RETHINKING COMMON VOCABULARY GUESSING STRATEGIES
A Renewed Case for Clarke & Nation (1980)

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Vocabulary knowledge is an important dimension of language that underpins reading ability, writing ability, and more broadly, academic success in K-12 and higher education (Grabe, 2009). Concern with vocabulary knowledge development has been framed by second language researchers in terms of intentional/incidental learning, implicit/explicit knowledge, breadth/depth of knowledge, and receptive/productive knowledge (Boulton & De Cock, 2017; Han & D'Angelo, 2009; Loewen, 2020; Nation, 2001). In many of the K-12 and community college classrooms I have observed, these theoretical framings play out through a variety of vocabulary-focused practices: form-focused vocabulary workbooks, meta-cognitive strategies, dictionary skills, journaling, and meaning-focused extensive and intensive reading experiences. Reading experiences are the primary contexts for vocabulary growth yet there is persistent acknowledgement that a learner's incidental encounters with new vocabulary do not necessarily lead to robust acquisition for productive (speech or writing) purposes (Han & D'Angelo, 2009). In content classrooms in grades six through twelve in particular, where college readiness is of great import, incidental learning of vocabulary through reading seems to be often coupled with guessing strategies. Such a combination may address breadth of vocabulary knowledge to some extent, but it does not seem adequate in addressing depth of knowledge such that productive language abilities are supported. I invite caution in uncritically embracing the guessing strategies that I most often see, namely those that rely on word-part knowledge, cognate knowledge, and co-text/context. In this article, I examine why such common guessing strategies are problematic. I then posit a need for renewed attention to Clarke & Nation's (1980) strategy for word guessing with some modification to include dictionary use.

   Word-part knowledge. The study of word parts as a basis for vocabulary guessing during reading draws influence from English language arts pedagogy. While popular, there does not seem to be a solid empirical base to show its actual efficacy in L2 learning beyond a few morphological types (Echevarría et al., 2017; Zimmerman, 1997). Yes, it is true that some word parts, e.g., endings for nouns (-tion), verbs (-ate, -ify), adjectives (-ish), adverbs (-ly) reliably cue some aspects of word semantics. These should be taught, in my opinion, because they are reliable cues. However, they do not get at the core meaning of a word.

   The word-part approach dogmatically draws on a historical-analytic, and compositional approach to teaching that holds a misplaced reverence for Latin and Greek. This poses problems for English Learners (ELs): First, there is a wide range of morphological forms. Second, modern meanings are not reliably retrievable from the historical usage of those forms. Third, whole words are often not retrievable from the combination of parts in relation to the whole. Consider: *apology* = *apo* (away) + *logos* (word or

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speech). A historical analysis of parts deviates from our current understanding of the word. And how is a learner to know that *-med* in *premeditate* is not comparable to *-med* in *pre-medicate*? Examples abound. Morphological cues for meaning are unreliable and, notably, an EL is not in the best position to determine their usefulness. Even modern compounds (e.g., holdup, handcuff, skateboard, output) are problematic.

Cognates. Cognate-based guessing is popular with ESL and Spanish/ Portuguese bilingual education teachers in the United States, often in recognition of their value in a translanguaging stance (García et al., 2017), albeit with some problematic faith in linguistic transfer. Though many L1 cognates do tend to reliably map onto L2 forms, at what point does a learner determine that their L1 knowledge is not useful for L2 purposes? Spanish/English cognates are abundant but in many types of discourse, false cognates are also abundant [1], for example: arena ≠ athletic space, realizar ≠ realize, avisar ≠ advise, embarazada≠ embarrassed. There may be some semantic overlap for some false cognates but in the main, the L1-L2 relationships are not always straightforward. Competent speakers of both languages might remark cross-linguistic relationships but any analysis of morphological similarity and meaning might more reliably serve as a post hoc mnemonic rather than an ad hoc guessing strategy.

Co-Text/Context. Athough I frequently hear teachers prompting learners to look for context clues while guessing, I rarely see systematic student training on what this actually entails. My presumption is that teachers are implicitly asking learners to appeal to their developing schema based on their interaction with the text. However, researchers such as Schmitt et al. (2011) and Folse (2004) have pointed out that guessing from context presupposes a comprehension of that same context in the first place, and that unstructured, context-based guessing is problematic.

For the reasons outlined above, I have concern that popular and frequently used guessing strategies can undermine robust text comprehension and ultimately, productive vocabulary ability. I encourage teachers to provide learners with steps to bolster more dubious strategies and so, we consider Clarke and Nation's vocabulary strategy.

Clarke & Nation's strategy. Clarke and Nation (1980) argued for a multi-step guessing strategy for learning of words and collocations during reading: 1) determine the part of speech of the word; 2) look at the immediate grammar; 3) study the wider context (usually the conjunction relationships); 4) guess the word and 5) check the guess by re-examining the context. These steps align with explicit knowledge pathways, increase depth of knowledge, and putatively enhance the likelihood of productive vocabulary ability in ways that other guessing strategies do not afford.

However, I believe the last step requires modification to improve the odds that a guess is correct, that comprehension is fulfilled, and productive knowledge is more likely to emerge: Check the guess with an English learner dictionary (e.g., Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English Online) some of the time, perhaps 30% of the time, which is not an overwhelming task. Also, study the word in context of the dictionary listing and notate findings relevant to the text. I rarely see dictionary use explicitly scaffolded by teachers in middle and upper grades; more often, learners resort to translation devices. Nominal, consistent use of an English learner's dictionary raises the potential for development of productive knowledge (Boulton & De Cock, 2017) and, I would argue, improves the efficacy of the guessing strategies critiqued here.

I hope to compel teachers to question what seems to be pedagogical dogma. We often look at texts, reading strategy deployment, and vocabulary learning from our vantage as proficient language users. However, top-down knowledge creates an illusion of viability for strategies that may not successfully be deployed by the learner. Clarke and Nation's heuristic, modified to include systematic (though not overwhelming) dictionary work can serve as a viable redoubt that scaffolds learners toward more productive outcomes.

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Notes:
1. Examples of English-Spanish false cognates can be found at https://en.wikibooks.org/wiki/Spanish/Common_False_Cognates

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