

How salient is the notion of core vocabulary in
English teaching in Finland?

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Introduction

According to Bogaards & Laufer-Dvorkin (2004, 209), different lexical items in a language possess varying degrees of utility. It stands to reason, then, that the attention given to them by both the learners and instructors of a language should be distributed accordingly. This line of reasoning is further supported by the idea that a learner can achieve much with a comparatively small lexicon of carefully-chosen words (Nation 2001, 9).

Historically, both the teaching and learning of vocabulary have not been given as much attention or interest as other avenues of research within the field of second language acquisition (Milton 2009, 1). The present study seeks to rectify this by exploring the current state of English vocabulary instruction. Instead of looking at the topic from a learner-centric point-of-view, it focuses on teachers and, in particular, the principles that affect the manner in which they give vocabulary instruction. The concept of core vocabulary, which forms the majority of the study's theoretical foundation, will be examined in relation to its findings in an attempt to determine whether or not the vocabulary teaching principles described by teachers and the vocabulary they choose to prioritize display any of the central characteristics that are commonly assigned to core vocabulary.

The present study consists of the following sections. First of these is the theoretical background, which highlights the importance of vocabulary teaching and introduces the concept of core vocabulary, including how its use could be considered beneficial for vocabulary instruction. The next section describes the methodological choices that were made regarding the collection of data and its analysis. It also reintroduces the research question. The third section is dedicated to the analysis of data that not only seeks to give an answer to the research question, but also discusses the wider impact of the study's findings on vocabulary instruction. The final section acts as a summation. It addresses the most prominent limitations of the study, how it could be improved upon, and provides recommendations for future research.

Theoretical background

Vocabulary teaching is important for a number of reasons. Marzano & Simms (2013, 7) point out that children with larger vocabularies acquire new words faster than classmates with a smaller vocabulary. They also go on to mention that vocabulary knowledge is directly tied to success in school. Warjus (2010, 1) states that as second language learners fail to build the prerequisite broad vocabulary to be able to read (8000-9000 word families) and speak (5000-7000 word families), a large amount of criticism has been placed on language teaching strategy research. The failure to attain the aforementioned broad vocabulary is one of the central reasons why the current study aims to provide information on what are the underlying principles that English language teachers approach vocabulary teaching with.

While there is still active discussion around the exact nature of core vocabulary, its underlying idea is to find words which often occur in a language and are often used by learners and teachers to describe other, non-core vocabulary. For example, gobble, dine, devour, stuff and gormandize can all be defined as verbs which all describe ways of eating. “to eat”, being part of the core vocabulary, can be substituted for any of the aforementioned verbs but the same does not work in reverse (Carter 1998, 49). This means that core words cannot be easily described by non-core words. This is one way of testing whether a word is a core word or not. Another distinct feature of core words is their high degree of collocability in that the more core a lexical item is, the more partnerships it will have with other lexical items. A good way to demonstrate this is to look at how often the word bright occurs in the English language compared to the more seldom-seen word radiant. A child can be bright, so can the sun and an individual’s future. According to Carter (1998, 51) calling a child radiant is perceived as strange, thus the word does not collocate as effectively as bright.

Marzano & Simms (2013, 8) allude to the idea of core vocabulary when discussing children’s ability to form categories. A child that learns the verb shake can in turn attach other words to it,

such as shiver, vibrate, wiggle, flutter and jitter. Another often-used term in vocabulary research, which shares some similarities with the core vocabulary term, is high-frequency words.

There are a number of possible benefits to using core vocabulary as a basis for vocabulary teaching. It can serve as a guide to which vocabulary should be taught first. Furthermore, Carter (1998) mentions that Michael West's *A General List of English Words*, which contains 2000 words, allegedly on its own provides learners access to 80 percent of words in any text written in English. Suffice to say that this would provide a substantial boon to anyone who wants to learn to read English texts while possessing a relatively small vocabulary. Such access would even prove beneficial considering that, as students' ability to learn vocabulary develops, they should be able to discern and produce word meanings even outside of language classrooms (Carter 1998).

