

The **SLAS LEX GUIDE** to
Vocabulary Learning
Ian Kemble



School of
Languages and
Area Studies

SLAS LEX GUIDE 1
version 3

0. Keywords

The following text has been analysed by a concordancer. This is a computer package which produces lists of words in order of their frequency of occurrence in the text. The software also generates concordances: these are keywords in context. For example, there are over 100 examples of the word 'vocabulary' in context. From these concordances or language patterns the phrase 'vocabulary file' has been identified.

Listed below are 15 terms, some are single words others are phrases. These terms have been enumerated to help the reader understand and remember the contents of the *Guide*. Once you have understood all 15 terms by making appropriate notes, you will be well on your way to appreciating what the *Guide to Vocabulary Learning* has to offer.

1. vocabulary file
2. depth of processing
3. discourse analysis
4. lexical signals
5. organisational principle of vocabulary
6. collocation
7. frequency data
8. logical connectors
9. patterns of discourse
10. range of contexts
11. semi-fixed expressions
12. superordinate
13. chain (of lexical items)
14. cohesion
15. core vocabulary

1. Preface

The SLAS LEX (Vocabulary Learning and Development) project was launched at a meeting of the SLAS Language and Linguistics section in November 2001. The aim of the project is to raise awareness of vocabulary learning among undergraduate students of foreign languages and thereby to improve vocabulary learning in particular and language learning in general. The project has adopted a bottom-up approach – the project does not proceed from research findings into vocabulary learning but instead seeks to understand what students do, and teachers say, about vocabulary learning and to build on the information that emerges from this dialogue.

In May 2002, the School of Languages and Area Studies carried out an Initial Survey designed to identify the vocabulary learning habits of students in Years 1, 2 and 4 and their attitudes towards vocabulary learning and development. The responses were analysed and a report produced in June of the same year, the full text of which is available on the SLAS LEX website: www.port.ac.uk/slas/slaslex. Much of what students had to say in the survey has been included in the *Guide to Vocabulary Learning*, see in particular Section 3. Your Contribution.

Since 2002, four further surveys have been carried out, two with students and a further two with language teachers. Their findings have been either incorporated into new versions of the *Guide* for students or included in reports for language teachers. The SLAS LEX project has been taken forward at two levels: (a) at the macro-level through the provision of guides such as this brochure and the related brochure *Using the Dictionary Effectively* and (b) at the micro-level through practical language learning activities or tasks which are generated both in the classroom and outside it by both staff and students. *Vocabulary Learning*, it should be emphasised, is aimed at all students of foreign languages in the School, including English as a foreign language.

2. Introduction

The Initial Survey included an important opening question which invited students to categorise themselves as ‘effective vocabulary learners’ or ‘ineffective vocabulary learners’. It was necessary to define the term ‘effective learner’ and the following definition was provided. An effective learner is:

“Someone who makes a conscious attempt to learn new words and phrases using a variety of different methods and who can demonstrate a clear improvement in his/her vocabulary over a specific period of time, e.g. an academic year.”

It was interesting to note that approximately one third of students identified themselves as ‘effective learners’ and two-thirds as ‘ineffective learners’, and the evidence produced by students in the survey suggested that the ratio of 1:2 (effective:ineffective learners) was about right. Many of the statements made by the effective learners have been incorporated into *Vocabulary Learning*. In the following, the SLAS LEX approach to vocabulary learning is defined, using some of the ‘key words’ contained within the definition above: ‘a CONSCIOUS attempt to learn new words and PHRASES using a VARIETY of different methods and... DEMONSTRATE a clear IMPROVEMENT...’

