

*Using word lists to learn  
second language vocabulary  
is unproductive.*

### **In the Real World . . .**

AT A WORKSHOP IN JAPAN IN 1993, THE NOTED second language acquisition expert Rod Ellis asked the audience, which was composed of perhaps 90 percent Japanese EFL teachers and 10 percent English-speaking teachers, "I assume that most of you teachers here today learned English as a Foreign Language. What methods or techniques did your teachers use?" Most of the responses were murmurs of a few different methods, and then one older woman said in a somewhat shy voice but with impeccable English pronunciation, "Audiolingual."

Dr. Ellis's next question was addressed to this woman. "Do you think that was a good method? Was it effective?"

In typical Japanese fashion, she hesitated for a long time. She finally answered, "Well, I *thought* it was good," with emphasis on the word *thought* to indicate that she may have been wrong. In her voice—as we hear in many of our students' voices when we pose a difficult question to the entire group—you could hear that she was trying to give the right answer but hedge also. However, she really *did* think that

audiolingual was a good way to learn English—at least for her. She put emphasis on the word *thought* to indicate that she expected Dr. Ellis's next comments to explain why audiolingual was bad since that is what the vast majority of current methods books tell us.

It is worth noting that the woman went on to describe how she had learned English, what it was like to do the drills, and how she had since gone on to become an English teacher. All of this was delivered in impeccable English. Dr. Ellis made a final comment that the audiolingual method had clearly worked for her, and then he congratulated her on her excellent English.

This public display of not wanting to say the wrong thing—i.e., not wanting to say that the much maligned audiolingual method had indeed been an effective way to learn English—is reminiscent of the tale of the emperor's new clothes. An idea takes hold, and then it is very hard to undo it or let it go. Learning vocabulary from lists fits in this category.

Millions of people learned languages from the grammar-translation method for many decades (and some still do!), and it featured lists of vocabulary. In addition, students taught via the natural approach were often given lists of key vocabulary. With the audiolingual method, emphasis was on structured drills or patterns, but the words that learners had to substitute were often small lists of vocabulary. The vocabulary was not the target, but vocabulary lists were used nonetheless. In these methods, we can find learners who succeeded as well as those who did not. The point here is that no particular method or approach seems to have been that much more successful than another. Using lists appears to be neither detrimental nor miraculous.

There is little research to show that using lists actually hinders foreign language learning. Like any other aspect of language teaching, it is but one tool that can be used to help learners learn. When I hear people blindly criticize vocabulary lists, I like to think back to the exchange that I heard between Dr. Ellis and that English teacher in Japan.

## What the Research Says . . .

In a nutshell, vocabulary lists are not “in,” but we may be seeing a comeback now. This would certainly be good news for second language students, who need help in tackling the tremendous task of learning enough vocabulary to be able to communicate in their new language. Perhaps the worst that we can say about learning words from lists is that this activity is potentially dull (but effective). As a result, the big challenge in vocabulary teaching (and learning) is how to make this a pleasant activity given the large number of words to be learned (J. Hulstijn, personal communication, October 30, 1995).

In previous years, vocabulary texts contained lists of words that students were supposed to memorize and then be able to use when needed in communication. Reading passages and listening passages, for example, were sometimes preceded and/or followed by a list of words key to understanding the passage. These lists were in turn followed by exercises and activities of various kinds, but the format for the presentation of the words was a list.

When we talk about research on word lists in language teaching, it is important to make a distinction between research in which people memorize a list of known items and research in which people learn a list of new items. The latter is germane; the former is not. Many studies have looked at human ability to remember words in a list with the main focus being on how many words we can remember and how we can stretch this ability. The seminal work here is by Miller (1956), who found that adults, when given a list of items to attempt to memorize, have the ability to recall seven of the items—plus or minus two—without any special training. A logical follow-up question for psychologists was whether this ability could be improved. The answer is yes: by grouping the words into logical clusters, we are able to remember the groupings and, therefore, more items. Before we assume that there are implications from this for second language learning, let us examine this type of research more closely.

