

An interview with John Read

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Daniel Dunkley (DD): Dr. Read, could you tell me how you moved from studying Crow Indian language in the USA to writing a major book on vocabulary assessment (Read, 2000)?

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How do we measure a student's vocabulary? John Read of Auckland University, New Zealand, is the person best qualified to answer this question. Along with Paul Nation and Paul Meara, he has spent the last 30 years researching vocabulary knowledge, acquisition and assessment. In this interview he explains how he came to be interested in vocabulary assessment, and how he wrote his two well-known works: the word-associates test and the book *Assessing Vocabulary*.

いかに学生の語彙力を測定するべきであろうか。ニュージーランド、オークランド大学のJohn Readにこの質問をした。Paul NationとPaul Mearaともに、彼は語彙知識、語彙習得、語彙評価などを30年以上研究している。このインタビューでは、いかに語彙評価に興味を持つようになったのか、そして彼の有名な2つの研究成果である語彙連想テスト(the word-associates test)と著書 *Assessing Vocabulary*について語る。

John Read (JR): The first question is how I got to be doing research into Crow Indian language maintenance. That grew out of my experience as a student. In the period immediately after my Master's degree, at the beginning of my teaching career in the early 70s, I was involved in the early stages of the Maori language and culture revival, and developed an interest in sociolinguistics and bilingual education. These two aspects came together, so I went to the University of New Mexico to



do my doctoral work with Bernard Spolsky. There was a confluence of interests - the academic interest in sociolinguistics, and the political and cultural interest in the revival and revitalization of indigenous languages. The Crow reservation turned out to be a very interesting place to do research because there was a high level of maintenance among the members of the tribe. This ran counter to expectations; you would have predicted, as with most other American tribes, a high degree of language shift towards English.

DD: What happened after your time in New Mexico?

JR: After my research there I had a job at the Regional Language Centre in Singapore for five years. I think for someone in applied linguistics at that time I had an unusually strong back-

ground in research methodology. The reason for this was my experience in New Mexico. Because they didn't actually have a doctoral program in Applied Linguistics at the University of New Mexico, I went through the College of Education and did a number of courses on research methods that way. The job in Singapore involved both Research Methodology and Language Testing. I'd done some work on testing at New Mexico, and in fact two of the most prominent language testers of the seventies, Bernard Spolsky and John Oller, were both there at that time. Though my own research did not primarily focus on testing, I realize in retrospect that I picked up quite a lot through working with those two professors.

DD: So you finally returned to New Zealand?

JR: Yes, after five years in Singapore a lectureship came up at my old university in Wellington, Victoria University. So when I went back there I guess I brought together two things: on the one hand that interest and expertise I'd developed in testing, particularly in Singapore, and on the other hand an interest in vocabulary. Vocabulary was a traditional strength of the English Language Institute in Victoria. I guess currently the most famous vocabulary specialist there is Paul Nation. Through him I developed an interest in vocabulary tests in particular. And of course, even though he's not a testing person, he has developed a number of tests in his career, most famously the Vocabulary Levels Test.

DD: What kind of research did you do in Wellington?

JR: One of my early studies, which actually appeared in the *RELC Journal* (Read, 1988), looked at Nation's vocabulary levels test. I administered it at the beginning and the end of an intensive pre-university course as we used to call it. These days, it would be called an EAP (English for Academic Purposes) course. I looked at whether the vocabulary levels test could show any kind of growth in vocabulary over that three-month period. Another thing I looked at was the scaling of the different frequency levels in the test. There are five different levels of vocabulary knowledge: 2000, 3000, 5000, *university level* and 10,000 words. There are just 18 questions for each level, and I defined *mastery* as 16 correct answers out of

18. I wanted to see the extent to which when the students achieved a mastery of the 3000 word level, whether we could assume that they'd also mastered the 2000 word level. And if they achieved mastery of the university word level (specialist academic vocabulary), had they also mastered the 5000, 3000 and 2000 word levels? I found broadly there was that pattern. However, there was one exception, which has been found in other studies as well. We had a number of Spanish speaking Latin American students who were coming for post-graduate study at a New Zealand university; they didn't follow that pattern very clearly. The reason is, of course, that a lot of the less frequent vocabulary in English is from Latin or French. So speakers of Romance languages don't follow that sequence, that you would certainly get with Japanese learners, the more frequent the word is in the language the more likely they are to know the word. So that was the basis for that analysis that I did.