3. The SLAS LEX approach to vocabulary learning

In 1988, an American linguist named Stephen Krashen¹ defined in a specific way a set of two terms, which continue to resonate to this day: acquisition and learning. According to Krashen, learning takes place consciously in a controlled environment such as the classroom and ‘acquisition’ takes place unconsciously in informal learning environments outside of the classroom through exposure to, or immersion in, the language, e.g. in conversations with native speakers or in the use of a Learning Resources Centre for independent study purposes. For Krashen, acquisition was more important than learning. For our (vocabulary learning) purposes, however, both are important. We therefore advocate a balanced approach which is led by teachers and students alike. Let us give one example of the latter: In the Initial Survey, one Year 2 student wrote: “I watch children’s videos as I find I pick up the vocabulary better. I don’t feel pressurized to learn this way, and I learn the vocabulary more quickly.” Another wrote: “I listen to a lot of Spanish music and take time to look at the lyrics. I also watch TV in the Learning Resources Centre.” As classroom contact time is limited, the importance of these supplementary vocabulary activities cannot be emphasised enough.

The above definition of the effective learner refers to learning ‘new words and phrases’. The word ‘phrase’ is fundamental here and this is a view shared by the vast majority of our students (84%) who, in the Initial Survey, identified words AND phrases as the level at which vocabulary learning is appropriately pitched. We would identify with writers such as Lewis, Sinclair and Stubbs, see bibliography, who argue that the phrase is central to the development of vocabulary. Here is just one relevant quote: “Sinclair (1996)... puts forward the hypothesis that units of meaning are ‘largely phrasal’, that only a few words are selected independently of other words, and that ‘the idea of a word carrying meaning on its own [can] be relegated to the margins of linguistic interest, in the enumeration of flora and fauna for example.” (Stubbs 2001: 63). This approach to vocabulary learning is sometimes referred to as ‘chunking’, an approach which was echoed in the Initial Survey where one Year 1 student wrote: “I always try to use chunks of vocabulary which I have learnt. I write my essays for area studies in German.”

The definition also refers to ‘a variety of different methods’. In general, there are two major categories of learning strategy: metacognitive and cognitive. Metacognitive strategies are the strategies which involve learners in thinking about their learning: for example, what are the factors which affect their learning? What are their needs? How can they plan their learning? How can they evaluate their learning and monitor their progress? Cognitive

¹ Krashen (1988) *Second Language Acquisition and Second Language Learning*, Prentice Hall.

strategies, on the other hand, are the strategies which involve learners in actually doing things with the language in order to learn it, such as maintaining a vocabulary file or engaging in vocabulary learning activities, such as the ones outlined by students in the opening paragraph of this section. Research has shown that approaches which combine the development of cognitive strategies with that of metacognitive strategies help students to manage their own learning more successfully. Students gradually discover more about themselves as learners, about how to learn a language, and can take on more responsibility for their own learning. Going back to methods of learning vocabulary, no one method will suit all students. In the Initial Survey, one student wrote: “Every one has to find a way that suits him/her best in order to optimise vocabulary learning results... finding your own way of learning vocabulary is the best way to proceed.”

Finally, the definition refers to ‘demonstrating a clear improvement’. At the moment the School has not developed a mechanism for objectively assessing improvements in vocabulary. Nevertheless, students are able to set their own agendas for improvement and to monitor their achievement in assessments during their undergraduate studies.

4. Your contribution

We have already provided examples of what students do to progress their vocabulary learning and emphasised just how important they are. In the following, further examples are provided from the Initial Survey. Among other things, students wrote:

- Above all, a little dedication and motivation is needed to help develop vocabulary. Perhaps challenge yourself to learning 10 new words a day, write them down and then see in three days if you remember them.
- I like to explore vocabulary, finding verbs, nouns, adjectives, synonyms, antonyms that are linked to the original word.
- I think the best way to learn vocabulary is to write sentences with new words or do role-plays using them. Vocabulary is very important when learning a language, but I think you can never learn it by heart, but only with practice, mostly orally.
- I try to associate words with things to help me remember them.
- Sometimes I try to write short reports on my opinion of a certain film or book... writing emails to friends helps me with colloquial vocabulary.
- I learn new vocabulary when I use it in essays or short stories for homework. I will add new words to my personal dictionary and put the words into sentences.
- Normally we have a writing task linked to a piece of listening or reading. I try to use the vocabulary I have learnt from the listening/reading exercise in the writing task.

