An Introduction to
Second Language Vocabulary

THE PURPOSE OF THIS BOOK is to discuss eight pervasive myths or misconceptions regarding the teaching and learning of second language vocabulary. To better appreciate this discussion, a simple overview of basic concepts in second language vocabulary study are in order.

This overview is divided into two parts. The first part addresses the question of what we mean by the term *vocabulary* when nonnative speakers are studying a target language. Here we look at single words, set phrases, variable phrases, phrasal verbs, and idioms. The second part covers seven components of what it means to know a word. While the definition of the word is an obvious component, others include a word's frequency, register, spelling, and collocations. This last component in particular is important for learners to be able to use a word correctly.

Before you read any further, how would you answer these questions:

1. **What are the different kinds of vocabulary in English?**
2. **What are the components of knowing a word? Or, what does it mean to know a word?**

PART I: What Is "a Vocabulary"?

When we talk about learning vocabulary in another language, we immediately envision a list of words. Upon more careful inspection of our imaginary list, we would probably see that, for the most part, our list is composed of single unit words such as *dozen*, *awkward*, and *feedback*. However, vocabulary (or "vocabularies," as our students mistakenly call it when they assume that *vocabulary* is a count noun, as in "Teacher, I learned 10 vocabularies last night.") can be much more than just a single unit word.

There are in fact many different kinds of vocabulary items or "words." This is especially true when nonnative learners eye their target language as linguistic outsiders. One simple way to look at vocabulary for second language learners is **single words, set phrases, variable phrases, phrasal verbs,** and **idioms**.

Single Words

This is the group that most people think of first. By far, this group includes the bulk of the vocabulary of any language. This group includes not only more items but also more frequently used items:

- animals: *cat, dog, elephant*
- time periods: *Monday, January, today*
- countries: *Egypt, Mexico, Somalia*
- actions in the past: *flew, stayed, went*
- descriptions: *happy, amazing, destructive*
- counters: *dozen, plenty, decade*

Despite the name, however, this group also includes multiword vocabulary. Consider the words *thunderstorm* and *ice storm*. Both are single "words" even though *ice storm* requires two words to express its concept while *thunderstorm* requires only one. The number of actual words in the vocabulary item is the result of spelling conventions peculiar to English, not a vocabulary-related issue. The explanation of whether a compound vocabulary item is written as one word or two does not ap-

pear to be semantically based. For example, a cloth for a table is a *tablecloth* (one word) while a cup for coffee is a *coffee cup* (two words). Other examples of compound nouns being written as one word or two words on the apparent whims of English spelling conventions include *graveyard, homework,* and *holiday* versus *traffic light, bread box,* and *table scraps.*

Set Phrases

These phrases consist of more than one word and do not usually change. For example, in the set phrase *in other words,* we cannot say *with other words* or *in other terms* or *in other remarks* or *in other phrases* or other variations, even though *terms* and *remarks* and perhaps *phrases* might seem to be able to fit.

- *in other words*   not: *in other terms* (but *terms* are words)
- *raining cats and dogs*   not: *raining kittens and puppies* (you can only have the adult animals)
- *the bottom line*   not: *the lowest line* (but the *bottom* is the *lowest*)
- *all of a sudden*   not: *most of a sudden* (it's either all or nothing— but we don't have *none of a sudden* either)
- *it's up to you*   not: *it's above to you* (but *up* and *above* are close synonyms)

Other set phrases must be worded in a certain order even though rearranging the ordering would not really affect the meaning. However, English conventions have locked these phrases into only one possible ordering:

- *raining cats and dogs*   not: *raining dogs and cats*
- *up and down*   not: *down and up*

- *from head to toe*   not: *from toe to head*
- *back and forth*   not: *forth and back*
- *to and fro*   not: *fro and to*
- *ladies and gentlemen* not: *gentlemen and ladies*
                                (though common in
                                many languages)

Variable Phrases

While most of the components in variable phrases will stay the same, there is some variation. The variation often involves personal pronouns or some sort of possessive. For example, a usual form of the opening line of many business letters, especially from companies writing to inform you of a problem, is *It has come to our attention that . . . .* This line could easily be *It has come to my attention that . . .* if it were coming from your boss or coworker.

