

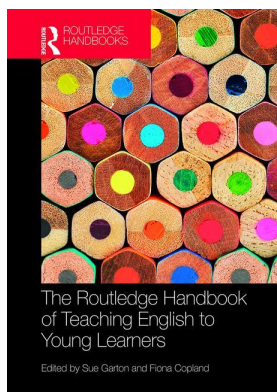
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Publisher: *Routledge*

Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number: 1072954 Registered office: 5 Howick Place, London SW1P 1WG, UK



The Routledge Handbook of Teaching English to Young Learners

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Vocabulary teaching for young learners

Publication details

<https://www.routledgehandbooks.com/doi/10.4324/9781315623672-15>

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Published online on: 10 Sep 2018

How to cite :- Torill Irene Hestetræet. 10 Sep 2018, *Vocabulary teaching for young learners from: The Routledge Handbook of Teaching English to Young Learners* Routledge

Accessed on: 28 Mar 2021

<https://www.routledgehandbooks.com/doi/10.4324/9781315623672-15>

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Vocabulary teaching for young learners

Torill Irene Hestetraet

Introduction

Developing a large, functional and age-appropriate L2 vocabulary is as important as ever before in YLL teaching of English. Many young learners receive massive out-of-school media exposure to the English language due to the significant role that it has as a lingua franca in today's globalised world. Children therefore start learning English informally very early, and may have prior knowledge of English vocabulary when they enter primary school (Lefever 2013). In many European countries, for example, the starting age of learning English has been lowered (Rixon 2015). Against this backdrop, the significance of L2 vocabulary for children's ability and need to express themselves becomes evident.

Before going any further, it is necessary to define some of the terms that will be used in this chapter.

Chunks, or *lexical chunks* or *multiword units*, can be defined as 'a group of words that commonly occur together, like "take a chance"', but the concept can also refer to 'word groups that are intuitively seen as being formulaic sequences, that is, items stored as single choices' (Nation 2013, p. 479). They are also referred to as *formulaic language* or *collocations*.

A *corpus* is a large electronic collection of written and spoken text. There are L1 corpora, learner corpora and child language corpora.

Explicit learning refers to learning that occurs through focused, deliberate study (Schmitt 2008), while *implicit learning* of vocabulary happens incidentally through exposure and use (Schmitt 2008).

A *word family* can be defined as a word and its main inflections and derivations, and the words within it all share 'a common meaning', such as the noun *leak* with its inflected forms *leaks* and *leaked* and derivations *leaky*, *leakiness* and *leakage* (Read 2000, pp. 18–19).

The concept *young learners* is defined as 'those at pre-primary and primary level, roughly from the age of 3 up to 11 or 12 years old' (Copland and Garton 2014, p. 224).

Historical perspectives

There is now a large body of research into the learning of L2 vocabulary (Schmitt 2008). This represents both recognition of the role of vocabulary and a shift away from grammar,

which for a long time received more focus, both in teaching and research (Zimmerman 1997). Corpus linguistics research since the 1990s has had a huge impact on the way the nature of vocabulary is now understood (Schmitt 2010; Wray 2009), most importantly because of ‘the use of corpus evidence to provide an empirical basis for determining vocabulary behavior, instead of relying on appeals to intuition or tradition’ (Schmitt 2010, p. 12). Most dictionaries today are based on electronic corpora with authentic examples of written and spoken language use, such as the British National Corpus (BNC), the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA) and the Collins Corpus. This means that our knowledge about how vocabulary is used and how words are combined into formulaic language has increased tremendously. There are also corpora of learner language, e.g., the International Corpus of Learner English (ICLE), and L1 child language, e.g., the Child Language Exchange System (CHILDES), which give us information about young learner language use specifically.

In a similar vein, Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) and sociocultural views on learning have brought about changes in the teaching of vocabulary to children. These perspectives are more learner-centred and allow for social interaction and learner-selected vocabulary, indicating a teacher role as facilitator for learning (Richards and Rodgers 2014, Mitchell et al. 2013).

Owing to research in the last few decades, we now have considerable knowledge about the way vocabulary is learned, both in L1 and L2 (Schmitt 2008). The L2 research mostly concerns older learners and, even though there are some studies of YLL vocabulary development (Orosz 2009), research on young learners is still scarce. There is broad agreement that a balance of explicit and implicit teaching approaches is to be recommended (Schmitt 2008; Nation 2013), although there has been a debate about how prominent the role of extensive reading should be in L2 vocabulary acquisition, in which Cobb (2008) argued against McQuillan and Krashen’s view that reading alone is enough for L2 vocabulary development (Cobb 2008, McQuillan and Krashen 2008). Explicit study of vocabulary is also necessary (Cobb 2007). This balanced view mainly concerns vocabulary teaching in general, and thus tends to assume older learners or adults, rather than young language learners. However, the research literature does take into consideration the beginner stages of vocabulary learning, and this, together with the general nature of the research, may therefore be seen as being generally applicable to YLL vocabulary development as well.

