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"We cruised through a terrible storm": A Critical Evaluation of *Vocabulary in Use: Intermediate* (Cambridge University Press).

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Abstract

This paper begins with a background to *Vocabulary In Use Intermediate* and an overview of the importance and treatment of vocabulary in the recent history of language learning. In Part One, the approach underlying the treatment, selection, organization and presentation of vocabulary in the book is discussed. In Part Two, the text is evaluated in the light of what is known about vocabulary acquisition and approaches to vocabulary acquisition, with particular emphasis on the role of memory, strategies, and interaction and their importance in the learning of vocabulary. The paper concludes with an evaluation of the text according to three principles for effective vocabulary teaching, some observations from field-testing of some of the exercises, and some comments regarding it's suitability for classroom use.

INTRODUCTION

i) Background to the book.

Vocabulary In Use Intermediate is described as a reference and practice book for the learning of vocabulary for students of English at intermediate level. First published in 1999 it belongs to the best-selling Cambridge *In Use* series of grammar and vocabulary self-study reference books. Since the publication of Murphy's hugely successful

English Grammar in Use (1987) this series has steadily expanded to include 25 different titles which have sold millions of copies worldwide. Cambridge claim on their web-site that the secret of the success of the books lies in "their trusted format of grammatical (and lexical) explanations on the left-hand pages and exercises on the right". Similarly, the objectives of the book are also straightforward and are listed below as they appear on the back cover.

1. Teaches approximately 2,500 useful words and expressions.
2. Easy-to-use format gives vocabulary explanations and practice exercises on facing pages.
3. Content-based topics teach words and phrases used for work, travel, money, health, weather, leisure activities, the Internet, and more.
4. Shows how to use new words and phrases in context, with emphasis on important collocations.
5. Suggests strategies for learning new vocabulary.
6. Includes a complete index with phonetic transcriptions, and an answer key.

However, while the objectives are clearly stated, the authors' view of SLA, and the teaching and learning of vocabulary in particular, are neither explained in a preface nor immediately obvious. The title appears to reflect a view of language learning held by Willis (1990. 75) who, in supporting his claims for the merits of a lexical syllabus, wrote: "learners need to find out as much as possible about language **in use**, and this cannot be done unless they are exposed to language **in use**". Certainly, the explanation and practice format marks a progression from the largely non-contextualized vocabulary exercise books of two decades ago, of which Watcyn-Jones' *Test Your Vocabulary 2* (1981) is

a prime example.

ii) The importance of vocabulary in the recent history of language learning.

If we accept that *Vocabulary In Use Intermediate* is a state-of-the-art text book, far superior to the *Test Your Vocabulary* series, we need to consider recent developments in the field of SLA and vocabulary acquisition which have allowed this progression to take place. Numerous commentators, notably Richards (1976), cited in Coady (1997. 273), have pointed out that the teaching of vocabulary is often neglected perhaps especially due to the emphasis on linguistic structure and oral/aural skills development. This was particularly apparent in audio-lingual methodology prevalent in the 1960s, and to a lesser extent in the 1970s, wherein simple vocabulary was used for extensive controlled practice of verb forms, as observed by Stern (1983. 464).

This state of affairs appears to have continued beyond 1976 through the CLT (Communicative Language Teaching) boom of the 1970s and 1980s where the teaching of vocabulary once again played a passive, or secondary role. Howarth (1998. 30) suggests that the learning of collocations in particular was downgraded because it "smacked of phrasebook learning". However, in the absence of data to indicate which words and MWUs (multiword units or chunks) should be learned first, or how, many practitioners evidently hoped that lexical acquisition would take place automatically. Meanwhile, the return to popularity of form-focused approaches was initially expressed through a revival in interest in grammar (Tonkyn 1994), perhaps further delaying the rise to prominence of vocabulary.