The current study's central goal is to provide information to current and future teachers of English on how their peers approach vocabulary teaching. More specifically, it aims to interview teachers with a premade set of questions which seek to find out whether or not they are consciously utilizing what Carter (1998) defines as core vocabulary. The reason to use premade questions is to make sure that the answers given will provide data on the underlying principles that govern each of the interviewees' vocabulary teaching. They are not, however, intended to impede or otherwise obstruct the participants from answering the questions in a manner that feels comfortable to them.

Methods and data collection

Semi-structured individual interviews

Interviews as a data collection method was chosen due to its ability to reveal information and background on topics that are not commonly discussed. They can, in essence, highlight specific

vocabulary and language that an interviewee uses to answer a question. Due to their open-endedness, they allow participants to elaborate, elucidate and even remedy any and all information that they choose to share with the interviewer. It needs to be mentioned that, being under the umbrella of qualitative research methods, they generally forgo breadth in favor of depth of coverage.

As the underlying goal of the study is to shed light on the principles behind English language teachers' vocabulary instruction in Finland, it makes sense to offer a platform for individual teachers to explain what kind of choices they make in relation to how they choose to give vocabulary instruction.

The interviews conducted as part of the research were individual interviews and semi-structured. This was to give each and every interviewee as much freedom as possible to explain their own, individual stance on vocabulary teaching, without feeling forced to reach a common consensus or be overshadowed by more talkative colleagues as part of a group interview. Vocabulary teaching as a phenomenon can be observed and studied from such a wide array of different viewpoints, that it is important to narrow down the topic to just vocabulary choice, hence the interviews were semi-structured, with questions designed to maximize the amount of time interviewees spend on explaining their philosophies on which words matter and why and whether or not they should be used to further educate students on other vocabulary items. Each of them were carried out in person, so as to make the situation as inviting to the interviewee as possible. Furthermore, they all took place in a location that the interviewee feels comfortable in.

Prior to interviewing the study participants, each of the interview questions were shown to a university professor, who gave comments and offered constructive criticism, when appropriate. Due to her extensive experience and expertise as a language researcher, no further pilot studies were deemed necessary.

The sample size of the study is small, as interviews tend to take a substantial amount of time to organize, transcribe (or summarize) and analyze. The goal was to interview three different

teachers that all teach at the same educational level. This was later modified to two who represent two different educational levels due to how difficult it was to reach teachers for an interview. The sample size is supported by the notion that qualitative research seeks to highlight and analyze phenomena by delving into individual experiences rather than show and give evidence to statistical correlation.

The focus of the study lies in trying to find out how teachers see vocabulary as part of vocabulary teaching. Therefore, the analysis of the data gathered from the interviews focuses on what is said, instead of how it is being said. In other words, it sees its data as content, rather than discourse. This is because the interviewer is gathering knowledge on English vocabulary teaching as opposed to examining the interview as its own linguistic phenomenon.

Because their semi-structured nature, exhaustively transcribing lengthy exchanges would take an enormous amount of time. Hence each has been summarized, as their main purpose is to give insight into two frames of mind regarding vocabulary teaching. Any and all transcription is solely conducted by the researcher as part of the summarization process.

The research question

The aim of this study is to better understand the salience of the notion of core vocabulary in English teaching in Finland. In other words, the present study seeks to document some of the underlying principles that govern vocabulary teaching, in particular in regards to word choices and the prioritization of certain vocabulary items over others. The research question is as follows:

How salient is the notion of core vocabulary in English teaching in Finland?

As mentioned in the background section of the present study, research into which words should be selected to be taught as part of English education is particularly important as it has been

proven that children with larger vocabularies acquire new words faster and that student's with larger vocabularies fare better in school than peers who know fewer words (Marzano & Simms 2013, 5).

