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## **The Minds Behind SLA: Insights from Leading Scholars—Stuart Webb**

**Stuart Webb** is Professor at Western University’s Faculty of Education and specializes in second language acquisition. With a PhD in Applied Linguistics, he has taught English as a foreign language and applied linguistics internationally for many years. His research investigates practical questions like how many words are needed to understand TV, how often words must be encountered to be learned, and which words are most valuable for students. Prof. Webb has authored books on vocabulary research and published over 100 papers in top journals.

**Your paper “The Effects of Repetition on Vocabulary Knowledge” has been influential in Second Language Acquisition (SLA) research. Could you define the specific area of SLA that it falls under and describe what initially led you to explore this topic?**

This study falls within the areas of (a) L2 vocabulary studies and (b) frequency effects on SLA. This was the first study that I conducted in my PhD research. The motivation for the research was to follow up earlier studies that looked at frequency effects on L2 vocabulary research but expand upon those studies by measuring gains in different aspects of vocabulary knowledge that were rarely assessed. Until that time, the norm was to only measure knowledge of form-meaning connection. I measured knowledge of orthographic form, association, collocation, and grammatical functions in addition to form-meaning connection. I was interested in learning how these different types of vocabulary knowledge developed and whether the gains in each type of knowledge would be similar.

**Could you recommend key resources—such as textbooks, papers, or other materials—that would be particularly beneficial for graduate**

**students and scholars looking to explore and deepen their understanding of this area of interest?**

I think that the most useful starting points for those interested in learning about researching vocabulary are the key textbooks in this area. For me, those books are Nation's (2022) *Learning Vocabulary in Another Language, How Vocabulary is Learned* (Webb & Nation, 2017), and *The Routledge Handbook of Vocabulary Studies* (Webb, 2020). Nation's (2022) book provides a comprehensive account of the applications of studies of vocabulary to teaching and learning over the last fifty years. *How Vocabulary is Learned* (Webb & Nation, 2017) is a more reader-friendly book that discusses key areas of vocabulary studies that relate to pedagogy. *The Routledge Handbook of Vocabulary Studies* (2020) is particularly useful for researchers because it highlights many different topics for studies of vocabulary, each discussed by key researchers in the field. For those planning to conduct research on vocabulary, I would also strongly recommend Schmitt's (2010) *Researching Vocabulary* and Nation and Webb's (2011) *Researching and Analysing Vocabulary*.

**What is one prevalent misconception about second language (L2) acquisition, teaching, or assessment that you've encountered in your work?**

First, I think that it is important to understand that what is suggested by researchers for classroom learning may not necessarily be implemented by teachers. It takes time for research findings to reach program developers and Ministries of Education. There are topics of vocabulary research that have been discussed among researchers hundreds of times over decades that teachers in many areas may still be unaware of. Finding a way to help apply research findings to pedagogy is a challenge that needs to be figured out. However, I think there is often an assumption among researchers that their findings have all been implemented into the classroom, which is problematic when that is not the reality.

Second, perhaps what is most important for research students is learning how to evaluate research methodology and findings rather than relying on the conclusions of researchers. The claims made by researchers may not necessarily be correct. Recently, I have found that some researchers make claims that are not supported by their findings and the research literature. If students assume that the researcher's claims are correct, then that may cause problems down the road if they focus on these claims in their own research. Developing the ability to evaluate research methodology and results allows students (and researchers) to rely on their own knowledge to make key decisions.

**How do you see the field of SLA and L2 teaching evolving in the coming years, particularly with the emergence of AI and other technological advancements?**

Changes in technology will always affect research and teaching to some degree. However, it probably does not happen quite as quickly as researchers might suggest. One reason for this is that researchers and teachers tend to be

older and slower adopters of technological advancements. For example, television has been around for a long time, but it is only in recent years that it is starting to gain some traction as a source of L2 input for researchers to investigate. Moreover, audiovisual input still plays a relatively minor role in classroom learning. Recent technological innovation such as AI will be the focus on new research, but I am not sure if it will make much impact on research or teaching in the next few years.

### **How do you typically develop a research idea?**

There are always many possible research topics, so it is important to be patient, consider the different options and choose carefully. Most graduate student research fails to get published. This means that it is only read by the supervisor and the examiners. If a student is going to work on a research project for two to four years, I hope that their effort will lead to something that many people can learn from. Not all topics are likely to succeed in publication. Therefore, it is best to take things slowly and evaluate the justification for each topic. I have seen quite a few students fall in love with a topic that is unlikely to generate interest and lead to publication. Thus, it is important to be flexible about research ideas. It is important that the student selects a topic that they are interested in, but it is equally important that the topic is worthy of investigation. Reading as much as possible is key before deciding on a topic so that it is grounded in the literature.

