As one of the most fundamental units in language, vocabulary has always been a major concern in language classroom instruction. Nation and Gu’s book entitled *Teaching and Learning Vocabulary in EFL* is specially tailored for teachers of English as a foreign language (EFL) to deal with the following interrelated lexical topics: (a) what types of vocabulary to teach, (b) how to teach vocabulary, and (c) how to assess learners’ vocabulary knowledge. What distinguishes this book from others is that the internationally renowned experts in vocabulary studies draw on their own extensive research and teaching experience and provide pedagogical guidance to teachers in EFL instruction. In brief, the book aims to help English teachers diagnose and solve problems in the teaching process and grow more professionally with pedagogical content knowledge of vocabulary.

Followed by three appendices, this monograph consists of nine chapters, all of which (except Chapter 9) are neatly organised in line with a unified structure, including core issues, a summary, what a teacher should do after reading this chapter, references and further reading. These chapters are well written in plain and simple English, allowing for the reader’s clear comprehension of the whole book.

Based on frequency and domain of use, Chapter 1 classifies five kinds of vocabulary that deserve EFL teachers’ and learners’ attention; namely high frequency words, mid-frequency words, low frequency words, academic words and technical words. Since they play different roles in understanding...
texts, the authors point out that the five levels of vocabulary need to be treated with different teaching methods. Furthermore, this chapter highlights three essential components that should be involved in knowing an English word: form, meaning, and use.

In Chapter 2, ‘How Vocabulary Is Learned’, it is argued that vocabulary learning occurs when two basic conditions are met. One is repetition, i.e., quantity of meetings with a word, especially spaced repetition that has been proven to generate more effective long-term retention of a word (Nakata 2015). The other is the quality of mental processing of a word, including noticing, retrieval, varied meetings and use, and elaboration. In order to improve these two conditions in classroom instruction, the authors offer some pedagogical recommendations, such as vocabulary control, training of strategy use, and theme-based learning.

Chapter 3 discusses how to plan a well-balanced vocabulary programme within a framework called ‘the four strands’, which are composed of meaning-focused input, meaning-focused output, language-focused learning, and fluency development. Prior to planning the lesson, this chapter stresses teachers’ need to determine what level of vocabulary their students should focus on. After that, it outlines some well-established principles for teaching high frequency, mid-frequency, and low-frequency words to ensure that students have sufficient opportunities to learn vocabulary through the four strands. Finally, it proposes a five-step teaching plan for teachers to put it into practice in their future vocabulary classes.

Guided by the above-mentioned four strands, Chapter 4 and Chapter 5 further examine vocabulary learning through the receptive skills of listening and reading, and the productive skills of speaking and writing. As well as some suggestions about useful conditions and materials for vocabulary learning through listening and reading, Chapter 4 goes on to detail an extensive reading programme with graded readers to develop learners’ vocabulary levels. In order to optimise vocabulary learning, three solutions to help learners cope with difficult texts are also provided — doing intensive reading and listening, turning reading and listening into an experience task, and getting help from others.

In Chapter 5, five kinds of speaking and writing activities are considered to facilitate vocabulary learning, i.e., substitution tables, copying texts, dictation, dicto-gloss, and issue logs. As for difficult speaking and writing tasks, this chapter provides a detailed account of guided tasks, shared tasks, and experience tasks to help teachers and learners set up more favourable conditions for learning words. In addition, fluency development tasks like 4/3/2, prepared talks, ten-minute writing, and linked skills writing are also discussed to support the learning of vocabulary.
Chapter 6 is the only one to look at vocabulary learning from the learners’ perspective, exploring the effects of learner strategies on vocabulary development and advocating learner autonomy. According to Gu (2003), the use of vocabulary learning strategies relies largely on learner, task, and context. Besides, different aspects and levels of vocabulary require different learning strategies. For example, memory strategies are often employed to develop the knowledge aspects of a word. Then the rest of the chapter shifts the reader’s attention to strategies for different vocabulary learning stages, including guessing and dictionary strategies during initial handling stage, repetition and encoding strategies during retention stage.

