

Teaching Vocabulary in the EFL Context

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Abstract Teaching vocabulary in the English as a foreign language (EFL) context is challenging. Incidental vocabulary learning is limited due to a lack of second language (L2) input, and most words are learned through classroom instruction. Overall, research has shown marginal L2 vocabulary growth in many EFL situations. Such research indicates a need for a more effective and efficient approach to teaching vocabulary in the EFL context. This chapter discusses how to optimise vocabulary learning in the EFL context. It touches on the following questions: Which words should be taught? How should vocabulary be taught? How many words do EFL learners need to know? What should a vocabulary-learning programme include? How can vocabulary learning be fostered given limited classroom time? Which activities might be useful in indirect vocabulary learning?

Keywords Vocabulary size • Vocabulary learning • Extensive reading • Extensive viewing • Vocabulary-learning programme

1 Introduction

Both first (L1) and second (L2) language educators and researchers agree that mastering vocabulary is of great importance in one's becoming a mature language user. Although learning vocabulary in a L1 and L2 is not fundamentally different, one of the important ways in which L1 and L2 vocabulary learning does differ is the rate of vocabulary growth. In the L1 learning context, the amount of regular input is immense allowing for much of vocabulary to be learnt incidentally. In contrast, the smaller amount of regular input in the L2 context means that the opportunities for learning new vocabulary items are limited, with relatively few words being acquired

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incidentally. It is, thus, hypothesised that teachers have the greatest influence on the quality and quantity of L2 vocabulary learnt by EFL learners (Laufer 2003). Because teachers play such a key role and ultimately decide what will be learnt, their careful planning and general knowledge of the issues involved in vocabulary learning may help enhance the learning process. The present chapter has as its aim to address a number of questions with regard to vocabulary size and coverage, the amount and type of vocabulary that EFL learners may know and need to know, core components of a vocabulary-learning programme, activities and opportunities for incidental vocabulary acquisition, as well as the role of the teacher in vocabulary learning in the EFL context.

2 Vocabulary Size and Coverage: Key Facts and Figures

According to Nation (2006), one of the ways of deciding on vocabulary learning goals in an English language-learning programme is to look at native speaker's vocabulary size. It is estimated that a well-educated native speaker of English knows about 20,000 word families, or around 32,000 vocabulary items, excluding proper names (Goulden et al. 1990). Clearly, this figure is a very ambitious and rather unrealistic goal for any L2 learning programme. It has been proposed that the vocabulary size of a highly educated non-native speaker of English is around 8000–9000 word families (Nation 2006) – less than a half of that of a native speaker of English.

Another, perhaps, more realistic, way of determining vocabulary learning goals is to identify how much vocabulary is needed in order to perform a particular activity in the target language, such as, for example, reading newspapers or novels, watching movies, participating in conversations, and so on (Nation 2006). When deciding on the amount of vocabulary needed for L2 learners to be able to successfully engage in a particular task, it is important to consider the relationship between lexical coverage (percentage of known words in a text) and reading comprehension. Hu and Nation (2000) studied precisely that. They determined lexical coverage by replacing the low frequency items in their text with nonsense words (such that one could be certain they were unknown to the learner). Reading comprehension was measured using a reading comprehension test and a cued recall test. It was found that with a text coverage of 80% (one in every five words being a nonsense word), no L2 reader was able to demonstrate satisfactory comprehension. When the text coverage figure was increased to 90%, a very small number of learners demonstrated adequate comprehension. When the figure was further increased to 100%, most learners were able to demonstrate good comprehension of the text. Further analysis revealed that 98% text coverage (i.e., one unknown word in every 50 words) would be required for most L2 learners to achieve good comprehension of a text.

