

## Module 5: Teaching vocabulary

### ► Unit One: What is vocabulary and what needs to be taught?

#### What is vocabulary?

Vocabulary can be defined, roughly, as the words we teach in the foreign language. However, a new item of vocabulary may be more than a single word: for example, *post office* and *mother-in-law*, which are made up of two or three words but express a single idea. There are also multi-word idioms such as *call it a day*, where the meaning of the phrase cannot be deduced from an analysis of the component words. A useful convention is to cover all such cases by talking about vocabulary 'items' rather than 'words'.

**Question** Can you think of five or six further examples of vocabulary items, in any language you know, that consist of more than one word?

#### What needs to be taught?

##### 1. Form: pronunciation and spelling

The learner has to know what a word sounds like (its pronunciation) and what it looks like (its spelling). These are fairly obvious characteristics, and one or the other will be perceived by the learner when encountering the item for the first time. In teaching, we need to make sure that both these aspects are accurately presented and learned.

##### 2. Grammar

The grammar of a new item will need to be taught if this is not obviously covered by general grammatical rules. An item may have an unpredictable change of form in certain grammatical contexts or may have some idiosyncratic way of connecting with other words in sentences; it is important to provide learners with this information at the same time as we teach the base form. When teaching a new verb, for example, we might give also its past form, if this is irregular (*think, thought*), and we might note if it is transitive or intransitive. Similarly, when teaching a noun, we may wish to present its plural form, if irregular (*mouse, mice*), or draw learners' attention to the fact that it has no plural at all (*advice, information*). We may present verbs such as *want* and *enjoy* together with the verb form that follows them (*want to, enjoy -ing*), or adjectives or verbs together with their following prepositions (*responsible for, remind someone of*).

What is vocabulary and what needs to be taught?

**Question** Can you think of five or six examples of items in the language you teach whose grammatical characteristics are not obviously covered by a regular grammatical rule, and which you would therefore need to teach when you teach the item?

##### 3. Collocation

The collocations typical of particular items are another factor that makes a particular combination sound 'right' or 'wrong' in a given context. So this is another piece of information about a new item which it may be worth teaching. When introducing words like *decision* and *conclusion*, for example, we may note that you *take* or *make* the one, but usually *come* to the other; similarly, you *throw a ball* but *toss a coin*; you may talk about someone being *dead tired* but it sounds odd to say *\*dead fatigued*.

Collocations are also often noted in dictionaries, either by providing the whole collocation under one of the head-words, or by a note in parenthesis.

**Question** Think of three or four typical collocations in the language you teach, and try translating them into another language. Do the collocations translate exactly? If not, what kinds of learning/teaching problems might this lead to, and what might you do about it?

##### 4. Aspects of meaning (1): denotation, connotation, appropriateness

The meaning of a word is primarily what it refers to in the real world, its denotation; this is often the sort of definition that is given in a dictionary. For example, *dog* denotes a kind of animal; more specifically, a common, domestic carnivorous mammal; and both *dank* and *moist* mean slightly wet.

A less obvious component of the meaning of an item is its connotation: the associations, or positive or negative feelings it evokes, which may or may not be indicated in a dictionary definition. The word *dog*, for example, as understood by most British people, has positive connotations of friendship and loyalty; whereas the equivalent in Arabic, as understood by most people in Arab countries has negative associations of dirt and inferiority. Within the English language, *moist* has favourable connotations while *dank* has unfavourable; so that you could describe something as 'pleasantly moist' where 'pleasantly dank' would sound absurd.

A more subtle aspect of meaning that often needs to be taught is whether a particular item is the appropriate one to use in a certain context or not. Thus it is useful for a learner to know that a certain word is very common, or relatively rare, or 'taboo' in polite conversation, or tends to be used in writing but not in speech, or is more suitable for formal than informal discourse, or belongs to a certain dialect. For example, you may know that *weep* is virtually synonymous in denotation with *cry*, but it is more formal, tends to be used in writing more than in speech, and is in general much less common.

**Question** How would you present the meanings of the words *swim, fame, childish, political, impertinence, kid, guy* and *bastard*? For which would you mention their connotations? And their appropriate contexts? (Some possible answers may be found in the Notes, (1).)

