A Lexical Syllabus for Teaching English in Junior High School: Improving Vocabulary Acquisition*

By: Chemda Ben Isty**

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Chemda Ben Isty provides the reader with an in-depth overview of state of the art theory underlying principles of foreign language vocabulary acquisition. Ben Isty's book is a treasure in its unique examination of vocabulary acquisition which is the essence of foreign language learning. More specifically, instead of investing precious resources on random vocabulary acquisition, Ben Isty shows how the English foreign language teacher might make use of frequency lists, focusing on the first 2,000 most frequent word forms together with other vocabulary such as culturally appropriate word forms, vocabulary important for classroom management, vocabulary that will increase students' motivation, vocabulary that is not too challenging from a phonological, morphological or semantic perspective, vocabulary that takes into account similarities and differences between the first and target languages and multiple word chunks. These lists were compiled into a lexical syllabus for teaching English in Junior High School. The author further claims that knowledge of this frequent list together with 1,000 less frequent word families will provide a sound basis for students understanding authentic texts.

The literature review differentiates between passive and active vocabulary knowledge where active vocabulary knowledge is processed in a deeper and broader manner and ultimately retained in memory. As a prerequisite for compiling the lexical syllabus, Ben Isty tested 9th grade students in the A and B streams. Her research questions investigated the extent that these students had active knowledge of the first and second 1,000 most frequent word families. In addition, she examined the relationship between active and passive knowledge of these words. Both streams had received 4 hours of English per week for over 5 years. They were streamed from 8th grade in order to provide the B stream with more intensive practice in smaller classes. Ben Isty found that students in the A stream scored 80% on knowledge of the first 1,000 most frequent words but only 56% on the second 1,000 most frequent words. Students in the B stream scored 53% for the first 1,000 most frequent words and only 20% for the second 1,000 most frequent words.

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High standard deviations reflecting heterogeneity between students probably reflects individual differences in language learning amongst any population.

Ben Isty goes on to show a very large gap between active and passive knowledge of vocabulary for both groups with the B group performing significantly worse despite their smaller classes but taking into consideration their slower pace of learning. It could be that these poorer results were a reflection of individual differences between students in the A and B stream. It could also be that in order to close the gap between vocabulary acquisition of students in the B versus the A stream, additional hours together with alternative methods for vocabulary acquisition would need to be provided (Skehan, 1986). These are empirical issues that could be examined in future research. It also may be that Ben Isty's results might reflect research findings of Sparks and colleagues (1998) where as a result of the implementation of alternative approaches there were significant improvements amongst weaker students, however, the gap between the stronger and weaker groups never actually closed. The scope of Ben Isty's research excluded students with special needs in the C stream. Interesting questions for further investigation would focus on the C stream and examine this group's passive and active vocabulary knowledge.

Ben Isty suggests further research which should examine why both A and B streams score at unexpected low level regarding the first 2,000 most frequent words families. Possible explanations for poor performance include excessive emphasis being placed on grammar versus vocabulary instruction, low expectations regarding vocabulary acquisition, inconsistent standards of instruction and activities, level of student engagement during vocabulary study and finally a lack of a lexical syllabus. In addition to increasing breadth of vocabulary knowledge, Ben Isty recommends emphasizing the transition from passive to active vocabulary knowledge. She provides the reader with research based recommendations for achieving this goal.

All the above provide the rationale for the design of the lexical syllabus in which she includes the first 1,000 and second 1,000 most frequent words from West's General Service List. The author uses the large word family as a unit of counting including a headword, inflected forms and common derivatives. This is done in order to highlight morphological connections and thereby lessen the learning burden. Ben Isty excluded inflections of verbs, adjectives and nouns which she argues should be taught within the context of grammar instruction. In addition, she excluded basic function and content words that were expected to be acquired in elementary school. One could question whether it is accurate to assume that the excluded words were actually acquired. Further research could test passive and active knowledge of the excluded words amongst A, B and C stream students.
There is no doubt that Ben Isty's book is a significant first step in raising awareness regarding the importance of implementing a lexical syllabus as a fundamental nucleus of EFL study. Policy makers within the Ministry of Education should closely read the research together with its implications. Junior high school text book writers would do well to use Ben Isty's lexical syllabus as a basis upon which to draw target vocabulary. EFL educators will find the syllabus useful as a checklist for teaching and may draw from the methodological suggestions in order to facilitate acquisition of active vocabulary knowledge. EFL students should be motivated by the goal orientated emphasis of a lexical syllabus and FL researchers will find Ben Isty's book a model upon which to design further research which will be twofold. First, examining the mastery of the first 2,000 most frequent word families amongst a wider and more representative sample of the population; and second, extending the study to other age groups in an attempt to build lexical syllabi for elementary and high school levels as well as for individuals with memory difficulties.

It is worthwhile mentioning that Ben Isty's book is a publication of her final extended applied paper within the framework of the M.Ed in languages at Oranim College supervised by Dr. Elisheva Barkon. The book is the epitome of one of the basic tenets of the graduate program – designing and using research to inform practice. If our goal is towards a more professional approach to teaching which is anchored in research based teaching practice, Ben Isty's book is an important step towards this within the field of English as a Foreign Language.

References
