words in this group? How stable are the high frequency words? How should teachers and learners deal with these words? The same questions guide the discussion on low frequency words, specialized vocabulary and testing vocabulary knowledge. Together with the detailed subject and author indexes, this structural design across the eleven chapters means that the book can quickly and easily be accessed when readers are seeking answers to specific questions or are investigating the research findings of specific questions.

Within each section of a chapter, Nation provides the reader with three types of information: theoretical perspectives, up-to-date findings of empirical research, and practical hands-on advice on how to design and implement the many recommendations and suggestions that have resulted from classroom application. Chapter 8 on word study
strategies is a good example of this approach. Having explained the various parts of a word, Nation considers the question: Is it worthwhile learning word parts? He begins his response by considering it from a cost-benefit perspective and moves on to support his analysis with the findings from empirical research. With respect to English affixes, he suggests that approximately 60% of prefixed words can be understood from knowing the commonest meaning of the base word. This and other sections on word study strategies lead to practical suggestions for teachers and learners about the conditions that need to be met for learning new complex words.

Classroom teachers as well as course leaders will find the six appendices extremely useful: headwords of the Academic Word List; 1,000 word level tests; a vocabulary levels test (test B); productive levels test (version C); vocabulary levels dictation test; function words. For those engaged in research on vocabulary teaching and learning and for those seeking additional information about studies that have only been cited or referred to briefly in the book, the list of references at the end will be a rich resource.

The clarity with which this book has been written and organised will make it a very user-friendly resource for all readers. While some may quibble about the scant attention given to theoretical perspectives underpinning the approaches recommended, others will highlight the book’s positive and practical contribution to a field that for years has been under-recognised and under-researched. Learning Vocabulary in Another Language is a substantive treatment of vocabulary teaching and learning and one in which every reader will find new insights, new approaches and new motivations.

Review by John Bitchener, Auckland University of Technology

REFERENCES