### 5. Aspects of meaning (2): meaning relationships

How the meaning of one item relates to the meaning of others can also be useful in teaching. There are various such relationships: here are some of the main ones.

- Synonyms: items that mean the same, or nearly the same; for example, *bright, clever, smart* may serve as synonyms of *intelligent*.
- Antonyms: items that mean the opposite; *rich* is an antonym of *poor*.
- Hyponyms: items that serve as specific examples of a general concept; *dog, lion, mouse* are hyponyms of *animal*.
- Co-hyponyms or co-ordinates: other items that are the 'same kind of thing'; *red, blue, green* and *brown* are co-ordinates.
- Superordinates: general concepts that 'cover' specific items; *animal* is the superordinate of *dog, lion, mouse*.
- Translation: words or expressions in the learners' mother tongue that are (more or less) equivalent in meaning to the item being taught.

Besides these, there are other, perhaps looser, ways of associating meaning that are useful in teaching. You can, for instance, relate parts to a whole (the relationship between *arm* and *body*); or associate items that are part of the same real-world context (*tractor, farmer, milking* and *irrigate* are all associated with *agriculture*).

All these can be exploited in teaching to clarify the meaning of a new item, or for practice or test materials.

**Question** In any language you know, find at least one (more) example for each of the main categories of meaning relationships listed above.

### 6. Word formation

Vocabulary items, whether one-word or multi-word, can often be broken down into their component 'bits'. Exactly how these bits are put together is another piece of useful information – perhaps mainly for more advanced learners.

You may wish to teach the common prefixes and suffixes: for example, if learners know the meaning of *sub-*, *un-* and *-able*, this will help them guess the meanings of words like *substandard*, *ungrateful* and *untranslatable*. They should, however, be warned that in many common words the affixes no longer have any obvious connection with their root meaning (for example, *subject*, *comfortable*). New combinations using prefixes are not unusual, and the reader or hearer would be expected to gather their meaning from an understanding of their components (*ultra-modern*, *super-hero*).

Another way vocabulary items are built is by combining two words (two nouns, or a gerund and a noun, or a noun and a verb) to make one item: a single compound word, or two separate, sometimes hyphenated words (*bookcase*, *follow-up*, *swimming pool*). Again, new coinages using this kind of combination are very common.

**Questions** What prefixes and suffixes in the language you teach would you consider it useful for learners to know? (Some suggestions in English are provided in the Notes, (2).)

How does a language you know other than English combine words to make longer vocabulary items? Can you give examples?

A good modern dictionary should supply much of the information listed in this unit when you look up a specific item. English teachers might find it useful to look at the *Cambridge International Dictionary of English* (1995) or the *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English* (1995).

## ► Unit Two: Presenting new vocabulary

This unit looks at the varied ways a new word can be presented to learners. If you prefer not to do the task, study Box 5.1 and then go straight on to the discussion questions in Box 5.2. Some possible answers to the latter are given later in the unit.

### Task Exploring different ways of presenting new vocabulary

#### Stage 1: Ideas for presenting specific items

Select an item from the vocabulary taught in a foreign language textbook you know. Think how the meaning of this item would best be presented to learners who are encountering it for the first time, and note down some ideas.

If you are working in a group, three or four participants then get together, share ideas and contribute new ones to each other.

#### BOX 5.1: WAYS OF PRESENTING THE MEANING OF NEW ITEMS

- concise definition (as in a dictionary; often a superordinate with qualifications: for example, a cat is an animal which...)
- detailed description (of appearance, qualities...)
- examples (hyponyms)
- illustration (picture, object)
- demonstration (acting, mime)
- context (story or sentence in which the item occurs)
- synonyms
- opposite(s) (antonyms)
- translation
- associated ideas, collocations

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#### Stage 2: Studying further techniques

Putting your practical suggestions aside for the moment, study a list of different techniques of presenting the meaning of new vocabulary. In a group, this list may be compiled by a brainstorm among participants, or derived from Box 5.1; or a combination of the two.

#### Stage 3: Application and comparison

Identify which one or more of the techniques were used in your own idea(s) for presentation. If you are in a group: were there any techniques which

tended to be more 'popular', others which were barely used? On second thoughts: would you/could you have used other techniques to supplement your original idea for presentation?

