
Book Reviews

Focus on Vocabulary

Paul Nation and Peter Yongqi Gu

Sydney, Australia: National Centre for English Language Teaching and Research (NCELTR), 2007. 184 pages

Reviewed by: *Michael Lessard-Clouston*

In recent years there has been a surge in publications on learning and teaching vocabulary in terms of both pedagogy and research. *Focus on Vocabulary* is a noteworthy example of this interest; it is part of the *Focus on...* series from the NCELTR at Macquarie University, which also includes titles on reading, grammar, and speaking. Written for teachers and other language professionals, these books are research-based, but address practical issues in classroom teaching, as this addition does nicely. Authors Paul Nation and Peter Gu are from Victoria University of Wellington in New Zealand, where a number of staff have been active in adding to the vocabulary literature. Nation's (2001) tome, for example, is considered the most comprehensive book on the topic to date, and Gu's (2005) study (published before he moved to New Zealand) is the only book-length work I am aware of on vocabulary-learning strategies.

Following a brief overview, *Focus on Vocabulary* is composed of eight chapters and four appendices. Each chapter starts with good prereading questions, which are then answered as one reads the chapter, and ends with a summary and references for further reading. Chapter one, on vocabulary in the curriculum, outlines four types of vocabulary (high frequency, academic, low frequency, and technical words), discusses how such vocabulary can hinder students' comprehension of technical texts, and summarizes what it means to know and learn a word. Based on a statistical perspective, chapter two introduces using corpora ("collections of text," p. 18) and computer analysis programs to create word frequency lists, compare texts (and the vocabulary in them), and produce concordances: examples of word use. Perhaps most useful for teachers, chapter three offers guidelines on how instructors can plan for and make decisions about dealing with the four types of vocabulary outlined in chapter one. Using Nation's (2007) four strands, the authors present the view that "a well-balanced language course" has four roughly equal components: "meaning-focused input, meaning-focused output, language-focused learning and fluency development" (p. 33). This chapter also considers how to approach low- and high-frequency words and a five-step plan for an effective vocabulary program.

The next two chapters deal with vocabulary and receptive (listening and reading, chapter four) and productive (speaking and writing, chapter five) skills. Chapter six offers an overview of learners' strategies and vocabulary acquisition, discussing the task involved, the four frequency levels of vocabulary (from chapter one), and how varied strategies might be used at various stages of vocabulary learning. Measuring vocabulary knowledge is the topic of chapter seven, which summarizes research on vocabulary size and shows how learners with varying levels of vocabulary knowledge would view or understand sections of various texts taken from a written corpus. This chapter refers to and is connected with three of the four appendices, which include a version of the popular Vocabulary Levels Test (appendix one) and a guide to using it (appendix three), plus a vocabulary size test (appendix two). The fourth appendix is made up of the Academic Word List. The final chapter, eight, asks 10 common questions about vocabulary (on the use of translation, context, dictionaries, etc.) and is devoted to short one-to-three-page explanations on each of these issues.

Focus on Vocabulary is commendable for many reasons, and teachers and teacher trainers will find it a current, relevant, and easy-to-use resource. This is a practical book that summarizes research and theory, but relates them to examples and strategies that teachers can apply in their own classrooms. For example, chapters one to seven include tasks to help readers connect issues to their own situations. In chapter two, for example, these include using MS-Word for word counts in a text and then comparing the results with a frequency program available for free download on Nation's Web site. Another great feature of the book is the sample texts and activities throughout that draw from school textbooks dealing with (mostly) science and social studies, and the use of tables, charts, and diagrams is excellent, so the book will appeal to various types of readers. The book is written not only for ESL/EFL teachers, but will also be of interest to subject matter teachers who work with English language-learners in mainstream classes. The word list and the two tests (and directions) in the appendices are also great resources for teachers to have on hand.

I used *Focus on Vocabulary* as a textbook in my TESOL Topics: Teaching Vocabulary course this year with good results. The examples are mainly from elementary and secondary texts, which students working with younger learners appreciated. But those teaching adults at college or university found the other textbook for the course (Coxhead, 2006) more relevant, and there was much common ground (she was one of Nation's graduate students). As a result, I am not sure if I will use either the Nation and Gu or the Coxhead books again, especially as Nation's new (2008) volume arrived recently and Zimmerman's (2008) handbook might be a better complement for it. The book also has a number of typos and missing references and seemed repetitive at times. My final concern about this and similar texts is the almost

exclusively quantitative approach to vocabulary that it presents, as vocabulary knowledge is complex. Although this is the dominant paradigm, it is not without weaknesses. Yet if readers approach *Focus on Vocabulary* with these limitations in mind, they will find much that they can learn. I thus strongly recommend it.