- Tandem learning and a lot of practice is the best way to improve vocabulary, not sitting and writing them all down and trying to learn by heart.
- Reading novels is the best way to learn new vocabulary, especially a few by the same author as writers often use the same words, so eventually you use the same word subconsciously. Try to increase the amount of reading you do per week as this is an efficient method of vocabulary building.
- I read a lot, particularly relevant materials for my course, year abroad, placement etc.
- The best technique for learning vocabulary is to immerse yourself in the language. Take it from me: I was the worst student in Year 2 and now I am doing very well.
- I watch children's videos as I find I pick up the vocabulary better. I don't feel pressurized to learn this way and I learn vocabulary more quickly.
- On reflection I should have been more consistent with vocabulary learning and made better use of the Learning Resources Centre. However, I would wholeheartedly recommend that future students make as much contact as possible with native speakers. This should be compulsory for all year groups as a part of their language programme.
- As vocabulary learning is up to the individual it's not possible to do any more than is already undertaken by the University: it's up to the student.

5. The vocabulary file

In the Initial Survey, an average of 84% of students stated that they normally kept vocabulary notes. However, only 22% said that they entered their vocabulary notes in their own vocabulary notebook or file. In subsequent surveys the number rose to 50%. We strongly recommend students to keep a Vocabulary File, see also SLAS LEX Information Sheet 1 [Keeping a Record of Vocabulary](#). There are a number of reasons for this recommendation, but primarily they are that the act of writing a phrase or expression down assists the process of memorisation. Research shows, however, that the key to memorising vocabulary is depth of processing (Craik and Lockhart 1972 in Leeke and Shaw 2000: 272). Depth of processing means not just simply making a note of unknown words – since they can be quickly forgotten – but recording vocabulary according to certain principles, i.e. knowing which vocabulary items to record, AND returning to them repeatedly in a variety of contexts, thereby using them actively. In other words, the recording of vocabulary in a vocabulary file is just a first stage in the process of vocabulary learning; their subsequent productive active use is key to successful vocabulary development.

It is useful to summarise the three key principles of vocabulary learning at this point:

- **Building.** Constantly acquiring new vocabulary items is unlikely to be as productive as building on existing vocabulary items or categories of vocabulary.
- **Context.** A word recorded or learnt in isolation is of little use: a context should always be provided.
- **Recycling.** A word encountered once only is unlikely to be memorable. It has to be used over and over again in order to become a part of the learner's active memory.

In the Initial Survey, students provided an example of depth of processing in the form of the LCWC (look/cover/write/check) technique, which Year 1 students in particular, but not just Year 1 students, use extensively. This takes the form of producing a list consisting of two parallel columns (foreign language and native language) of terms in context, which is first learnt, then one column is covered up (foreign language) and the terms in the native language are written down and finally checked against the original list. The exercise is repeated in reverse mode, with native language terms covered up and foreign language terms identified and checked.

Another example of depth of processing provided by students was the use made of native speakers. Year 4 students in particular commented on the importance of a linguistic partner as an important way of learning vocabulary: "I try to pick up and remember phrases that my language partner uses", wrote one. "I strongly advise all language students to form a friendship with a native speaker on arrival, as I have a number of French friends and have extended my vocabulary enormously", wrote another.

In order to become effective vocabulary learners, one of the key writers on the subject, Nation (2001: 395), suggests that learners should be guided by four principles:

1. They should continue to increase their vocabulary and enrich the language they already know.
2. They should know what vocabulary to learn, what to learn about it, how to learn it, how to put it to use and see how well it has been learned and used.
3. They should use frequency and personal need to determine the vocabulary to be learned.
4. They should be aware of what is involved in knowing a word and should be able to find that information about particular words.

