

Vocabulary acquisition / learning. (A summary of important points, S. Insley)

How second language (L2) vocabulary knowledge is learned / acquired has been a topic of discussion in second language acquisition (SLA) literature for at least two decades.

Input, Output and SLA

Krashen (1985) proposed that a necessary condition for L2 acquisition is “comprehensible input” that is, input (exposure to language) that the learner can understand or, ideally, that is just a little beyond the comprehension of the learner (comprehensible input + 1). Swain (1986) proposed that comprehensible output is also vital to SLA – output is the language produced by the learner. It can be comprehensible or incomprehensible to an interlocutor. Swain proposed that when learners have to make efforts to ensure that their output is comprehensible, acquisition is fostered. These researchers proposed that an L2 could be acquired without explicit teaching and learning. However, for our purposes, it is necessary to make a distinction between SLA in instructional and natural settings (Lightbown & Spada, 1999). Within instructional settings, the discussion has focussed around the nature of implicit and explicit knowledge of an L2.

Implicit and Explicit Vocabulary Learning

“Implicit learning is acquisition of knowledge about the underlying structure of a complex stimulus environment by a process which takes place naturally, simply and without conscious operations. Explicit learning is a more conscious operation where the individual makes and tests hypotheses in search for structure. Knowledge attainment can thus take place implicitly (a non-conscious and automatic abstraction of the structural nature of the material arrived at from experience of instances), explicitly through selective learning (the learner searching for information and building then testing hypotheses), or, because we can communicate using language, explicitly via given rules (assimilation of the rule following explicit instruction)” (N. Ellis 1994). Ellis claimed that the phonetic and phonological features of new words are learned implicitly as a result of frequent exposure. Similarly, the motor aspects of articulation of word forms develop implicitly as a result of practice. However, the meaning of words is learned explicitly, requiring conscious processing at semantic and conceptual levels, and paying attention to form - meaning connections. Successful learners use complex metacognitive strategies such as inferring word meanings from context and semantic imagery mediation, to learn the meanings of new words. Schmidt (1990) concluded that “subliminal language learning is impossible, and that noticing is the necessary and sufficient condition for converting input into intake.” (p.129).

Vocabulary learning and ‘depth of processing’ (engagement with the new material).

The importance of deeply processing new vocabulary has been attested by many researchers. Craik and Lockhart (1972, in Nation, 1999) proposed that it is “depth of processing” which is crucial to the retention of information. They proposed that the richness of discussion about new material is important to retention. Although there is much debate about what constitutes “deep processing”, cognitive psychologists tend to agree that “memory performance is determined far more by the nature of the processing activities engaged in by the learner than by the intention to learn per se.” (Eysenck, 1982, p. 203, in Laufer and Hulstijn, 2001, p.6). Researchers agree that processing new lexical information more elaborately, (eg, paying careful attention to the word’s pronunciation, spelling, grammatical category, meaning and semantic relations to other words) will lead to higher retention than by processing new lexical information less elaborately (eg, paying attention to only one or two of these dimensions.)

Hulstijn (1992, in Laufer & Hulstijn, 2001: 11) also found that when learners were asked to infer the meaning of words from context by choosing the correct meaning from multiple choice options, subsequent retention of these words was better than when they were provided with a synonym of the words during a reading task. Similarly, Hulstijn, Hollander and Greidanus, (1996), found that the relatively few words that were looked up in the dictionary during a reading task yielded much higher retention scores on a subsequent test than the same words in marginal gloss condition (the meaning of each word is supplied in the margin). Paribakht and Wesche (1997: in Laufer & Hulstijn, 2001)) found that words that were practised in a series of exercises were better retained than words inferred from context. Other studies reported in Laufer & Hulstijn reached similar results. A study which examined the effect of writing on the retention of new vocabulary (Hulstijn and Trompeter; 1998, in Laufer & Hulstijn, 2001) found that looking up words in an L1-L2 dictionary and incorporating them in a composition was more effective than looking up words in an L2-L1 dictionary for comprehension purposes. Cho and Krashen (1994: in Laufer & Hulstijn, 2001) investigated vocabulary acquisition

through reading. Four subjects took part in this study. The first subject did not use a dictionary at all and acquired 7 words from a book. The second subject used a dictionary initially and then abandoned it – she acquired 8 words. The other two subjects used a dictionary all of the time and wrote the words with example sentences in a booklet. These subjects acquired 17 and 34 words respectively per book.

Intentional and accidental vocabulary learning

In SLA literature, a distinction is made between intentional and accidental learning. In intentional learning, the purpose of a task is made clear to the learner, for example, learn these words for a test. In incidental learning, the purpose of the task is not made explicit, for example, the learner is given a text (containing new words) to read and told that he/she will be expected to recall the content of the text. The learner is then tested on his/her recall of the new words). Laufer and Hulstijn (2001) investigated that retention of vocabulary through incidental learning. They found that when vocabulary is processed incidentally, retention is conditional upon three factors: need, search and evaluation, and that the higher the involvement load the better the retention.

Need = motivation

Search = looking for the meaning of the word

Evaluation = some kind of selective decision about the word, e.g., a comparison of the given word with other words, choosing between dictionary meanings, in other words, choosing the right word for a cloze, choosing which other words will combine with the new word (from other texts or the dictionary).

Task-based learning and vocabulary acquisition

Task-based learning (Candlin, 1987; R. Ellis, 2003; Willis, 1996; Skehan, 1996) has been a more recent methodology which incorporates both incidental and intentional acquisition / learning theories. Task-based learning proposes that learners learn the TL naturally (rather than artificially) by becoming involved in completing a task in the TL. In this approach, the focus is on task completion, in which meaning is primary, there is some communication problem to solve, there is some sort of relationship to comparable real-world activities, task completion has some priority and the assessment of the task is in terms of its outcome. New vocabulary is learned incidentally through the completion of the task which involves using the new vocabulary. Willis's (1996) completed a framework for task-based teaching practices, where an explicit teaching focus is completed at the end of the task completion.

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