RAISING AND ASSESSING SECOND LANGUAGE VOCABULARY FLUENCY

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The centrality of vocabulary knowledge cannot be overstated; it underlies the acquisition success of not only reading and listening skills, but also writing, speaking, and grammar learning (Alderson, 2005; Segalowitz, 2005). Linguists have proposed various definitions of vocabulary knowledge. Qian's (2002) definition has generally been a cited gold standard. According to Qian, vocabulary knowledge consists of four facets:

1. vocabulary size or breadth knowledge that refers to recognition of words,
2. depth knowledge of all features of a word including its semantic, syntactic, phonemic, graphemic, morphemic, collocational and phraseological traits,
3. lexical network of words that are stored, connected and represented in the lexicon, and
4. fluency or speed of retrieval of word forms and their meanings.

Vocabulary fluency is the speed or ease with which we can retrieve the meaning of a word that we encounter or with which we can retrieve the form of a word when we have a meaning in mind. Researchers often speak about this in terms of automaticity (Segalowitz & Segalowitz, 1993). Sometimes we find disfluent learners: they may know a lot of words but take a relatively long time to recall their meanings or come up with the word. It's also possible to have a small vocabulary but be very fluent with it. Obviously, for any given speaker, fluency for common words will not be the same as fluency for rare words, so when we think about vocabulary fluency, we typically mean some kind of average fluency for that person, but sometimes fluency for individual words or groups of words is what is meant.

For the focus of this article, I will delve into vocabulary fluency in the context of adult second language acquisition. In what follows, I highlight strategies that have been shown to effectively enhance vocabulary fluency development in the second language classroom. I will also discuss the importance of assessing vocabulary fluency in combination with breadth and depth tests to produce a complete assessment of learners' vocabulary development and growth.

Extensive Reading and Form-Focused Instruction

As we've seen, vocabulary knowledge has a number of dimensions, including breadth and fluency. In most language learners, vocabulary fluency development trails vocabulary breadth knowledge (e.g., Zhang & Lu, 2014). In other words, learners tend to be more successful in learning many words with low average fluency than they are in building fluency. This raises the importance of vocabulary fluency development in the second language classroom. Two major approaches to increase second language vocabulary knowledge, including vocabulary fluency, are extensive reading and form-focused instruction (FFI).

Extensive Reading

Extensive reading involves reading a massive amount of text, many times more than the amount covered in most language classes. To achieve this significant increase in volume, the text should be very easy for the reader. This is typically achieved with graded readers. Learners should choose a graded reader that interests them. To see if it's the right level, they can try the free extensive reading placement test from the Extensive Reading Foundation, or they can read a few pages and make sure they know all or all but one word per page. When they're reading, they should have the experience of seeing a "movie in their head" rather than always being conscious of decoding the words on the page. Once they've found their level, Nation (2015) recommends reading one book at their level each week.

The reason that extensive reading is effective at increasing fluency is that learners are working mostly with familiar vocabulary instead of dealing with a lot of new words, and they're seeing the same words repeated many times because of the massive volume of reading they do. According to Nation (2015), extensive reading offers more repetitive exposure to words that are applied in various contexts than FFI. Nevertheless, FFI can still be useful.

Form-focused Instruction

FFI refers to explicit instruction in teaching word forms and meanings, either before or when meeting them in a text. There is some empirical support for pre-teaching a word and its features before reading the same word in context (File & Adams, 2010). This appears to lead to slightly better fluency gains than its converse, reading a target word in context before an instructed focus on the word form and its features. However, FFI can be time-consuming and impractical if it is the only strategy used to increase vocabulary fluency.

Teachers and students often focus on explaining and learning the "hard words" in a text for FFI. But these rarely provide the best fluency gains. Vocabulary lists based on corpus data can help teachers in selecting and prioritizing words for vocabulary fluency exercises. One such list is Coxhead's (2000) Academic Word List (AWL) which consists of words most

frequently used in academic settings. At the end of a two-year longitudinal study of 300 first-year university students in China, recognition of the most frequent 2,000 words and the AWL was faster than that for less frequent words. (Zhang & Lu, 2014). While general word frequency is a key factor in vocabulary fluency development, words frequently used in academic settings can also an important fluency determinant in an academic setting.

Repetition is a Key Vocabulary Fluency Development Strategy

Repeated word exposure is needed for both vocabulary depth and vocabulary fluency. To get the more than ten repetitions per word recommended (Webb, 2007), a combination of extensive reading, FFI, and flash cards is useful. These practice activities facilitate repetitive word exposures across word contexts and meanings. As vocabulary fluency typically lags behind vocabulary breadth development, the implication is that fluency exercises of repetitive word instruction and exposures in different contexts beyond ten repetitions per word are lacking and badly needed in the second language classroom to reduce the gap between vocabulary breadth knowledge and fluency.

Building Vocabulary Fluency in Form and Meaning Recognition

When we increase vocabulary fluency, the retrieval of a word form and its meanings becomes more automatic and uses less attention. When we increase vocabulary fluency, we free up attentional capacity for higher order processes such as reading comprehension (Segalowitz & Hulstijn, 2005). That said, developing fluency in both form and meaning recognition of target words by extensive reading can be difficult as reading comprehension and processing surrounding word contexts can use up all the available attention, leaving none to develop fluency in target words.

A strategy that can reduce attentional demands for aspects other than the target vocabulary may speed the growth of vocabulary fluency. A recent study has shown that a code-switched reading method does just that for Chinese-English learners (Ong & Zhang, 2018). Under this method, graded readers are translated into the L1 save the target words that remain in the L2. The story and word contexts presented in the L1 are easily comprehensible and require little attention, allowing the reader to focus on recognizing target word forms and meanings. Furthermore, the sharp relief between target words left in English and the rest of the text in Chinese increases attention to target word forms, which may lead to fluency in form recognition. This cognitive-relief effect of codeswitched texts increases retention and retrieval of target words, potentially facilitating fluency in recognizing target word forms and meanings.

Importance of Testing Vocabulary Fluency

While measuring vocabulary breadth and depth knowledge is the central focus of vocabulary testing, assessing vocabulary fluency has been largely neglected by second language teachers and learners. A combination of vocabulary fluency tests with vocabulary breadth and depth tests would afford a holistic evaluation of learners' vocabulary development and help teachers identify learners weak in vocabulary fluency for remedial practice. Unfortunately, computer-assisted language testing is instrumental in measuring vocabulary fluency effectively. Computer-mediated tests enables accurate and real-time measurements for assessing vocabulary retrieval speed, and facilitates large-scale and automatic testing and scoring (Cheng, Matthews, & O'Toole, 2015). Nevertheless, a simpler fill-in-the-blank dictation can be used to assess recognition fluency. A sentence is printed with the target word replaced by an underline. In this test, the whole sentence is read aloud, including the target word, and test takers write the word that they hear in the blanks. If teachers assess vocabulary fluency more often, students will likely pay more attention to it.

Concluding Remarks

Second language vocabulary fluency is largely neglected by teachers in the classroom, both in learner development and evaluation. Teachers should not neglect vocabulary fluency development of their students in their focus on vocabulary size growth. Rich and repeated input in FFI and extensive reading should aid in raising and accelerating second language learners' vocabulary learning. Code-switched reading raises learners' lexical retention-retrieval that may increase the speed of accessing or retrieving target word forms and meanings. Importantly, evaluation of vocabulary fluency should be combined with the evaluation of vocabulary breadth and depth for teachers to assess learners' vocabulary knowledge holistically.

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