How would you complete these sentences?

Situation A: You studied French in high school for one year, then you studied two years in college (with a one-year interval between the two years), and then you studied a month or two here and there. A friend asks you, "How long have you been studying French?" You answer, "Well, let me see. I guess I've been studying French _____ for about eight years." What phrase would you use to complete this sentence with the idea that sometimes you did this and sometimes you did not?

Situation B: It's 6:00 P.M. When you woke up this morning, it was raining. It stopped mid-morning. Just before noon, it started raining again but only briefly. Later, it rained from 2:00 P.M. to 3:30 P.M. About an hour ago, it started drizzling again. If you were to call someone in a different part of the country and that person asked you about the weather where you are, you might say, "Well, it's been raining _____ all day long." What phrase would you use to indicate the nature of today's rain?

The answer to both Situations A and B is *off and on* or *on and off*. (I

personally never say *on and off* and was quite surprised to hear others say this. I wonder if this is regional usage.)

Another example of a variable phrase is *It has come to _____ attention that* + S + V. You know that this phrase is formal and serious. You also know that it is used more in writing than in speaking. You know that if you receive a letter that begins *It has come to our attention that you* . . . , the message is usually not good. This phrase really means something like "I'm going to tell you what you did and the problem that it has caused." This phrase is not about knowing *it* + *has come* + *to* + (anyone's attention). This is a good example of where a learner needs to know this whole phrase as a single phrase or single vocabulary item. The only thing that could change in this expression is the possessive adjective before the word *attention*, with *my* and *our* being much more common than *her* or *their* although, in theory, any possessive adjective could work here.

Phrasal Verbs

Your awareness of phrasal verbs is critical to your ability as a native speaker to provide comprehensible input for your ESL students. Native speakers have no idea that they are using phrasal verbs, nor do they see why these words are so hard for ESL students to deal with.

What is a **phrasal verb?** A phrasal verb consists of two or three words. The first word is always a verb. The second word in a phrasal verb is a preposition or particle/adverb. If there is a third word, it is usually a preposition. A good example is *put up with*, meaning to tolerate or stand.

Many verbs can serve as the verb in a phrasal verb, but common ones include *put, take, come, call, make, go,* and *get*.

> **examples:** *put away, put off, put on, put up, put up with, put down, come back, come off as, come up with, come down with*

Understanding phrasal verbs is problematic for ESL students for four reasons. First, phrasal verbs are extremely common in English. (They occur in Germanic languages but not in Romance languages.) You cannot function in English without knowing a large number of phrasal verbs very well. Therefore, ESL learners must know the meanings of the more frequent ones even in the simplest of exchanges. In trying to provide good comprehensible input for students, ESL teachers must be aware of phrasal verbs so they can better gauge the level of their input. What appears comprehensible may not be so, and the biggest factor may be phrasal verbs.

A second problem is that phrasal verbs are rarely transparent in meaning. Knowing the parts of the phrasal verb does not equal knowing the whole phrasal verb. The example that I always use in teacher training workshops to get people's attention is *throw up*. If you know *throw* (as many of our low-level students do) and if you know *up* (as almost any beginner does), it should follow then—but does not—that you will know the meaning of *throw up*.

Consider these examples that have *call* as a base. Each phrasal verb has a very different meaning.

1. He **called off** the meeting.
2. I **called up** Joe to invite him to the game.
3. Can you **call** me **back** later?
4. The teacher **called on** the sleeping student.
5. Mr. Graves **called** me **in** to discuss my job performance.
6. She **called out** the answers.

In addition, there is another level of meaning that phrasal verbs can express in English, and this subtle sociolinguistic meaning is very hard for our ESL students to capture. Phrasal verbs are one way that we express informality in English conversation. Unlike English, many languages have syntactic ways of expressing informality and familiarity—for example, verb endings vary depending on whether the subject is the formal or informal *you*. Consider the examples in Table 1.

