

From the Bookshelf

Vocabulary in Language Teaching

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Vocabulary in Language Teaching by Norbert Schmitt. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000. Pp. vii + 224.

What's wrong with the following sentence? *The patient is in steady condition*. It's grammatically correct, isn't it? Nevertheless, if you are a native speaker, you are uncomfortable with it. You would say the patient is in *stable* condition. Unfortunately, ESL/EFL students make collocation mistakes like this all the time. Moreover, they get frustrated when they memorize long lists of vocabulary words, work on writing grammatically accurate sentences, and end up with the teacher saying "but we don't say it like that."

All too often, ESL teachers busy themselves teaching reading, writing, listening and speaking along with grammar, but assume that vocabulary will somehow take care of itself. In fact, many teacher training programs neglect it. Fortunately, Norbert Schmitt has written a book which thoroughly explores the nature of vocabulary and its vital role in language learning and teaching. Although lexical knowledge and competence are central to communication, few ESL professionals are aware of what students need to know about words and how to go about helping them acquire sufficient breadth and depth of lexical knowledge. With clarity and insight, Schmitt gives both the MA TESOL student and the established professional a comprehensive and broad examination of the lexical approach to language teaching.

The nine chapters in Schmitt's book provide a thorough introduction to vocabulary for the classroom practitioner who would like to teach vocabulary and exploit its potential contribution to language learning. The author begins by exploring what it means to know a word, drawing on Paul Nation's descriptions of the kinds of word knowledge that learners need. After reviewing the history of vocabulary teaching movements, Schmitt points to the future. He notes

that powerful computer programs, examining millions of words of text, are now yielding more information about vocabulary and its synergistic links to grammar. He puts a great deal of emphasis on multi-word units and word associations, then goes on to explore how "encyclopedic" vocabulary knowledge is acquired and how the instructor can coach students on developing skills and strategies for increasing their lexical competence. Finally, he examines approaches to assessing vocabulary knowledge.

In each chapter, Schmitt provides scores of explicit examples to illustrate the principle. Schmitt generously includes "Applications to Teaching" sections throughout each chapter. End-of-chapter exercises invite the readers to think about how to apply the principles in the classroom and how to relate them more deeply to their own teaching experiences. Six appendices and an extensive list of references complete the volume.

Though Schmitt does not explicitly point out that some of our cherished assumptions about vocabulary teaching may, in fact, be erroneous, the astute reader may be stimulated to question long-held precepts. Can students really learn new words from context? Should I require students to use only monolingual dictionaries? Should word lists be avoided at all costs? Just how many of the words in a given text do students really understand? Is the comprehensible input really comprehensible?

To read an extended, in-depth synopsis of *Vocabulary in Language Teaching*, go to the ORTESOL web site and click on the ORTESOL Journal link. If you are intrigued by any of the topics, go read the book itself. You will be well rewarded.

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