Is explicit vocabulary focus the reading teacher's job?

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Abstract

This paper reports findings from a case study of the amount of explicit vocabulary focus (EVF) that occurred in a week of classes for one group of upper intermediate students in an intensive English program (IEP). To assess EVF, instruction from a total of 25 hours of classes was analyzed to see if the number of EVF events was more connected with the course (i.e., grammar, reading, composition, communication skills, or TOEFL), the instructor, or both. Data reveal that the reading course, long assumed to be the source of most vocabulary focus, may or may not be the main source in an IEP curriculum. Data from this study demonstrate that a better predictor of EVF in any given class or course may be the instructor, and that the number of EVFs in a week of intensive instruction is surprisingly low.

Keywords: vocabulary, curriculum, reading, intensive English program, ESL

Intensive English Programs (IEPs) provide English instruction for the increasing number of English language learners (ELLs) who hope to enroll in an academic program at an English-medium college or university. In the 2008–2009 academic year, approximately 675,000 international students, many of whom are nonnative speakers of English, attended a U.S. institution of higher learning, representing an eight percent increase over the previous year (Fischer, 2009). At the same time, millions of domestic students with limited English proficiency also entered colleges and universities.

For academic success, many experts agree that the single most important skill is reading (Grabe, 1991; Johns, 1981). An IEP curriculum typically includes composition, grammar, listening, reading, and speaking. IEPs usually provide extensive training in reading through an integrated course that combines reading skills with composition, or reading with listening and speaking, or through a discrete course that concentrates specifically on reading.

Researchers (Carrell, 1991; Clarke, 1980; Lee & Schallert, 1997) found that second language (L2) reading was somewhat more of a language issue than a reading issue, so coursework includes practice of reading skills but highlights language instruction, especially vocabulary. Vocabulary knowledge is important for all skill areas, but it is most clearly linked to reading. We know that vocabulary is related to proficiency in L2 listening (Chang, 2007; Huang & Eskey, 2000; Markham, 1999; Nation, 2006; Smidt & Hegelheimer, 2004; Vidal, 2003), and it plays an

important role in L2 writing (Astika, 1993; Coxhead & Byrd, 2007; Dordick, 1996; Engber, 1995; Ferris, 1994; Folse, 2008a; Jacobs, Hartflel, Hughey, & Wormuth, 1981; Lee, 2003; Pizarro, 2003; Santos, 1988). However, research data demonstrate that vocabulary knowledge most assuredly correlates highly with proficiency in L2 reading (Chung & Nation, 2003; Cobb, 2008; Davis, 1944; Grabe & Stoller, 2002; Hirsh & Nation, 1992; Horst, Cobb, & Meara, 1998; Hsueh-chao & Nation, 2001; Hu & Nation, 2000; Laufer & Sim, 1985; Nation, 2006; Nation & Wang, 1999).

Until 1998, the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL), the internationally recognized standard examination for acceptance into a U.S. center of higher education, consisted of three sections with the following names: listening comprehension, structure and written expression, and reading comprehension and vocabulary. These categories reflect the general consensus that vocabulary is part of reading. (The current TOEFL includes vocabulary in all skill areas of the examination. See Folse, 2008a, for more on how vocabulary is tested in the TOEFL.)

Academic success depends on reading ability, and reading ability is in turn strongly linked to vocabulary, but where is vocabulary being taught in IEPs? Very few IEPs have a separate vocabulary course. Is vocabulary being covered in the reading course? In other words, is the course subject the best predictor of where vocabulary is taught in an IEP, or is some other factor a better predictor? Because little if any research to date has examined this question, the current study seeks to identify where and how vocabulary is being taught in an IEP curriculum.

Our ELLs' Lexical Dilemma

Nation (2006) and others have demonstrated that readers need to know a whopping 95%–98% of the words in a passage to be able to comprehend it, thus putting ELLs at a stark disadvantage. In addition to the huge learning load, L2 learners face a real time crunch. Cobb (1999) aptly sums up this dilemma: "Students typically need to know words measured in thousands, not hundreds, but receive language instruction measured in months, not years" (p. 345). In both classrooms and real-world environments, ELLs value comprehensible input for language growth, but their limited vocabulary knowledge often means that the English they hear or read is not comprehensible and therefore cannot serve as useful input and actual intake (Folse, 2004); that is, much of the language to which they are exposed outside of the classroom cannot readily become comprehensible input. ELLs who benefit the most from communicative classroom practices that are currently in vogue are those who have higher levels of vocabulary. What ELLs have been saying all along—that they need more vocabulary—is evident from the lexical gap shown by current data.