Such a balanced approach to vocabulary teaching in general is reflected in Nation’s four strands for the teaching and learning of vocabulary, which may also be relevant when addressing and balancing the vocabulary needs of children. The strands, applied to YLL vocabulary, are the following: *meaning-focused input*, which allows for input and exposure, for example, from children listening to stories, watching films or reading graded readers *meaning-focused output*, which may involve children taking part in spoken interaction or writing creative stories; *language focused learning*, which includes explicit study of the high frequency vocabulary items that the children need the most; and *fluency development*, which focuses on the recycling and consolidation of the vocabulary that is already familiar to the children (Nation 2013, pp. 1–2).

Recent YLL research has made some very interesting contributions to our knowledge about the L2 vocabulary development of very young children. This research suggests that learners pick up vocabulary and manage to engage in short dialogues even before they start school (Lefever 2013) and that pre-primary school children actively use chunks in child-initiated play in English (Mourão 2014).

Critical issues and topics

What vocabulary do young learners need?

Young learners are motivated by and enjoy learning the L2 vocabulary that they need in order to express their intended meaning, and they are eager to use this vocabulary productively, either in interaction or in writing (Hestetraet 2015, Szpotowicz 2009). With this in mind, it is evident that learning L2 vocabulary is of major significance in children's current and future lives. Long and Richards (2007) consider vocabulary as 'the core component of all of the language skills' and explain how it plays 'an important role in the lives of all language users, since it is one of the major predictors of school performance, and successful learning and use of new vocabulary is also key to membership of many social and professional roles' (Long and Richards 2007, p. xii). Its role as a predictor of mastery may be more essential than ever, both in countries where children are massively exposed to English vocabulary in and out of school, but also in parts of the world where this is not the case. Many children are expected to use English in their future private and professional lives. Thus children need to develop their L2 vocabulary both for their existing as well as their future lives, and this seems to be of critical importance.

The first critical issue in YLL vocabulary learning is vocabulary size development. When children start learning vocabulary, high-frequency words are the most important ones. These are the 3,000 most frequently occurring words in English. Knowing these words, learners can understand spoken English with 95% coverage, which means that that is the rate of words known, and 5% of the words will be unknown (Nation 2013, Nation 2006). Mid-frequency words are the 3,000–9,000 most frequent words, and high-frequency words are those above the 9,000 level.

A five-year-old child knows about 5,000 words in her L1, and goes on learning around 1,000 words a year. An educated L1 speaker knows about 20,000 words (Nation and Waring 1997, p. 7). Newer L1 research indicates similar, but slightly lower, results in vocabulary size. According to Biemiller (2005) and Biemiller and Slonim (2001), as explained by Anthony et al. (unpublished article), young L1 speakers of English learn 800–1000 words a year. For five-year-olds the average word family size was 3,000 and for eleven-year-olds it was 9,000. Based on these results, L1 learner vocabulary size can be estimated as 'age minus 2 times 1000' (Anthony et al. unpublished article). Thus the estimated vocabulary size of a nine-year-old would be: $9 - 2 \times 1000 = 7000$. These figures indicate both the possibilities and the challenges the vast number of words in English pose to the L2 speaker. This does not imply, however, that it is necessary for a YLL child to learn all of these words, as there are other considerations to be made.

YLL vocabulary size matters when it comes to what children may be able to understand in an L2. In order to be able to guess meaning from context when listening or reading, which is considered a very important vocabulary learning strategy, the optimal condition is to have 98% coverage and only 2% unknown words (Nation 2013). This constitutes one in every 50 running words. With this coverage, it takes 6,000 words to understand a children's movie, 7,000 to understand spoken English, 8,000 to understand newspapers, and 9,000 to understand novels (Nation 2013, 2006). With 95% coverage, it takes 3,000 words to understand spoken English and 4,000 for the remaining genres (Nation 2013, 2006). Recent research indicates that it is possible for L2 children to explicitly learn at least 300 words or more per year, with a vocabulary uptake of six words per hour of instruction (Orosz 2009). The critical issue in YLL vocabulary learning is therefore to develop vocabulary sizes large enough for the children to reach the goals of understanding spoken and written English, with a focus on high-frequency vocabulary.