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The Reviewer

Michael Lessard-Clouston has taught for 20 years in Canada, China, Japan, and the United States. He is an associate professor of applied linguistics and TESOL in the School of Intercultural Studies at Biola University in La Mirada, California, where his courses include discourse analysis, second-language acquisition, and vocabulary teaching.

Research in Applied Linguistics: Becoming a Discerning Consumer

Fred L. Perry, Jr.

Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum, 2005, 268 pages (US \$29.95—prepaid)

Reviewed by: *Theresa Ann Hyland*

The litmus test of any book is whether it is a useful addition to one's bookshelf. In the case of Fred Perry's book *Research in Applied Linguistics: Becoming a Discerning Consumer*, I would have to answer with a resounding *Yes!* The underlying assumption of this book is that developing the habit of critically reading research is a crucial prerequisite to writing critically sound research papers. The book provides a framework for judging research articles, encourages students to examine articles in their own field of interest, and paves the way for students to write their own literature reviews and research articles. In his preface, Perry identifies MA students in linguistics or TESOL and teachers of research methods courses as his primary audience, but I would also recommend it to graduate students in education. It is designed to be useful either for self-study or as a course text.

The book is organized into three main sections: Fundamentals for Discerning Consumers; The Major Components of Published Research; and three appendices. Perry begins by making connections between research reading, practice in the field of linguistics, and the need to write up research. This introduction establishes the framework for a tome that is both accessible

to a well-defined audience and logically constructed. The second part provides a detailed description of each section of a typical research article and provides methods for critically evaluating them. Perry's voice is that of a knowledgeable teacher/facilitator. He has adopted and adapted classroom techniques to the written form. He consistently refers to examples from research to illustrate concepts. He intersperses text with exercises designed to encourage students to interact with the ideas of the book. He uses analogies, graphs, tables, and figures to explain esoteric concepts. Finally, he uses amusing anecdotes and recursive reflection to promote scaffolded learning. I particularly like how he uses a small number of sample articles to discuss the various sections of academic research papers. I also like his lists of key terms and additional readings at the end of each chapter. Although the questions used in the exercises may seem repetitive, they serve a twofold purpose: (a) they help the reader develop a clear model of how research papers are written, and (b) they help the reader develop an awareness of why an article should be read not just for its research question and conclusions, but also for its methods of data collection and data analysis. Finally, the collected materials from these exercises could serve as the starting point for a literature review.

Appendices A and B rightfully belong in the main body of the text because they extend the argument of the book. Appendix A shows students how to turn the reading of research into a literature review. Here the analogy of the mosaic, along with the practical tips for collecting and collating material, will help writers who are novices in the discipline to make sense of research when writing about it. Appendix B delves into some of the more esoteric methods of statistical data analysis that students may run across in their reading. Perry asserts that although readers may not be able to use these statistical tools, they should be able to understand what they are, how and why the researcher has used them, and how valid the researcher's conclusions are. Appendix C, on the other hand, is more distant from the book's central arguments: it provides information about journals in the discipline, including some Canadian journals.

There are a few problems with the book. Although Perry uses seminal articles in the field, some of the studies are more than 15 years old. And there are some unnecessary repetitions, for example, information on pages 201-202 is nearly identical to the Keyword search in Box 2.1 on p. 27; Table 7.1 (p. 151) contains the same information as appears in a clearer format in Table 7.2 (p. 159). I think Perry needs to be reminded that not everything is made clearer by rendering it into a table. In addition, there seem to be a few typographical errors (e.g., on p. 174 PPMC should read PPMC).

These are merely quibbles about a book the insights of which more than make up for such minor problems. Most of Perry's figures and tables clarify difficult concepts (Fig. 3: Relationships among variable types; Table 6.2:

Reliability coefficients used in research; Fig. 7.2 Testing the null hypothesis), and sometimes they add humor to the book (e.g., Fig. 5.3: The research minefield). I especially appreciate Perry's discussion of threats to internal validity and the Internal Validity Evaluation Inventory (p. 108). Moreover, Perry's advice to the reader not to develop the kind of cynicism that rejects all studies because they are conducted in less than ideal conditions is well founded. In short, then, this book meets many of the needs of the novice researcher. It clarifies concepts, promotes critical reading, predicts questions, and always keeps the discussion meaningful yet down to earth.

The Reviewer

Theresa Ann Hyland is Director of Writing and Cross-cultural Services at Huron University College, where she teaches EL1 and EL2 writing courses and administers the Writing Centre and the International Exchange program. Her research interests include how students use research in their academic essays and the assessment of writing proficiency.

