

## Book Reviews

*This is an ongoing column, featuring reviews of books and other materials for ESOL teachers and students. Please send submissions to the column editor (to be decided), at [columns@idiom.nystesol.org](mailto:columns@idiom.nystesol.org). The review in this issue has been edited by Elizabeth Fonseca.*

**Review of Keith S. Folse, *Vocabulary Myths: Applying Second Language Research to Classroom Teaching*.** Ann Arbor, MI: The University of Michigan Press. 2011.  
by Scott B. Freiberger

As English as a new language (ENL) teaching professionals, we are often bombarded with a plethora of hastily stitched together handouts and matching materials for professional development purposes. Although facilitators and content authors may be well intentioned, these fly-by-day English language development or literacy instruction materials often lack relevant research, and even a smidgen of humor or practical application. Thankfully, *Vocabulary Myths: Applying Second Language Research to Classroom Teaching*, by Keith S. Folse, effortlessly infuses all three ingredients. In his book, Dr. Folse demystifies common misconceptions about second language teaching, delves deeply into the literature, and provides practical teaching advice that may be immediately applied.

The eight myths Dr. Folse discusses are: vocabulary is not as important as grammar; using word lists is unproductive; using semantic sets to teach new vocabulary facilitates learning; translations should be discouraged; guessing words from context is an excellent strategy; only one or two strategies are needed; monolingual dictionaries are most useful; and finally, teachers, textbooks, and curricula cover second language vocabulary adequately (Folse, 2011). The book is divided into eight sections for the eight myths, with each presenting and explaining in detail why a widely held myth about second or new language learning is inaccurate. Every section of each chapter is also nicely delineated for practical teaching application. For example, “In the Real World” provides classroom context, “What the Research Says” provides helpful guidance and support (and even notes the shortfalls of some widespread research implications), and “What You Can Do” offers practical, hands-on advice for educators.

The book begins with a preface in which Dr. Folse posits that explicit vocabulary teaching is not only important but also necessary for students learning a second or new language. He notes that context may not provide clues to vocabulary word or complex text meaning “if the learner does not [already] know a large number of words” (p. vi). Dr. Folse further delves beyond contrastive analysis to impart knowledge about learning vocabulary in languages that vary greatly from English—i.e., that lack similar cognates, daily expressions, or common greetings: “Students [around the globe] appreciate good instruction in vocabulary, which includes teaching words that students need to know, giving many good examples of the words, and holding students accountable for the words through appropriate practice activities and systematic testing” (p. viii).

In the comprehensive introductory section, Dr. Folse delineates the various vocabularies in English and what truly “knowing a word” entails (p. 1). Readers learn that vocabulary for students studying a second or new language contains single words, set phrases, variable phrases, phrasal verbs, and idioms (p. 2). The author is adept at explaining each concept in detail, even going so far as inserting a table to present formal versus informal present tense endings in

different languages (the author speaks several and often draws on this experience to impart knowledge about effective language learning and teaching).

*Vocabulary Myths: Applying Second Language Research to Classroom Teaching* is chock full of humorous anecdotes about situations that many teachers of English may likely have encountered, particularly while working abroad. In terms of practicality and the potential for improving best teaching practices, this book should be required reading in any program that specializes in English language instruction for speakers of other languages. As the author aptly notes, “Without grammar, little communication may be possible; without vocabulary, *no* communication is possible” (p. 25, stress in the original). If you pick up a copy, you too should have a much better grasp on how to help your students improve their vocabulary development and English comprehension skills.

After the invigorating NYS TESOL 45th Annual Conference, where I spoke with a good number of educators from grades that ran the gamut from primary and secondary schools to English language institutes at the collegiate level, it has become apparent that *Vocabulary Myths: Applying Second Language Research to Classroom Teaching* has had a tremendous impact on TESOL. This is a book that is not only familiar to many teachers of English, but that also has changed how professionals in our field actually view and teach vocabulary in their courses. Though the myths and research data included here appear to be until only 2004, this information is certainly extremely valuable to classroom teachers today. One missing area of vocabulary research, however, that has burgeoned since 2004 is corpus linguistics. In the next edition of this book, it will be interesting to see how Dr. Folse weaves more recent research from corpus linguistics into his myths.

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