TABLE 1 Formal vs. Informal Present Tense Endings

Language	Formal *you*	Informal *you*
Spanish	*[usted] habla* (you speak) *[usted] come* (you eat)	*[tu] hablas* (you speak) *[tu] comes* (you eat)
Japanese	*hanashimasu* (you speak) *tabemasu* (you eat)	*hanasu* (you speak) *taberu* (you eat)
French	*vous parlez* (you speak) *vous mangez* (you eat)	*tu parles* (you speak) *tu manges* (you eat)

English verbs do not operate in a similar way, so ESL students who are trying to translate "formality" through grammatical endings will have a perplexing time. Not only does English not have a grammatical solution to this problem, it actually requires learners to know multiple labels or vocabulary for the very same social function. Consider the word that means to "to get rid of something, especially something that is viewed as useless or unpleasant." The word that the learner is looking for is *discard*, yet in natural conversation, we do not use this word. Instead, we use the phrasal verb *throw away*, which sounds more conversational than the more formal *discard*, just as *put up with* is easier on the ears than *tolerate*.

A third difficulty of phrasal verbs is that they are often reduced in conversation. Thus, they are not only hard to comprehend semantically, they are simply hard to hear. Consider this conversation:

A: What did you **think of** the test?
B: I thought it was kind of tough, especially the last part.

A: Yeah, it was. Hey, did you **come up with** a good answer for the essay question?
B: At first, no, but then I started writing down a few things, and then the answer just sort of **took off**.

An ESL student would have a hard time hearing the pieces of each of these phrasal verbs. In *think of*, the word *of* is greatly reduced as is *with* in *come up with*. In the example *took off*, the two words get run together so that they sound much more like "to cough" than *took* and *off*. If—**and this is a huge assumption that should never be underestimated**— the student has actually been able to accurately hear the phrasal verb and caught all the pieces, then the learner still faces the semantic challenge: What does it mean? This is further complicated in conversation because the conversation keeps flowing as the learner is still trying to decipher the phrasal verb, and more phrasal verbs are bombarding him or her.

The fourth problem of phrasal verbs is the particle or preposition. This added part is actually critical to meaning because it is what differentiates *postpone* (*put off*) from *get dressed* (*put on*) or *solve a problem* (*come up with*) from *get sick* (*come down with*). Phrasal verbs can be separable or nonseparable. For example, we can say, "The teacher *called off* the test," but we can also say, "The teacher *called* the test *off*." Either of these is correct. In the first example, the ESL learner is lucky in that the pieces of the phrasal verb are next to each other. However, in the second example, the word *off*, which is crucial to the meaning of *call off*, is actually three words away.

As if that were not complicated enough, English actually allows the particle to "float" much more than three words away. Consider this conversation involving the phrasal verb *look up*, meaning to search for information in a book or other source:

> *A:* Did you do the homework?
> *B:* What homework?
>
> *A:* Well, we were supposed to *look* all those Latin and
> Greek roots on page 52 *up*.
> *B:* Are you serious? I forgot!

In this example, *up* is located ten words away from *look*. This kind of structure happens frequently in conversation and is yet another example of why phrasal verbs are difficult vocabulary for ESL learners.

Idioms

All languages feature idiomatic expressions, and each idiomatic expression, or idiom, is a vocabulary item. The test of whether a "chunk" is an idiom or not is whether the sum of the meanings of the individual words is equal to or similar to the meaning of the whole phrase.

Most phrasal verbs, for example, are idiomatic. As explained earlier, *throw up* is not the sum of *throw* and *up*. ESL learners are confused when they find out that the opposite of *put on* clothing is not *put off* clothing. If removing clothing is to *take off* clothing, then why isn't the opposite *taking on* clothing? With idioms, logic often has no place.

When a person *lets the cat out of the bag*, there is no cat, there is no bag, and there is no cat in any bag. The words *let, cat, out,* and *bag* are all frequent words, ones that might be covered in any basic or even beginning-level English class. However, knowing the meaning of these four words hardly prepares the learner to figure out the meaning of this idiom. Other idioms include raining *cats and dogs, feeling blue, sell like hotcakes, jump the gun, be up in the air, get with it, shake a leg, a feather in one's cap, wake up on the wrong side of the bed,* and *have a bad hair day*.