One critical factor to consider when choosing what vocabulary to teach children is selecting age-appropriate vocabulary that relates to the children's cognitive development. Cameron (1994, 2001) outlines how within cognitive linguistics it is maintained that children learn basic level concepts, such as *chair* and *dog*, before they learn the more specific lower level concepts, such as *rocking chair* and *spaniel*, and the more general higher level concepts, such as *furniture* and *animal* (Cameron 1994; Cameron 2001). According to Cameron (1994), the higher level and lower level concepts 'will be acquired mainly through social interaction within educational institutions, because they are socially determined' (Cameron 1994, p. 32). Further, she maintains that this knowledge has implications for how vocabulary is chosen and taught, both when it comes to syllabuses and texts. It then follows that basic level concepts should be introduced first, gradually followed by lower and higher level ones as the children develop cognitively.

A second crucial factor concerns choosing age-appropriate vocabulary in the sense that the children find it meaningful. Meaningfulness is one of the principles within Communicative Language Teaching, stating that 'language that is meaningful to the learner supports the learning process' (Richards and Rodgers 2014, p. 90). When children self-select vocabulary that is relevant and meaningful to them, they become more involved and their motivation to learn is likely to increase. In this way, the teacher and the children can develop a dialogue about the vocabulary needs of the learners. The choices may involve what items to be expressed, to be learned and to be tested. Giving learners a choice promotes motivation, reflection, awareness and autonomy (Dam 2011, p. 43).

Interaction and vocabulary learning

Interaction is another significant issue in vocabulary development, relating to how to teach and learn the vocabulary that YLL learners need. Interaction supports YLL vocabulary learning. This view is grounded in both theory, mainly the interactionist approach, which 'is successfully demonstrating many interconnections between L2 interaction and L2 learning' (Mitchell et al. 2013, p. 187), and sociocultural theory, where dialogic communication 'is seen as central to the joint construction of knowledge (including knowledge of language forms)' (Mitchell et al. 2013, p. 248), and in YLL and vocabulary research. Nation explains that when learners interact to solve tasks, their attention to language features may support vocabulary learning (Nation 2013, pp. 172–173). Rixon (2015) asserts that it is not enough with 'mere exposure'; interaction is also 'required for optimum take-up and development' (Rixon 2015, p. 42). However, the transition from learning words explicitly to using vocabulary to partake in interaction seems to be a challenging transition for both young learners and their teachers (Hestetræet 2015). Attending to interaction through child-initiated play in the early years of learning English vocabulary, as suggested by Mourão (2014), may seem to help. Young children introduced to chunks to support child-initiated play in English learning areas (English corners) in pre-primary school successfully managed to interact in English, recycling the chunks they had learned and helping one another, even when the teacher was not present (Mourão 2014, p. 261). Developing teacher competence and knowledge about the role of interaction in children's language learning is another way it may be strengthened in countries around the world (Rixon 2015, p. 42). From a learner autonomy perspective, Dam suggests that authentic communication in the classroom promotes interaction:

If we want our learners to be genuine users of the target language, including outside the classroom, we must create a learning environment that is real life in its own right. This

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means that ongoing communication between teacher and learners must be authentic. This implies that the participants act and speak as *themselves* within their respective roles in the teaching/learning environment.

(Dam 2011, p. 44)

Choice of tasks in the YLL classroom also influences interaction and vocabulary development. According to Pinter (2015), stories used in task-based learning (TBL) ‘inherently elicit interaction and feedback’ (Pinter 2015, p. 119). Further, she explains, through the interaction the learners motivate ‘their partners to produce cognitively and linguistically modified, better-quality output.’ (Pinter 2015, p. 119).

The incremental process of knowing a word: form, meaning and use

In order for children to know a word, it is vital to know its form, meaning and use, both productively and receptively (Nation 2013, Schmitt 2008). The noun *dog* may serve as an illustration. To know the form of this word means to know its pronunciation, its spelling and its grammar. To know its meaning is to know that it denotes ‘an animal with four legs and a tail, often kept as a pet’ (Oxford Learners Dictionary). As the children grow older, they will also learn other senses the noun *dog* has, such as ‘a male dog’ as opposed to ‘a female dog’, and the synonyms and associations that it has, along with specific examples of dogs, such as *spaniels*, and that it is an example of the higher level concept *animal*. To know the use of the word *dog* involves knowing the collocations it forms, such as *to have a dog*, *to feed the dog*, *to walk the dog*, *a friendly dog*, *a family dog*, and *dogs bark*. It also means gradually knowing that it is a frequent word and knowing its register, for example that the word also has disapproving senses that are only used in informal contexts.