ELLs have insufficient vocabulary knowledge, especially when compared with their native speaker counterparts. ELLs certainly recognize their lexical plight (Laufer, 1997) as a huge source of frustration (Green & Meara, 1995; James, 1996; Leki & Carson, 1994), but how limited is our ELLs' vocabulary? While an educated native speaker of English knows about 20,000 word families (Nation, 2001), which equates to approximately 70,000 words, ELLs know only a fraction of this number. In fact, the vocabulary of foreign learners who are high school

graduates and university students is less than a quarter of that known by their native speaking peers (Laufer & Yano, 2001).

An Overview of What We Know about L2 Vocabulary

Prior to 1990, few empirical studies of L2 vocabulary had been published, but we have since seen an explosion of quantitative and qualitative research in this important area. During the last two decades, for example, some L2 journals that had previously ignored L2 vocabulary dedicated whole issues to L2 lexical research (e.g., *The Canadian Modern Language Review*, 1996, 2006; *Studies in Second Language Acquisition*, 1999; *Reading in a Foreign Language*, 2008). Comparing four monographs on L2 vocabulary acquisition, Meara (2002) noted that books on vocabulary acquisition were so rare that his comparative review article would have been impossible before. Meara goes on to explain that Nation's (1990) *Teaching and Learning Vocabulary* was the first substantial work on L2 vocabulary for more than 50 years. Since 1990, many important books on L2 vocabulary have been published, most notably *Second Language Reading and Vocabulary Acquisition* (Huckin, Haynes, & Coady, 1993), *Vocabulary in Language Teaching* (Schmitt, 2000), *Learning Vocabulary in Another Language* (Nation, 2001), and *Teaching Vocabulary: Strategies and Techniques* (Nation, 2009).

Seeking to answer very practical pedagogical questions, hundreds of published studies have looked at a wide range of aspects of L2 vocabulary acquisition, including at least 10 areas of L2 lexical research as seen in Table 1. This research has examined the vocabulary being studied, what the learners do with vocabulary, and how teachers and activities practice target vocabulary. Meara lamented in 1980 that vocabulary was a neglected aspect of language teaching, but so much has been investigated in this area now that Laufer's (1986) prediction that L2 vocabulary would one day no longer be the proverbial stepchild of L2 research appears to have finally been realized. (See extant research on instructed L2 vocabulary learning and Laufer, 2009, for a timeline of influential L2 vocabulary studies of vocabulary acquisition from input and from form-focused activities.)

In his seminal *Learning Vocabulary in Another Language*, Nation (2001) spends only two very general paragraphs discussing "vocabulary in classrooms." Such a superficial discussion may at first seem illogical, but only a handful of studies have recorded vocabulary teaching or learning in actual classrooms. For example, Meara, Lightbown, and Halter (1997) examined the quantity of unknown vocabulary in 5 hours of classroom interaction in an intensive English program. Sanaoui (1996) analyzed 10 hours of French as an L2 classroom interaction by 10 different teachers. Lazaraton (2004) carefully analyzed 3 hours of one ESL teacher's use of gestures in accomplishing vocabulary explanations. Slimani (1989) examined whether student-initiated or teacher-initiated topicalization (i.e., introducing a topic or question) resulted in more vocabulary learning.

In an important study of whether teachers' explicit vocabulary focus (EVF) resulted in better student learning of vocabulary, Dobinson (2001) examined the relationship between the amount of EVFs in a given class with how many and which words were actually learned by the ESL students. Dobinson found that (a) words that are mentioned, repeated, focused upon, or at the

center of attention have a higher chance of being recalled and retained; (b) EVFs can result in more vocabulary learning, but such learning can be idiosyncratic in nature; (c) learners do not have to be part of the actual teacher-learner or learner-learner interaction about the vocabulary item to learn that item, that is, there are overt learners and covert learners; and (d) words that the teacher intends to focus on may be learned by many students, but words that the teacher did not focus on may be learned just as well, proving that vocabulary learning opportunities may occur throughout any lesson.