### **Could you share a transformative moment in your academic journey?**

Before applying to PhD programs, I spent about a year thinking about topics. Eventually, I felt that I had a great idea for my PhD research and that this research would be impactful and publishable. When I was applying to programs, I found that Professor Paul Nation was coming to my city to give a presentation, and I arranged to meet him. I was excited to tell him about my idea for research and was hopeful that he would be interested in accepting me as his PhD student. When I told him about my idea, he listened carefully and thought about it for a minute after which he told me he thought it was a great idea. He then told me that he could see me setting it up as a series of studies that involved looking at how different activities contributed to different aspects of vocabulary knowledge. I was very happy to hear that he was willing to be my PhD supervisor, but I was also surprised by his interpretation of my proposed research topic, which was quite different from what I had imagined. However, I understood that he knew much more about researching vocabulary than I did and I happily followed the direction he suggested. In retrospect, I can see that my initial idea was not a good one. Having the opportunity to listen and learn from Paul Nation was the transformative moment in my academic journey.

**What is the most important key trait you have noticed in successful scholars, and why?**

I believe the most important key traits in successful scholarship are (a) having a very strong understanding of research methodology, and (b) being efficient. Methodology is at the heart of research. You need to have a sound research design to have valid results. Other aspects of a study such as the literature review and discussion can be revised. However, if there are problems with the results, the value of the research is limited because the findings lack validity.

I believe that successful scholars also tend to be extremely efficient. Efficiency is extremely important because there are many demands on your time in an academic career and as you become more successful, the demands tend to increase. It is best to get manuscripts written and submitted in a timely fashion, because there are always other research projects to complete.

**What advice would you give to early-career researchers looking to make a meaningful impact in the field of SLA?**

Do not rush research. Quality research takes time. It takes time to develop knowledge and expertise through comprehensive reading. It takes time to find good research questions, and it is worth taking the time to carefully design the study to ensure that you have valid results. When developing a study, look for good models of research design in top-tier research journals such as *Language Learning and Studies in Second Language Acquisition*. These two journals provide useful models of research designs because their articles tend to be longer to ensure that there is sufficient detail provided in the methodology sections to allow readers to understand and evaluate the research.

**Is there anything important you would like to add that our previous questions did not address?**

I credit any success that I have had as a scholar to having an amazing PhD supervisor (Paul Nation) and outstanding students to supervise such as Zhouhan Jin, Su Kyung Kim, Akifumi Yanagisawa, Takumi Uchihara, Thi Ngoc Yen Dang, Michael Rodgers, Tatsuya Nakata, and Yosuke Sasao. For students finding a supervisor who is an expert in the area they are interested in is key. Having manuscripts rejected by journals should be expected. However, if your supervisor has a successful track record of publication in top journals and believes in the quality of your research, then you are more likely to persevere and resubmit when rejections inevitably occur.

Having manuscripts rejected should be expected. Most of my early articles were rejected multiple times. What is important is to learn from those rejections. Reviewers are not necessarily correct with all their criticisms. However, there is usually something to be learned from reviews. I am sure my writing and research improved through going through the review process and having many tough rejections.

**Quick-fire preferences:**

**Teaching or research?** I love both.

**Long-term projects or short-term studies?** Short-term studies.

**Methodology-driven research or theory-driven research?** Methodology-driven research. I love the challenge of investigating a topic in new ways.

**Writing or data analysis?** Originally data analysis but in recent years, writing.

**Writing in silence or with background voices?** Writing in silence. I am a procrastinator, so I need to write with no distractions.

**Reading digital or printed books?** Digital.

**Small or big conference?** I love both if they are in person.

**Early bird or night owl?** Definitely a night owl. I wrote my PhD thesis between 10 p.m. and 6 a.m. It is hard to procrastinate at 3 a.m.!

**Summer or winter?** I look forward to all the seasons.

**City or countryside?** City to live in, but countryside to hike or relax.

**Coffee or tea?** I love both, but coffee tends to power my writing.

September 2, 2025

*Note: This interview was conducted via email. The responses are presented in Stuart Webb's natural manner of expression, with minor stylistic edits for clarity and flow.*

## References

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