DD: How exactly were you asked to write your vocabulary assessment book, which was published in 2000?

JR: I was actually first asked to write the book in 1991. My first sabbatical after I went to Wellington was in 1990, and I went to Britain. I divided my time between two places. First I spent three months at Birkbeck College, London University. There I worked with Paul Meara, who's one of the big names in vocabulary studies. He was just finishing his time there before he moved to University College Swansea in Wales to establish his famous doctoral program there. It was while working with him that I developed the test I guess I'm best known for, the word associates test (Read, 1993). Meara at that time had been working on the concept of word association. He used the standard word association test where you give the language users a series of stimulus words and ask them to respond, either orally or in written form, with the first word that comes into their head. There are well-established norms for native speakers. For example, in the 1960s and 70s there was a lot of work done with native speaking children and adults which showed that the kind of responses they gave were fairly stable and consistent from one native speaker to another. But Meara and I found that that wasn't the case for second language learners. In fact,

Meara has just published a book called *Connected Words*, which pulls together six or seven articles he's published over the years. His theme is how word association of various kinds can give insight into the nature of the second language lexicon. I've just written a review of it.

DD: What was new about your Word Associates Test?

JR: Our innovation was the notion that instead of asking learners to supply responses to a word-association task, why not give them a selection of words to choose from? Originally there were eight words – four of the words are associated with the target word and four aren't. Your task is to pick which of the words are associated either paradigmatically or syntagmatically. So it includes not only aspects of the meaning of the word or synonym, but also words that can collocate with the target word.

DD: Did you meet Alderson, the series editor at that time?

JR: Yes. After that three months in London I went to Lancaster for another two to three months at the invitation of Charles Alderson. It so happened that at that time he was putting together the original proposal for that series of books in which mine appears. I didn't actually see much of Charles while I was there for various reasons, but he did attend a seminar I gave to graduate students just before I left. He was looking for someone who was not only a language tester, but also had a strong interest in vocabulary, so I was in the right place at the right time. But it took quite a long time for the series to be accepted. I think in 1992 I wrote a couple of draft chapters, and then in 95 the series was accepted and I wrote a more formal proposal to get the contract from Cambridge. I wrote another two chapters then.

DD: Who is *Assessing Vocabulary* for and what is its message?

JR: Its intended audience is both test developers and classroom language teachers. I looked at theory and research on one hand and vocabulary testing on the other. The theory is what we know about vocabulary knowledge and use in addition to what we know about the ways vocabulary can

be measured. Theory and practice are integrated by my framework for vocabulary assessment. Also, one chapter is devoted to four case studies, including the TOEFL test, and I finally discuss new directions for vocabulary assessment, including computer applications.

DD: Who else influenced you in the 90s?

JR: In the long process of writing the book I met up with Carol Chapelle. Of course testing is one of her areas, and at that time she was quite interested in vocabulary testing. I think she'd come at it from her work with the cloze procedure and C-tests. That collaboration with her was very helpful for me in developing my ideas. It provided a more sophisticated view of language assessment than I could have had if the book had in fact appeared in 94 or 95 (Read & Chapelle, 2001).

DD: How is vocabulary testing viewed by academic language testers?

JR: I guess from the time I first got involved in vocabulary testing I used to be a bit uncomfortable about talking about my work at language testing conferences. A focus on vocabulary seemed so much out of the mainstream at the time. Language testing had moved decisively into communicative and task-based testing of speaking and writing skills, and that was where all the leading edge research was being done. So focusing on vocabulary seemed to be rather old hat. In some ways vocabulary tests were the kind of classic discrete-point test which everybody thought had been discredited in the 70s. It was fashionable to rubbish Robert Lado without necessarily having read his book. It's also true to say that for a long time, in the 70s and 80s, the vocabulary researchers like Meara, Nation and Laufer were a fairly lonely bunch. One big change that occurred during the 90s and this century is that vocabulary studies, generally, and not just vocabulary testing have come much more to the fore. But, if you look at SLA, although there is more focus on vocabulary tests, I think there is still a sense that it's not really at the core of SLA research compared with the study of syntax and morphology. That's a point that I picked up in my review of Meara's book.

DD: How about the future?