The data consists of two, roughly twenty-minute-long interviews from two teachers of English currently working in the field. Each of the interviews took place in otherwise empty rooms save for the interviewee and the interviewer. Two separate devices were used to record each of the interviews, so as to minimize the risk of faulty equipment ruining the recording process. Each of the participants have been given pseudonyms so as to not reveal their identities.

The interviews were structured as follows.

First there were a series of lead-in questions designed to ease participants into discussing vocabulary teaching.

How long have you been teaching English?

When and where did you complete your teacher training?

What is the most rewarding aspect of teaching foreign languages?

After this, each of the participants gave answers of varying length to each of the following questions in no particular order.

How do you approach vocabulary teaching?

As part of your teaching, how often do you focus on vocabulary?

What is your primary language for teaching vocabulary?

How do you relate new vocabulary into what has previously been taught?

Do you consciously make decisions about which words you use to describe vocabulary?

How do you tackle a large list of vocabulary?

Which kinds of vocabulary learning tools do you offer for your students?

How do you evaluate your students' vocabulary knowledge?

Do you prioritize certain teaching certain words rather than others? (Why?)

Do you feel like you have all the necessary tools to tackle vocabulary teaching?

Can you think of something, (a method or a yet unused tool), that you feel would improve the current state of vocabulary teaching?

How do you recycle and recover previously taught vocabulary?

The participants were allowed to interject at any given point during each of the interviews.

After the interview process, each interview was combed and given a rough transcription, which was used as data for further analysis. Citations that are used as part of the analysis have been transcribed more rigorously so as to not modify or otherwise dilute any of the utterances.

Theoretical framework for analysis

The analytical framework of the present study is based on the inductive approach to data analysis, instead of its counterpart, the deductive approach, that sees researchers first creating any number of predefined schemata, which are subsequently used as part of the coding process (Epstein & Martin 2004, 2). The reason to favor the inductive approach stems from its ability to render complex data clearer to analyse by allowing key themes to naturally emerge through keen and detailed inspection of raw data while avoiding the constraints inherent in more structured methodologies (Thomas 2003, 2). Using the inductive approach entails multiple, careful and thorough readings of data, during which a researcher identifies emergent, recurring themes and categories within a set of data, including any text segments that will be housed within said categories (Thomas 2003, 4.)

Analysis

The following two tables (**Table 1.1** and **1.2**) were produced as a result of the inductive approach to data analysis, outlined in the previous section. They consist of three key over-arching elements related to vocabulary teaching that were covered as part of the interviews. These serve as headers for three vertical columns populated by central factors that have an influence them. Each of the factors were chosen based on their prevalence as part of the answers supplied by the interviewees. While the tables by no means offer exhaustive, all-encompassing accounts of each interview, they do seek to encapsulate the most pertinent data gleaned during the data analysis process.

Interviewee A: English Vocabulary Teaching		
Each of the following affects:		
taught vocabulary	vocabulary teaching	assessment of vocabulary knowledge
frequency of occurrence in language	words' semantic content rarely taught	word usage/correctness in context
essentiality	words should not be taught in isolation	traditional testing e.g. fill-in-the-blank exercises
beneficiality	vocabulary often too abstract to explain in target language	teachers' desire to see taught words being used
outside sources e.g. textbook authors	a heavy focus on text transmitted messages	
teacher intuition/experience	no explicit philosophy behind the process	

Table 1.1

Interviewee B: English Vocabulary Teaching		
Each of the following affects:		
taught vocabulary	vocabulary teaching	assessment of vocabulary knowledge
frequency of occurrence in language	students guided towards independent study	word usage/correctness in context
basic vocabulary same regardless of field	use of monolingual dictionaries	correctness left for the teacher to decide
corpus-based studies	vocabulary studied independently	communicative function in context
teacher intuition/experience		students' ability to use some of the course vocabulary
course type		effective use of vocabulary

Table 1.2

There are three factors that appear in both tables. These are, within the taught vocabulary columns, the “*frequency of occurrence in language*”, “*teacher intuition/experience*” and the “*word usage/correctness in context*” in the assessment of vocabulary knowledge columns.