With this figure in mind, in a more recent corpus study, Nation (2006) investigated how large a vocabulary was needed to adequately comprehend a variety of written and spoken texts. For example, it was found that a vocabulary of 9000 word

families (made from the British National Corpus (BNC)) would be needed to read *Lady Chatterley's Lover* by D. H. Lawrence, and a vocabulary of 8000–9000 would be needed to read other similar novels. Interestingly, a similar 8000–9000 vocabulary size was found to be needed for adequate comprehension of newspaper texts. When simplified texts, such as graded readers designated for language learners, were looked at (e.g., *The Picture of Dorian Gray* by O. Wilde), it was found that only 3000 word families were needed to achieve a 98 % coverage level. Nation (2006) also looked at spoken texts, such as a children's movie *Shrek* and unscripted spoken English. The former required about 7000 word families and the latter a comparable 6000–7000 word families, excluding proper nouns. It was concluded that if one takes 98 % as the ideal coverage, a 8000–9000 word-family vocabulary is needed to deal with most written texts, and 6000–7000 word families are required to deal with most spoken texts (other figures have also been proposed; for example, van Zeeland and Schmitt (2013) found that, based on a 95 % coverage figure, language learners would need to know 2000–3000 word families for adequate listening comprehension, which is, clearly, lower than Nation's (2006) estimate of 6000–7000 families based on a 98 % figure). These vocabulary sizes might be considered as useful language learning targets.

3 How Much Vocabulary Do EFL Learners Know?

L2 vocabulary learning progress is often slow and uneven. Whereas native speakers may learn, on average, 1000 word families each year until the age of 20 (Goulden et al. 1990). This rate of growth is clearly unrealistic in the EFL learning context. This is due to a number of inter-related factors, such as insufficient input, lack of opportunities to use the language outside the classroom (insufficient output), teaching methods used (communicative language teaching vs. grammar-translation method), amount of time dedicated to the English language in general, amount of time dedicated to vocabulary learning in particular, and so on.

By and large, studies have shown that English vocabulary knowledge and learning rates in the EFL context fall far short of what is considered to be a norm in the L1 context. For example, Nurweni and Read (1999) investigated the English vocabulary knowledge of 324 first-year university students in the Indonesian EFL context. They found that after six years of formal English language instruction, on average, the learners knew 1226 English words (986 words, or just under 50 %, of the General Service List (West 1953) and 240 words, or 30 %, of the University Word List (Xue and Nation 1984)). Given that L2 learners of English are thought to require 4000–5000 words to be able read university level textbooks (Nation 1990), it is evident that the EFL learners in Nurweni and Read (1999) were not equipped even with the most basic vocabulary to be able to cope with university-level readings. As the authors conclude, the limited vocabulary knowledge found in their study is disconcerting as Indonesian EFL learners are expected to have the vocabulary size of a minimum of 4000 words upon entry to the university. As a possible solution to such

an alarmingly low level of vocabulary gains, the authors recommended paying more attention to vocabulary learning; in particular, focusing more directly on teaching high-frequency words.

Such was also the conclusion of Webb and Chang (2012), who investigated the vocabulary knowledge of 166 EFL learners in Taiwan over a period of five years. They measured students' vocabulary learning progress using the *Vocabulary Levels Test* (VLT: Schmitt et al. 2001). The data were examined according to the number of hours of English language instruction that learners had received (e.g., while one group enjoyed between 10 and 22 h of English classes per week, another group had a mere 2–6 h of English per week). The authors found that those with less exposure to English learnt significantly fewer words (some learnt as few as 18 words in one year), while the learners with greater exposure learnt as many as 430 words in one year. Perhaps, most disappointingly, the study revealed that after nine years of English language instruction, less than half of all the learners had mastered the words in the first 1000 word families. More disappointingly still, only 16% of the learners had mastered the words in the second 1000 word families. Similar to Nurweni and Read (1999), Webb and Chang (2012) highlighted the need to specifically focus on the high-frequency words, that is, those in the first and second 1000 word families.

4 Choosing Words to Be Learned in an English Language-Learning Programme

Frequency plays a central role in language acquisition, processing and use. It is believed that the language processor is tuned to input frequency because language users are sensitive to the frequencies of linguistic events in their experiences. Lexical frequency effects are, arguably, some of the most robust in psycholinguistic research, and are thought to be responsible for the organisation of the lexicon (Bod et al. 2003; Ellis 2002; Forster 1976). Indeed, frequency is a decisive (albeit not the only) factor indicating which L1 words are likely to be learned and when. Some words are acquired early on in a child's life (*milk, bottle, dog*), others may be acquired later in life (*internet, university, marriage*); many words, however, may never be acquired, used, or ever encountered by even highly educated L1 users (terms and other very low frequency words: *dactylion, tachyphagia, yclept*). It is, thus, hardly surprising that frequency of occurrence should be the guiding force in language teachers' and course designers' decisions regarding what should be taught to L2 learners and when. Over the past two decades, corpus-driven studies of written and spoken discourse have been fundamental in improving our understanding of the relative frequency of words and, hence, value of vocabulary in language learning and teaching.