#### Stage 4: Discussion

On the basis of the information gathered in Stage 3, or your own reflection, discuss orally or in writing generalizations that can be made about the usefulness of the different techniques. Specific questions to consider appear in Box 5.2; of these, some possible answers to Questions 1–3 are presented below.

#### BOX 5.2: QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION: VOCABULARY PRESENTATION TECHNIQUES

1. Some techniques are more popular than others. What are they, and can you account for their popularity?
2. Are there techniques that are particularly appropriate for the presentation of certain types of words?
3. Are there techniques which are likely to be more, or less, appropriate for particular learner populations (young/adult, beginner/advanced, different background cultures)?
4. Do you, as an individual, find that you prefer some kinds of techniques and tend to avoid others? Which? And why?

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#### Comments on the questions in Box 5.2

1. Answers to this will vary; on the whole, definition, synonym and description tend to be the most popular, perhaps because they are the most obvious and conventional. The use of the others demands more awareness and originality, but can be more rewarding in terms of effective teaching and interest.
2. Yes. A concrete object, for example, is more easily illustrated visually, an action can be mimed. Concepts that are very difficult to explain in the target language because the learners are not yet sufficiently proficient to understand the explanation may be more conveniently presented through mother-tongue translation or explanation. You can probably think of further examples.
3. Yes. For example, younger learners react well to concrete illustration, older ones can cope better with more abstract explanation or definition.

### ▷ Unit Three: Remembering vocabulary

There are various reasons why we remember some words better than others: the nature of the words themselves, under what circumstances they are learnt, the method of teaching and so on. The following is an interesting way to examine some of these factors. It is actually a memory experiment, involving the recall of as many items as possible on a learned list. Obviously, we do not usually do this

in the classroom, but its results have clear relevance for conventional vocabulary learning and teaching. If you have time, and are working in a group, it is worthwhile trying it yourself: work according to the Stages laid out below, and only read the Comments section afterwards to compare your own results and conclusions with mine. If you are not able to do the experiment yourself, read through the instructions and go straight on to the *Comments*.

The experiment takes about an hour, including instructions and discussion. There should be at least eight participants, and may be as many as 30. If there is no trainer, one participant should be prepared to take on the role of timekeeper, telling people when to start and finish the different rounds.

#### Task Group experiment: Memorizing words

##### Stage 1: Preparation

Prepare: one copy of the lists in Box 5.3 for each participant; a results sheet, as in Box 5.4; and have ready a pocket calculator.

##### Stage 2: Process

First round: half the pairs in the class work on List A, half on List B; partners help each other learn by heart the items on their list. After three minutes

#### BOX 5.3: WORD-LEARNING EXPERIMENT

A	B
WHO	ARM
DOT	LEG
ASH	PEG
LAR	PIG
SEX	TON
OCT	FOX
FOR	DOG
AWE	CAT
ION	MAN
CAN	BOY
OWN	SON
DIG	MUM
OBI	DAD
HUT	BAD
THE	SAD

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they conceal the lists and try to write down as many items as they can remember. Their results (the number of words they remembered) are recorded on a sheet or OHP film (Box 5.4).

Second round: each pair does the same thing again with the list they did not work on the first time; but this time they work for a minute and stop for a minute, work for a minute and stop for a minute, work for a minute; then write down what they remember. The 'stopping' minutes should be filled with an activity that takes their minds off the lists: counting backwards from 100, for example. The results are recorded as before.

#### Stage 3: Results

Work out the average results for:

- Each list (in the bottom row of the table): was there a difference? Can you account for it?
- Each round (in the extreme right-hand column of the table): was there any difference between 'massed' learning (doing all the learning in one block of time) and 'distributed' (having breaks between learning sessions)?

#### Stage 4: Conclusions

The average results probably show some significant differences. Discuss what the implications might be for teaching.

#### Stage 5: Further discussion

After looking at the numerical results, consider or discuss the following questions:

1. Were there any particular words that most people seemed to remember better? Can you account for this?
2. What strategies did people use or invent to help themselves remember?
3. Was there any significance in the placing of an item in a list? Were words from the beginning – or end – more easily remembered?