Finally, *Vocabulary In Use Intermediate*, a solid book of 266 pages

informed by corpora, implies a view of language learning where lexical competence is no longer subordinate to both linguistic competence and communicative competence. In fact, Schmitt has argued that they are central to both since understanding vocabulary in discourse is a pre-condition to understanding grammatical patterning (Schmitt 2000. 143) and control of lexical phrases is crucial for fluent language production (Schmitt and Carter. 2000). Furthermore, explicit teaching of the most frequent words is generally considered to be preferable to exclusive reliance on implicit teaching, or reading-based acquisition, especially where the chances of learning or at least understanding a new word in this way on first encounter are only 15% (Coady, 1997. 276 and Schmitt, 2000. 137).

PART ONE The approach to vocabulary

What approach underlies the treatment, selection, organization and presentation of vocabulary in Vocabulary In Use Intermediate?

i) Teatment

Referring back to objective no. 1, *Vocabulary In Use Intermediate* aims to introduce both words and phrases. As mentioned by Robinson (2002), in a "lexical" view of vocabulary, inspired by Lewis (1993), recent attention has focused more on MWUs than the more traditional "grammatical" view of vocabulary, which prioritizes the study of single word lexemes. Where do the authors, Redman and Shaw, stand on the issue of the relative importance of each view and resultant approach?

In attempting to classify multi-word chunks, Howarth (1993, 1996), cited in Robinson (2002) distinguishes functional expressions and composite units. At first sight, the text features a large number of the former including gambits such as "How are things at school?" in Unit

99, which covers "vague language", and formulae, such as "I regret to inform you…" in Unit 100 (formal and informal language). While proverbs are conspicuous by their absence, idiomatic language is explored in Unit 19 (idioms and fixed expressions) and elsewhere. Regarding composite units, collocations receive greater coverage, in line with the consensus among many commentators that these are more important in language learning (Robinson 2002). One reason for their importance, according to Coady (1997. 282) is that MWUS are not acquired efficiently through what he describes as "ordinary language experience" and that learners need to develop collocational proficiency through explicit instruction. To this end, both grammatical collocations, such as phrasal verbs (Units 17 and 18) and lexical collocations, such as "make a profit" (Unit 68), receive appropriately detailed coverage throughout the book, but especially in the section entitled "phrase building" (Units 14-27) covering twenty-seven pages.

In contrast, a large part of the text is devoted to the grammatical study of vocabulary. It should be pointed out that even in a lexical view of vocabulary some grammar morphemes are highlighted for the learner, as they are in Willis' lexically-indexed task-based syllabus for the Cobuild course (1988). In this sense, the excellent and detailed coverage of morphology and word formation in *Vocabulary In Use Intermediate* (Units 8-13), including units on affixation (Units 8, 9, and 10), is not symptomatic of a strongly grammarian view of language in itself. However, in Willis' lexical syllabus (Willis, 1990. 81), abstract labels such as parts of speech are avoided since they were considered unhelpful to the learner who has to struggle with words as surface forms of the language. On the other hand, a learner with no knowledge of parts of speech terminology, and other "language for describing

language", which is used so extensively throughout the text, would likely find *Vocabulary In Use Intermediate* quite a struggle. While the terminology is clearly presented and explained in Unit 2, and wherever necessary, this grammarian view of vocabulary would not suit learners with no interest in, or patience for, studying metalanguage.

But just how grammatical is the book and, remembering that Cambridge already publish another title *Grammar In Use Intermediate* (Murphy, 1987), where do the boundaries lie? Robinson (2002) points out that lexical words, nouns, verbs, adjectives, and adverbs are the most productive classes in the study of vocabulary and special focus on them is provided in the section entitled "parts of speech" (Units 28-33). However, it is surprising that "non-productive" parts of speech such as articles, also receive coverage in Unit 28, as they do in Murphy's book, Unit 69, where instinct tells me they genuinely belong. Nevertheless, while the first sixty-eight units of Murphy's work, or about seventy percent of the book, deal with verb forms and tenses, reference to tense in *Vocabulary In Use Intermediate* is restricted to one sentence in Unit 34 (page 70) and a table completion exercise of the infinitive, past tense, and past participle of only six verbs in Unit 53 (page 109). A larger reference list of past forms and participles of irregular verbs would have been a useful addition, especially since the learner is required to know these to complete some of the exercises.

