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Reviewed work:

Teaching Word Meanings. (2006). Steven A. Stahl & William E. Nagy. Mahwah, New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates. Pp. 220. ISBN 0-8058-4364-7. \$24.95

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Teaching Word Meanings by Stahl and Nagy is a book written for teachers of young native speakers of English. Stahl and Nagy are very well known figures in research in first language vocabulary and reading. They are very active researchers and bring a lot of knowledge and experience to this very practical book for teachers. The book is divided into three main sections: “The lay of the land,” “Teaching specific words,” and “Independent word learning.”

The first section looks at the nature and role of vocabulary and outlines a general approach to vocabulary. Chapter 1, “The importance of vocabulary,” is a brief introduction to why teachers should give attention to vocabulary. Chapter 2, “Vocabulary knowledge, reading comprehension, and readability,” explores the various hypotheses about the relationship between vocabulary knowledge and reading, covering the instrumental, knowledge, aptitude, and access hypotheses, and gives a brief general introduction to readability. Chapter 3, “Problems and complexities,” looks at the issues of how many words children know, the differences between spoken and written English, and what is involved in knowing a word. Chapter 3 was particularly interesting for me because it contains a special section set off from the rest of the chapter on the issue of how many words children know. I stand on a different side of the fence here from Stahl and Nagy. I take a conservative approach to vocabulary size, using word families with a large number of members, whereas Stahl and Nagy include fewer items in a word family and include items I would not count. However, I agreed with almost all that was said, and I suspect that if we sat down and worked through the issues we would largely be in agreement.

Chapter 4, “A comprehensive approach to vocabulary learning,” proposes the vocabulary learning pyramid (an analogy with the food pyramid for a healthy diet). It has the three levels:

(1) increasing breadth and depth of vocabulary knowledge through experiences with oral and written language, (2) taking incremental steps to increase knowledge of specific words, and (3) achieving productive control and precision of meaning for new words and concepts. Level 1 is largely related to incidental learning. Level 2 involves deliberate instruction, but is concerned mainly with contributions to the cumulative growth of words. Level 3 also involves instruction and aims at productive use in speaking and writing. Levels 2 and 3 also involve the development of independent word learning strategies.

Chapter 5 is the first chapter in Section 2 and is called “Teaching words for ownership.” It outlines four principles for teaching words: provide both definition and context, get active processing, provide multiple exposures, and use discussion. There is a lot of research which lies behind these principles, but because the book is aimed at teachers only a small amount of it is actually referenced. This is a major reason why the book would not be used as the main text in an MA course on vocabulary but could be a main text for an in-service course for teachers. Chapter 6, “Teaching concepts,” is an excellent discussion of a wide range of activities for developing word meaning. There are plenty of example tasks and clear description of the activities. Chapter 7, “Teaching high frequency words,” shows the influence of research done for English as a foreign language. The authors are suitably cautious about teaching these words to native speakers as they are all likely to be known. There is a growing issue in education systems where English is the native language in determining who is a native speaker and who is not. Many learners who at first sight may seem to be second language learners may in fact be more like native speakers of English and may thus have much larger vocabularies than would be expected. Chapter 8, “Talking about words,” is the last chapter in Section 2 on teaching specific words. It shows how teachers can engage learners in discussions about words. It has transcripts of such discussions and plenty of suggested activities for starting these discussions.

Section 3 is called “Independent word learning” and contains the final six chapters of the book. Chapter 9, “Exposure to rich language,” is where there is the biggest gap between vocabulary teaching for second or foreign language learners and vocabulary teaching for native speakers. Understandably, there is no discussion in the book of extensive reading using graded readers. The focus is more on how can we make sure that native-speaking learners get exposure to language which has plenty of unknown and partly known words. In British circles, Chapter 10, “Promoting word consciousness,” may be more likely to be called “lexical awareness.” As in every chapter of the book there is a wealth of activities and examples. Chapters 11 to 13 are each on the strategies of word parts, guessing from context, and definitions. The advice given is sensible and well supported by research, which is not surprising, as it is in these areas in particular that the authors have well deserved, and strong international reputations. The book concludes with a brief chapter which is largely a three-column table listing seven types of words (high frequency words, words requiring some explanation, and so on), how to identify these words, and how to teach them, which is effectively a brief summary of the book.

The book has a very substantial ten-page bibliography (there is no doubt the authors are well in touch with the field), an author index, and a subject index.

I found only one debatable error of fact. Hsueh-Chao and Nation (2000), which should actually be Hu and Nation (2000), are listed as supporting 95 per cent coverage of text for comprehension

when the results of their experiment showed that 98 per cent coverage (nearer to Carver's 1994 figure of 99 per cent) was the desired coverage.

One of the things I found selfishly pleasing about the book was that there was reference to studies done on vocabulary for English as a foreign or second language. For many years the interaction between first language and second language vocabulary research has been a one-way street with second language researchers and writers drawing heavily on first language research, but very few first language researchers seeing what second language research has to offer. The reasons for this are partly historical in that it is only in the last twenty years that there has been substantial growth in good quality second language vocabulary research. This book is a first sign that the one way street is beginning to become a two-lane highway, which is a very welcome change, as there are areas of second language vocabulary research that are much more developed than the corresponding areas of first language vocabulary research and where the research is directly applicable to first language teaching and learning. Some of these areas include corpus-based studies of word frequency and coverage, computer-assisted vocabulary learning, and deliberate vocabulary learning.

This is an authoritative and engaging book. It is a tremendous resource for teachers. Rather than an author index, it should probably have an activity index, as a very large number of very practical activities are clearly described and justified throughout the book. The chapters are the right size so that it can be read a chapter at a time without great effort. When it is used by teachers of English as a second or foreign language, there needs to be an appreciation that there are some important differences between first and second language vocabulary learning, largely in the use of simplified material and the use of bilingual word cards and bilingual dictionaries.

In short, this is a highly recommended book.

References

- Carver, R. P. (1994). Percentage of unknown vocabulary words in text as a function of the relative difficulty of the text: Implications for instruction. *Journal of Reading Behavior*, 26, 413-447.
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About the Reviewer

Paul Nation is a professor of Applied Linguistics in the School of Linguistics and Applied Language Studies at Victoria University of Wellington, New Zealand. He has taught in Indonesia, Thailand, the United States, Finland, and Japan. His specialist interests are language teaching methodology and vocabulary learning. His latest book is *Learning Vocabulary in Another Language* published by Cambridge University Press (2001), and there is a book on vocabulary teaching *Teaching Vocabulary: Strategies and Techniques* to appear in 2007 from Thomson Heinle Publishers. E-mail: Paul.Nation@vuw.ac.nz