In the corpus study described above, Nation (2006) found that a 8000–9000 word-family vocabulary is needed to deal with written texts, and 6000–7000 word families are needed to adequately comprehend spoken texts. More importantly,

Nation (2006) concluded that the greatest variation in vocabulary is likely to occur in the first 1000 word families, which cover around 80 and 83 % of written and spoken texts, respectively. Similarly, the most frequent 1000 word families in the BNC were also found to cover over 85 % of the words in 88 television programmes (Webb and Rodgers 2009a) and around 86 % of the words in 318 movies (Webb and Rodgers 2009b). These findings demonstrate the value of the high frequency words and, thus, make learning the first 1000 word families of primary importance in any English language-learning programme. On the contrary, the second 1000 word families in Nation (2006) were found to account for around 9 and 6 % of written and spoken language, respectively, while combined the fourth and the fifth 1000 word families were found to provide only 3 % coverage of written and 2 % coverage of spoken texts. Clearly, however, in order to reach specific language learning goals and be able to communicate effectively in the L2, it is fundamental to learn and be able to operate with the words beyond the first 1000 word families.

What these figures demonstrate, first and foremost, is the relative value of words in vocabulary learning. Learners' primary task should be sufficient mastery of the words in the most frequent 1000 word families before they move on to second or third 1000-word levels. Evidently, learners learn (or attempt to learn) what teachers present them with. Thus, an important role in the mammoth task of vocabulary learning belongs to language teachers and course designers, whose duty it is to choose, in a principled way, which words should be learned and when.

Earlier in the chapter, we reported that students in various EFL contexts, even those studying at a university, may not know some of the high-frequency words found in the first 1000 word families, and may know very few, if any, words in the second 1000 word families (Danelund 2013; Nurweni and Read 1999; Quinn 1968; Webb and Chang 2012). These learners' vocabulary knowledge can be said to fall far short of what is expected of an EFL learner upon entry to university. These rather disheartening findings suggest that vocabulary learning in the EFL context may be lacking a number of important elements, both at the level of course planning and course delivery. In what follows below, we discuss what can be done to improve the effectiveness of the EFL learning programme on vocabulary development.

5 Vocabulary-Learning Programme: Key Features

A number of challenges exist with respect to L2 vocabulary learning and teaching. First, much unlike L1 vocabulary learning, L2 vocabulary learning rates are slow and uneven. This is largely due to insufficient input and lack of opportunities to use the language in and outside the classroom. Second, the sheer task may appear daunting – there is simply too much to learn. An educated native speaker knows 20,000 word families, while an educated L2 speaker's vocabulary is 8000–9000 words – even the latter may be a life-long challenge for an EFL learner. Finally, words differ vastly in their frequency and coverage and, hence, learning worth – it is, therefore, imperative to choose words judiciously. It makes little sense to introduce an EFL

learner to words from the second 1000 families (or beyond) until the words in the first 1000 word families have been mastered, if not productively then at least receptively. What can help learners and teachers in the vocabulary-learning quest is the development of a sound institutional programme aimed at optimising vocabulary teaching and learning.

A prominent example of such a programme is Nation's (2001) model that incorporates the vocabulary component of a language course. The main tenets and elements of this model can be summarised as follows:

1. *Establishing goals and needs.*

While an overarching goal will, inevitably, be to increase learners' vocabulary size, more specific goals may differ from one group of learners to another. For example, depending on what the learners already know, the focus may be on high-frequency, academic, technical, or low-frequency vocabulary. In order to identify the goals and to establish what kind of vocabulary teachers should focus on, it is important to find out what vocabulary learners already know. Nation (2001) and Webb and Chang (2012) suggest using diagnostic testing, such as the VLT (Schmitt et al. 2001), or *Productive Levels Test* (Laufer and Nation 1999). While the VLT is a receptive test and the scores will indicate whether learners can *recognise* the meanings of L2 forms, the Productive Levels Test indicates whether learners might be able to produce the L2 forms of words when speaking and writing. Thus, teachers should establish what vocabulary learners already know and can use, and which words should be focused on and to what extent.