To sum up, it appears that a broad-based approach is taken, encompassing both grammarian and lexical views of vocabulary learning, and emphasizing the fact that they are inextricably linked, as pointed out by Schmitt (2000. 14). However, the view expressed by Howarth (1993), cited in Robinson (2002) that an understanding of

grammar is necessary for understanding how to use lexical items, is echoed in Unit 19 (Idioms and fixed expressions, page 40), where the authors warn of several difficulties in using idioms, including the fact that "they may have a special grammar".

ii) Selection

To return to the issue of MWUs, and lexical collocations in particular, corpus evidence is invaluable in illustrating how we use phrases and groups of words and their frequency in different contexts. Frequency is an important consideration since first, as Nation and Waring (1997. 8) claim, it is a measure of usefulness, and second, as Moon (1997), cited in Robinson (2002), points out "there are a lot of multi-word items in the language, but a lot of them are very infrequent". In this sense, much of the quality of *Vocabulary In Use Intermediate* is a reflection of the quality of the 600 million word Cambridge International Corpus (CIC) which informs it.

Data from the concordancing of such corpora, rather than pure intuition, as had been the case in the past, is therefore absolutely vital in selection of content, especially in analyzing and presenting common syntactic behaviour of words, or colligation (Richards, 1976: Assumptions about knowing a word number 4, cited in Robinson, 2002). According to the Cambridge web-site, corpora reveals that, for example, the word which most commonly follows 'worry' is 'about', and this particular co-occurrence is introduced in Unit 15, page 32.

An important part of the CIC is the Cambridge Learner Corpus (CLC), a large collection of examples of English writing from learners of English all over the world which provide information on what

problems learners experience with vocabulary. This information, and it should be pointed out that Howarth (1998. 31) bemoans the lack of production-based research into collocations, allows the authors to engage in extensive and impressive "troubleshooting" of commonly occurring errors. For example, learners are advised: "Notice the use of 'be + adjective' (not 'have +noun') in these expressions: I'm hungry" (Unit 20, page 42).

Also concerning the possibility of error, and with reference to Richards' third assumption about knowing a word (Richards, 1976), cited in Robinson (2002), learners are warned of limitations imposed on use through register constraints. These are considered important by Schmitt (2000. 36) and, for example, the idiom "kick the bucket" is marked as "inappropriate when offering sympathy" (Unit 19, page 40).

iii) Organization

Attempting to analyze the principles underpinning the organization of the contents of the book (see pages iii) to v), or the design of the syllabus, is no simple task. With reference to the work of White (1988) in the field of curriculum design, the following picture of a hybrid syllabus emerges. On the one hand, the subsections covering word formation, phrase building and parts of speech appear to belong to what White (1988. 46) would term a traditional 'Type A' syllabus, which aims to provide the learner with analytic knowledge, or knowing about the language, or in this case knowing about vocabulary. On the other hand, the first section on learning strategies, to be discussed later, belongs to the 'Type B' syllabus tradition, where the focus is learner-centred and concerns 'how' rather than 'what' (White 1988. 46-47). The largest section of the book (Units 38-90), however, is content-based (see

objective no. 3 earlier), recognizing the fact that topics are central to our schemata, where individual words have no inherent meaning, except as Langacker (1987), cited in McCarthy (1990. 47), explains "through the access they afford to different stores of knowledge". In this sense, each topic-based unit is designed to activate appropriate knowledge domains and word association networks in the learner. These cognitive domains are either basic, for example Unit 59: *Food*, covering sets of fruits and vegetables, or abstract such as Unit 46: *Human feelings and actions*, covering jealousy and fear.

In addition to the components described above, two other types of syllabus are included. First, a mini functional syllabus is incorporated in the section entitled "Phrase-building" where Units 24-27 introduce exponents for a variety of functions such as apologizing (Unit 24), with accompanying notes on the importance of giving excuses to promote awareness of pragmatic aspects of language use. Second, there is a notional syllabus in Units 91-95 dealing with concepts such as time. In sum, the contents, while drawn from a variety of fields, are organized and graded effectively and it is difficult to think of a topic area that is not included.

