
Reviews of Books

Keith S. Folse, *Vocabulary Myths: Applying Second Language Research to Classroom Teaching*

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Folse, K. S (2004): *Vocabulary Myths: Applying Second Language Research to Classroom Teaching*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan. ISBN 0-472-03029-9

According to the back-page synopsis, *Vocabulary Myths* is intended to discredit a number of commonly-held myths about vocabulary acquisition, and to foster a paradigm shift that views vocabulary as fundamental to the process of learning a second language. It does this by presenting empirical research, and discusses what teachers can do in their classrooms to facilitate ‘true vocabulary acquisition’. Lofty aims indeed.

Actually, the first impression one gets is that parts of this book have simply been pieced together haphazardly, and that many of the sections for applying research to classroom practice have been tacked on as afterthoughts. Yet this impression would not be entirely justified. *Vocabulary Myths* turns out to be a useful summation of recent pertinent research on second language vocabulary acquisition, and contains constructive observations on how the research findings may be transferred to classroom teaching practices. The problem is that the reader is forced to sift through rather a lot of superfluous and ill-considered subject matter to get to the useful portions.

The author starts off with a crash-course on types of vocabulary – single words, set phrases, variable phrases, phrasal verbs, spelling/pronunciation, polysemy, parts of speech, idioms, collocation, connotation, frequency and usage. In doing so, Folse jams too much information into too few pages. He should have referred the reader to other, more thorough studies of these facets of language rather than try to cram them all into one chapter, but such citations seldom appear.

Folse frames each chapter as refuting a vocabulary acquisition ‘myth’, which is disconcerting. The first chapter heading reads: ‘*In learning another language, vocabulary is not as important as grammar or other areas*’. The reader processes this notion, then is forced into an about-face: it’s a myth, the opposite is the case. Mentally reversing each chapter heading becomes wearisome.

In chapter 1, drawing on important research in the area, the author points out that teachers often view grammar as being more important than vocabulary, despite evidence that a wide vocabulary base is essential for writing, reading, listening and speaking (Joe, Nation and Newton 1996; Newton 1995). But he then says (p. 23) that a perusal of current ESL textbooks turns up no vocabulary lists in the lessons/units or vocabulary index in the back of the book. What books is he referring to? *Cutting Edge* has vocabulary modules throughout. So does *New Interchange*. So do *Passport: English for International Communication* and *New Headway*. Folse’s statement is ill-conceived and inaccurate. Chapter 2 is concerned with the ‘myth’ that using word lists to learn

second language vocabulary is unproductive. Having made this statement though, the author fails to mention a single source which claims this. What myth?

From here on, though, a clearer line of thought begins to manifest itself. Chapter 3 provides a solid argument for presenting vocabulary in thematic sets (based on the lexis needed for the task or text at hand) rather than in semantic sets (learning lexis by rote, e.g a long list of colours). Chapter 4 denounces the 'myth' that translation into students' first language (L1) should be discouraged when teaching vocabulary. Folse points to pertinent research indicating that L2 learners pick up a word just as easily – sometimes more easily – through exposure to translation as through explanation in English. "Research is clear: Translations are not bad but are in fact a helpful tool in learning new foreign language vocabulary" (68). The argument omits some crucial points, however. How are we to implement translation into heterogeneous classes in an ESL setting, where three or more languages may be spoken among the students? Nor does the author pursue the issue that translation can easily dominate in language learning, at the expense of students' ability to communicate in the L2.

Chapter 5 contests the idea that inferring the meaning of a word from context is a good way to learn L2 vocabulary. Folse quotes Hulstijn (1992), who found that learners are just as likely to infer a wrong meaning as a correct one, and to remember the meaning they guessed, regardless of its accuracy. He harks back to his earlier thesis that L1 translation is better for retention than submerging students in a text full of complicated lexis and asking them to speculate on the meanings. Some of his practical suggestions are weak – he admonishes teachers to 'choose context clues, exercises and activities that match the proficiency level of your students' (84). No surprises there.

Chapter 6 argues against the notion that good vocabulary learners make use of only one or two particularly effective vocabulary learning strategies. In fact, the best learners use a wide variety of retention strategies. The author stresses the importance of teaching students retention strategies, but only to the extent that they are comfortable with them: if a strategy is burdensome, such as copying dictionary entries into a vocabulary notebook, then students will abandon it. Also, there is no quick fix – students must actively sit down and commit new language to memory. In contrast to his other 'practical suggestions' sections, which are frequently meagre, banal postscripts, Folse here delineates a number of effective vocabulary learning strategies, including the use of word-association keywords, mental images to remind one of a new word, examining the parts of a word, keeping a vocabulary notebook and so on.

The next myth discussed is that the best dictionary is a monolingual one. Although many teachers prefer students to use a monolingual dictionary, Folse argues that a student who does not know what word X means is unlikely to comprehend its explanation in a monolingual dictionary either. He suggests that bilingual dictionaries have been pilloried unfairly: 'There is no empirical evidence showing that bilingual dictionaries do anything but aid comprehension and contribute to overall lexical growth and acquisition' (120). The problem is that a bilingual translation often does not match the intended context, a concern exemplified by students who express a desire to 'lapidate' a ball. Folse advocates the use of *bilingualised* dictionaries, which have both the L1 definition and L2 translation of a given word. He also suggests that all the possible contexts of a word be explained to students. But even bilingualised dictionaries can be contextually confusing, and comprehensive explanations are often unfeasible in a language as convoluted as English. The problem of inappropriate translation will persist, no matter what kind of dictionary is used.

The last myth to be countered is that teachers, textbooks and curricula deal with L2 vocabulary adequately. Folse claims that coverage of vocabulary is in fact woefully inadequate

since it is something that everyone assumes learners will just ‘pick up’ through acquisitional osmosis. Few teachers attempt to stretch their students’ acquisition, despite the fact that ‘second-language readers rely heavily on vocabulary knowledge, and that a lack of vocabulary knowledge is the largest obstacle’ (Huckin and Bloch 1993). Having made this point, Folse outlines effective methods for practicing vocabulary, and explores their theoretical underpinnings. He discusses exercises for matching vocabulary with definitions, having students write definitions for new words, and writing words to match definitions. He gives examples and permutations of this type of exercise, to make them as attractive and effective as possible. For those of us who have reflected upon our own vocabulary teaching practices and been found wanting, these formulae for increasing retention are welcome tidbits.

All things considered, then, *Vocabulary Myths* is a useful book which encapsulates a great deal of significant research on vocabulary acquisition. Its discussion of these research findings is useful to ES/FL teachers who may previously not have given very much thought to processes of lexical expansion. It is unfortunate that some of the text is extraneous and superfluous; nonetheless, if the reader is willing to overlook this, then there are items of merit to be found. Perhaps the most beneficial course is to go through the book and pick out the useful elements – then find the original studies and textbooks referred to and read them at first hand.

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