Let us briefly examine these principles. Principle 1 reminds us that vocabulary learning is an ongoing activity and stresses the cumulative nature of the activity.

Principle 2 states clearly that students should approach vocabulary learning in a systematic and organised way rather than a random one. In this regard it is necessary to be aware of the objectives of the Language Grade you are registered for (see Student Handbook) and to discuss these with your language teacher (the metacognitive strategies referred to above). In the surveys, which have been carried out with SLAS students, respondents reminded us of the importance of the topic as a key organisational principle of vocabulary. At ab initio level, the topics, on the basis of which the communicative competence of the learner is developed, typically include travel, food, relationships and, at an advanced level, the vocabularies of the senses, of graphical representation, of social, political and economic issues of contemporary relevance to the country or countries, whose language(s) one is studying. There are many other ways in which vocabulary is organised and these are explained in outline in the SLAS LEX Information Sheet 1 *Keeping a Record of Vocabulary*.

Writers on vocabulary distinguish between ‘core vocabulary’ and ‘technical vocabulary’. Core vocabulary is vocabulary which is used frequently and technical vocabulary – which is interpreted here in a broad sense – is more restricted in its use. Language learners typically recycle core vocabulary and supplement it with technical vocabulary. Core vocabulary is so versatile that great care needs to be taken in recording it accurately (see principle 4 below). On the positive side, however, it is sometimes claimed that if you know the 2,000 or so most frequent words (lemmas)² in any language, then you will understand 90% or more of the words (word-forms) in an average newspaper article (Stubbs 2001: 101). However, as Stubbs goes on to point out: “Whether you grasp the point of the article is a different question, because it might well be that the 10% of unfamiliar words are precisely the ones which are crucial to understanding the text (though you may be able to guess at least some of them from the context).” This means that 2,000 words are an absolute minimum.

In the paragraph above we referred to the frequency of occurrence of lexical items and this is one of the key notions mentioned in principle 3. In deciding which vocabulary items to record, students should take account of the frequency of occurrence of terms which, thanks to the development of the modern dictionary, is a much easier task to perform. The modern dictionary, particularly the *Collins* range of bilingual dictionaries, which are recommended by the School, makes extensive use of huge databases or corpora numbering several hundred million words. Such computer-stored data allows the lexicographer to quickly identify those items which occur most frequently and to draw the user’s attention to such terms. This is done explicitly in the *Macmillan Dictionary for Advanced Learners* where words are helpfully marked in terms of their frequency.

² A lemma is a basic item of vocabulary, i.e. one stripped of its derivational and conjugational endings. For example, the verb ‘work’ is a lemma and the terms ‘works’, ‘worked’ are the word-forms of the lemma ‘work’.

Another way in which a dictionary-maker such as Collins is able to use frequency data to help the dictionary user is contained in the section ‘Language in Use’ which is to be found in the middle of the post 1999 Collins dictionaries. Here words or expressions are grouped together under a number of different headings or language functions, such as making an apology, making a suggestion, expressing an opinion, see also page 16.

Principle 3 also states that students should base their vocabulary learning on personal need. In their article [Learners’ independent records of vocabulary](#), which investigated the vocabulary records of postgraduate non-native speakers of English, Leeke and Shaw say that students who make vocabulary lists do so “because they have found exposure does not lead to enough familiarity to produce the (vocabulary) item, because they give a high priority to language learning... One reason for giving a high priority is that one has an [immediate purpose](#) for the learning associated with the list...” (Leeke and Shaw 2000: 283). Personal need is closely allied to the notion of the metacognitive strategy, that is to say having a clear agenda for vocabulary learning.