iv) Presentation

Regarding the contents of each unit, presentation of vocabulary is similarly well-organized and well-grounded in lexical acquisition theory. The relationship between words and meaning is explored through synonymy, hyponymy, antonymy, relational opposites, and part-whole relations. First, regarding synonymy, the semantic relations of sameness between 'tall' and 'high', for example, are explained and the concept checked through exercises in Unit 93. Second, regarding

hyponymy, words are frequently organized in taxonomies or sets as in animals and insects in Unit 43. McCarthy (1990. 20) observes: "The task of the learner is to map L2 taxonomies on to L1 and, ideally, note overlaps, gaps and partial correspondences". Also in Unit 93, a note is included, perhaps with native speakers of French and Spanish in mind, that 'great' does not mean 'big', or 'large' in English. Similarly, in order to foster good mapping habits, in Unit 16 learners are advised: "Translate the prepositional phrases in this unit into your own language. Which ones are exact translations, and which ones aren't?".

Also concerning taxonomies, superordinates and co-hyponyms are presented in 'ways of speaking, looking and talking' (which, in a rare proof-reading oversight, should surely have been 'walking') such as 'whisper, stare and stroll' in Unit 46.

Regarding antonymy, the concepts of markedness and gradability are also explored. Again in Unit 93, marked adjectives are introduced as in 'How long,/wide/tall..?' although, disappointingly, the incorrect use: 'How short/narrow....?' is not highlighted, or explained. As for gradability, 'scale and limit adjectives' are clearly graded in Unit 31, from 'terrible' to 'fabulous' and wind is graded from 'breeze' to 'hurricane' in Unit 39, for example. Part-whole relations are also utilized extensively with parts of the house in Unit 50, and parts of the body in Unit 43. While attention is drawn to differing sense relations in synonyms, as with positive and negative aspects of "slim" and "skinny" (Unit 44), full componential analysis, using grids, is not utilized, despite claims to the benefits of illustrating semantic features of similar words in this way by commentators like McCarthy (1990. 31) and Sokmen (1997. 249). Schmitt (2000. 88) suggests that such grids may be too

large to learn, and that they may be more useful in later stages of acquisition, beyond the core meaning presentation stage.

PART TWO The approach to vocabulary acquisition

Is it consistent with what is known about vocabulary acquisition?

i) The role of memory

The role of memory in vocabulary acquisition cannot be underestimated, but neither can the fact that we cannot actually observe words in the human brain. However, the following three points about the storage of words and MWUs in the mental lexicon are universally accepted. First, as mentioned earlier, words are not stored at random (Schmitt, 2000. 43) and second, the mind tends to chunk lexical phrases (Schmitt, 2000. 75) justifying the topic-based presentation of both words and phrases in sets. Third, as Schmitt mentions several times in *Vocabulary in Language Learning* (2000. 137 for example), vocabulary is learned incrementally with much of what is stored in short-term memory never being transferred to long-term memory. The extent to which the third point is taken into account by the authors of the text shall be discussed later, but the success with which the learner can retain new lexical items depends to a large extent on the learner's use of strategies.

ii) The role of strategies

Presentation and practice opportunities for VLS (Vocabulary Learning Strategies) receive impressively extensive coverage throughout the text, and the fact that only four strategies out of the 31 listed in Schmitt (2000. 134) are not included is testimony to the comprehensive nature of their treatment. See Table 1 below. This includes

coverage of dictionary use (Units 3 and 4) which, according to Coady (1997. 287) is essential since research shows that learners waste time and make mistakes here.

Table 1. Coverage of vocabulary learning strategies in Vocabulary In Use Intermediate

Note. The left-hand column is copied from Schmitt's list of vocabulary learning strategies (1997) cited in Schmitt (2000. 134). The right-hand column contains references to the strategies that are presented in *Vocabulary In Use Intermediate.*

Strategy groups:
DET=Strategies for determining the meaning of a new lexical item.
SOC=Social strategies.
MEM=Strategies for memorizing a new lexical item.
COG=Cognitive strategies.
MET=Metacognitive strategies.