#### BOX 5.4: RESULTS SHEET

ROUNDS	LIST A	LIST B	AVERAGE
FIRST			
SECOND			
AVERAGE			

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#### Comments

##### Results

List B often produces near-perfect scores; List A noticeably less. This difference can be attributed to two main factors: the uniform (fairly low) level of difficulty of the items in List B, as opposed to the very mixed level of List A; and the fact that the words in List B are grouped according to meaning- or sound-association, whereas in List A there is no such grouping. The results would indicate not only that we learn words better when we can easily assign meaning to them, but also that it is much easier to learn words in groups, where one can be associated with, or 'hung onto' another. It is interesting that an association through rhyme (*sad-bad*) can be just as effective as an aid to memory as one through meaning (*mum-dad*), though of course this varies from learner to learner.

A comparison between massed and distributed learning usually shows a difference in favour of the distributed.

##### Implications for teaching

There are various interesting practical conclusions to be drawn.

1. You will get better results if the words you teach have clear, easily comprehensible meanings.
2. You will get better results if items can be linked with each other, or with ones already known, through meaning- or sound-association.
3. It is better to teach vocabulary in separated, spaced sessions than to teach it all at once. In other words, words will be learnt better if, for example, they are taught briefly at the beginning of a lesson, reviewed later in the same lesson, and again in the next than if the same total amount of time is used for learning the words all at once. This needs careful lesson-planning, but will repay the effort.

##### Further questions

Some possible answers to the questions asked at Stage 5 above are:

1. Particular words that were remembered: people tend to remember words that have personal or emotive significance (*mum, dad, sex*).
2. Strategies: people commonly attempt to link items together in sense units, or find some reason to associate them, or look for personal significance. All these can be harnessed in teaching.  
Another point worth thinking about here is the wide variety of strategies used by different learners. A strategy found useful by one learner may be quite useless to another.  
We cannot, of course, teach a whole class in a way that will fit every student's learning strategies! – but we can encourage individual students to find what 'works' for them and to approach a learning task in an appropriate way.
3. The placing of words in a list: words at the beginning of a list tend to be remembered better, all things being equal. This may affect your planning: teach your more important new words first, or at the beginning of a lesson.

See Stevick (1976) for further discussion of similar issues.

## ► Unit Four: Ideas for vocabulary work in the classroom

Unit One dealt with ways of presenting specific individual items; this one looks at procedures that involve interaction with a whole set of items, in order both to consolidate learning of ones the learners have previously encountered, and to provide a context for the introduction of new ones.

### Group task **Sharing ideas**

#### Stage 1: Preparation

Each participant prepares a vocabulary activity which they think is effective. Teachers with some experience may bring activities they have used; others may recall ideas from their own language-learning experience or that they have observed, or find suggestions in books (see *Further reading* at the end of this module); or simply create new ones.

#### Stage 2: Presentation

The activities are presented to the group. This is best done by actually performing them, the presenter role-playing the teacher and the others the students; in this way you get the 'feel' of the procedure and remember it well. But doing it this way is very time-consuming, so in a large group some people may have to simply describe their activities, or present them in written form.

#### Stage 3: Discussion

A discussion should follow each presentation, on questions such as: What was the main objective of the activity (awareness-raising/presentation of new vocabulary/review and practice)? What particular aspects of vocabulary did the activity focus on? How effective was it, and why? How interesting/enjoyable was it? For what sort of class, or situation, is it appropriate? Were there any unusual or original aspects of it which you would like to discuss?

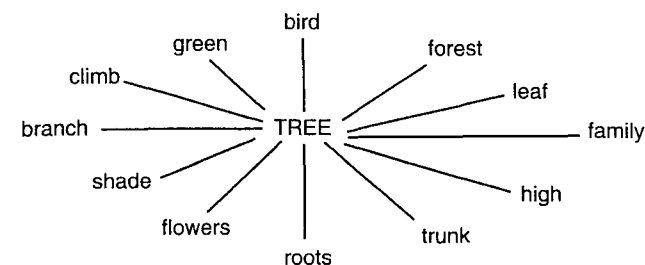
Two activities of my own are described below.

### Ideas for vocabulary activities

#### 1. Brainstorming round an idea

Write a single word in the centre of the board, and ask students to brainstorm all the words they can think of that are connected with it. Every item that is suggested is written up on the board with a line connecting it to the original word, so that the end result is a 'sun-ray' effect. For example, the word *tree* might produce something like the sketch below.