The best work on identifying which idioms are used in spoken American English was done by Liu (2003), who examined three corpora containing a total of six million words. The composite list contains three bands according to the usage. Here are the top 15 idioms (in order of frequency) from Band 1, the most frequently used idioms in spoken American English: *kind of, sort of, of course, in terms of, in fact, deal with, at all, as well, make sure, go through, come up, look for, find out, go on,* and *as well as*. It is easy to see that these examples are idioms because they do not mean what they would appear to mean—that is, their literal meaning is not being used. For example, *kind* as a noun means "type" or "class." However, consider the literal and idiomatic meanings of *kind of* here:

Literal: *The cobra is a kind of snake.*
Idiomatic: *It's kind of hot today, isn't it?*

<u>PART II:</u> What Does It Mean to Know a Word? What Does Knowing a Word Include?

When you ask a student, "Do you know this word?" and the student says, "Yes," what proof would convince you that the student does indeed know the word? More than likely, the answer is the meaning of the word. To answer the question, "Do you know this word?" we expect a student to provide the meaning. However, knowing a word involves much more than knowing just its meaning.

Polysemy

First of all, a word rarely has just one meaning. Most words in English are polysemous, that is, they have multiple meanings. Some have relatively few meanings. For example, *shovel* can be the instrument or the action. (This may not seem like two things to you, but note how we shovel with a shovel, mop with a mop, and mow with a mower, but we sweep with a broom, paint with a brush, and charge with a card.)

With a relatively small number of meanings, *shovel* is clearly in the minority in English. *Table* can be the piece of furniture, a set of numbers or figures, the action of not talking about something in a meeting, or a descriptive word (as in table scraps or tablecloth). Other words have multiple meanings: *put, put on, put down, put off, put away, put up with, put back*, etc.

An example that the students like to confront us with is *get*, so it behooves teachers to become very familiar with this verb. Consider how the meaning of *get* changes so dramatically in these examples: *get mail* (receive without trying), *get the mail* (go to a place to retrieve it), *get the measles* (contract a sickness), *get angry* (become), *get to the airport* (arrive), *get in a car* (enter), *get washed* (passive voice), and many others.

Connotation

All words have a denotation and a connotation. The denotation refers to the most basic or specific meaning of a word. In contrast, a connotation is an idea that is suggested by or associated with a word. For example, the word *scum* is just the name of a layer that forms on the sur-

face of a body of water, but the word has connotations of impurity, badness, and ugliness.

Table 2 illustrates denotation and connotation of five words that express a similar concept.

While denotation is fairly straightforward, connotation can vary. The connotation of a word can change from negative to positive or vice-versa over time. The connotation of a word can also vary from culture to culture (even with two cultures or groups that speak the same language) as well as from individual to individual. The connotations listed in Table 2, for example, are the connotations that I, based on my life experiences, would assign to these words. To me, *thin* is a neutral word. To some, hearing "You look so thin!" would be a positive statement, while to others it would be a negative statement. To me, *skinny* has a neutral to negative connotation. *Slim* seems to be more positive when it deals with weight. (In contrast, in the phrase *slim chance,* it has a negative connotation, but that is a different meaning.) *Lean* and *slender* have positive connotations, which explains why weight loss or nutrition companies have chosen these words for their brand names (e.g., Lean Cuisine®).

Connotation can also impact a nonnative speaker's ability to learn a new vocabulary item since the positive or negative value assigned to a word by the learner also plays a role in how difficult a word is to learn. Positive words are easier to remember than negative words (Ludwig, 1984). In two empirical studies (Yavuz, 1963; Yavuz & Bousfield, 1959), English-speaking individuals learned translations of 18 Turkish words equally divided into positive, neutral, and negative words. In both

TABLE 2 Denotation vs. Connotation

Word	Denotation	Connotation
thin	not overweight	neutral image
skinny	not overweight	negative image
slim	not overweight	positive image
lean	not overweight	positive image
slender	not overweight	positive image

experiments, recall was significantly better for the positively loaded words than for the neutral or negative words. The teaching principle here is that words that have (or seem to have—to the learner at least) a negative connotation may be more difficult to commit to memory.

