

## A Brief Overview of Vocabulary Depth Knowledge

Dan Liu

Sichuan University of Arts and Sciences, Sichuan, China

### Abstract

**Vocabulary is the basic element of language and the basis of language communication. However, most English learners only memorize vocabulary by rote, and can't use vocabulary in real life. In order to improve the English level of second language learners, many effective methods have been put forward in the field of foreign language teaching. This paper aims to explore the essence of vocabulary depth in order to improve learners' vocabulary learning ability.**

### Keywords

**Vocabulary Knowledge; Vocabulary Breadth; Vocabulary Depth.**

### 1. Introduction

As is known to all, we all start to learn English from primary school, however, the English level of second language learners is still very poor. There are still some problems in English vocabulary teaching, especially among non-English majors. In college English teaching, teachers attach more attention to grammar and vocabulary size, but ignore the depth of vocabulary knowledge. Additionally, limited English classes are another major reason that learners cannot express their ideas effectively in writing or practical communication. In the past few decades, many scholars have attached great importance to the study of L2 vocabulary breadth, factors affecting vocabulary acquisition and vocabulary acquisition strategies. However, the literature review on vocabulary depth has not attracted widespread attention. This paper will briefly review the research on L2 vocabulary knowledge, especially the depth of vocabulary knowledge and propose the methods of L2 vocabulary depth knowledge acquisition. This study not only emphasizes the depth of vocabulary knowledge, but also provides a new approach to college English teaching, especially vocabulary teaching.

### 2. Definition of Vocabulary Knowledge

A language is an ever-growing repository, not an infinite set of words and fixed expressions. It can be defined as a means of linguistic communication with instrumental, social and traditional characteristics. Learners' vocabulary knowledge has always been regarded as the most critical factor affecting language competence. However, studies in recent decades have found that the definition of vocabulary knowledge is inconsistent.

In recent years, two influential methods of vocabulary knowledge research have attracted the attention of scholars. One is called the "dimensional approach" and the other is called the "developmental approach" and the former aims to achieve educational objectives. This definition is based on classroom observations to define a word from many aspects. Cronbach (1942) first posed the question: "What does it mean to know a word?" He divided vocabulary knowledge into two parts: the meaning of words and the level of accessibility. He proposed that understanding a word should include five aspects: generality, breadth of meaning, accuracy of meaning, availability and applicability. Although a relatively comprehensive explanation has been proposed, it lacks other aspects of lexical knowledge (pronunciation, spelling, origin, morphology-syntax, variant, and word association). The latter is an empirical

approach based on quantitative and qualitative data collected from second language learners. However, the experimental time is long, and it is affected by the uncertainty of the experimental subjects, so there is a great controversy. So, this paper will highlight the dimensional approach.

The next influential linguist was Richards, who expanded the definition of lexical knowledge. He was the first to list the different kinds of word knowledge. Richards (1976) believes that in order to understand a word, there should be eight hypotheses: "the characteristics of native speakers' lexical knowledge, association, syntax, frequency, etymology, register, semantic features and polysemy". Some empirical studies are based on his vocabulary knowledge framework. His theoretical framework is a great breakthrough in the study of vocabulary acquisition. Richards' framework reflects the essence of vocabulary acquisition, but it still fails to mention some basic elements, such as phonology, collocation, the relationship between vocabulary acquisition and the conditions of vocabulary acquisition.

### **3. Relevant Research on the Depth of Vocabulary Knowledge**

The research on L2 vocabulary acquisition is mainly divided into two parts: one is bilingual mental vocabulary in psycholinguistics. The second is to pay attention to language teaching from the two dimensions: vocabulary breadth and vocabulary depth, which are the most important parts of a learner's language competence. The breadth of vocabulary knowledge is about vocabulary size, which belongs to quantitative aspect. The study of vocabulary size provides clues for the further study of vocabulary knowledge. However, the relevant researches on the knowledge of vocabulary breadth only present the surface information of a word. So more research is needed in another area-the depth of vocabulary knowledge. Compared with vocabulary size, depth of vocabulary knowledge is another major aspect, which refers to the degree to which learners master a word or knowledge of a given word at different levels, and belongs to qualitative aspect. The depth of vocabulary knowledge involves more complicated knowledge than the literal meaning. Laufer(1998) proposed that vocabulary development not only includes vocabulary size, but also includes improvement from shallow level to deep level, which includes two important aspects: understanding basic meaning and deepening known vocabulary. However, there are few researches on the depth of vocabulary knowledge. Richards (1976) believes that to master a word, learners must fully understand words with different elements, which is beneficial to improve learners' language ability, especially their writing ability. The depth of vocabulary knowledge consists of form, morphological attribute, syntactic attribute, meaning, register and frequency. The process of vocabulary acquisition is a gradual one from the superficial level to the complete mastery of a particular word, rather than the basic elements of its meaning and form.

In this part, the empirical research on the depth of vocabulary knowledge at home and abroad will be introduced. Western studies in this field appeared in the 1990s, carried out by Nation, Richards, Schmitt et al. Domestic related research began in 2000 with the paper of Wu Xudong and Chen Xiaoqing. Although the empirical research is limited, there are still important research results.

Under the research framework of Nation and Richards, there have been many researches on the depth of vocabulary knowledge. According to the framework of Nation, Schmitt and Meara(1997) tested the depth of vocabulary knowledge from two dimensions of suffixes and associations. The purpose of this study was to investigate the changes in suffixes and associations over the course of one academic year. In the post-test, the learners' vocabulary increased by 330 words. Studies have shown that subjects' knowledge of suffixes and word associations is limited but the two aspects of vocabulary knowledge, namely word association

and suffixes, interact with each other and are related to learners' vocabulary size and language ability. However, this study only chose verbs as the target words, ignoring other parts of speech. Later, Schmitt(1998) conducted a study that measured vocabulary knowledge in four dimensions: association, spelling, grammatical information, and meaning. The results showed that the subjects were better at spelling, but the derivations remained at surface level. His paper does not refer to relevant empirical research, but only provides rough information on the depth of vocabulary knowledge. In addition, due to the small number of subjects, the results lacked validity.

In China, pioneers Wu Xudong and Chen Xiaoqing (2000) conducted research from a new perspective under Nation's framework. High school and university students were chosen as the subjects, and the test was conducted from four aspects: meaning, collocation, synonyms and inflectional affixes. It is found that four aspects can be acquired simultaneously due to the cognitive characteristics of vocabulary learning. Compared with the other three types of vocabulary knowledge, learners have a higher grasp efficiency of word meaning.

From the perspective of vocabulary development, Liu (2002) tested the dimensional development and acquisition model of English vocabulary knowledge. The subjects were Chinese English learners with three different English levels. The test content consists of affixes, meanings and parts of speech, and is based on 10 high-frequency words. The focus of this quantitative study is the depth of vocabulary knowledge. However, several studies have added weight to our findings (Mo Qingyang and Sun LAN (2004)). Meaning is easier to get than collocation and each kind of vocabulary knowledge is influenced by different acquisition modes.

The above research is based on the framework of Nation and Richard. Although these studies differ in detail, the results confirm the views of Nation and Richard and reflect the complicating factors of L2 vocabulary acquisition. Vocabulary is the basis of communication, but poor vocabulary ability is common among college English learners. This paper reviews the vocabulary knowledge from the perspective of vocabulary depth, which lays a foundation for vocabulary research.

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