This activity is mainly for revising words the class already knows, but new ones may be introduced, by the teacher or by students. Although there are no sentences or paragraphs, the circle of associated items is in itself a meaningful context for the learning of new vocabulary. The focus is on the meaning of isolated items.



This kind of association exercise is useful when introducing a poem or other literature: a key concept can be placed in the centre, and the brainstorm used as a 'warm-up' to the theme, as well as a framework for the introduction of some of the new vocabulary.

You may, of course, use other sorts of stimulus-words or connections: put a prefix (say *sub-*) in the centre and invite the class to think of words that begin with it; or a transitive verb (like *push*) and think of objects to go with it; or any verb, and think of possible adverbs; or a noun, and think of adjectives; or vice versa. You can probably think of further possibilities: the basic technique is very versatile.

#### 2. Identifying words we know

As an introduction to the vocabulary of a new reading passage: the students are given the new text, and asked to underline, or mark with fluorescent pens, all the words they know. They then get together in pairs or threes to compare: a student who knows something not known to their friend(s) teaches it to them, so that they can mark it in on their texts. They then try to guess the meaning of the remaining unmarked items.

Finally the teacher brings the class together to hear results, checking guesses and teaching new items where necessary.

This activity tends to be morale-boosting, in that it stresses what the students know rather than what they do not; it encourages student cooperation and peer-teaching; it also entails repeated exposure to the text and vocabulary items, through individual, group and teacher-led stages.

## ► Unit Five: Testing vocabulary

There are many different types of vocabulary-testing techniques, selected examples of which are shown in Box 5.5. Some are written out as they would be presented to the learner; others are described. If you do not wish to do the task, study Box 5.5 and then go on to read the following Comments.

### Task **Looking at vocabulary-testing techniques**

For each example, define for yourself what aspects of the item(s) are being tested, and – just as important – what is **not** being tested! You may wish to

**BOX 5.5: VOCABULARY-TESTING TECHNIQUES****Example 1**

Choose the letter of the item which is the nearest in meaning to the word in italics:

He was *reluctant* to answer.

- a) unprepared    b) unwilling    c) refusing    d) slow

**Example 2**

Choose the letter of the definition which comes closest in meaning to the word *elated*.

- a) ready and willing    b) tense and excited  
c) tending to talk a lot    d) in high spirits

**Example 3**

Draw lines connecting the pairs of opposites.

<b>A</b>	<b>B</b>
brave	awake
female	expensive
cheap	succeed
asleep	cowardly
fail	male

**Example 4**

Which of the prefixes in Column A can combine with which of the words in Column B? Write out the complete words.

<b>A</b>	<b>B</b>
over	human
trans	national
super	flow
dis	form
inter	infect

**Example 5**

Underline the odd one out: goat, horse, cow, spider, sheep, dog, cat.

**Example 6**

For each of the following words, write a sentence that makes its meaning clear.

1. wealth    2. laughter    3. decision    4. brilliant

**Example 7**

(The teacher dictates the words from Example 6, the students write them down.)

**Example 8**

(The teacher dictates the mother-tongue equivalents of the words in Example 6, the students write down the target-language versions.)

**Example 9**

Fill in the gaps:

In the seventeenth \_\_\_\_\_ Spanish ships sailed \_\_\_\_\_ to Central and \_\_\_\_\_ America to fetch gold for the Spanish \_\_\_\_\_. The ships were often attacked by \_\_\_\_\_, who infested the 'Spanish Main' (the sea \_\_\_\_\_ north-east of Central and South America).

Adapted from *The Cambridge English Course 2 Student's Book* Michael Swan and Catherine Walter, 1985

**Example 10**

Complete the passage using the words from the list:

area, century, pirates, government, regularly, South

In the seventeenth \_\_\_\_\_ Spanish ships sailed \_\_\_\_\_ to Central and \_\_\_\_\_ America to fetch gold for the Spanish \_\_\_\_\_. The ships were often attacked by \_\_\_\_\_, who infested the 'Spanish Main' (the sea \_\_\_\_\_ north-east of Central and South America).

**Example 11**

(Students are given sentences in the mother tongue to translate into the target language; or vice versa.)

**Example 12**

Finish the following sentences:

1. I feel depressed when...
2. I never have an appetite when...
3. It was a great relief when...

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refer back to Unit One for a summary of various aspects of vocabulary items that need to be taught and therefore, in the present context, tested. Add any further remarks you wish on the advantages or disadvantages of the technique, and how, or whether, you would use it.

