**The importance of vocabulary in language learning**

**Арфеня Хачатрян**

Старший преподаватель кафедры «Мировые языки»

Yessenov University

(Aktau, Kazakhstan)

When it comes to learning a foreign language such as English, many students spend hours working through textbooks, doing grammar exercises and perhaps even watching the occasional Netflix show in their target language.

However, many people don’t realise that working on vocabulary is just as important, if not more important when it comes to success in learning a foreign language.

In this article, we’ll take a closer look at the topic of vocabulary and explore some of the reasons why it’s so important, and how it can help students achieve their language learning goals and achieve fluency faster.

Vocabulary is the foundation of language

In a nutshell, vocabulary is important because it’s the basis of all language. It’s the raw building blocks that we can use to express our thoughts and ideas, share information, understand others and grow personal relationships.

Even if we barely know a language and have zero grasp of grammar, we can still communicate (although we might end up sounding like cavemen!)

For example, pointing at a chocolate pastry in a French bakery and saying the few words ‘pain au chocolat’ with a friendly smile is just as likely to result in a tasty breakfast as uttering a grammatically perfect sentence. It would be nice to have both, of course, but it’s not essential.

As British linguists [David A. Wilkins](https://pdfs.semanticscholar.org/b57a/f2cfb67d02b3a0989ad0df5d794e90023bce.pdf%22%20%5Ct%20%22_blank)eloquently put it, “without grammar, very little can be conveyed; without vocabulary nothing can be conveyed.”

If you’re not entirely convinced yet, think about [how children acquire language](https://www.linguisticsociety.org/resource/faq-how-do-we-learn-language%22%20%5Ct%20%22_blank). Before they ever attempt complex structures, they’ll utter single words such as ‘duck’, ‘ball’ and ‘teddy’ and are usually able to communicate what they want.

Again, as with ESL students, their ability to communicate becomes much more effective once their language abilities develop. But the point here is that they are still able to communicate using vocabulary alone.

A large vocabulary helps develop other language skills

When you have a wider vocabulary in your target language it also helps support all four language skills: reading, writing, listening and speaking. As [Paul Nation](http://www.victoria.ac.nz/lals/about/staff/paul-nation%22%20%5Ct%20%22_blank)(2015) noted in[his paper on vocabulary learning](http://nflrc.hawaii.edu/rfl/April2015/discussion/nation.pdf%22%20%5Ct%20%22_blank): “Vocabulary is not an end in itself. A rich vocabulary makes the skills of listening, speaking, reading, and writing easier to perf

Reading

Vocabulary knowledge is perhaps the most important factor when it comes to reading comprehension, both for native and non-native speakers.

For example, if you sit down to read a book and you don’t know the vocabulary used, you’ll struggle to understand the meaning of the text.

You might end up looking up the words in a dictionary, guessing the meaning of the words from their context, or you might simply give up and find something else to read.

This can be disappointing, disheartening and also shatter your confidence.

This connection between vocabulary size and second language attainment has been widely researched over the years.

One of the most interesting of these was [a 2010 study](http://nflrc.hawaii.edu/rfl/April2010/articles/laufer.pdf%22%20%5Ct%20%22_blank) that discovered that a surprising 64% of variance in the reading score was due to vocabulary size.

(See also van Zeeland ([2013](https://academic.oup.com/applij/article-abstract/34/4/457/199564%22%20%5Ct%20%22_blank)), Hu and Nation ([2000](http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/9781405198431.wbeal1430/full%22%20%5Cl%20%22wbeal1430-bib-0006%22%20%5Ct%20%22_blank)), Schmitt, Jiang and Grabe ([2011](http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/9781405198431.wbeal1430/full%22%20%5Cl%20%22wbeal1430-bib-0012%22%20%5Ct%20%22_blank))

Listening

We see similar evidence when it comes to listening skills for the language student, for obvious reasons.

Clearly, if you have never seen or heard a particular piece of vocabulary in a second language, it will be much harder to recognise and decode the sounds and therefore extract the meaning.

If you’re an advanced language learner, you may be able to make sense of the word through context or by relating it to [other words in the same word family](https://textinspector.com/help/academic-word-list-and-phrases/), but this can be difficult.

As [Hilde van Zeeland](https://independent.academia.edu/HildevanZeeland%22%20%5Ct%20%22_blank) points out in her 2012 paper, [Lexical Coverage in L1 and L2 Listening Comprehension: The Same or Different from Reading Comprehension?](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/270815130_Lexical_Coverage_in_L1_and_L2_Listening_Comprehension_The_Same_or_Different_from_Reading_Comprehension%22%20%5Ct%20%22_blank)’, a student’s vocabulary knowledge isn’t the only factor when it comes to listening skills but it certainly plays an important role.