2. *Taking into account environmental factors.*

Nation (2001) suggests establishing features and characteristics of the learners (e.g., Do they share the same L1?), the teachers (e.g., Are teachers well informed about teaching and learning vocabulary?), and the situation (e.g., Do L1 and L2 share cognate vocabulary?).

3. *Following vocabulary-teaching principles.*

Arguably, the core of Nation's model is the three principles of *content and sequencing, format and presentation*, and *monitoring and assessment*. The principle of content and sequencing deals with the vocabulary to be learnt, the stages and means of learning. For example, frequency and range of occurrence should be the main guiding force in deciding what should be learnt and when. Students should also be trained in vocabulary-learning strategies (guessing from context, learning word parts, learning to use a dictionary, using word cards) and be familiarised with what is involved in knowing a word (form, meaning, aspects of use). With regards to the principle of format and presentation, Nation (2001) emphasises that high-frequency words should occur in the four strands of meaning-focused input (learning through listening and reading activities that are oriented towards comprehension and enjoyment), meaning-focused output (learning through speaking and writing), language-focused learning (deliberately learning language features such as pronunciation, vocabulary, grammar, and discourse), and fluency development (which does not involve the learning of new vocabulary

items, but focuses on becoming fluent in using what the learner already knows). The four strands are a useful basis for vocabulary learning, because each strand focuses on different aspects of knowing and using a word and contributes to vocabulary development in its own unique way. In addition, this principle highlights the importance of spaced, repeated exposures to the target vocabulary (we will come back to this principle in the final section of the chapter). Finally, the principle of monitoring and assessment centres on a regular and systematic use of various types of assessment (e.g., tests, quizzes) in order to measure learning progress, but also to motivate and encourage learners. Depending on the goals, some assessment may happen weekly or fortnightly (short-term achievement), while other forms of evaluation may only happen twice, at the beginning and at the end of the course (long-term achievement).

4. *Evaluation of the vocabulary component of a language course.*

The final component of the model centres on evaluating the effectiveness of the vocabulary component of a language programme. Nation (2001, 2008) provides a number of principles that can be used to achieve this aim. The following questions draw on some of these principles:

- (a) Were the target vocabulary learning goals reached?
- (b) Were the important environmental factors taken into account?
- (c) Were the learners' needs met?
- (d) Are teachers and learners happy with the vocabulary-learning programme? If not, do they understand its key components and principles?
- (e) Did the learners' development of vocabulary knowledge extend beyond the learning of form and meaning? Were the learners able to *use* the target vocabulary? If not, were there sufficient opportunities for students to encounter the target vocabulary (in and outside the classroom)? Were the learners encouraged to use extracurricular activities for indirect vocabulary learning?

6 Vocabulary Learning Activities: Learning Outside the Classroom

As has been pointed out throughout the chapter, researchers and educators recommend paying more attention to vocabulary learning and strategically focusing on teaching high-frequency words. However, there is a limit to how much vocabulary can be explicitly taught in the classroom. It is not uncommon for EFL students to have a very limited exposure to the target language (some learners in Webb and Chang (2012) had as few as two hours of English classes per week). In addition, not all of this time will be dedicated to vocabulary learning; other aspects, such as grammar, will too be part of the curriculum. It may, therefore, be of considerable value to encourage EFL learners to engage in a number of extracurricular, out-of-classroom activities that focus on and promote the acquisition of new vocabulary.

As Nation (2001) notes, opportunities for indirect vocabulary learning should occupy much more time in a language course than direct vocabulary learning activities. Such indirect activities may, for example, include extensive reading and extensive viewing.

6.1 *Extensive Reading*

Reading may not be *the* main source of vocabulary acquisition in an instructed language-learning context (Laufer 2003), but it can be used as a useful activity outside the EFL classroom. It is also one of the activities central to Nation's (2001) strand of meaning-focused input. Second language researchers, educators and practitioners have long acknowledged an important role of reading in vocabulary acquisition (Pigada and Schmitt 2006). It has been claimed that acquiring vocabulary through reading leads to learning gains due to repeated encounters with the same word (according to Nation's (2001) core principles of vocabulary teaching, spaced, repeated exposures are imperative for vocabulary learning). This suggests that longer texts might be better suited for vocabulary learning purposes than shorter ones, as the same word is more likely to be encountered a number of times. Extensive reading has been argued to be particularly effective in vocabulary learning. Not only does extensive reading offer opportunities for repeated exposure to the same lexical item, but it also provides learners with opportunities to encounter words in their contexts of use, thus helping them notice, read, analyse, and eventually learn new items.

