

What the corpus-based investigation outlined in this chapter suggests is that the quest for an ever larger and larger vocabulary reflects a rather one-dimensional view of advanced level achievement. In the final analysis, the classroom or course materials will only be able to traverse the surface of the vast iceberg of low frequency vocabulary and the onus will be on the learner him/herself to achieve the goals, but the goals are achievable given the right strategies and motivations. In this conversational extract from the CANCODE corpus, note how the speakers vary their ways of essentially saying that someone was 'in love' (indicated in bold); such a skill is a marker of the advanced user of vocabulary, someone who has created the necessary network of associations between the various items rather than just storing them as an atomised list in the memory. One proviso which needs repeating here relates to the mismatch between frequency of occurrence and the powerful, natural tendency of the mind to learn associated sets of items which can be retrieved as wholes, as well as the notion of psychological saliency, which may generate the curiosity and motivation to learn even rare items such as idioms. Words at the lower frequency levels tend to bring with them more sub-senses and extended meanings, and more obvious cultural connotations, in the sense that high frequency words can be, and usually are, dealt with at lower proficiency levels in terms of only their core, most frequent meanings – a sensible way of tackling the polysemic nature of most words in graded learning, in the view of Lennon (1990). Connotations and recurrent collocations can be usefully traced using concordance evidence. Such a learner may not in fact have a massive vocabulary, but may be better equipped to use and explore the vocabulary of the target language than one who simply adds more and more words without building an integrated lexicon and without developing that 'learner agency' so often discussed in sociocultural theory (Lantolf and Appel 1994a, 1994b), which can enable the learner to surpass instructional intervention and become a better, self-regulated learner. Explicit focus on such items may be necessary to tune the learner's antennae to be receptive to new ones when they are used both in and out of class, and to foster learner agency and independence. Vocabulary skills include ways of maximising learning opportunities during interaction (e.g. asking for paraphrases, probing the meaning of unfamiliar items with one's interlocutor, etc.). A focus simply on linear increase in vocabulary size (or vocabulary breadth as it is often termed) produces diminishing returns as far as text coverage is concerned; there is evidence anyway that learners' vocabularies are far from stable and may fluctuate up and down, with words known at one point in time forgotten at a later point (Meara and Rodriguez Sanchez 1993). To develop awareness and skills that will stand the learner in good stead for becoming an autonomous vocabulary-learner is a question of developing activities alongside the actual learning of words which introduce to the learner notions such as collocation, metaphor, connotation, etc. And since the vocabulary learning task is open-ended and impossible to complete in a typical institutional programme, the implication is that the advanced level should also be defined by the extent to which the learner is able to operate independently with a set of skills and strategies for processing and using new vocabulary. On the other hand, the advanced level learner will not be defined simply by his/her vocabulary size vis-a-vis native speakers, but rather more by his/her ability to develop depth of knowledge and the tools and strategies to pursue vocabulary learning and use independently. To push the vocabulary size towards comprehension targets above 90% for typical texts seems feasible, and involves ultimately aiming for a 9–10,000-word receptive