In this type of list-recalling activity, native speakers are given the

task of remembering as many words as possible from a list of, say, 20 words within a specific, short time limit. Participants in Group A are given a randomized list of 20 words while participants in Group B are given the same 20 words but grouped semantically or morphologically, as illustrated in Table 4.

**TABLE 4 List-Recall Words**

Group A	Group B
spoon creation Toyota eaten	fork spoon knife eaten
creatively blue Ford fork	Toyota Ford Pontiac driven
green drawn create pencil	red blue green drawn
Pontiac paper knife driven	paper pencil ink written
ink red creative written	create creative creatively creation

Obviously, it is easier for us to remember more items from Group B than we can from Group A. This does not, however, tell us much about learning lists of foreign language vocabulary (for real purposes). In ESL and other language learning settings, we are much more interested in lists of *new and unknown* items that are followed by a synonym, a translation, or some notation to help the learner remember them.

Consider the task of an English-speaking student who is learning Japanese as a foreign language. The task is not to remember a list of known (English) items such as *pencil*, *car*, *green*, and *tree*. Nor is the task to remember a list of unknown (Japanese) words such as *empitsu*, *kuruma*, *midori*, and *ki*. Instead, the learner's task is to learn a list of unknown items that correspond to some known items. Such a list would look like this: *pencil* = *empitsu*, *car* = *kuruma*, *green* = *midori*, and *tree* = *ki*.

Another difference between the mental task with these two types of lists is that Miller and others looked at the effect of short-term memory of items. In real language teaching, however, we are more interested in learners' ability to retain these new words over time. Furthermore, the

participants in this kind of psychological study had no real use or application for the material being memorized—that is, they were attempting to commit to memory a list of random words or numbers. In contrast, our students have a very different and real motivation because they will actually *use* this vocabulary.

Perhaps as a result of the more communicative approaches to language teaching, lists have fallen out of vogue. Learning from lists of de-contextualized words was thought to not be valuable, so lists in textbooks disappeared. Commenting on vocabulary materials common in the 1980s and '90s, Maiguashca (1993) noted that “we have come a long way from the random, haphazard lists of L2 words, each accompanied by supposed L1 equivalents, which used to characterize language textbooks and manuals in the past” (p. 89). Yes, there was a change in how words were presented. Yes, the words were often accompanied by L1 equivalents, especially in foreign language materials or in EFL materials. However, the words were not haphazard—they were more often than not thematically related to the topic of the reading or listening passage.

While it is sometimes thought that learning words from lists is an ineffective way to learn new vocabulary, empirical evidence supporting this notion is scant. (How the words should be grouped and whether they should be accompanied by a translation are separate issues discussed in Myths 3 and 4, respectively.) In fact, Clipperton (1994) states that “it would appear that when new words are first presented, it may be best to do so out of context” (p. 743). Carter (1987) adds that while advanced learners may benefit from learning vocabulary in context, beginning learners probably benefit the most from words that are presented in lists of translation pairs. Carter and McCarthy (1988) note that research has made claims that translation pairs are not only useful but also that large quantities of new vocabulary can be learned efficiently and quickly in this way. Nation (1993) strongly advocates what he calls a “vocabulary flood” for beginning learners. This flood would invariably feature learning words from a list.

In a study of 128 Hebrew speakers studying EFL, Laufer and Shmueli (1997) compared four modes of presentation, including lists: (1) words presented in isolation, (2) words in minimal context (i.e., in

one meaningful sentence) (3) words in text context, and (4) words in elaborated text context. In the isolated words condition, students were given a list of 20 words with L1 (first language) translations or English synonym equivalents. In the minimal context condition, students were given the same information as in (1) but with a single sentence of context. In the text condition, students read a passage that had all 20 target words with glosses in the margin. In the elaborated text condition, the material was the same text as in (3) but after lexical elaboration, thereby making the language, including the target words, more comprehensible. This last step represents what second language materials writers do with "real" material before adding it to their coursebooks.

In each mode, half of the target words were translated into the learners' L1 and the other half were explained in English. Words glossed in L1 were always retained better than words glossed in L2. As for the context effect, words presented in lists and in sentences were remembered better than words presented in text and elaborated text. Thus, in this study, *less* information was better. Retention scores were higher when less information or limited context was given about the word and lower when more information or extended context was given.