Table 1. *Studies of L2 vocabulary research*

L2 Lexical research area	Studies
1. Methods of vocabulary instruction	Dobinson, 2001; Jones, 2004; Laufer & Shmueli, 1997; Lazaraton, 2004; Mondria & Wit-de Boer, 1991; Rodriguez & Sadoski, 2000; Schatz & Baldwin, 1986; Schmitt, 2008; Tinkham, 1993, 1997; Tozcu & Coady, 2004; Zimmerman, 1997
2. ELLs' vocabulary learning strategies	Brown & Perry, 1991; Fan, 2003; Feyten et al., 1999; Flaitz & Feyten, 1996; Folse, 2009; Fraser, 1999; Gao, 2007; Gu, 2003a, 2003b; Gu & Johnson, 1996; Huckin & Bloch, 1993; Lessard-Clouston, 1994; Nassaji, 2003; Sanaoui, 1995; Schmitt & Schmitt, 1993a, 1993b; Stoffer, 1995
3. The development of second language learners' vocabularies	Barcroft, 2007; Cobb, 2008; Cobb, Spada, & Zahar, 2001; Ellis, 1994; Haynes & Baker, 1993; Horst & Collins, 2006; Laufer & Hulstijn, 2001; Laufer & Paribakht, 1998; Lee, 2003; Nesselhauf, 2003; Parry, 1993; Schmitt, 1998; Schmitt & Zimmerman, 2003
4. Comparisons of first language versus L2 for initial word presentation	Folse, 2007, 2008b; Grace, 1998; Hulstijn, Hollander, & Greidnaus, 1996; Prince, 1995
5. The differential difficulty of some words	Ellis, 1994; Laufer, 1997; Waring, 1999
6. The effect of different practice activities on learning	Barcroft, 2004; Chun & Plass, 1996; Cohen & Aphek, 1980; Folse, 2006; Joe, 1995, 1998; Laufer & Hulstijn, 1998; Nakata, 2008; Newton, 1995; Paribakht & Wesche, 1996, 1997, 1999
7. The effect of certain types of marginal glosses and web annotations on incidental vocabulary learning	Chun & Plass, 1996; Folse & Chien, 2003; Grace, 1998; Groot, 2000; Hulstijn, 1992; Hulstijn, Hollander, & Greidanus, 1996; Lomicka, 1998; Roby, 1991, 1999; Watanabe, 1998
8. The number of words L2 learners need to learn	Birch, 2007; Chujo & Utiyama, 2005; Cobb, 2007; Hazenberg & Hulstijn, 1996; Laufer, 1989; Nation, 2006; Vanderplank, 1993; Webb, 2008; Webb & Rodgers, 2009
9. The use of specific technologies such as online dictionaries and web sites, mobile phones, and blogs	Cobb, 1999, 2006; Loucky, 2005; Suzuki, 2004; Thornton & Houser, 2004
10. The words that students need to learn	Biber, 1986; Carlo et al., 2004; Coxhead, 2000; Freiermuth, 2007; Laufer, 1990; Laufer & Yano, 2001; Liu, 2003; Xue & Nation, 1984

Hulstijn (2001) cites three key issues impacting L2 vocabulary pedagogy: (a) the quality of information processing at the first encounter with a new word, (b) the number and nature of the rehearsals for a word to be learned, and (c) the training of automatic access to the word

knowledge necessary for fluent language use, an area that appears to be neglected in current L2 teaching.

The present study investigates the first two of these issues, that is, the extent to which vocabulary is encountered or rehearsed during a typical day in an IEP. Despite the number of extant L2 vocabulary studies, very few have observed the extent to which vocabulary is dealt with in ESL classes, even though it seems like such a basic question. Though teachers recognize their learners' lexical gap (Knight, 1994), many feel uncertain about how vocabulary can best be incorporated into their teaching plans (Read, 2004).

The purpose of this case study is to examine vocabulary teaching and learning in a typical IEP curriculum. Are IEP classrooms good sources of vocabulary? Do teachers explicitly teach vocabulary? Do students ask questions related to vocabulary? How is vocabulary being addressed, if at all? Is vocabulary more likely to be covered in the reading class? Or does some other factor contribute to the class in which vocabulary is being taught? The following three research questions guided the collection of data in the classroom observations in this case study.

> 1. To what extent is vocabulary being covered in an intensive English program?
>
> 2. Are explicit vocabulary focuses being initiated by the teacher, the students, or both?
>
> 3. Is there more attention to vocabulary in a particular course than in others? If so, why?

Method

This research was conducted at an intensive English program at a large North American university. Most of the students enrolled in the program to improve their English proficiency to enable them to complete their subsequent university studies in English. To meet this academic goal, students in this program take five 50-minute classes a day, that is, 25 classes per week, in one of four proficiency levels (beginning, lower intermediate, upper intermediate, advanced). The five courses in this program focus on specific areas, namely grammar, reading, writing, speaking (communication skills), and TOEFL preparation. One week of consecutive classes was observed, which was Week 5 in an 8-week course. Week 5 was selected because the students had had time to get to know each other and interact as a group.