Children learn L2 vocabulary incrementally. This means that words are learned little by little, over time. It takes many encounters to develop word knowledge of form, meaning and use, and for this knowledge to be consolidated and enhanced. At the beginning stages of learning a word, Schmitt suggests, explicit study is to be recommended whereas later in the process learning from context, implicitly, can improve word knowledge (2008, p. 334).

Chunks for young learners

Learning chunks is also a critical issue for young language learners when building a functional vocabulary, because they provide children with ready-made phrases they can use to express meaning. They are also referred to as lexical chunks, multiword units, collocations and formulaic language. Learning chunks can help children develop fluency and express themselves more easily. Chunks, or multiword units, can generally be defined as ‘a group of words that commonly occur together, like “take a chance”’, but since there are different types of them, it should also be mentioned here that they can also refer to ‘word groups that are intuitively seen as being formulaic sequences, that is, items stored as single choices’ (Nation 2013, p. 479). Chunks have been described as being very useful for children, both when expressing their needs and when building up an L2 (Wray 2002).

Chunks serve important communicative functions in the language of both native speakers and non-native speakers. Wray (2002) reviewed existing studies of the use of chunks in L2 young learner language, mainly from the late 1970s and 1980s, some of them from an L2 naturalistic setting, others from an L1 environment. She found that children use chunks for socio-interactive purposes. These functions (Wray 2002, pp. 161–169) include to get

things done, such as in *Milk, please* and *Can I play with this?*; to demonstrate group membership, e.g., *How are you? Have a nice day! See you tomorrow and I'm sorry*; and demonstrate individuality, e.g., *I can do this, I know this*. Another function included using chunks to gain control of their language learning development, such as in *What's that?*; *I don't understand*. Since chunks seem to have these functions, it also seems important to provide young learners with them. Wray suggests that very young L2 learners 'seem naturally adept at employing formulaic sequences' and that in primary school L2 learning is enhanced in social interaction with peers (Wray 2002, p. 148). From this it may be concluded that the teaching of vocabulary may allow for both plentiful numbers of chunks as well as social interaction between the learners.

Very young learners in the pre-primary English classroom have also been shown to use chunks in interaction, during child-initiated play and in a Portuguese study (Mourão 2014). The children used chunks such as 'Let's play . . .', 'Your turn!', 'Raise your hand!', 'What's missing?', 'They're the same' and 'Help please' (Mourão 2014, p. 261), indicating that functions of the chunks were to initiate and take part in the play, as well as ask for help. The children were strongly motivated and were 'observed correcting each other, reminding each other of English words and expressions, and actively helping each other to play in English' (Mourão 2014, p. 261). Thus these Portuguese children managed to both interact and play through the use of chunks.

Some researchers, such as Wray, claim that chunks are prefabricated and 'stored and retrieved whole from memory' (Wray 2000, p. 465). There is a debate whether children learn chunks as a whole and then later unpack the grammar of them, or whether the chunks are rote-learned and dropped when the process of rule-governed grammar competence takes over (Myles et al. 1998, p. 327, cited in Kersten 2015, p. 134), or if both of these processes are at play.

Current contributions and research

One current research contribution to the vocabulary development of young learners comes from an Icelandic context, where a study of young learner language indicates that the children had picked up English vocabulary from exposure prior to starting school. The children were able to recognise vocabulary and participate in conversations. Media exposure is suggested as one of the most important factors influencing early incidental learning. A teaching implication pointed out in the study is that it is important to build on the prior English vocabulary knowledge young children have when they start school (Lefever 2013).

The second contribution is an investigation of the vocabulary size development of young Hungarian learners of English. Promoting childrens's vocabulary size development is one of the major tasks of the YLL teacher, and research may yield information about the process of vocabulary growth and how much vocabulary children may learn. The Hungarian study suggests a vocabulary uptake of 'about six words per contact hour' in the first years of learning English (Years 3–6, ages 9–12) (Orosz 2009, p. 191). An average of ten words were presented in each class (Orosz 2009, p. 183). There was an average growth of 348 words per year in Years 3 and 4, 481 in Year 5, and 280 in Year 6 (Orosz 2009, p. 188). The mean vocabulary size estimates ranged from 348 in Year 3 to 696 in Year 4, 1177 in Year 5 and 1457 in Year 6 (Orosz 2009, p. 188). The results indicate that the vocabulary growth is consistent and the teaching programme successful (Orosz 2009, p. 191). It could also be mentioned that in 'the first year of English, the most able performers appear to learn 1000

words' and that in Year 6 'the most able learner scored over 3000 words in the vocabulary size test' (Orosz 2009, p. 191).