Strategy group	Strategy	Reference in *Vocabulary In Use Interm.*
Strategies for the discovery of a new word's meaning		
DET	Analyze parts of speech	p 10 First decide new word's part of speech
DET	Analyze affixes and roots	Units 8-10 Affixation
DET	Check for L1 cognate	p 201 How many direct translations can you find?
DET	Analyze any available pictures or gestures	p 96 Pictures used to aid meaning discovery
DET	Guess meaning from textual context	p 41. Guess meaning of three idioms in text
DET	Use a dictionary (bilingual or monolingual)	Units 3 and 4

SOC	Ask teacher for a synonym, paraphrase, LI translation	Unit 7 Classroom language
SOC	Ask classmates for meaning	Unit 7 Classroom language

Strategies for consolidating a word once it has been encountered

SOC	Study and practice meaning in a group	p 29 Try to do this exercise with a friend
SOC	Interact with native speakers	

MEM	Connect word to a previous personal experience	p 115 "Have you ever needed stitches?"
MEM	Associate the word with its coordinates	p 6 Record common partners together
MEM	Connect the word to its synonyms and antonyms	p 137 Replace underlined words with synonyms
MEM	Use semantic maps	p 6 Organize words on a page
MEM	Image word form	p 89 label picture without looking at opposite page
MEM	Image word's meaning	p 69 Think of something you always do
MEM	Use Keyword Method	
MEM	Group words together to study them	p 31 Keep a record of collocations
MEM	Study the spelling of a word	p 9 Find the silent letters
MEM	Say new word aloud when studying	p 4 Practise saying words out loud
MEM	Use physical action when learning a word	

COG	Verbal repetition	p 4 Practise saying words out loud
COG	Written repetition	p 4 Erase answers and write again later
COG	Word lists	p 117 Write down a list of clothes you like
COG	Put English labels on physical objects	
COG	Keep a vocabulary notebook	Unit 2 "Keeping a vocabulary notebook"

MET	Use English-language media (.....newscasts)	p 169 Buy 3 English newspapers, read/underline
MET	Use spaced word practice (expanding rehearsal)	p 4-5 Routine and review: Develop active and systematic approach. Maintain interest through study technique variation. Planning

MET	Test oneself with word tests	p 4 Test yourself
MET	Skip or pass new word	p8 Continue reading on encountering unknown word
MET	Continue to study word over time	p2 Be on the lookout for words you have studied and note whenever you meet them

Recognizing the importance of memory, it seems appropriate that 11 of these VLS deal with consolidating the word following initial encounter. This feature of *Vocabulary In Use Intermediate* reflects a growing appreciation of the value of strategies in SLA, and especially in skills development, since the 1980s. Indeed there is some overlap with these strategies such as asking for clarification ("What does X mean?", Unit 7) contained in numerous lists for listening strategies (Rost, 1990. 112) and inferring meaning from context, or lexical guessing strategies (see page 41), which are also considered important in the development of reading skills (Oxford, 1990. 321-4). Although claims to the effectiveness of teaching them to learners has not gone unchallenged, it is generally recognized that GLLs (Good Language Learners) use better and more strategies (Chamot, 1990. 169) justifying the huge range of VLS presented.

While it would be reassuring to know which strategies are more likely to be effective, the authors allow the learner not only choice of strategy use (Unit 1. B), understanding this is often governed by personality and motivation, but also encourage learner choice of which words to learn. For example on page 49: "Look up *go* in a...dictionary. You will find many meanings...but just concentrate on two or three that you think may be useful...Try to learn them". As Schmitt (2000. 144) comments: "If students choose some of the words they study, they may well be more motivated in trying to learn them". The key benefit of

this approach is that it helps learners recognize their own style of learning (Sokmen, 1997. 256) and page 5 contains a questionnaire to raise levels of awareness in the learner regarding preferred learning styles. Finally, building a varied strategic repertoire is essential if they are to continue to learn new words (Nation 1997. 11).

iii) The role of interaction

While the above account of VLS concerns the development of autonomous learning, *Vocabulary In Use Intermediate* is also clearly influenced by interactive approaches to learning where two important features are observable. First, vocabulary is introduced and practiced in "real-life-like" interactive contexts such as exercise 78. 3, page 159: "Complete this e-mail message", and in discourse where the items presented are most likely to be encountered. Second, Allen (1983), cited in Coady (1997. 281) claims that vocabulary is best learned in situations where the learner perceives a need for it and most units contain exercises which introduce a communicative context for using the lexical items introduced on the opposite page. Questions such as: "Do you have any ex-boyfriends or ex-girlfriends who speak English very well?" (page 97) can be used either as discussion prompts in the classroom or as cues for written personalized responses in self-study to aid in meaning and memory consolidation. This process is often referred to as "deep processing" and is the second of Stahl and Fairbanks (1986) three principles for effective vocabulary teaching, cited in Coady (1997. 282).