Participants

The group of students that was observed in this study consisted of one section of 14 ELLs in Level 3 (upper intermediate) of a four-level program. Their proficiency level would be best summarized as approximately 475 on the paper-based TOEFL or 4 on the IELTS (International English Language Testing System). The students' first languages included Arabic (1), French (1), Japanese (3), Korean (4), Portuguese (1), Spanish (3), and Thai (1). They ranged in age from 17 to 27, with the average age being 19. There were 7 females and 7 males.

Based on a program placement test, students enter one of the four levels and are then assigned to a section within that level. The curriculum coordinator assigns students to a certain section within a level in a stratified random manner to balance gender, first language, and country of origin as much as possible. At the time of this observation, there were multiple sections of Level 3, and this particular group observed in this study was chosen by the program director as representative of the program's upper intermediate students. Therefore, the section of students that was chosen for observation in this study was in all ways a typical Level 3 group for this particular intensive English program.

Data Collection

For the purposes of this study, an EVF is operationalized as a learner's encounter with a word or a rehearsal for a word (Hulstijn, 2001). In teacher-initiated EVFs, the teacher draws attention to a word in some way, such as by writing it on the board, using it in an example sentence, repeating it, asking what it means, asking students if they know its meaning, or asking students to use it in an example. In student-initiated EVFs, the student focuses on the word by looking it up in a dictionary, asking the teacher or another student for its meaning, attempting to use it in an example, or even highlighting it in the book or on the worksheet. The purpose of this study was not to measure the depth of the EVF, but rather the *number* of occurrences.

The observer is an experienced language teacher and TESOL trainer with proficiency in Spanish, French, Japanese, and Arabic. This multilingual ability is important because the observer was able to note different types of vocabulary interaction that occurred, including interactions in an ELL's native language such as a Japanese ELL using Japanese to ask another Japanese ELL what a given word meant. In the class, the observer was not introduced to the students, and many of them simply assumed that he was a new ELL in the class. Interaction between the observer and the students in or out of class was very low, so the observer was not a participant in any way.

The observer sat in on all 25 hours of the group's classes during the week. As much as possible, he sat in the back row to avoid distracting the natural classroom interactions of the students and teacher as he was taking notes. Whenever any explicit vocabulary focus took place, the observer noted the duration of the EVF as well as what happened in the EVF.

An audio recording was also made of the classes and all audible EVFs were later transcribed. Because some classes featured interaction in small groups or pairs, not all interactions could be audio recorded. However, with a small class size of 14, the observer was able to watch and listen to student interaction in order to count EVFs in which students consulted a paper or electronic dictionary or asked someone about the meaning of a word. Obviously, some EVFs were most likely missed when classes had multiple interactions occurring simultaneously, but small group work did not occupy a large percentage of class time.

Occasionally, the observer also made notes about the activity regarding the demeanor of the class when EVF happened. Whenever a student asked a question of the teacher or another student, the observer kept a record of the question. At the end of each day, the observer went through his notes to clarify points that were not so clear due to illegible handwriting or incomplete notetaking.

There was very little interaction between the five teachers and the observer. The teachers had been asked not to call on or otherwise engage the observer in class. Some of the teachers knew the observer before this study, but none knew that the purpose of this study was to examine vocabulary focus in their classes. They were told that this study was being conducted to see how well the program's curriculum was organized from a student's point of view. Therefore, the researcher in essence became a silent student in the group for a week.

Results and Discussion

As seen in Table 2, attention to vocabulary varied widely by course and by initiator, that is, student or teacher.

Table 2. *Explicit vocabulary focus (*EVF*)*

Course	EVF	Average number of EVFs per class	Student-initiated EVF	Teacher-initiated EVF
Communication Skills	40	8	17 (43%)	23 (57%)
Composition	9	1.8	3 (33%)	6 (67%)
Grammar	24	4.8	7 (29%)	17 (71%)
Reading	15	3	15 (100%)	0 (0%)
TOEFL Preparation	33	6.6	3 (9%)	30 (91%)
Totals	121/week	24.2/day	45 (37%)	76 (63%)

Research Question 1. To What Extent Is Vocabulary Being Covered in an Intensive English Program?

In their week of study in an intensive English program, students in this upper intermediate ESL class had 121 EVFs. This number represents just over 24 EVFs per day, which equals 4.8 EVFs per class meeting.