Another recent contribution concerns the beliefs and practices of YLL vocabulary teachers. Language teacher cognition can be explained as 'what language teachers think, know and believe and the relationships of these mental constructs to what teachers do in the language teaching classroom' (Borg 2003, p. 81). Teacher cognition research has yielded insight into the beliefs and practices YLL teachers have, and contributed understanding that is useful for teachers and teacher educators in further developing professional knowledge (Borg 2009; Gao and Ma 2011). Some studies have been conducted into the vocabulary teaching of YLL English teachers. Lau and Rao (2013) carried out a qualitative study of the vocabulary instruction in early childhood classrooms in Hong Kong. Their main findings indicate that the teachers employed a 'limited variety of instructional practices in teaching vocabulary' (Lau and Rao 2013, p. 1378), with a focus on word recognition and memorisation, and these practices were in line with the teachers' beliefs. Similar results were found in another qualitative study of vocabulary instruction, in Year 7 in a Norwegian setting (Hestetræet 2015). The teachers did not seem to use the full range of teaching possibilities available, focusing on teacher-selected decontextualised vocabulary, leaving less room for spontaneous interaction. The teachers' prior language learning experiences seemed to influence them to either choose similar or quite dissimilar instruction (Hestetræet 2015, p. 50). Both of these studies suggest a need for balanced vocabulary teaching, which also includes contextualised vocabulary, such as in storytelling and reading and meaning-focused output, such as in spontaneous interaction.

Research on the use of ICT to promote language learning and vocabulary development provides interesting and innovative contributions to the field of YLL research. Schmid and Whyte (2015) investigated the use of interactive whiteboards and videoconferencing to support collaboration between young learners in primary schools in Germany and France. They explain how the use of ICT 'offers opportunities for exchanging meaningful information and ideas in authentic tasks' and how it 'allows interaction with speakers who do not share a native language and can provide scaffolding to support this interaction' (Schmid and Whyte 2015, p. 241). Citing Camilleri, Sollars, Poor, Martinez del Pinal and Leja (2000), they further maintain that 'oral, synchronous interaction is best suited to young learners who do not master the written language and cannot sustain motivation over weeks and months' (Schmid and Whyte 2015, p. 241). The findings of the study included motivational gain and 'enhanced communication skills' (Schmid and Whyte 2015, p. 252). What is more, the teachers and learners expressed that they found the activities authentic and that they preferred them over traditional ones, even though there was also room for more spontaneous interaction among the learners, as well as more learner-centredness.

Recommendations for Practice

The main recommendations for practice include having a varied and balanced approach to teaching YLL vocabulary. This means that it should allow for both explicit and implicit teaching and learning, which are processes that complement one another (Nation 2013, p. 348), and for Nation's (2013) four strands of meaning-focused input, meaning-focused output, language-focused learning and fluency development. Naturally, the use of ICT also belongs in a modern YLL classroom to support vocabulary learning.

Explicit vocabulary teaching: pre-teaching and word cards

The main benefits of explicit, direct vocabulary teaching include that it is fast and efficient and provides opportunities for conscious focus and controlled repetition, as well development of the word knowledge necessary for productive use (Nation 2013, p. 444). Such explicit teaching is most useful for high-frequency words, as these are the words that children need to learn first. They need these words to be able to understand when listening and reading, and to be able to express themselves through interaction and in writing. Pre-teaching may aid both text comprehension and vocabulary learning, and should involve rich instruction. Rich instruction includes aspects of meaning, form and use, as well as the context in which the words appear and the collocations in which they combine (Nation 2008, pp. 60–62). Rich instruction is time-consuming and should therefore be used only with the high-frequency words that the young learners need the most. Using pictures, objects and actions makes it easier for children to understand the meaning, and it aids memorisation, due to the meaning being ‘stored both linguistically and visually’ (Nation 2013, p. 121).

Another example of explicit teaching is to use word cards (Nation 2013, pp. 437f). By using cards children may develop their vocabulary size quickly. One of the reasons for this is that having to retrieve the meaning of the word on the card supports learning, and it gives better results than memorising lists where both the words and their meaning are provided. Spaced retrieval has proved to be particularly beneficial, as it allows for improving word knowledge every time. The word form, in spelling, is provided on one side of the card, and the meaning on the other. The meaning can be explained in the L2, translated into the L1 or be a picture that shows the meaning.