While both of the interviewees viewed “*frequency of occurrence in language*” as the prioritization of vocabulary items based on their commonness within the English language, their methods for determining said priority differed significantly. According to interviewee B, university-level academic English vocabulary consists of study-based, high-frequency words, which represent the most common lexical elements of academic English regardless of field or discipline. This is in stark contrast to the oral account given by interviewee A, who stated that word prioritization at high-school level is largely dictated by what textbook authors choose to

incorporate into the teaching materials that they make and teachers' own intuition, accrued over several years of work experience. Even though the two levels of education represented by each interview are not entirely analogous with one another, it is worth considering should more research be conducted into determining and better outlining the "core vocabulary" of high-school level English in Finland. Such a consideration becomes even more relevant when student matriculation exams are taken into account, as some of the prioritization on the teacher's part, as told by interviewee A, is based on how useful any given vocabulary is for the exam. Assuming that a clearly definable amount of vocabulary that is always relevant for the matriculation exam exists, which seems to be the case since teachers do claim to develop a sense of what is and is not relevant for the exam, it stands to reason that much of the workload currently shouldered by said teachers could be outsourced to English language teaching research in order to further streamline and enhance language learning and teaching. Teachers could even take part in said research and offer valuable information that is currently only known individually, not collectively.

As for "*teacher intuition/experience*", both interviewees said that they have developed much of it over time while working as language teachers, with interviewee A stating that, even though it is not something a teacher actively thinks about, it is always present, guiding the teaching process. Although, as previously stated, university academic English vocabulary teaching is built on vocabulary research data, it seems that teachers are very much on their own when it comes to evaluating what vocabulary is most essential, especially at a more granular level. This is further supported by the fact that both interviewees went on to mention that they had not really ever considered many of the questions that were raised during the interviews regarding vocabulary teaching. Interviewee A pointed out that vocabulary as an element is interesting, because it is seen as something concrete, which means that often not a lot of thought gets given to any underlying philosophy behind it.

As with "*teacher intuition/experience*", "*word usage/correctness in context*" is also mainly determined by teachers themselves. Interviewee B states that, ultimately, it is the teacher's role

to determine whether or not the words used by students fit a teacher-prescribed context, with the only external guideline vaguely noting that “word use has to be formal”. This would suggest that school-based English language vocabulary instruction suffers from a clear lack of uniform guidelines for teachers to better tackle this part of their profession. Moving away from vague, evaluatory criteria, which suffer from language’s context sensitive nature, to a more tangible set of core vocabulary could make evaluating students’ output a much less ambiguous process. Rather than trying to arbitrarily adhere to one’s own sense of correctness and suitability, teachers would then simply weigh and assess whether or not students have managed to use core vocabulary that has been taught to them during a course or possibly a much longer time-span.

One of the key features of core vocabulary outlined in the theoretical background section of the present study is learners’ ability to attach new, non-core words to core vocabulary. When asked how the interviewees recycle, re-cover and relate previously taught vocabulary to new vocabulary interviewee A mentioned the use of exercises that task students with using what they have already learned. Interviewee B was unable to give a definitive answer to the question and admitted that he has not given conscious thought to how that manifests itself during taught courses. The fact that Interviewee A named fill-in-the-blank and sentence translations as the traditional methods for testing student vocabulary knowledge highlights a possible concern regarding the current standard testing practices. Instead of forming increasingly complex, interconnected mental maps about the semantic interrelations and hierarchies that underpin the vocabulary of any human language, students spend the majority of their study time trying to cram single word translational equivalents, which are of dubious value anywhere else except school. It is entirely possible that some of the most dedicated students take it upon themselves to create and study the semantic landscape of English vocabulary. Despite this, such a task should not solely be relegated to students, when language education as a whole stands to benefit from methodological restructuring.