Principle 4 refers to a notion which is fundamental to effective vocabulary learning, namely that the learner must ‘know’ his/her words. ‘Knowing a word’ is not as easy as the brevity of the expression suggests. In simple terms, it means knowing (a) how to speak the word (pronunciation), (b) what the relationship is between the spoken and the written form of the word (spelling), (c) the grammatical features of the word, e.g. part of speech, gender, plural form etc. (grammar), (d) the context in which the word is used, informal, formal etc. (style), (e) the user or group of users of a word (register), (f) the central meaning of a word (denotation), (g) the associative meaning of a word (connotation), (h) the various senses of the word, if the word is used in more than one sense (polysemy). These are just a few – but an important few – of the aspects of what it means ‘to know a word’. Above all, it is important to know with which other words a particular word occurs. To adapt a well-known line of John Donne: ‘No word is an island’ or, in the words of a famous British linguist, J.R. Firth, ‘You shall know a word by the company it keeps.’ It is to this important organisational principle of vocabulary that we now turn before looking at the construction of the entry in the student vocabulary file.

6. Collocation and all that

‘1066 And All That’ is a reference to a major caesura in the history of England, and we hope that the information on collocation provided below will serve to reinforce the importance of the phrase in vocabulary learning, to which reference has already been made.’

Collocation has to do with the way words combine with one another. Let us start with an example, in this case from Lewis (1997:26):

All pupils should carry out compulsory community service as part of a radical approach to promoting moral values in schools, a government advisory group is expected to recommend.

The text contains a number of groups of words which we recognise as familiar.

*to carry out a service
a radical approach
to promote values
a government advisory group
expect to recommend
etc.*

Indeed, as Lewis (1997: 26) comments: “The text seems to consist of little except collocations combined with each other. Although this type of text is more collocation-rich than many, chunks of different kinds are characteristic of texts from different genres.” Furthermore, they are all expressions which can be used creatively in new texts, and hence are worthy of inclusion in any vocabulary file. The following further example is taken from a newspaper business report:

Since March, the group has announced the closure of Wellcome’s main research site in Beckenham, the proposed sale of Wellcome’s London headquarters and the closure of its own head office in the West End. The new headquarters will be at Glaxo’s office in Greenford, and in America manufacturing of prescription medicines will be concentrated on Glaxo’s North Carolina factory.

Included among the collocates are:

*to announce a closure/sale
to concentrate manufacturing on*

Seeing the collocate ‘to announce a closure/sale’ causes us to reflect on which other words combine with ‘announce’ and to ask if there is a pattern. Equally, in relation to ‘concentrate on’, we may ask which other terms can occupy the slot filled by ‘manufacturing’. “Seen in this way”, comments Lewis, “collocations are not just an extension of the concept of ‘words’; they provide learners with a powerful organising principle for language.” (Lewis 1997:26)

A useful perception is to see the collocation as providing a frame with slots which can be filled in a limited number of ways. Let us take as an example the expression:

(S)he's got rather a... accent.

Our knowledge of how language is used suggests that the adjectives which collocate most strongly with *accent* are *strong*, *slight*, *French/German/northern*. Other words are possible: *cute*, *pretentious*, *tricky*; but not *glazed*, *tough*, or *spacious*. "Collocation is about degrees of likelihood. We recognise a spectrum between pairs of words which we expect to find together and words which we are surprised to find together. Collocation is not determined by logic or frequency, but is arbitrary, decided only by linguistic convention.", writes Lewis (1997: 29). Let us look at one further example, the use of the word 'way'. Here, we find the following typical patterns:

the	easiest	}	way is to...
	best		
	simplest		

As Lewis suggests, collocations extend over a spectrum. At one end, we have fixed expressions, like idioms, e.g. to talk turkey, to talk shop, to talk business, to talk politics or fixed expressions used typically in social settings, like: Good morning. It's a lovely morning, isn't it? Happy New Year. or No, thank you, I'm fine. I'll have to be going. At the other end, we have a very large number of semi-fixed expressions, which can be exemplified by the following opening paragraph of an academic paper:

There are broadly speaking two views of... The more traditional, usually associated with... and his/her colleagues, suggests that... while the more progressive view, associated with... suggests... In this paper I wish to suggest a third position, which, while containing elements of the view proposed by... also takes account of recent developments in... which have produced evidence to suggest...
(Lewis 1997:11)

The paragraph is full of semi-fixed expressions. We would identify with Lewis's statement that "the importance of semi-fixed expressions cannot be overestimated." (Lewis 1997: 33) He goes on to say that: "... the collocations which the learner typically needs for productive purposes, particularly writing, are neither the most frequent nor the strongest but medium strength collocations (*profit/output/turnover grew by 3% but prices increased*, not *grew). (Lewis 1997: 209).