Implicit vocabulary teaching: graded readers, picturebooks, oral storytelling and Readers Theatre

Reading extensively is one of the most important ways in which children can learn vocabulary implicitly and further develop their vocabulary knowledge (Stahl and Nagy 2012, p. 49). Both L1 and L2 studies show that there is a strong relationship between children’s vocabulary knowledge and reading comprehension (Droop and Verhoeven 2003). Extensive reading can be explained as ‘the reading of large numbers of texts largely chosen by the learners where there are 5% or less unknown running words’ (Nation 2013, p. 219). With such a low percentage of unknown words, it is possible for young learners to practise the important strategy of guessing the meaning of these words from context. However, as young learners may still be in the process of learning to read in their L1, learning to read in their L2 may require support. Arnold and Rixon (2014) suggest what they refer to as a ‘bridge’ between the decoding stage and the ‘lift-off’ stage of reading for meaning and for pleasure to support YLL reading (2014, p. 30). Graded readers are simplified, complete books ‘that have been prepared so that they stay within a strictly limited vocabulary’ (Nation 2013, p. 247). These books are divided into different vocabulary levels, so that as the children’s vocabulary level develops, they can read books that have slightly more advanced vocabulary. According to Arnold and Rixon (2014), referring to the work of Claridge (2012), there is a lack of graded readers for YLL children, and therefore many teachers use graded readers that are developed for L1 learners, usually younger than the YLL children. As a result, the L2 learners may find the content of the books to be ‘of “low interest”’ (Arnold and Rixon 2014, p. 38). If the content is more mature, the learners may need support with cultural,

cognitive and textual challenges (2014, p. 32). In Arnold and Rixon's (2014) study about the implementation of an extensive reading programme with YLL children aged 6–12 in Hong Kong, L1 reading materials were employed, but adapted to fit the needs of these L2 learners of English. These adaptations included plenary sessions that focused on reading strategies, such as phonemic, grammatical and semantic awareness, but also on how to guess meaning from context by using cues from pictures and the text (2014, p. 36). The use of graded readers may support the consolidation and fluency development when the children encounter and retrieve the meaning of familiar vocabulary, as well as the development of reading skills in general (Nation 2013, pp. 248–249, Beglar et al. 2012).

Picturebooks represent another type of reading material that may support implicit YLL vocabulary learning and literacy development. Picturebooks combine text and pictures, and the pictures provide a context that facilitates the comprehension of unfamiliar vocabulary. According to Bland, 'the visual images in picturebooks are regarded and acknowledged as an effective scaffolding context, supporting comprehension' (Bland 2013, p. 31). The use of picturebooks encourages interaction between the pictures and the words, the teacher and the learners and between the learners themselves, inspiring the children's imagination. Mourão (2015) explains that with 'picturebooks, young learners are given a multitude of opportunities to use language that represents the pictures and the words and the interpretations created from the two modes coming together' (Mourão 2015, p. 214). Using picturebooks that capture the young learners' imagination is also a way of supporting their 'aesthetic, cultural, cognitive and emotional development' (Mourão 2015, p. 214). The authentic language in picturebooks is often rich in chunks (Kersten 2015, p. 138, Bland 2013, pp. 152–153) and includes repetitions of vocabulary items (Birketveit 2013, Kersten 2015). These repeated exposures support YLL vocabulary learning, as it may take at least 8–10 encounters to learn a word, and since word knowledge is consolidated when words are used repeatedly, but in different contexts (Schmitt 2010, p. 31). This illustrates that vocabulary is learned incrementally, little by little, through recycling. Another advantage of using picturebooks is that they 'provide visual support for weak or reluctant readers' and the learners can choose whether to 'rely mostly on the pictures or mostly on the verbal text or go back and forth between the two according to where their cognitive strength lies' (Birketveit 2013, pp. 17–18).

Oral storytelling is another example of how to teach vocabulary implicitly, through listening, in the YLL classroom, particularly for the very young learners. Oral stories 'have traditionally been told by word of mouth, with, these days, many retellings in written form and remediations in digital form or film.' (Bland 2015, p. 185). Oral stories contain short sentences and are rich in repetitive vocabulary and formulaic language and therefore offer plentiful exposures and recycling of vocabulary. What is more, oral stories have a plot with an archetypal story template, which young children easily relate to and which captures their imagination. This template has '*a logically linked series of events, a structure that includes a beginning, a middle and an end, characters that remain the centre of attention throughout, and to whom the story happens, and a resolution that offers some resolution or release*' (Crago 2011, p. 211, cited in Bland 2015a, p. 186, italics in the original). According to Bland, narrative such as storytelling to children who are not fluent in reading yet 'can play an enormous role in their L2 acquisition' (Bland 2015, p. 185).