Apart from vocabulary research conducted at the university-level, there appears to be no readily observable application of the concept of core vocabulary into English language teaching based

on the two interviews. Furthermore, the vocabulary teaching, learning and testing practices described by the interviewees do not appear to reflect the core principles that characterize core vocabulary and act as proponents for its implementation to vocabulary instruction. This observation is further evidenced by statements given by interviewee A, who admitted that the contemporary trend in vocabulary teaching is to prioritize word pronunciation, rather than semantics. Additionally, Interviewee A went on to disclose that there is a heavy focus on observing the underlying messages in texts, as seen in the “**vocabulary teaching**” -column, instead of on the analysis and deconstruction semantic-interrelations of words on a word-by-word basis. This is not inherently bad, as much, if not most, of language-based intercourse is predicated on smooth transmission of ideas from one individual to another. However, if one is to be able to formulate entirely new utterances and be given far more agency over what and how they choose to communicate their ideas, it stands to reason that a much more robust understanding of language at a molecular level is a necessity.

Conclusion

The present study has sought to identify the salience of the notion of core vocabulary in English language teachers' vocabulary instruction in Finland, while delving into the underlying, guiding principles that influence their work.

It has concluded that, based on the interviews, no overt application of the notion of core vocabulary exists in English vocabulary teaching, aside from the vocabulary research-based lexical prioritization at the university-level. Furthermore, the teaching, learning and testing practices described by both of the interviewees depict classroom customs that abstain from the systematic analysis of the semantic relationships embedded in human language. This inference is supported by both Marttinen (2008, 91) and Kovanen (2014, 71), who observed in their studies that the vocabulary studying methods used by Finnish ESL students in high schools consist of reading, writing and word translation. According to the studies, these methods do not involve deep processing of vocabulary, as they are based on rote learning. Moreover, each of the researchers called for more attention to be given to vocabulary acquisition methods and instruction, as the majority of students who took part in each respective study stated that they had never even been taught how to study vocabulary.

There are notable limitations that the present study suffers from. First of all, as stated in the methods -section, due to the small sample size and the chosen data collection method, it can only highlight a number of possible phenomena related to vocabulary teaching. It cannot, like quantitative methods, attempt to draw and demonstrate any statistical correlations that may exist between phenomena. Further studies are needed to statistically support the results and claims made by the present study.

While the present study has been conducted in an effort to shift some of the inherent focus of vocabulary instruction research from teaching and learning methods towards words and word choice, one cannot help but to acknowledge that many areas of this field of research are naturally connected to one another. Teaching, as a profession, involves not only its subject matter, but also

both at least an instructor and an instructee. In hindsight, many of the questions set forth as part of the interviews could have more directly addressed what kinds of words are being taught and why, rather than how they are being taught and how teachers evaluate their students' vocabulary knowledge.

The open-endedness of the interviews can be seen as both a strength and a weakness. It facilitated the uninhibited emergence of data that might have otherwise never surfaced during the interviews. This means that the data accurately portrays the answers given by the interviewees, rather than being the product of interference from the interviewer. On the other hand, allowing participants to spend as much time as they need on any given question has resulted in two distinct data sets, each lacking some of the questions included in the other.

The outcome of the present study and the findings presented therein warrant further investigation into word choice in vocabulary instruction, and the type of role that core vocabulary may play as part of it. This is all the more apparent as both interviewees admitted to not having ever even considered most of the questions proposed to them during the interviews. The data and results uncovered during the research process should be supplemented by quantitative studies, which would give statistical credence to them. Furthermore, qualitative studies making use of further refined and narrower series of questions would almost certainly provide a more detailed account of the role that word choice plays in vocabulary instruction.

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