In another study, Prince (1995) examined the role of the L2 proficiency of learners and whether L2 vocabulary is presented in a list of L1 translations or in a series of L2 sentences (i.e., L2 context). Prince found that less proficient students were able to recall more items when they had learned the words in the translation condition rather than in the context condition. Thus, this research showed that some students perform better when they were given only a list of L2 words and their translations.

While lists may not be the most interesting way to present new vocabulary, the point here is that there is practically no evidence to suggest that learning new words in lists is in itself detrimental. One potential drawback heard from teachers is that students will gain only superficial knowledge of the new words. There is a concern that if students learn only the meaning as a translation or a simple synonym, then the students will not be able to actually use the word.

While this might initially appear to be a valid concern, learning a word is rarely a single off-on type of accomplishment, as we saw pre-

sented in the Introduction. Learning a word—that is to say, *knowing* a word—involves knowing many different kinds of things about that word. Thus, learning lists of words with a translation or with a synonym or simple definition can be seen as a solid first step. Once learners have a basic understanding of a word, they are then enabled to understand the word in passive encounters, such as in listening or reading, as well as use the word in the more active encounters in speaking and writing. (The terms *passive* and *active* as used here parallel Nation's [2001] use of *receptive* and *productive*.) At the very least, they are able to notice the word, and this attention aids in ultimate learning (Schmidt, 1990).

The argument that superficial learning of words in a list does not allow richer usage of the word—though intuitively appealing—does not hold up when we look at second language acquisition research. In Folse (1999b), I looked at the effect of exercise type on vocabulary retention (this will be discussed at length in Myth 8), but I also compared student production of new vocabulary, not just passive recognition. All of the target vocabulary words were presented in a list, and students were given specially written definitions, many of which were single-word synonyms or at best short definitions using very easy vocabulary. In the subsequent test of whether or not learners actually “knew” the word, learners had to demonstrate their knowledge by writing a definition or native language translation *and* a good example sentence using the word. While there was an effect for type of exercise, clearly learners were able to acquire words well enough to define them as well as use them in meaningful, original sentences.

If lists are not only acceptable but actually one of many useful tools in learning foreign language vocabulary, then this begs the question of which words should go in the lists. It is up to teachers to compile lists that are suitable for their students since no one is more familiar with the learning needs of a particular group of students than the teacher of that group. In addition, widely used word lists, usually targeting ESL students seeking to complete their tertiary studies in English, are available. In fact, several compilations are commonly used in materials and curriculum planning. These lists differ primarily in their intended learner audiences. These differences are outlined in Table 5.

**TABLE 5 A Comparison of Word Lists**

List	Words	Notes
<b>teacher-generated</b>	key vocabulary as chosen by the teacher or students	No one knows the students better than the teacher of those students.
<b>Dolch List</b>	220 sight words for elementary school children ( <i>big, before, eight</i> )	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Prepared in 1936</li> <li>• Based on frequency</li> <li>• Mostly function words; does not include concrete words</li> <li>• Useful in K-3 reading materials</li> </ul>
<b>General Service List</b>	2,000 words that are of general service to learners ( <i>the, city, prepare</i> )	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Published in 1953</li> <li>• Based on frequency</li> </ul>
<b>University Word List</b>	808 words that occur in academic text materials ( <i>alternative, feasible, revive</i> )	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Published in 1984</li> <li>• Based on frequency</li> <li>• Cover 8.5% of academic text words</li> </ul>
<b>Academic Word List</b>	570 word families that occur in a variety of academic text materials ( <i>consistent, aware, trigger</i> )	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Published in 1998</li> <li>• Based on frequency</li> <li>• Only words that occur in many different types of academic material</li> </ul>



As Table 5 indicates, the elementary school teachers have the Dolch List, which was prepared by E. W. Dolch in 1936. The words in this list are high-frequency words that make up from 50 to 75 percent of the reading material in English in U.S. elementary schools. Because these words are so important to basic reading, learners need to recognize them immediately; hence, they are often called **sight words**. These words cannot be learned through use of pictures (there are no concrete nouns on the list); children must be able to recognize these words at a glance before they can read confidently. By the end of third grade, all English-speaking students should be able to recognize the 220 words on the Dolch List.