Readers Theatre 'is essentially an activity in which a group reads a text aloud' (Drew and Pedersen 2012, p. 71). For young children it can be used with stories and literature, such as *Mr. Twit's Revenge* or *Rumpelstiltskin*, but also with simplified factual texts. The chosen text is made into a script with shorter parts that the children first rehearse and read aloud in turn, performing for one another and the rest of the class. This type of activity promotes

word recognition and the understanding of vocabulary (Drew and Pedersen 2012, p. 81). It also provides a context and allows for plentiful recycling of words both during the rehearsal and performance, and learners find it motivating to participate in the activity. According to Rinehart, Readers Theatre is ‘an integrated language event with an authentic communication purpose’ (Rinehart 1999, p. 87).

The use of ICT in vocabulary teaching

ICT, too, can be used to support both explicit and implicit vocabulary learning. An example of the former is to use electronic flashcard programmes. According to Nakata (2017), such programmes ‘have been developed in a way that maximises vocabulary learning’ (Nakata 2011, p. 17). As with ordinary flashcards, the learner is ‘asked to associate the L2 word form with its meaning, usually in the form of a first language (L1) translation, L2 synonym, or L2 definition’ (Nakata 2011, p. 17). The main benefits of using electronic flashcards include the efficiency with which they allow for learning a large number of words in a short period of time, and that the learners go on to use these words for ordinary, meaningful purposes. Nakata outlines how most flashcard programmes are flexible, so that it is possible for children to make their own cards, to choose between L2 definitions/synonyms or L1 translations depending on learner needs and to include both chunks and individual words. It is also possible to use sound files, images or video clips to link the programme to own or external vocabulary database, and to allow for receptive and productive retrieval and recognition and allow for generative use, which means to ‘encounter or use previously met words in novel contexts’ (Nakata 2011, p. 22, referring to Joe 1995, 1998; Nation 2001, pp. 68–70). Finally, the programmes have adaptive sequencing and expanded rehearsal functions, which means, respectively, that words that are hard to learn can be studied more and that words are studied more frequently right after the first encounter and then less frequently and between longer intervals as they become more familiar to the learners (p. 23).

ICT can also be used to promote meaning-focused output through online interaction between YLL learners from different countries. As shown in the study by Schmid and Whyte (2015) of young learners from Germany and France, video communication can be used for task-based learning. Using drag-and-drop functions, the children collaborated online to solve tasks such as creating an ID-card for all the learners, designing funny animals, and selecting food items to buy in the supermarket and to serve for breakfast. The tasks promoted production of comprehensible output through learner interaction, as well as improved communication skills and motivation (Schmid and Whyte 2015, p. 252). However, both the teachers and the learners from this study thought that there was more room for spontaneous interaction in which the learners could express themselves. This means that such considerations should be made in creating ICT tasks for the young learners. In both this study as well as in the use of ICT and websites generally, pictures, or the visual mode, have an important function. According to Stone (2007), ‘non-linguistic modes, particularly the visual, are gaining dominance’ and to ‘ignore the role of modes such as images, movement, sound, and layout would be to ignore central systems of meaning’ (Stone 2007, p. 52).

Teaching vocabulary through TBL

Choosing meaningful tasks, for example through task-based learning (TBL), may promote learner involvement and vocabulary production in the YLL classroom. Task involvement creates a need for using both familiar and unfamiliar vocabulary in a context. Learner

interaction is essential in task-based learning. Pinter addresses this when explaining that the ‘underlying principle behind both CLT and task-based learning is that authentic learner interaction, motivated engagement and purposefulness are important in making progress in language learning.’ (Pinter 2015, p. 114). For example, when children create TBL stories, it is the puzzle of the story that generates vocabulary production, and ‘learning happens by confronting gaps between the young learners’ existing linguistic repertoire and what emerges as a need/gap while talking about the puzzle with others’ (Pinter 2015, p. 119). Thus, by taking part in the interaction, the learners develop their awareness about the familiar vocabulary they already know and the unfamiliar vocabulary that they need to narrate the story. Pinter distinguishes between linguistic, social, cognitive and metacognitive demands that tasks may present to the young learner, and suggests that teachers contemplate the extent to which the learners have the necessary language, interaction skills and maturity when selecting suitable tasks for them (Pinter 2015, p. 119). Similarly, she recommends the learners to develop their TBL awareness by asking themselves questions such as if they understand the vocabulary communicated by their partner, if there is a need for repetition, if the language is difficult, if the information conveyed is important or not and if they are making task progress (Pinter 2015, p. 119).