CONCLUSION

How effective are the materials likely to be and what are the practical implications?

Stahl and Fairbanks (1986): three principles for effective vocabulary teaching.

i) Provide adequate definitional and contextual information.

ii) Allow opportunities for deep-processing.

iii) Provide multiple exposure.

Measured against the first of these principles, however, the provision of both adequate definitional and contextual information, doubt surrounds the presentation of some items. For example, a problem surfaced in extensive field-testing of one cloze exercise of a text describing a bad flight (page 177, 87. 3 item 4) where 24 subjects (N= 103) completed the phrase: "...for half an hour we _____ through a terrible storm...." with a form of the verb "cruise". See Table 2 below. It seems that the overgeneralization is invited by the authors' inadequate definition of 'cruise' as 'flying at a steady speed', without reference to the fact that the verb CRUISE implies ease and comfort.

Table 2. Analysis of answers received from 103 subjects in field testing of 87. 3 item 4:

"we.....through a terrible storm" p. 177. ANSWERS WITH A FORM OF THE WORD.....:

CRUISE (23) cruised 10, were cruising 6, crused 2, cruise 2, cruse, cruising, crusing.

GO (17) went 13, go 2, it went, were going.

PASS (14) passed 9, pass 5.

FLY (11) flew 4, fly, flyed, flied, flight 2, fligh, flighted.

COME (7) came 2, coming 3, was coming, were coming.
OTHERS: got 5, get rid of, had been, took off, took plane, were, hit, put our seat
ran, seated, upright position, waited, could.
no answer given 12
(illegible) …pended

The following is a list of four recommended alterations and additions to the answer key for exercise 87. 3 and the left-hand page of unit 83.

i) Include the word FLEW somewhere in the example sentences on the left-hand page.
ii) Accept alternative answers for item 4 instead of FLEW eg. WENT/CAME/PASSED
iii) Explain why some answers are unacceptable eg. CRUISED
iv) Add the words "with comfort" to the example sentence "we are now cruising (flying at a steady speed)".

However, the third principle, that of providing multiple exposure, is barely satisfied. In this respect, bearing in mind the incremental nature of vocabulary learning, the book is not *teaching* 2,500 useful words and expressions, (see objective 1) so much as merely *introducing* their core meanings. Without repeated exposure of words and MWUs in different contexts, acquisition will likely remain incomplete or not occur at all. It is perplexing that review units are not included, as they are in *Business Vocabulary In Use* (Mascull, 2002). They would be a welcome addition, as would a CD of example sentences to teach word pronunciation and pictures in colour, as featured in *Basic Vocabulary in Use* (McCarthy, 2002).

In sum, while *Vocabulary In Use Intermediate* would be suitable for a variety of learning programs, including exam courses, such as Cambridge FCE, or topic-based General English courses, the learner would be well-advised to gain a deeper understanding of lexis in context through studying graded readers of similar headword level, for example Cambridge level 5 (2,800 headwords). This would allow for a combination of explicit and implicit learning. In the classroom, I would prefer to ask students to read and complete the units for homework before exploring limitations on use of the items covered, through componential analysis for example, and degree of substitutability in collocations, rather than introduce new words. In preparation for programs with monolingual groups, I would check for non transferable collocates (Bahns, 1993 cited in Schmitt, 2000. 81) and analyze the "limits of cross-linguistic correspondences" (Swan, 1997, cited in Schmitt, 2000. 149). All things considered, the popularity of the *Vocabulary In Use* series seems guaranteed for the foreseeable future, along with the newfound prominence of vocabulary in language learning.

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