Lesson03: Vocabulary and Reading Comprehension

The reading–vocabulary relationship

What does it mean to know a word?

the simple form–meaning connection does not provide an accurate picture of the types of word knowledge we all learn. In the case of the reading–vocabulary connection, when we know a word well, we access at least nine components of word knowledge:

**Table 13.1. *Components of word knowledge***1. Orthography (spelling)  
2. Morphology (word-family relations)  
3. Parts of speech  
4. Pronunciation  
5. Meanings (referential range, variant meanings, homophones)  
6. Collocations (what words very commonly go with a word)  
7. Meaning associations (topical links, synonyms, antonyms, hyponyms)  
8. Specific uses (technical, common)  
9. Register (power, politeness, disciplinary domain, formality, slang, dialect form)

When we learn a word, we do not know everything about a word immediately, and in many cases, we continue to add information to our mental lexical entries throughout our lives. First encounters with words may only leave a brief impression of the word form or the part of speech of the word. Much of our word knowledge outlined above develops over time through multiple encounters in multiple contexts. Moreover, knowing one or two meanings for most words is not nearly the full set of word information that we eventually build. Even when we know a word, we continually update the entry for the word and fill additional pieces of the puzzle.

How many words are there in English?

How many words do L1 students know?

How many words should an L2 learner know?

***Learning words incidentally from context***

Learning words from context entails incidental exposure to new words; that is, the goal of the learner is to read and understand, not to notice and try to learn new words. Exposure to new words involves some passing attention as comprehension is constructed, but a new word may not even be noticed in any conscious way. If it is noticed, it may  
be skipped, or some minimal possible meaning may be assigned to it in order to continue the effort to understand the text.

***Guessing words from context***

Guessing words from context is a general skill practiced by all readers to varying extents. When we see a new word, we may notice it and (tacitly) recognize its form and part of speech; we may notice some aspects of the word form – some affixes or word-stem parts that contribute to a guess; we may quickly associate some meaning with the word – a property, a thing, an action – within the topic of the reading passage; we may quickly decide on a meaning that seems to work  
well enough in the immediate context of trying to understand the text. In many instances, the guessed meaning of the word will be quickly lost. On further encounters with the word, the process repeats itself, but with more supporting information available on each iteration

**Reference:**

**Reading in a Second Language:**Moving from Theory to Practice by ***William Grabe (*** Northern Arizona University). Cambridge University Press 2009.