Modern technology can also help teachers use extensive reading more effectively in the EFL context. For example, the RANGE programme (Nation and Heatley 2002) allows teachers to tactically choose texts for different courses according to the vocabulary level of their learners. When selecting texts for use in and outside the classroom, it is advisable to use texts that are primarily made of high frequency words and contain relatively few low frequency words. The RANGE programme, which allows the user to compare vocabulary loads of a large number of texts at the same time, is easy to use and can be an invaluable tool for teachers and course designers alike. Webb and Chang (2012) argue that judiciously selecting texts that largely contain high frequency words will provide superior conditions for text comprehension and will allow the learner to focus their attention on the target vocabulary. Other researchers have similarly argued for the relative simplicity of extensive reading texts, and have outlined some of the key principles to be borne in mind when choosing extensive reading material for a language-learning programme. For example, Day and Bamford (2002) put forward ten principles for an extensive reading approach that deal with the nature of extensive reading, as well as the conditions and methodologies necessary for its implementation and success:

1. The reading material is easy (i.e., primary focus on high-frequency vocabulary; the RANGE programme can help teachers select appropriate texts);

2. A variety of reading material on a wide range of topics must be available;
3. Learners choose what they want to read;
4. Learners read as much as possible (i.e., multiple encounters with a new word are necessary; Nation and Wang (1999) suggest that learners need to read about one book per week in order to meet repetitions of a new word soon enough to reinforce the previous meeting);
5. The purpose of reading is usually related to pleasure, information, and general understanding;
6. Reading is its own reward;
7. Reading speed is usually faster rather than slower;
8. Reading is individual and silent;
9. Teachers orient and guide learners;
10. The teacher is a role model of a reader.

As can be seen, the focus is primarily on L2 learners – their choice, their reading for pleasure, and their comfort zone. Importantly, extensive reading promotes learner autonomy, can be motivating, and can result in substantial vocabulary learning, which is difficult to achieve with explicit teaching during the short period of time that L2 learners spend in the classroom (Pigada and Schmitt 2006). Finally, as Nation (2001) points out, the use of reading may be one of the few options for out-of-class vocabulary development for some learners, such as, for example, EFL learners. Researchers have, therefore, recommended including extensive reading into the language-learning programme (Day and Bamford 2002; Pigada and Schmitt 2006).

6.2 *Extensive Viewing*

It has been argued that word knowledge involves a number of skills and that word learning can be facilitated by approaches and methods that provide varied learning experiences. Extensive reading *may* be one of the few options for out-of-class vocabulary development available to EFL learners (Nation 2001), but it is not the only one. Researchers also suggest that an approach that involves comprehensible and enjoyable aural input in the form of extensive listening to aural versions of graded readers and other text types may be a useful way to further expand vocabulary knowledge and listening skills (Chang and Millet 2014; Renandya and Farrell 2011). Extensive viewing of L2 television is another such activity that can complement extensive reading (Webb 2009, 2014).

Television, movies and videos have a long history in English language teaching and learning, and research into the ways in which popular media can be used to enhance English learning dates back to the 1980s (Lin and Siyanova-Chanturia 2014). EFL learners are particularly encouraged to watch English television programmes outside the classroom (Lin and Siyanova-Chanturia 2014; Nurweni and

Read 1999) since research has shown that it can aid the learning of English vocabulary (Koolstra and Beentjes 1999; Lin 2014).

Webb (2009, 2014) recommended extensive viewing of English language television programmes as an approach to increasing vocabulary growth. Lin and Siyanova-Chanturia (2014) suggest that *internet television* may be an ideal material for developing autonomous vocabulary learners. They argue that EFL learners can take internet television with them and watch it wherever they happen to be (while commuting, at home, at university). Recent technological developments mean that internet television is accessible with a few clicks on an internet-enabled smartphone (or another mobile device), allowing learners to receive authentic input even if they have only a few minutes on a train.