Given the large number of words that ELLs need to know and the lexical gap that these learners face, explicit focus on fewer than 5 words per class seems extremely low. Unfortunately, many of these EVFs per day are not done in a way that facilitates remembering or recycling. For example, they are done orally with no accompanying visual cues. Very few instructors wrote a new word on the board. Many times one student asked about a word, but the instructor did nothing to draw the whole class's attention to the word, its meaning, or any strategy for remembering the word. The problem is not only the small amount of class time spent on vocabulary but also the limitations of the actual EVFs that occurred.

Research Question 2. Is Explicit Vocabulary Focus More Often Initiated by the Teacher, the Students, or Both?

Of the 121 EVFs in this week of ESL study, 76 were teacher-initiated, and 45 were student-initiated. Therefore, on average, 63% of all EVFs originated from the teacher, and 37% came from the students.

Clearly, the majority of EVFs are being initiated by the teachers. The lone exception was the reading instructor who did not initiate a single EVF during the entire week of observation. If this anomalous course is removed from the equation, the ratio of teacher- versus student-initiated EVFs increases to 72%–28%.

A very surprising finding here is that students are not asking more vocabulary questions in class. Studies have shown that students recognize their severe lack of vocabulary knowledge, and surveys from intensive language students (Green & Meara, 1995; James, 1996) indicated that they wanted more instruction in vocabulary. In the present study, however, students asked about vocabulary only 45 times in 25 class meetings, which averages just under 2 per class meeting (1.8). Given their own recognition of their lexical deficit, why did they themselves not attempt to make vocabulary a more integral part of their classes?

Even at this higher proficiency level, students asked questions about basic meaning instead of higher-order thinking. For example, student questions were almost always of the type "What does X mean?" instead of "What is difference between X and Y?" or "Can young people use X in conversation? Or, is it just for books?"

Research Question 3. Is There More Attention to Vocabulary in a Particular Course Than in Others? If So, Why?

Table 2 shows that the number of EVFs ranged from a low of 10 in the composition course to a high of 40 in the communication skills course. As these numbers represent a total of 5 classes per course, a composition class had on average 2 EVFs while a communication skills class had 8 EVFs, a fourfold difference.

These variations may be explained in terms of the textbook used in the course, the teacher of the course, and the nature of the lesson objectives for the classes in the five courses in the week that I observed.

Communication Skills Course

The communication skills course had the highest number of EVFs (40). This course did not have a textbook. The instructor introduced a current event from the news in each class meeting and proceeded to engage the entire class, encouraging students to offer their ideas and calling on specific students when they did not speak up on their own.

One unique characteristic of this instructor is that he made extensive use of the whiteboard. He wrote the current event on the board. As the discussion ensued, he wrote useful vocabulary items on the board.

The instructor pushed students to go beyond their comfort zone. When students relied on their simpler, known vocabulary, he often wrote on the board a word that was more appropriate for an upper intermediate level as seen in this exchange:

> T: What did you wear in high school?
>
> S: Yes, we had uniform with lines.
>
> T: Like this? (T draws a shirt with stripes on board.)
>
> S: Yes.
>
> T: We call this *stripes*. (T writes STRIPES on board and draws a line to the stripes.)

In this particular course, students asked many vocabulary questions, which I think occurred because they knew that this teacher was good at explaining vocabulary and would write words on the board. While almost all student-initiated EVFs were asking about the meaning of a specific word (e.g., "What is DRESS CODE?"), students in this course often asked for the word for a given concept as seen in these two examples:

Example 1

> S: What do you call a high shoe with a big thing at the back?
>
> T: That's called *a high-heeled shoe* in English. High heels.

Example 2

> S: What do you call noise when you sleep?
>
> T: Like this? (Demonstrates SNORE. Writes SNORE on the board.) The verb in English is *snore*.

Thus, in this course, students often asked for "label to meaning" questions as opposed to the more usual "meaning to label" questions.

Another reason that students may have perceived this teacher to be good at teaching vocabulary was that he also gave students strategies about how to remember specific words. For example, when a student asked about the meaning of *rookie*, the teacher wrote the word on the board, offered a short explanation, and then added, "You can remember this word because it sounds like COOKIE. rookie, cookie, can you hear the two words?"

Though most teachers just gave the meaning of the word in question to the student who asked about the word, this teacher often engaged the whole class in word learning. Students seemed to like this interactive teaching style:

> S1: What is the meaning *accurately*?
>
> T (to class): What do you think?
>
> S2: exactly
>
> S3: I don't know.
>
> S4: properly
>
> T: Accurately is like exactly. It means you have the correct answer.