**The Psychology of the Language Learner:
Individual Differences in Second Language Acquisition**

Zoltán Dörnyei

Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum, 2005, 270 pages (\$29.95 US—prepaid)

Reviewed by: *Jim King*

Why do some language-learners succeed and others fail? Why do some people pick up a new language with relative ease, whereas others toil for years but never seem to improve? For those who have ever pondered these questions, *The Psychology of the Language Learner* could be a good place to start looking for some pertinent answers. The aim of Dörnyei's monograph is to provide a systematic and comprehensive overview of individual differences (IDs), along with accounts of how these variables can be so influential on a learner's success in the second-language acquisition (SLA) process. In an eight-chapter book that begins with a brief history and taxonomy of *individual differences*, a term that stems from the field of differential psychology, the five central IDs of personality, language aptitude, motivation, learning and cognitive styles, and language learning strategies are each enlarged on in individual chapters. As the author points out in the preface, a number of anthologies on learner issues have recently appeared (Breen, 2001; Cook, 2002; Cornwall & Robinson, 2000; Robinson, 2002). However, none has the advantage of this book's unified voice and style, nor are they able to avoid repetition or to focus on smaller sub-areas. This latter point is evidenced in chapter 7, which following on from chapters that deal with the core IDs, concentrates on the lesser researched variables of anxiety, creativity, willingness to communicate, self-esteem, and learners' beliefs.

One of the strengths of this book lies in how each chapter is broken down into manageable subsections that follow a logical progression. Dörnyei

provides explanations of the background of basic psychological theories before going on to detail how these concepts interface with SLA and ID research. By tracking the historical development of such theories, the book offers readers who may not be well versed in the fields of psychology or psycholinguistics a more solid understanding of the issues at hand. A good example of this appears in chapter 2, that dealing with personality, temperament, and mood. An account is given of the development of the highly successful personality type inventory, the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI), and how its roots can be traced to Carl Jung's personality models of the early 20th century. Later in the chapter, the reader is provided with a critical appraisal of how the MBTI has been applied in various L2 studies.

Perhaps the most robust, and certainly the longest, chapter 4 deals with motivation. Dörnyei is well known for his extensive work in L2 motivation research (Dörnyei, 2001), and this is reflected in a chapter that provides a precise overview of the field by dividing it into three phases: Gardner's early social psychology period, the cognitive-situated period of the 1990s, and the process-oriented period that was instigated in recent years by Dörnyei and his colleagues in Europe. Dörnyei underlines the importance of the study of motivation in SLA when he states, "It provides the primary impetus to initiate L2 learning and later the driving force to sustain the long and often tedious learning process; indeed, all other factors in SLA presuppose motivation to some extent" (p. 65). Of particular note here is the exposition of Dörnyei's new L2 Motivational Self System. The system, which springs from a convergence of self theory and motivation theory in mainstream psychology, encompasses ideas about the ideal self and the ought to self, both dealing with future perspectives, along with the broad causal concept of L2 learning experience. It will be interesting to see how this paradigm develops over time.

Although *The Psychology of the Language Learner* is certainly written in a scholarly style, this should not put off potential readers who have no prior knowledge of psychology or ID research. Dörnyei's succinct and lucid prose is supported by an extensive index of definitions to deal with technical terms, in addition to comprehensive author and subject indices. The book could be a useful resource for practicing language teachers because it provides insights into practical aspects of how ID variables relate to SLA. For example, toward the end of chapter 5, which addresses learning and cognitive styles, we are shown the practical implications of how an understanding of these concepts can help to promote more effective L2 instruction. Graduate students and established researchers in the fields of education, linguistics, and psychology should also find the book useful as a state-of-the-art summary of research into IDs, in particular because it contains such exhaustive coverage of the instruments used to measure these variables. Anyone who reads *The Psychology of the Language Learner*, whether students, researchers, or teachers,

will soon come to appreciate that the issues the book raises about psychological models and SLA are far from simplistic, but it is to the author's credit that these complex issues are always presented in an understandable and accessible manner.

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The Reviewer

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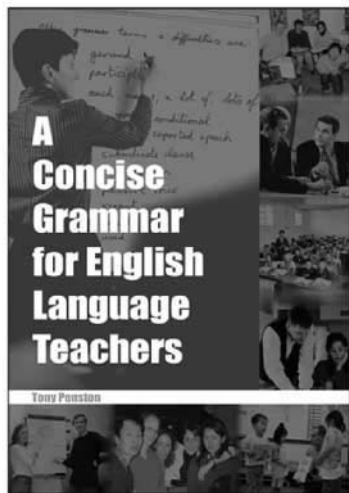
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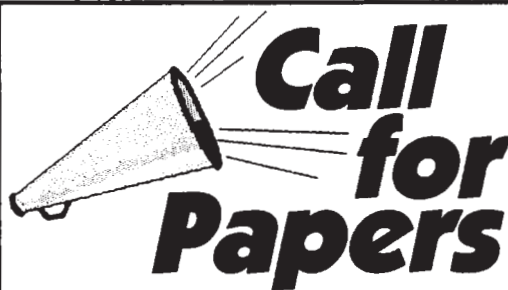
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