Spelling and Pronunciation

English is a language that has a relatively low letter-to-sound correlation, thus making many English words difficult to spell and/or pronounce (from the written letters). This is especially true when English is compared with languages such as Japanese or Spanish where pronunciation is consistent with the way words are spelled.

Knowing the spelling of a word is in itself quite an accomplishment for a nonnative speaker. Consider the sound /i/ (*ee* in some dictionaries). This one sound can be written in at least eight different ways: **ea**t, n**ee**d, retr**ie**ve, p**eo**ple, k**ey**, rec**ei**ve, b**e**, laz**y**. Likewise, knowing the correct pronunciation can be problematic. The letter *a* can be pronounced in at least five ways: *cat* /ae/, *father* /a/, *lawn* /[ɔ]/, *cake* /eI/, *interval* /ə [schwa]/.

Part of Speech

Knowing the part of speech of a word is important. It is important when learners know two or more forms for one word: *wise* (adj.), *wisely* (adv.), *wisdom* (n.). It is also important when similar words confound the situation: *lend* (v.) vs. *loan* (n.) or *affect* (v.) vs. *effect* (n.).

The part of speech of a word can make a word harder to master. "Psychological research shows differential performance on tasks involving nouns, verbs, adjectives, and adverbs, indicating that the form class of a word is a reasonably potent variable in verbal tasks" (Ludwig, 1984, p. 554). While the exact ranking of the parts of speech in terms of difficulty is not clear, Laufer (1990) sums it up best: "It is sometimes argued that certain grammatical categories are more difficult to learn than others. Nouns seem to be the easiest; adverbs—the most difficult; verbs and adjectives—somewhere in between" (p. 298). In follow-up interviews of learners using the keyword method, Atkinson (1975) found similar results. Learners reported that the keyword method worked best for nouns, less well for verbs, and least well

for adjectives. Phillips (in Laufer, 1990) noted an interaction between the effect that part of speech has on word difficulty and the proficiency level that a learner has: nouns were easier to learn than verbs or adjectives, an effect that decreased as the learner's proficiency increased.

Abstract words seem to be more difficult than concrete words. According to Mackey (1965), the reason that nouns are easier to remember than verbs or adjectives is probably a function of concreteness and of frequency. Laufer (1990) cautions, however, that "if all the other features of two words were identical, the concrete one would probably be easier. In the real learning situation, however, many concrete words present a problem since they may contain other factors of difficulty" (p. 300).

Some teachers may assume that once a learner knows one of the basic four forms of a word (i.e., noun, verb, adjective, adverb), the learner either knows or easily learns all four forms. This is not the case. In a study of 106 undergraduate and graduate nonnative English–speaking students, Schmitt and Zimmerman (2002) found that it was rare for a student to know all four forms or no form of a word. In other words, partial knowledge of at least one form was the norm. Results also showed that learners tended to have a better understanding of the noun and/or verb forms rather than the adjective and/or adverb forms. The authors conclude that teachers cannot assume that learners will absorb the derivative forms of a word family automatically from exposure and suggest explicit instruction in this area of vocabulary.

Frequency

Knowing a word can also mean that the learner knows the frequency of occurrence of that word. Though this aspect of a word may seem almost trivial, the frequency of a word is often cited as a major factor in a given word's difficulty. In fact, Haynes (1993) claims that word frequency is probably *the* major component in word difficulty.

A given word may well express the concept that the person wants to express; however, that concept may have several possible names, some of which may be more useful to a nonnative learner because that particular word is more frequent. The rarer forms, though most certainly semantically appropriate, would make the speaker sound strange.

Complete this sentence with a word that means that you are extremely hungry: "I'm _____." Many people would complete the sentence with the word *starving*, but words such as *ravenous* and *famished* are certainly possible. However, *ravenous* and *famished* are not nearly as common as *starving*. Likewise, while *violet* and *purple* may refer to the same color, the latter is used much more frequently, so a nonnative learner should also use *purple* more often than *violet*. Using the word *violet* when the vast majority of native speakers would say *purple* would "mark" the learner's English as non-native.