Finally, this teacher was well aware of his students' lack of vocabulary with regard to the class materials and designed class activities to overcome this gap. In one class, he showed an excerpt of the movie *Men in Black*. In my years of class observations, I have seen many teachers play a large chunk of a video and then ask students general language questions such as "Did you understand the video?" or "Do you have any questions about anything that you did not understand?" Watching a large chunk of a video is not very so useful for explicit vocabulary learning because there is no opportunity for ELLs to focus on any specific unknown words. With a short chunk, learners can remember a section that they did not comprehend well, and teachers can better direct learners' attention to new words. In this class, the teacher pre-taught five new vocabulary words and asked the class to listen for them during the 3-minute video clip. He played the clip twice. After the second time, he gave students a matching activity with 22 vocabulary words from the clip. When I asked him afterward about these words, he told me that he intentionally included what he thought were known and unknown words but that all of the words were important for these students' language growth.

Composition Course

The composition skills course had the lowest number of EVFs (9). This course had a textbook, but it was not used in the week that I observed. The assignment for this week was to write an autobiography of themselves in six parts (birth, childhood, school, hero, event, future), and classes consisted of students silently writing their papers or editing their peers' papers. Though vocabulary plays an important part is making a paper sound more academic or proficient, the teacher did nothing to promote more advanced vocabulary usage in student writing. As Folse (2008a) explains, many writing teachers erroneously believe that vocabulary is not important in the quality of writing and is therefore not the writing teacher's job. In fact, vocabulary proficiency plays a large part in many high-stakes writing examinations.

Of the low number of EVFs (9), only 3 came from the students while 6 came from the teacher. This teacher-initiated figure would have been even lower had the instructor not used a poem in class as an example of an autobiography. In going over the poem, the teacher asked students to read the poem to figure out the meaning of 5 vocabulary items. Had she not used this poem, the number of EVFs for the week of classes would have dropped from 9 to an abysmal 4.

I noticed that many students used electronic bilingual dictionaries to find a word in English. On a positive note toward explicit vocabulary instruction, the teacher commented to the whole class upon returning their papers, "You used lots of special expressions in your essays, and that's good." What was missing was any teacher action to require students to do something with their vocabulary. With grammar, the teacher had students proofread their own papers to look for specific grammatical checks such as "All sentences need to have a verb" or "Make sure the main verb in sentences that begin with *he*, *she*, or *it* end in *-s* if it is present tense." The teacher then had students exchange papers and peer edit for grammar and punctuation errors. However, the teacher could easily have incorporated an explicit vocabulary focus in this course by asking students to do the following in their writing:

> • Use three vocabulary words from your reading (or some other) course. Underline those
>   words.

- Use at least two words from the Academic Word List (or any suitable list). Underline those words twice.

- If you have used a word that you are not sure of, put a box around it and I will check that.

Grammar Course

Of the five courses, the grammar course ranked in the middle. The grammar course had 24 EVFs for the week with 4.8 per class. Most of the EVFs came from the teacher (71%).

Grammar books are notorious for not introducing much new vocabulary in them (Azar, 2007). Having taught grammar courses many times and authored many published grammar materials myself, I know that authors intentionally suppress the level of vocabulary in grammar materials so that the learners can focus on the grammar being taught. Thus, I was surprised at 24 EVFs in a grammar course until I examined the content of this week's lessons. I found two factors that contributed to the higher than expected figure of 24 EVFs.

In one class, the teacher showed a 3-minute silent video clip of a man interacting with two other people as he was having problems opening the door to his house. At the end of the video, the teacher asked students to write what happened in the video. When students later took turns telling what they had written, the teacher provided appropriate words that no one had used, such as *landlady*, *village*, and *mock*. The grammar objective of this activity was for students to use the correct verb tenses in describing the series of past events, but the students stayed within their comfort zone and used words like *woman*, *town*, and *laugh* instead of the more appropriate *landlady*, *village*, and *mock*. In my years of class observations, I know that most grammar teachers tend to stick to the textbook, so this teacher's additional activity is perhaps the (good) exception.

The second reason for the higher-than-expected number of EVFs in this grammar course has to do with the grammar being studied this particular week. One lesson this week included verbs followed by infinitives or gerunds. The list of verbs followed by gerunds includes words such as *deny*, *dread*, *involve*, and *resent*, and many of the verbs in this list were unknown to students. I doubt that other weeks would have included so many unknown words.

Reading

Of all the language skills, we most often associate vocabulary with reading. Surprisingly, the reading course had very few EVFs. With only 15 EVFs for the week, each class had only 3 EVFs.

The textbook had reading passages followed by the usual comprehension questions. It also had at least one vocabulary assessment activity per chapter. In this book, the vocabulary activities were invariably matching activities between the word and its meaning, with very little emphasis on going beyond definitions.