7. The vocabulary file entry

In *Implementing the Lexical Approach*, Lewis (p.78ff) proposes vocabulary notebook entries based on collocation, such as the following:

Five verbs		+ noun
dismiss	}	objection
express		
meet		
raise		
withdraw		

An even more sophisticated entry is also proposed:

Five verbs	Five adjectives	+ noun
attract	adverse	criticism
be subject to	blunt	
deserve	constant	
react to	helpful	
provoke	severe	

While students are unlikely to adopt this format unless they have the time to undertake the necessary research, it nevertheless serves to underline the approach we are proposing, which is to see vocabulary not as an unordered set of lexical items but as structured or patterned according to a number of criteria, one of the most important of which is collocation. One practical way for students to grasp the essentials of a word and to make an appropriate vocabulary file entry is to adopt the following format:

Aufsatz	Heute abend geht's nicht. Ich muss einen _____ schreiben.	essay
Geduldig	Nicht so schnell. Sei doch _____.	patient
Viel Glück	_____ bei der Prüfung.	good luck

The column on the left lists the foreign language word or expression, in this case German, the column on the right is its English equivalent. The important column in the middle provides a sample context in sentence form, thereby providing a basis for the word or expression to be retained more readily. The idea is that the learner completes the sentences in the middle column without covering up either the right- or the left-hand column, thus making use of the German and the English word as a reference. The

process is then repeated with the right-hand column covered over. When the sentences can be completed without the help of either column 1 or 3, the learner can consider the items learnt.³

Summary

As we stated earlier, students have to develop their own way of recording vocabulary: what works for one student does not necessarily work for another. What is important is that the notes, which are made, are effective. 'Effective' here means using the strategies and principles which have been described above.

The key guidelines for the organisation of vocabulary which have emerged from the discussion so far are summarised below:

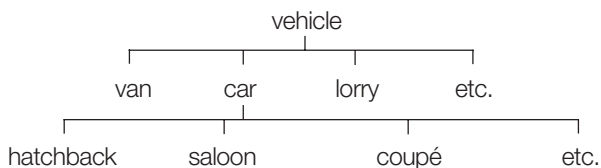
- **Topic.** In the Initial Survey students identified topic areas as an important organising principle of vocabulary. In the early stages of language learning topic areas are the obvious way of organising vocabulary, whether this takes the form of greetings, such as: *Hello, how are you today? I'm fine/OK/not too good/a bit under the weather* or directions such as: *Keep straight on, then turn left, take the second road on the right* etc. At a more advanced level topics also provide a framework for the capture of vocabulary. For example, across Europe some of the main topics currently being discussed are: immigration, right-wing parties, human rights, the 'war against terrorism', the euro, and the enlargement of the EU etc.
- **Core v. technical vocabulary.** As we have seen, vocabulary can also be categorised in terms of core and technical vocabulary. It is important to capture terms (words and particularly phrases) which are used frequently as well as key terms which are relevant to an understanding of a particular subject. The two vocabularies go hand in hand, although the former is more challenging to record in a vocabulary file since, as we have stated above, it is much more versatile, i.e. is used across a range of contexts.
- **Language functions.** The attention of the reader is again drawn to the Language in Use section of the new Collins set of bilingual dictionaries where expressions used to convey a number of different language functions are enumerated: suggestions; advice; offers; requests; comparisons; opinions; likes and dislikes; intentions and desires; permission; obligation, agreement; disagreement; approval and disapproval; certainty, probability and possibility; doubt, improbability, impossibility. Functions constitute an important way in which vocabulary is organised.