The importance of tasks for incidental vocabulary learning is reflected in Laufer and Hulstijn’s (2001) *task involvement hypothesis*, in which it is suggested that the cognitive components *search* and *evaluation* and the motivational component *need* (Laufer and Hulstijn 2001, pp. 14–15, Nation 2013, p. 98) influence acquisition. The need component has to do with necessity, the search component with finding meaning of unfamiliar vocabulary and the evaluation component with selection of appropriate meaning, all of them either receptively or productively. For example, there is more task involvement in writing tasks than in reading tasks, because the need for vocabulary is stronger.

Writing tasks, for example through TBL, create a need for vocabulary for the children (Nation 2008, p. 83). However, learners are more likely to use vocabulary that they are familiar with than use words that they have just encountered (Coxhead 2007, p.335, Nation 2013, p. 270). This may suggest that young learners also need support when building up their writing skills.

Future directions

The massive exposure to English that many young learners are subject to is, undoubtedly, beneficial for their vocabulary development. Even though it is natural to embrace this early exposure, it still represents challenges for the teaching and learning of vocabulary. A logical implication is, of course, that vocabulary teaching must build on the learners’ existing knowledge when they start school, in order to remain meaningful to the children. Another consequence of the learners’ prior L2 vocabulary knowledge is that language teacher education should include methodology on how to teach young learners who already have this knowledge. A challenge from the learner perspective is that exposure to vocabulary does not necessarily involve acquisition, which may take many encounters as well as opportunities for receptive and productive retrieval. To this day, there is a scarcity of studies into young learner vocabulary development. More research is needed on children’s L2 vocabulary size and vocabulary knowledge from countries around the world, both where there is major and minor exposure to English. Further research is also needed in the field of teacher cognition about vocabulary teaching to find out what teachers believe and do in relation to current vocabulary theory and recommendations for practice. Finally, the use of ICT offers tremendous

opportunities for vocabulary learning in the future, through text, images and sound alike. Still, it seems that interaction between learners in the classroom will not go out of fashion.

Further reading

- 1 Bland, J. (Ed.). (2015). *Teaching English to young learners: Critical issues in language teaching with 3–12 year olds*. London: Bloomsbury.

This book has a collection of recent research from YLL scholars about a wide range of aspects relevant to YLL teaching, such as pre-primary English, immersion teaching, task-based learning, chunks, grammar, intercultural understanding, storytelling, picturebooks, drama and ICT.

- 2 Hasselgreen, A., Drew, I., and Sørheim, B. (2012). *The young language learner. Research-based insights into teaching and learning*. Bergen: Fagbokforlaget.

This is a collection of chapters on YLL research about a wide range of topics, including use of the the European Language Portfolio, reading stories, approaches to teaching reading, Readers Theatre, incidental pre-primary language learning, phonological competence, vocabulary and assessment.

- 3 Lefever, S. C. (2013). Incidental foreign language learning in young children. In Hasselgreen, A., Drew, I., and Sørheim, B. (eds.) *The young language learner: Research-based insights into teaching and learning*. Bergen: Fagbokforlaget.

Lefever's study offers interesting insight into Icelandic young learners' knowledge of English prior to starting school.

- 4 Nation, I. S. P. (2013). *Learning vocabulary in another language*, 2nd ed. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

The second edition of Nation's book is an essential reference work about current research on vocabulary for students, teachers and researchers alike.

- 5 Nikolov, M. (Ed.). (2009). *Early learning of modern foreign languages: Processes and outcomes*. Bristol: Multilingual Matters.

This book, edited by Nikolov, presents recent YLL research from many different international scholars and perspectives, such as for example using the Early Years Literacy Programme in a Norwegian context, the age factor and reading, vocabulary size development, factors in YLL vocabulary acquisition and target language use in China.

- 6 Orosz, A. (2009). The growth of young learners' English vocabulary size. In Nikolov, M. (ed.) *Early learning of modern foreign languages: Processes and outcomes*. Bristol: Multilingual Matters.

The study by Orosz offers valuable insight into the vocabulary development of young Hungarian learners of English.

Related topics

Grammar, assessment, materials, syllabus, technology in the classroom

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