Usage

Knowing a word also means knowing when it is appropriate to use that word instead of a synonym or similar word. This information about usage can include both syntactic information (e.g., we hardly ever use this verb in passive voice) and pragmatic information (e.g., we do not use this word when speaking to people of higher status). For example, the words *thing* and *stuff* are similar in meaning, but one is considered a standard word while the other is considered slang or informal language. The first word would be considered acceptable to use in, say, a job interview, but the second one would probably not.

Let us consider the concept of "not continue to live." The basic vocabulary item to express this concept is the word *die*. At the same time, let us consider differences in usage of three other vocabulary items that express the same denotation.

We can say, "I'm sorry to hear that your mother died," but it might be more common, especially when talking with a known person and wishing to convey our sympathy, to say, "I'm sorry to hear that your mother passed away." Thus, the usage of *pass away* may be restricted to a speaker who knows the listener and who wishes to express sincere regret or sympathy. That same person could not say, "I'm sorry to hear that your mother kicked the bucket" or "I'm sorry to hear that your mother is pushing up daisies."

The vocabulary item *kick the bucket* is often used for a deceased person that we did not know or did not care for much. Thus, there is a pragmatic/sociolinguistic usage issue with this vocabulary item. In ad-

dition, there is a syntactic issue with *kick the bucket*. In the example of SUBJECT + *kick* + *the bucket*, the subject must be a person or living thing, *kick* would be a transitive verb, and *the bucket* would be the object of the verb. Thus, *kick* is in the active voice. Any verb in the active voice can also be used in the passive voice. Consider, however, the usage problems associated with this particular vocabulary item in these two examples:

1. The old man kicked the bucket last week. (active voice)
2. The bucket was kicked by the old man last week. (passive voice)

In Sentence 1, active voice, the meaning could be literal (the old man really did use his foot to kick the bucket) or it could be figurative/idiomatic (the old man died). In Sentence 2, passive voice, the meaning can only be the literal meaning that the old man actually *kicked* the bucket. Therefore, in terms of usage, this particular idiom cannot be used in passive voice. This is a special usage issue for this vocabulary item since all active voice verbs should be able to be transformed to a passive voice form as well.

Similarly, the vocabulary item *push up daisies* has several special usage issues. Syntactically, *push up daisies* would appear to be a simple V + O construction. Given that *push* is a verb, we could in theory use this verb in any of the 12 different verb tenses. However, the verb in this vocabulary item is rarely used in any tense except a future progressive construction with *going to* or with *will*: He**'s going to be pushing** up daisies. He**'ll be pushing** up daisies. This expression does not occur in simple past tense even though *die* is frequently used in the past tense: He **pushed** up daisies vs. He **died**. Another syntactic usage issue is that this expression, similar to what we saw with *kick the bucket*, occurs only in active voice, never in passive voice. We cannot say even in future progressive tense, "Daisies will be being pushed up by him."

This vocabulary item also has a pragmatic/sociolinguistic usage limitation. At a register level, we could say that *kick the bucket* and *push up daisies* are slang or informal language while *die* and *pass away* are standard words. A nonnative learner could easily assume—albeit

incorrectly—that the two slang expressions could be used interchange-ably, as could the two standard vocabulary items. Natural usage of *push up daisies* is in situations involving a warning of an impending death for a certain reason. Consider this example: *He'll be pushing up daisies if he testifies against us.*

Collocation

Perhaps the single most important aspect of knowing a word for non-native learners—besides or in addition to the obviously requisite syn-onym or denotation meaning—is the collocation(s) of a new vocabu-lary item. The meaning of collocation is apparent in its constituent parts: **co** (together) + **location** (place). A **collocation** is a word or phrase that naturally and frequently occurs before, after, or very near the target vocabulary item.

Make a sentence in your head with the word *squander*, which means to waste or use unwisely. (Do not go on without coming up with an ex-ample!) In theory, any noun could follow the word *squander*, but the most common collocations for squander in English are *money* or *resources* (salary, $1,000, or inheritance), *time* (the morning, her vacation, a life-time), or *opportunity* (opportunity, chance, prospect). Thus, common col-locations for the verb *squander* are money, time, and opportunity.