According to Lin and Siyanova-Chanturia (2014), the following principles demonstrate the potential of internet television, especially, in the EFL context where classroom time is limited:

1. Learners receive extensive exposure to English;
2. Learners have the opportunity to observe authentic, everyday English. This is especially important in the context of formulaic language which has been found to be particularly problematic for L2 learners (Siyanova and Schmitt 2007, 2008; Siyanova-Chanturia and Martinez 2015);
3. Internet television facilitates contextual vocabulary acquisition.

Extensive viewing is not unlike extensive reading, in that it too promotes repeated exposure to lexical items and exploits contextual cues available to the viewer. With regard to the latter, however, television provides multimodal (e.g., aural, visual) contextual cues, which are likely to make it easier for learners to not only work out the meaning of an unknown lexical item, but also to learn the new item (Lin and Siyanova-Chanturia 2014). Simply put, given the availability of multimodal contextual cues, fewer exposures may be necessary for vocabulary learning to take place.

One of the principles of extensive reading proposed by Day and Bamford (2002) is that it should be easy. Because television puts emphasis on authentic (unmodified) input, this is unlikely to apply to extensive viewing of television. Moreover, while extensive reading is suitable for any level (beginner, intermediate, advanced), television may only be suitable for more advanced EFL learners. Even then, learners may need help and guidance on how to make watching television a valuable learning (rather than entertainment only) experience. The following strategies, adapted from Lin and Siyanova-Chanturia (2014), may help guide EFL learners:

1. Repeated viewing: Repeated viewing leads to repeated encounters with a vocabulary item. There is no maximum number of times that a learner can watch a given episode (in Nation's (2001) model, the importance of repeated encounters with the target item is emphasised);
2. Training on contextual vocabulary learning skills: This will help learners acquire implicitly from watching television;
3. Programme selection: While learners' individual interests should be prioritised, Lin (2014) argues that programmes should be chosen based on the extent to

which they reflect real language use. Lin (2014) found that television programmes in the factual, drama and comedy categories were more representative of everyday English than programmes in the music, learning and religion categories;

4. Narrow viewing: Viewing programmes on the same or similar theme, which is more likely to provide multiple repetitions of vocabulary items and may help learners accumulate vocabulary on a particular topic (Rodgers and Webb 2011);
5. Subtitles: These can be used in the same language as the programme (*intralingual* subtitles), or in another language, such as learners' L1 (*interlingual* subtitles). Subtitles have been found to aid vocabulary learning (Koolstra and Beentjes 1999). However, more research is needed on the effect of subtitles on foreign language learning, as recent findings suggest that while foreign-language subtitles may assist learning, native-language subtitles may, in fact, create lexical interference (Mitterer and McQueen 2009).

Finally, learners may also benefit from reading-while-listening activities. Research suggests that reading while listening can lead to greater vocabulary learning than reading alone (Webb and Chang 2012; Webb et al. 2013). TED Talks (<http://www.ted.com/>) and other similar services provide a range of videos and talks with transcripts. In addition, Tom Cobb's Compleat Lexical Tutor (available at <http://www.lextutor.ca/>) offers a range of electronic versions of graded and ungraded readers accompanied by recordings that learners can listen to before, after, or during reading. It is noteworthy that the Compleat Lexical Tutor is an extremely valuable resource for teachers and learners alike, offering (among other things) such tools as word lists, concordancers, vocabulary profilers, and vocabulary tests.

Overall, researchers agree that watching (traditional) television and internet television can be a useful EFL activity promoting learner autonomy and enhancing vocabulary learning, and recommend including extensive viewing of television into the language-learning programme.

7 Conclusion

In the present chapter, we raised a number of issues pertinent to vocabulary teaching and learning in the EFL context. Overall, research has shown only marginal L2 vocabulary growth, suggesting that vocabulary learning in many EFL situations may be inefficient. These findings call into question current EFL pedagogies and practices. We argued that careful development of the vocabulary component of a language course – that takes into account the core principles of vocabulary teaching – might have a positive and long-lasting effect on the development of vocabulary knowledge among EFL learners. Finally, we proposed that a number of extracurricular, out-of-class activities, such as extensive reading and extensive viewing, have the potential to contribute to vocabulary development and enhance EFL learners' vocabulary knowledge.

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