³ An idea attributed by Klapper (1998) to Hohmann (1986), *Lexikalische Lernerbeit mit dem Lehrbuch. Der fremdsprachliche Unterricht* 20: 171-180

- **Collocation.** A significant element of the discussion has been to show that language, in terms of the lexicon, does not consist solely of single words but, much more importantly, of phrases. And it is this notion, namely that it is the phrase which is the key to communication that increasingly affects the way in which teachers and students approach language learning. It has been manifested for a number of years in the way in which language is taught and is particularly evident in the way in which the modern dictionary is constructed. (See separate guide on *Using the Dictionary Effectively*.)

8. Sense relations

A further way in which vocabulary is organised is in terms of sense relations – synonymy, antonymy, and hyponymy. Most students are familiar with the relations of synonymy and antonymy – relations of sameness and oppositeness – and, indeed, they were mentioned frequently in the Initial Survey. The relation of ‘hyponymy’, however, is less well known. Hyponymy is the relationship of inclusion and organises words into *taxonomies* or hierarchical tree-type diagrams, for example:



‘Vehicle’ could have been further divided into ‘motor vehicles’ and ‘horse-drawn vehicles’, with ‘cart’, ‘carriage’, and ‘stagecoach’ coming under the latter type. Other divisions on the basis of ‘type of x’ are also possible, for example passenger-carrying vehicles versus cargo-carrying ones. *Roget’s Thesaurus* attempts to organise the whole of the English language in this way (McCarthy 1990:19).

Superordinates like ‘vehicle’ (‘van’, ‘car’, ‘lorry’ are the co-hyponyms of the superordinate) are usefully deployed in summary-writing and are often used when two speakers negotiate meaning, for example:

Madge: I’m surprised you don’t have a cat.

Annie: We never did like *pets*.

(Annie broadens the meaning by using a superordinate.)

(McCarthy 1990: 53)

Superordinates are also often used in translation when a particular term in one language does not have an equivalent in the other, and recourse is therefore made to a generic equivalent in order to solve the particular translation problem.

9. Discourse structuring

When we talk of vocabulary we can distinguish two fundamental types: 1 vocabulary as lexical items (the words and phrases in a dictionary or vocabulary file) and 2 vocabulary as discourse markers. The latter is the subject of section 9 of the *Guide*. In recent years, discourse analysis has become prominent in applied linguistics. Discourse analysis is concerned with how linguistic events like telephone calls, conversations, transactions in shops, interviews, teacher-student talk in class, and a host of other events, where language is dominant, are structured. In the field of written text, discourse analysts are interested in how the components of text fit together coherently and form patterns, which, in turn, create complete discourses.

For our purposes, three types of patterning are of interest:

• Chaining

Let us illustrate the concept of chaining by looking at the following extract from McCarthy, 1990, page 55:

A group of people are talking about the ferry crossing on their recent holiday:

- A:** but it was lovely our one with the nightclub and we had, we had a super cabin which was just below the nightclub, utterly soundproof you know, when you think what houses are like, when we shut our cabin door you wouldn't know there was anything outside and yet there was a nightclub pounding music away, just one immediately overhead and we were the cabin next to it and you couldn't hear at all
- C:** good heavens
- B:** that's good, very good
- A:** and it's, of course we could say to the children we'll just be upstairs and they knew they just had to put their dressing gown on and come up if they wanted us and that was super

The text is held together by groups or chains of lexical items:

- nightclub and cabin, which are repeated twice
- soundproof, couldn't hear, which form a chain related to the sense of hearing
- below, overhead, upstairs, up, which refer to location lovely, super, good, which are evaluative terms.