Consider the vocabulary item *commit. Commit* has three different meanings: (1) make or do, (2) dedicate resources, or (3) be dedicated to, always used in the passive voice. One could argue that these are three dif-ferent words, so we will work with the first meaning only, which is "to make or do." Complete this sentence: *He committed _____.* What are some examples that pop into your head right away?

The most common collocations for *commit* as a verb are all types of crimes: *commit murder, commit suicide, commit grand larceny, commit adul-tery*. Thus, *commit* does not mean just "do or make" but "do or make something negative." An ESL student who learns that *commit* in *commit a murder* means "to do or perform an action" might attempt to make the following seemingly logical combinations: *commit a joke on someone, com-mit the housework, commit a lie*. The problem—a huge problem for nonna-tive learners—is that *commit* does not collocate with *joke, housework,* or *lie.*

The most common vocabulary items collocate with all sorts of words. The rarer the vocabulary word is (i.e., more likely to be an "advanced" word for a second language learner), the fewer the collocations will be. The verb *take* can collocate with *a taxi, a shower, medicine, a test, a person from one place to another, someone's temperature, a credit card*, and on and on. In fact, the verb *take* derives its meaning from its object collocation. On the other hand, a rarer word such as *exempt* has more specific collocations. In the active voice, the word following *exempt* will almost always be a person. The next collocation slot will be the word *from*. The third collocation slot will be some sort of requirement. The collocation patterns for the word *exempt* are illustrated here:

Collocations for *EXEMPT*				
(subject)	**exempt** (all verb tenses possible)	(someone)	*from*	a requirement a test taking the test having to get a passport

Certain target vocabulary can have rather complex collocations, and knowing which words can be used with the new word can make that word (even) more difficult for L2 learners. Collocations may vary greatly from language to language and may therefore not be transferred from L1 to L2. Because of both the difficulty and the importance of collocations (Nattinger & DeCarrico, 1992), McCarthy (1994) advocates direct instruction and practice in this area.

What obviously then follows from this is, how can teachers know which words collocate with a certain vocabulary item? The first answer is to trust your intuition as a native speaker. What would you say in this particular example? Make up a sentence in your head, but remove yourself from any classroom or ESL setting. How do you think a native speaker would *naturally* use that word? If you are a nonnative speaker, trust your knowledge of English. You have attained a certain level of knowledge of English, and you most likely know what combines with what.

A second solution is to use data from corpus linguistics. A corpus is

a set or body of language examples such as actual newspapers, books, transcripts of conversations or interviews, or movie scripts. All of the corpus becomes the source or databank from which collocation software is used to identify collocations. For example, if we did a search for the word convey, we might find these examples:

> . . . he said. I think he wanted to *convey* the message that there is hope that . . .
> . . . do you think is the best way to *convey* this information? Is it that we are . . .
> . . . Wilson had failed to accurately *convey* what the Prime Minister said. An . . .
> . . . say they rely on Mr. Sims to *convey* messages that they do not want . . .
> . . . public demonstrations does not *convey* a message independently of the . . .

This is but a small example, but we can see that *convey* frequently collocates with the word *message*. Other collocations for convey are *information* and *what (someone) say/says/said*. This information is important so that teachers do not tell students that *convey* means "send" but rather that *convey a message* means to *send a message*. From this students can then understand that *convey information* means to *send information*. The teaching point here is to teach the collocation, not just the meaning of one of the words in isolation when in fact that word does not usually occur alone? (When is the last time you said, "Yes, I'll convey that to you tomorrow"? Never!)

What Does All of This Mean?

What we have seen so far is that vocabulary in any language is a complex issue. In ESL terms, there are many kinds of vocabulary. Most people think of only single words. To be sure, these are numerous and problematic for our learners, but there are many other kinds of vocabulary that present additional and important challenges. We have also seen that knowing a word is not nearly as straightforward as it may have seemed. Is knowing a synonym sufficient? Is translating enough? Is the ability to use the word in a sentence enough? The important point as we look at the eight myths presented in this book is that a word is not just a single word and that knowing a word is actually a multipart task.