Unfortunately, the teacher rarely exploited vocabulary. She often asked generic questions such as "Do you understand everything in the story? What about the vocabulary?" and never once in 5 hours of classroom interaction asked a student about a specific word or phrase. She never wrote any vocabulary on the board.

In my opinion, her vocabulary explaining skills need improvement, and she seemed to have a hard time gauging what upper intermediate level really meant. Consider this exchange:

> S: What is the meaning of hostage?

> T: A person who is kept against their will.

The teacher then gave an example of some hostages being held in the Philippines.

Very few students at this level know this meaning of the word *will*. The negative usage of the word *keep*, which is usually positive as in *Where do you keep your wallet at night?* is rare. Finally, the use of passive voice here makes this explanation unnecessarily complex. The teacher could have done a better job by creating an imaginary but plausible example for the students while using simpler grammar: "Imagine that a man robs a bank. When he is robbing the bank, the police come to the bank. The man wants to leave the bank freely, so he takes a person with him for protection. He tells the police 'Don't follow me or I will kill this person.' That person that he is holding is called a *hostage*." At the same time, the teacher should write the word *hostage* on the board so that everyone in the class knows exactly what the teacher is explaining. While an example is integral to almost all explanations, my impression as an observer was that none of the students understood her reference to the Philippines.

A similar problem exists with this exchange:

> S: What does "he had a dusty face" mean?

> T: His face was weatherbeaten, older.

The word *dusty* is probably not a word that is worth learning, but its root *dust* is. The teacher should have written the word on the board and asked students if any of them knew the base word *dust*. The teacher's synonym *weatherbeaten* is a very poor choice because no one at this proficiency level would know this word. When it was spoken quickly and then followed by the word *older*, students most likely heard *weather* and *older*, so *dusty* is somehow connected to old weather.

A perusal of the book material for the week revealed many vocabulary words that students at this level would probably not know. The students, however, asked surprisingly few questions. This may have been because of the teacher's weak ability in explaining vocabulary or the lack of attention given to vocabulary by the teacher in this class.

Given the low emphasis on vocabulary in this reading class, I found it painfully ironic in the last class of the week that the teacher announced that the students would have a vocabulary test the following week. To prepare students for this test, the teacher wrote 20 words from the week's story on the board, which the students had to write down. She then told the students to look up and copy the definitions from the glossary in the back of the textbook. It was evident to me by

the end of the week that students were not very happy in this course. The lack of direct teacher instruction contributed to a low morale in the class, which may have accounted for the tendency of many students to arrive late for this course.

TOEFL Preparation Course

The TOEFL preparation course had the second highest number of EVFs (33). The TOEFL instructor had the highest number of EVFs (30) and the highest percentage of EVFs (91%). However, this high number may have been due to the content of the week's lessons.

Within a TOEFL preparation course, the content of any one class can vary tremendously since the examination itself covers speaking, listening, reading, and writing. Vocabulary plays a key role in all four of these language skills, and as we have seen in this study, the number of EVFs across courses has varied considerably.

The topic of three of the five classes this week involved Latin and Greek word roots, such as *terr* (land), *spec* (see), and *contra* (against). In the first class, the teacher went over the list of twenty roots in the coursebook. She then asked students to come up with words illustrating these roots. Students whose first languages also use these roots were able to come up with more complex examples not known by many students, and these examples then became words that the teacher explained to the whole class. In particular, students whose first language was not a Romance seemed to be overwhelmed by this activity as they had to learn a new root, its meaning, and then a word from their classmates. In the second class, the teacher had flashcards and a practice sheet for words using these roots. In the third class, the teacher distributed small slips of paper with one of the roots on it. She asked students to write the meaning and a word example for each root. I noted that few students could provide the meaning, but most could give an example word.

One strength of this instructor was that she pointed out new vocabulary to the whole class. Note the following exchanges that occurred in a lesson on adjective clauses:

Example 1

> S (reads a sentence that she wrote): The girl who is wearing a floral suit is our neighbour.
>
> T: Floral? Did you use your dictionary?
>
> S: Yes.
>
> T: I thought so. How many of you can explain the word *floral*?

Example 2

> S: The man who is wearing sunglasses is bald.
>
> T: Who can explain *bald*?
>
> S: Not so much hair.
>
> T: Yes, that's right. In this picture, he's bald, but that's normal because it's a bust of a man. A bust is …

In Example 1, the teacher acknowledged a word that she had gauged to be new for most of the students in the class. In Example 2, she actually explained the adjective *bald* and the noun *bust*. I noted that in this class, students frequently copied down new words that the teacher identified as new vocabulary. It was clear to me that they trusted her to give good vocabulary words.