• Lexical signals

Again, let us use an illustration to exemplify what we mean:

Q: I face a particular problem with vine weevil in a plant-growing operation. A solution I have seen is to mix aldrin into the potting compost. This seems to me an appealing approach, given the amount of handling involved. Is there an organic answer?

A. Watering with diluted liquid derris works very well.
(extract from McCarthy 1990: 57)

The extract contains a number of words which typically occur in academic discourse where students have to write essays on 'problem' topics, such as pollution, TV violence, poverty etc. They are the lexical signals or signal words which constitute the abstract vocabulary of argument. They are also referred to as procedural vocabulary items, that is to say they do not have a high semantic content, but because of their status as a kind of high order superordinate (see page 17), are extremely useful general words which can be used in a range of contexts.

For example, if you reply to the question: What did you and John talk about? by saying: "We talked about the problem and some of the issues involved and he suggested an approach that might lead to a solution." the listener can only understand what is being referred to, if s/he has a knowledge of the situation. In other words, the listener fills in or lexicalizes these 'half-empty' words ('problem', 'issues', 'approach', 'solution') with reference to other parts of the discourse.

• Logical connectors

Logical connectors are devices which are used to produce connected discourse, particularly in formal academic situations where an essay is being written or a presentation being made to other students. The basic connectors are those of:

- Addition. E.g. and, furthermore, moreover; firstly, secondly, thirdly, finally
- Contrast or opposition. E.g. however, but, nevertheless
- Cause and effect. E.g. consequently, therefore, hence
- Instrumentality. E.g. by, with

Let us illustrate with an example.

In an informal situation, recounting an experience to a friend in a pub, the typical patterning of discourse might be:

“The flat was too small. We bought a house. I used a mortgage broker for the first time. It worked a treat. Everything was done by phone. It was all very efficient. That was the good bit. The bad bit was the builder. It started OK. He kept on asking for money up front, removed a number of items from the house and did a runner. We got the police in.”

In a more formal context the patterning changes, the vocabulary, too, and connectors are introduced to structure the discourse.

“We bought a house **because** the flat was too small for three. I used a mortgage broker for the first time **and** it worked very well. All of the business was conducted by phone **and** it was very efficient. **However**, it was not all plain sailing. There were problems with the builder. Things went well initially, **but then** he started asking for money to be paid in advance, removed a number of items from the property and **finally** left without completing the work. We **therefore** called in the police.”

Summary

Chains, lexical signals and logical connectors are three important devices which we use to structure the texts we produce. They help us to organise and create the regular patterns which are found in extended stretches of spoken and written discourse. This type of patterning is known as lexical cohesion and was introduced by Halliday and Hasan in their seminal work on the subject, *Cohesion in English*, which first appeared in 1976.

10. Conclusion

The SLAS LEX Project has been in operation for three years and during that period there have been discernible improvements in the way in which vocabulary is approached by language teachers and students. In particular, more students are aware of the organising principles of vocabulary and use vocabulary files to record topic-based vocabulary items. For their part, language teachers have introduced more vocabulary-based exercises and a good start has been made on the discussion of metacognitive strategies with students.

The most recent survey showed, however, that there is still room for more personal initiative by students in relation to language study time outside of the classroom. Adjusting to language learning in an HE context and becoming an effective vocabulary learner, and hence a good language learner, takes time, but the satisfaction which derives from having grasped the nettle in good time is there to be gained. We hope that the SLAS LEX *Guide to Vocabulary Learning* and accompanying Information Sheets 1 and 2 on *Keeping a Record of Vocabulary* and *Extracting Information from Written Texts* will make a modest contribution to the achievement of this objective.

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Ian Kemble
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SLAS LEX (Vocabulary Acquisition and
Development) Project
School of Languages and Area Studies
Park Building, King Henry I Street
Portsmouth PO1 2D2 UK

T: (023) 9284 6060
F: (023) 9284 6040
E: ian.kemble@port.ac.uk
W: www.port.ac.uk/department/slas