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## 'We learn as we go': How acquisition of a technical vocabulary is supported during vocational training

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### ABSTRACT

This study provides insights into language development in a trades training context in New Zealand. Its key focus is to identify how the acquisition of the specialised words is supported in a primarily practical training environment. Transcribed recordings of 16.5 h of talk on a building site and in theory classrooms, along with interviews with tutors and learners, were analysed to explore the extent and nature of episodes where attention is drawn to the specialised terms and provide insight into strategies for and beliefs about learning these new words. Findings show that both tutors and learners do draw attention to the language they are using, primarily the meanings associated with new forms, mainly through tutor-talk and tutor-learner interaction. This description of how experienced tutors support their trainees' vocabulary acquisition is likely to be of value to new and experienced tutors in trades teaching and beyond.

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## 1. Introduction

This article, which draws on data collected at a polytechnic institution in New Zealand, concerns how trainees are supported to learn the specialised language of carpentry in a primarily practical environment. During an interview when asked how he learnt this specialised language, one carpentry trainee with English as an additional language replied, "We learn as we go." This statement suggests that learning takes place as part of learners' day-to-day interaction on the building site rather than as part of a formal process. [Lave and Wenger \(1991, p.85\)](#) propose that "Language is part of practice, and it is in practice that people learn." The purpose of this study is to explore what this practice of 'learning as we go' entails, by describing how, through interaction in the practice of carpentry training, attention is drawn to the language of carpentry. One carpentry tutor interviewed for the study said, when referring to his learners, "When they can walk like a builder and talk like a builder, then we can start having a conversation"; but how are learners supported to develop the ability to 'talk like a builder' so they can have these conversations? Given that "vocabulary is central to understanding and using language at any level" ([Hirsh & Coxhead, 2009, p.5](#)), how is developing the language of carpentry, specifically its specialised words, supported in a primarily practical context?

Studies in the area of literacy describe literacy as practices located in social and cultural contexts, rather than a single, universal construct ([Barton, 2006](#); [Barton, Hamilton & Ivanič, 2000](#); [Baynham & Prinsloo, 2001](#); [Street & Lefstein, 2007](#); [Gee, 2000](#), pp. 180–196) and a focus on literacy needs to consider the domains where literacy is used ([Street, 2001](#), pp. 13–22).

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Literacy is developed through contextual practice, when individuals interact through a process of meaning making, constructing meaning through the activity in which they are engaged (Gibbons, 2003). In carpentry the 'activity' is construction on a building site where learners are mediating meaning through participation in and practice of the trade, as they learn how to interact, make sense of and communicate within the domain of carpentry.

Research exploring language and literacy in vocational training has looked at a range of features and challenges of these literacies and of embedding these in vocational training. Roberts et al. (2005) define embedding language and literacy as combining their development with vocational skills so that they are integral to vocational training. They explored characteristics of embedding across a range of vocational contexts and found that the teacher supporting language and literacy development "needs the opportunity to support learners at the time of the practical task ... providing learning through doing" (Roberts et al., 2005, p.8). Casey et al. (2006) explored embedding and its impact on learning and achievement and highlighted that language and literacy need to be "explicitly taught but in ways that learners perceive are clearly integrated within their own vocational motivations and aims" (p.42). In terms of the challenges of vocational literacies, Edwards, Minty and Miller (2013) found that the literacy practices of vocational assessments are more demanding than originally thought, often invisible to both learners and tutors, yet central to success in terms of attainment. And finally, Bak and O'Maley (2015) highlighted the tensions that vocational tutors often have to grapple with between the complexities of language and literacy and embedding these into vocational training. None of these studies have focused specifically on how the learning of vocabulary is addressed in this context. However, if, as the research suggests, vocabulary is central to understanding language, and learning the language needs to occur during the practice of vocational training, this raises questions of how, in these vocational training contexts, the learning of vocabulary is integrated and supported especially given more recent findings cited here of the demands of vocational literacy practices for both tutors and learners. In addition, as a recent study has shown (Coxhead, Demecheleer, & McLaughlin, 2016) one of the key challenges of training in the carpentry environment is the large amount of lexis required in order to study and work as a carpenter. This research then raises the question of how vocabulary learning is supported and integrated with vocational training and the development of literacy in this context.

In the area of English language teaching there has been much research into teaching and learning vocabulary in specialised disciplines and academic contexts. This research has focused on analysing the specialised vocabulary load of texts, exploring the challenges these terms present, and on approaches to teaching and learning (Hirsh & Coxhead, 2009; Mudraya, 2006; Nation, 1990, 2001, 2007; Nation & Gu, 2007; Ward, 1999, 2007). Research has also highlighted that although it was initially thought that technical or more specialised words accounted for about 5% of words in a text (Nation, 2001) a subsequent study (Chung & Nation, 2003) showed that in an Anatomy text, coverage was as much as 37.6%. This challenge is further complicated by 'sub-technical words' which can have a general meaning in everyday contexts but can take on a new meaning in a specific discourse, for example 'solution' in its general sense but 'solution' meaning a chemical substance (Mudraya, 2006). Studies have also been carried out in both secondary and academic contexts, identifying discourse features, syntactical structures and lexical bundles that need to be taught explicitly to ensure that the relationship between language and content is transparent (Cortes, 2004; Creese, 2006; Mohan, 1986; Unsworth, 1997). This research raises the question of how links are made between language and content in a tertiary carpentry training context.

A recent study of learning disciplinary language in the New Zealand context (Basturkmen & Shackleford, 2015) focused on how content tutors in the first year of a Bachelor of Accounting degree paid attention to language within meaning focused instruction. These researchers "wished to understand specifically how the accounting lecturers might already be helping students with language in their teaching" (p.87). They discovered that lecturers frequently engaged in helping their students with the language during content-based lectures in a range of ways including elicitation, correcting prior utterances and using more common and more technical words together to support understanding. Costa (2012), this time in an Italian context, investigated the extent to which lecturers in higher education integrate a focus on form during content-based lectures, and discovered that moments during lectures where the lecturer drew attention to the language they were using were quite common. These included the lecturer using explanation and definitions for lexical and grammatical features, typographical enhancement and code switching. Both of these studies provide examples of what Gibbons describes as "linguistic bridges between learner language and the target register" (Gibbons, 2003, p.267), specifically, the connections that are made between using the language and constructing new knowledge. The present study adds to this growing body of research. However, in contrast to an academic context, we describe a focus on language in trades training where learning is primarily through 'doing' rather than learning through instruction. We give attention to a context that has been neglected in the literature, that is, the learning of vocabulary within trades training.

The above research on drawing attention to language as part of content-focused instruction may be distinguished from Second Language Acquisition (SLA) literature, where focus is primarily on language. Of particular relevance to our research are SLA studies that have looked specifically at vocabulary learning. A study by Dobinson (2001) sought to find out if students learn the vocabulary items that teachers teach. She found that focus on the word by the teacher facilitated recall, as did repetition, and the number of conversational turns associated with a new word. However, involvement of the learner him/herself in discussion of the word was not more effective than hearing it discussed by others in the class. Laufer and Rozovski-Roitblat (2011) found that word-focused practice, as might happen in a language classroom, was more effective for learning a word than occasional focus on a form, such as the attention paid to vocabulary by the teacher or learners in a content-based classroom. Like both Dobinson (2001) and Laufer and Rozovski-Roitblat (2011), Plonsky and Loewen (2013), undertaken in a Spanish L2 classroom in which focus was on uptake of grammar and vocabulary, report that a number of factors are associated with uptake of lexis including frequency of exposure and episodes when focus is on language rather than content. In addition,

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