The General Service List (West, 1953) is a list of 2,000 words whose frequency of occurrence make them of the greatest service to learners, hence the name for this list. Each word is followed by a number indicating the number of occurrences per five million words. The General Service List was widely used for years in designing content of graded readers and other learning materials. One problem with this list is the number of words. Each word has a headword and a list of its derivatives. For example, under the entry for *possession*, we find *possess* and *possessive*. Is this one word? Or three? And if it is three, is there one form that we should concentrate on? A more valid concern is the age of the words. Do these words reflect current usage?

Xue and Nation (1984) developed the University Word List (UWL), which is a list of about 800 vocabulary words that are common in academic texts. Academic texts were used as the data source because this list is designed to help nonnative speakers who are in an academic setting—that is, those who want to study in high school, community college, or university. This list does not include any of the words in the General Service List (GSL), so students should study the GSL before attempting the UWL. Nation (2000) estimates that this list covers 8.5 percent of academic texts. These words, though relatively few in number, are essential for learners to grasp the full meaning of an academic text.

More recently, Coxhead (2000) developed the Academic Word List (AWL), which consists of 570 word families. The selection process for these word families helped ensure a useful list of words. The words had

to occur in over half of the 28 subject areas in the academic corpus of 3,500,000 words from which the word families were pulled. In addition, words had to occur more than 100 times in the corpus, and words had to occur at least ten times in each of the subject areas. These guidelines produced a list of words that are useful for the widest possible range of nonnative learners of English. Reflecting the academic nature of this list, the list does not include any of the word families occurring in the GSL.

Each of these lists is useful in its own right. What teachers must do is to see if one of these lists can be of assistance not only to the obvious needs of learners but to the often unnoticed need of teachers, who may want to use these lists in selecting words to teach or even to know which words to avoid using in their speech so as to make their speech more comprehensible for their learners. (In addition to these word lists, it is recommended that teachers take a look at the list of Liu's [2003] idioms commonly used in spoken American English.)

In conclusion, lists are not the evil that they have been portrayed to be. Research to support this claim of evil simply does not exist. In fact, many learners like learning from lists and actually ask for them. Therefore, it is important that teachers be aware of the various professionally developed lists that may (or may not) be appropriate for their particular students.

## What You Can Do . . .

### 1. Don't hesitate to use vocabulary lists.

There is absolutely no reason not to present lists of words to your students provided that the words in the list are part of the regular curriculum. Hulstijn, Hollander, and Greidanus (1996) conclude that teachers should "give learners a list of important words for subsequent intentional learning, or, perhaps more motivating, encourage learners to

draw up an individual list of words that they consider relevant to remember" (p. 337). (Words from lists can be used to create flashcards, a popular learning strategy that is discussed in greater detail on pp. 99–102.)

## **2. Don't rely only on word lists.**

The problem here is not the particular method or teaching technique but rather the reliance to a large extent on *any* method or approach, including word lists (or drills or communicative speaking tasks). As with all things in life, moderation is the key. Good classroom teaching includes a variety of methods, approaches, and techniques to complement what is being taught and to whom it is being taught. Teaching ten concrete nouns to beginning learners might not be the same as teaching ten abstract nouns to advanced learners, so why would we use the same techniques?

## **3. Include your students' likes and dislikes as well as their classroom expectations in your teaching.**

Despite what you have been told in training courses, many students **do** like lists. Lists are clear. Lists are concrete. Students can easily see what they know and what they do not know yet.

In some cultures, rote learning is the norm and students will expect this type of presentation of material. Good teaching is moving learners from point A to point Z. A good teacher can quickly "read" where the learners are initially. This involves knowing something about how they are accustomed to learning. When I taught in Saudi Arabia, my students loved lists. They asked for them, and when I gave them a list, I found that I could pretty much expect the majority of the students to know the words on that list within a few class meetings. Rather than working against your students' expectations, why not use them to the group's advantage?