Chapter 7 mainly delves into the measurement of EFL learners’ vocabulary knowledge, especially vocabulary size, to help teachers evaluate where their students are now and how far they need to go. In this chapter, the authors delineate briefly the purposes, test-takers, and websites of three common measures of vocabulary size: the Vocabulary Levels Test, the Vocabulary Size Test, and the Picture Vocabulary Size Test. In order to gain a balanced picture of their vocabulary knowledge, it is important to measure learners’ lexical richness in writing, like the type-token ratio and rating scales about vocabulary component. Furthermore, this chapter also presents some small-scale vocabulary tests to promote vocabulary learning, such as labelling or completing diagrams, completing or evaluating sentences, and translating words into the first language. No matter whether students take standardised vocabulary size measures or small-scaled vocabulary tests, teachers should take validity into consideration when choosing test items.

Chapter 8 attempts to investigate vocabulary using computer programmes. To begin with, this chapter interprets the meanings of the term ‘word’ in respect of token, type, and word family so as to help the reader understand the statistical output from the follow-up vocabulary analysis programmes. Then it particularly introduces the AntWordProfiler programme and demonstrates how this programme is used to analyse vocabulary difficulty in a text. Also, some concordance programmes are given to collect detailed information about the use of a particular word or compare the differences between two words. With these computer tools, teachers are able to improve vocabulary teaching by creating frequency lists, making concordances, and comparing texts with vocabulary lists.

Chapter 9 responds to ten frequently asked questions in relation to vocabulary which have been raised from the authors’ own academic lectures, ordinary classes, or e-mail enquiries. These questions touch upon the application of first language translation to vocabulary teaching and learning, vocabulary learning in context, collocations, learning English
words through the curriculum, dictionary use, extensive reading, to name a few. In this chapter, the authors not only share their personal opinions about the questions, but also recommend some classical literature after every question to the reader who may be interested in exploring profoundly vocabulary issues.

Taken together, as part of Pedagogical Content Knowledge for English Language Teachers series, this book under review succeeds in providing a comprehensive overview of teaching, learning, measuring, and investigating vocabulary in EFL context. The main strength of this book lies in its building an interface between theories and practice. In other words, the authors elaborate on the theories of vocabulary acquisition and their empirical research findings in recent years and apply both the theories plus research to vocabulary teaching practice. Another strength worth mentioning is that each chapter of the book begins with several pre-reading questions and ends with direct suggestions about what teachers should do after reading. These two sections provide teachers with excellent opportunities to reflect on their own teaching practice and important checklists to take action. Last but not the least, a wide range of tasks are designed from Chapters 1 to 8. These tasks include expressing viewpoints on the topics discussed, implementing a lesson plan, sitting a vocabulary test, and so on. In short, readers will find the tasks thought-provoking, thus deepening their understanding of the chapters.

Nevertheless, the monograph is not without its weakness. One of the most obvious shortcomings is that an introduction is presented at the beginning of Chapters 1, 2, 6, 8, and 9, but not in the other chapters for no reason. As a result, it would lead to the reader’s difficulty in reading some chapters without an introduction. Second, the book fails to paint a full picture of certain vocabulary teaching topics. For instance, Chapter 3 only outlines some well-supported teaching principles for high-, mid-, and low-frequency words, but neglects to look at academic words and technical words. As another example, Chapter 6 lists some vocabulary learning strategies on initial handling and retention stages respectively. However, it keeps silent about activation stage. Finally, I would strongly suggest that more pages be devoted to compiling an index at the back of the book so that the reader can simply refer to key concepts, topics, and names, when necessary. Moreover, the glossary in Appendix 2 needs to be supplemented with more items. Otherwise, only ten technical terms are far from adequate for those who are not so familiar with the realm of vocabulary research.

Compared with Nation’s other seminal volumes, e.g., Learning Vocabulary in Another Language (Nation 2001) and How Vocabulary Is Learned (Webb and Nation 2017), this book does not cover thoroughly
every aspect of vocabulary matters in second language acquisition and foreign language teaching. Despite this limitation, it proves to be a useful practical manual primarily for EFL teachers, pre-service teachers, and learners. Even those researchers or postgraduate students whose academic interest includes vocabulary studies will find this book to be an enlightening reference too.

References