Speaking

If you’re a native speaker, you’ve probably experienced a time when a particular word is ‘on the tip of your tongue’ but you’re unable to remember it. It can be frustrating and often cut the conversation short.

It works in a similar way for a second language learner who hasn’t learned that particular vocabulary word in the first place. If they don’t know (or can’t remember) that piece of vocabulary, they will be unable to completely express their message.

For this reason, knowledge of vocabulary is widely considered to be perhaps the most crucial element when it comes to person’s ability to speak a foreign language

For example, in the 2013 paper, “[Vocabulary Knowledge and Speaking Proficiency among Second Language Learners from Novice to Intermediate Levels](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/271178063_Vocabulary_Knowledge_and_Speaking_Proficiency_among_Second_Language_Learners_from_Novice_to_Intermediate_Levels%22%20%5Ct%20%22_blank)”, Rie Koizumi asserted “…out of five factors (i.e., accent, comprehension, fluency, grammar, and vocabulary), vocabulary was the only one that affected level differences between learners at novice and intermediate levels. For learners at intermediate levels and above, all the five factors affected level differences, but vocabulary frequently appeared as the discriminatory factor.”

Writing

You’ll also find it much easier to express yourself in writing if you have a larger vocabulary. You’ll have a larger selection of words to choose from and you’ll be able to be more precise when you’re expressing a thought, feeling, event or idea.

Again, there’s significant linguistic research to support this idea. For example, in the 2008 study, ‘[Vocabulary Size and the Skills of Listening, Reading and Writing. Language Learning Journal’,](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/249049293_Vocabulary_size_and_the_skills_of_listening_reading_and_writing%22%20%5Ct%20%22_blank) [Lars Stenius Stæhr](https://www.researchgate.net/scientific-contributions/2021877686_Lars_Stenius_Staehr%22%20%5Ct%20%22_blank) stated “Learners’ receptive vocabulary size was found to be strongly associated with their reading and writing abilities…”

The more words you know in any language, the better you can express yourself.

A larger vocabulary can be a stepping stone to higher levels of language fluency

Put simply, the more vocabulary you know, the easier it will become to improve your language skills.

For starters, this knowledge will allow you to access a wider range of learning materials designed for both native and non-native speakers.

It will also help you understand these words from their context, naturally expanding your vocabulary and improving your language skills without needing to spend time looking the words up in a dictionary or asking someone for an explanation.

On top of this, the more vocabulary words you understand, the more you’ll be able to decipher the meaning of new words by breaking them down into their morphemes (smaller parts). (See [Nation, 2008](https://link.springer.com/referenceworkentry/10.1007/978-0-387-30424-3_147%22%20%5Ct%20%22_blank)).

A good example of this is the word, ‘unhappy’. If we break down this word, we have [un-] and [happy]. If we know that the prefix [un] is a [derivational morpheme](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GdrgdVgmX28" \t "_blank) (i.e.. it inverts the meaning of the morpheme it’s attached to), then we can work out the meaning of the word itself.

All of this saves a significant amount of time, boosts the language student’s confidence and also helps support fluency. They feel able to tackle more complex texts or social situations, which exposes them to an even wider range of vocabulary and allows them to further their knowledge of the second language.

Without a strong foundational knowledge of vocabulary, this can’t happen.

A rich vocabulary is associated with greater academic performance

Many ESL students are studying English because they want to attend an English-speaking university, excel at higher level study and land a well-paying job. A large vocabulary can help them do just that.

As you have seen above, a [wide vocabulary](https://www.tesol.org/docs/books/bk_ELTD_Vocabulary_974%22%20%5Ct%20%22_blank) is associated with a greater performance across all aspects of foreign language learning, including speaking, reading, writing and listening.

It’s important to note that this applies to both native speakers and second language students. This is why we encourage children to read widely in their native languages- the wider their vocabulary, the greater their chances to perform well academically.

**References:**

Bonwell, C. C., & Eison, J. A. (1991). ED340272 1991-09-00 Active Learning: Creating Excitement in the Classroom. ERIC Digest. *Higher Education*, 1–6.

De Lano, L., Riley, L., & Crookes, G. (1994). The meaning of innovation for ESL teachers. *System*, *22*(4), 487–496. https://doi.org/10.1016/0346-251X(94)90005-1

Dostert, L. E., Eddy, F. D., Lehmann, W. P., & Marckwardt, A. H. (1960). Tradition and Innovation in Language Teaching. *The Modern Language Journal*, *44*(5), 220. https://doi.org/10.2307/321110

East, M. (2019). Sustaining innovation in school modern foreign language programmes: teachers’ reflections on task-based language teaching three years after initial teacher education. *Language Learning Journal*, *47*(1), 105–115. https://doi.org/10.1080/09571736.2016.1221440

Liao, X. Q. (2000). Communicative Language Teaching Innovation. *ERIC*. https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED443294.pdf