After discussion of these examples, you may wish to suggest further useful techniques which have not been shown here.

Teachers learning in a group might like to come together later to compare notes; and/or refer to my own comments below.

**Comments****Examples 1 and 2: Multiple-choice**

Note that only denotative meaning is tested, the testee does not need to know the words' connotations, spelling, pronunciation, grammar, or how they would be used in context. Multiple-choice questions are tricky and time-consuming to compose, but, if the answers are clear, very quick and easy to mark. Note that a

testee who does not know the answer has a 25 per cent chance of being right by guessing!

The second example allows for more careful and subtle distinctions in meaning.

### Example 3: Matching

As in the previous examples, only meaning is tested; and is knowledge of an opposite a proof that the testee knows the meaning of the original word? Matching items are quicker and easier to compose than multiple-choice; but note that the last option – if the learner has all the others right – becomes obvious. This problem can be corrected by the provision of more items in Column B than in A.

### Example 4: Matching

Here the only thing that is being tested is whether the testee is aware of the existence of the (combined) word! Which probably means they also know its meaning, but this fact is not actually being tested. See also the last comment on matching exercises above.

### Example 5: Odd one out

Again, only meaning is being tested, and you have no way of being sure that all the items are known. But this is at least more interesting to do, and usually easy to mark.

### Example 6: Writing sentences

Spelling and pronunciation of the items are not tested, but most other aspects are. This is a bit boring to do, and difficult to mark objectively, but does check the testee's knowledge fairly well.

### Example 7: Dictation

Dictation tests aural recognition and spelling only. However, if learners can recognize and spell an item correctly they probably also know what it means: it is extremely difficult to perceive, let alone spell, words you do not know. A relatively easy test to administer and check.

### Example 8: Dictation-translation

This checks if students know meaning and spelling only. There is the problem that the mother-tongue translation may be inexact or misleading; but if it is a reasonable equivalent, then this is a very quick, easy and convenient test to administer and check.

### Example 9: Gap-filling

This tests meaning, spelling, to some extent grammar and collocation. But testees may write down possibly acceptable items that are not in fact the originals, or what you intended; will you accept them?

### Example 10: Gap-filling with a 'pool' of answers

Meaning is tested here, also to some extent grammar and collocation. This version is easier to do and mark than Example 9.

### Example 11: Translation

Translation can test all aspects of an item, but there is the usual difficulty of finding exact equivalents across languages, and it may be tricky to mark.

### Example 12: Sentence completion

This tests (denotative) meaning only; but is 'personalized' and interesting to do and read!

## Notes

### Meaning: denotation, connotation, appropriateness

*Swim* means the action of propelling oneself through the water by moving the body; *fame* means the state of being well known to the public, with connotations of favour and popularity; *childish* means like a child, usually applied to an adult, or an adult's behaviour, with negative connotations; *political* means to do with public or national affairs, often connoting cynical power-play; *impertinence* is impoliteness, usually used of an inferior behaving with lack of respect to a superior. *Kid* means the same as 'child', and *guy* means 'man', but both are used almost exclusively in informal, spoken speech; note that *guy* in the singular usually refers to a male, but the plural commonly includes both males and females. *Bastard* is a child of parents who are not married; usually used as an insult or an expression of contempt in informal spoken language (the word *illegitimate* would be substituted if no offence is intended).

### Word formation

Some common, useful prefixes in English are:

*a-/ab-, ante-, anti-, auto-, co-/con-/com-, circum-, dis-, e-/ex-, inter-, mis-, non-, per-, pre-, re-, sub-, super-, trans-*;  
and suffixes: *-able, -er/-or, -ic, -ify, -ism, -ist, -ise/-ize, -ment, -ness, -tion*.

### Further reading

#### BACKGROUND

Carter, R. and McCarthy, M. (1988) *Vocabulary and Language Teaching*, London: Longman.

(A collection of articles on applied-linguistics aspects of the topic; see particularly the Introduction, and articles by Nattinger and by Sinclair and Renouf)

Hurford, J. R. (1983) *Semantics: A Coursebook*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

(Easy to follow and comprehensive, with self-checking exercises and tests; an excellent way to teach yourself the subject)