In two of the week's five classes, the teacher spent the first 10 minutes of the class discussing a current event. In doing this, she used new vocabulary, which she wrote on the board, and students also asked her questions regarding words that they needed to talk about the current event as in this exchange:

> T: Did you hear the news about the conjoined twins in Singapore?
> Class: (no response)
>
> T (writes CONJOINED on the board): What do you think conjoined means? We studied this word part.
>
> S1: Joined together.
>
> T: Yes, that's right.
>
> S2: I saw this. They, the doctors put the babies, very tiny, in the … I don't know what you call this place for protect the tiny babies.
>
> T: Incubator. (T writes INCUBATOR on the board.)

Like the communication skills instructor, this teacher had a good grasp of which words her students might not know. Furthermore, her teaching style included explicit attention to vocabulary. In my opinion, even if the week's lessons had not included the word roots, I think this instructor would have focused a great deal on vocabulary anyway.

Conclusions and Recommendations

An educated native speaker of English knows about 20,000 word families, or 70,000 words (Nation, 2001), but ELLs know only a fraction of this number. As ELLs attempt to catch up with their native-speaking counterparts, an important objective of their IEP courses should be to learn as much vocabulary as possible. Every IEP needs a systematic plan for vocabulary instruction, including explicit teaching, practice, and assessment.

At the same time, learners need to be more trained to be more aggressive in seeking out new vocabulary that they need. Based on these observations of 25 hours of classroom instruction in an intensive English program, student-initiated EVFs were very low. Cultural norms that favor teacher-centered classes and individual personality differences could account for a certain amount of student reticence. However, students may benefit from training in strategies to be more aggressive learners (Feyton, Flaitz, & LaRocca, 1999; Flaitz & Feyten, 1996; Folse, 2009; Fraser, 1999).

The data from this study revealed that in a typical IEP, vocabulary is not being covered well. Explicit focus on vocabulary was in short supply. While developing fluency with previously studied material is a key goal of many classroom activities, it is unlikely that desire to practice

fluency of previous material could account for the low number of EVFs. Furthermore, the quality of many of the EVFs that did occur was unimpressive. Though the students had a class where grammar was being systematically covered and where composition rhetorical modes were being taught according to a course plan, there was no similar plan for vocabulary. I must add, however, that the curriculum of the IEP in this study is the result of many teachers' and administrators' collaboration and offers a good program of study. My experience with many IEPs through teaching, program visits, and communication with teachers in those programs is that almost no IEPs have a plan for teaching vocabulary across the levels the way they do for the teaching of grammar.

There seemed to be little correlation between the type of course and the number of EVFs. In TESOL literature, reading is the course most often associated with vocabulary (Cobb, 2007; Grabe & Stoller, 2002; Horst, Cobb, & Meara, 1998; Hsueh-chao & Nation, 2001; Hu & Nation, 2000; Nation, 2006; Nation &Wang, 1999), but the reading course in this case study had the lowest number of EVFs. In vocabulary teaching, a much more important factor than the course seemed to be the instructor. As noted in the descriptions of the five courses, it was the instructor who either promoted or ignored vocabulary teaching and learning in the classes. However, vocabulary instruction should not depend on the teacher or on impromptu teachable moments. Instead, experts (Graves, 2000; Marzano, 2004; Nation, 2001, 2009) call for a comprehensive, systematic approach to teaching vocabulary.

We know that vocabulary knowledge is crucial in language proficiency in all skills, and ELLs themselves often complain about their lack of vocabulary knowledge as well as the lack of focus on vocabulary in program curricula. Despite these factors, vocabulary is not being given the same systematic attention that grammar, composition, and reading are given.

Teachers need training in multiple ways that vocabulary can be taught and assessed. Such training would include explicit teaching techniques such as writing words on the board for all students to see and doing short drills or other activities to assess and recycle vocabulary items, as well as implicit vocabulary focus through reading and listening tasks that include, focus on, and recycle vocabulary items (Nation, 1990, 2009). Curriculum and textbook designers need to move vocabulary to the forefront so that it receives the attention that it rightfully deserves (Nation, 2001). In an IEP setting, teaching vocabulary is not just the reading teacher's job. Instead, focusing on vocabulary should be the responsibility of not only all teachers but also all learners. Teachers need training in ways to increase EVF in their classes, and learners need training in noticing, practicing, and retaining vocabulary.

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