Vocabulary Learning Strategies and Foreign Language Acquisition

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Contents

Introduction: An Outline of the Book

Second Language Acquisition,[1] as a field of scientific research and a foundation of contemporary language instruction, is still a relatively young discipline. Historically, second language instruction was either not grounded on any scientific theory (e.g. the Grammar-Translation Method), or was grounded on conclusions partly derived from valid linguistic theories and partly from general theories of learning (e.g. the influence of structural linguistics and behaviourism on the development of the audiolingual method). The Grammar-Translation Method was based on the fundamental assumption that learners will learn the target language simply by following the teaching method, whereas according to the audiolingual method the learner is conceived of as a passive recipient of the programme whose intervention would seriously interfere with the desirable automatic reaction. These theories received severe criticism from the new opposing theories, such as the interlanguage theory that views the learner as a creator of rules and errors as evidence of positive efforts by the learners to learn (Selinker, 1972). The new theories incited two general directions in SLA research: Rubin (1975) begins her work on raising awareness of learners' strategies of learning responsible for the language learning success, and Krashen (cf. 1981) proposes his influential theory which states that, for language acquisition to occur, learners need natural authentic communication, and not direct instruction. Due to this idea Krashen has often been recognised as the originator of the communicative approach to second language teaching. In addition to the above-mentioned approaches and methods, there is a host of other methods, often referred to as alternative, that have, in their own ways, influenced second language instruction. In general, language instruction today clearly reflects recognition and appreciation of the values and contributions of various methods and approaches.

In such an eclectic context, the cognitive theory of learning (i.e. a number of theories based on similar ideas and characterised by comparable conclusions) significantly influences the theory of second language learning and acquisition. Many theorists and researchers in the

field of second language acquisition find that it is absolutely necessary to understand the interaction between language and cognition in order to explain the process of second language acquisition (e.g. Ellis, 2000; O'Malley & Chamot, 1996; Robinson, 2001; Skehan, 2000).

The ardent 'advocates' of the extreme cognitive approach entirely discard the behaviourist tenets; whereas the less radical cognitivists agree that the behaviourist theory is able to explain some aspects of learning. Gagné (1977, cited in Stern, 1986), for example, distinguishes several varieties of learning: learning intellectual skills, concepts and rules; learning problem solving or cognitive strategies; verbal information learning; motor skill learning; and the learning of attitudes. His conceptualisation of learning includes both behaviourist and cognitive principles and is reflected in his postulation that any concrete learning task, such as language learning, involves several or even all kinds of learning.

Zarevski (1994) finds it rather unrealistic to expect that one coherent theory can explain the whole complexity of learning. This is why the explanations within one theory range from the point of conflict to the point of interaction. The great strength of the cognitive theory lies in its capacity to explain the development of the competence to use the second language knowledge. This may serve as a basis for further developments of a more comprehensive theory that would be able to fully account for second language acquisition.

Due to the influence exerted by the cognitive theory of learning, the concept of language learning strategy or learner strategy referring to what learners do in order to make their learning manageable and efficient has become widely recognised in the field of second language acquisition.[2] An adequate explanation of how learning strategies contribute to the acquisition and attainment of the language has to account for a number of variables, from social and cultural learning context, covering varieties of factors influencing the use of strategies, to the language task.

This book focuses primarily upon vocabulary learning strategies. It aims at exploring what lies behind this phenomenon and examines both its linguistic and psychological aspect. Although the approach taken is rooted in the cognitive theory of learning (discussed in Chapter 2), we also look at the inherent linguistic features of lexical items and the complexity of lexical forms and relationships (Chapter 1). By doing so, we acknowledge the potential impact that these linguistic features may have on vocabulary acquisition, which the cognitive theory has been reputed to fail to do. Chapter 3 gives a critical review of previous research on vocabulary learning strategies. It is followed by an analysis

of methods and instruments for assessing vocabulary learning strategies and of their advantages and drawbacks. Chapter 4 reports on three original studies on vocabulary learning strategies. The first one focuses on the problem of research methodology, i.e. designing an adequate instrument for measuring the use of vocabulary learning strategies. The second study explores the latent affect of instruction on the development of vocabulary learning strategies by investigating the relationship between vocabulary teaching strategies employed by teachers and vocabulary learning strategies selected by their learners. The third study examines the differences in the use of vocabulary learning strategies that may be attributed to the target language being learnt. This cross-linguistic study questions the universality and transferability of learning strategies and recognises the role that the social learning context may play in strategy use. Finally, implications for practice and further research are discussed.

Notes

1. Although I find the distinction between *learning* and *acquisition* (cf. Thatcher, 2000), and between *second* and *foreign language* useful and necessary, for reasons of general recognition and acceptance, the terms *second language* (L2) and *acquisition* will be used in this book, apart from instances where the distinction is a prerequisite for understanding the issues in question. *Second language* refers to both the language acquired in the environment where the target language is the language of communication and to the language acquired in the environment where the target language is not used for communication. The term implies that one language (first or native, L1) has already been acquired. In Chapter 4 of this book, the description of original research, the term *foreign language (FL)* will be used, because it refers to English learnt as a foreign language in an environment where another language (Croatian) is used for communication. The terms *acquisition* and *learning* will be used synonymously. Both terms are related to the processes of knowledge acquisition on the assumption that all learning is to some extent cognitively controlled. When it comes to vocabulary learning, the two processes are especially difficult to separate (Laufer, 1986). Thus, learning and acquisition will not be considered two different kinds of learning, but different degrees of knowledge acquisition.
2. According to Griffiths and Parr (2001), learning strategies have been implied by all methods and approaches to second language learning and teaching (e.g. the role of memory strategies in the Grammar-Translation Method, social strategies in the communicative approach, or affective strategies in suggestopaedia). Although they consider Krashen's theory an exception, it is his theory that Bialystok's (1979) concept of the monitoring strategy is based on. These examples emphasise the crucial role that language learning strategies should play in the language instruction programmes.

Chapter 1

Factors Affecting Vocabulary Learning and Acquisition

Despite the abundance of research on vocabulary acquisition that has been conducted by linguists, psychologists and theorists of L2 acquisition, there is still no generally accepted theory of vocabulary acquisition (for further discussion, see Meara, 1997). This fact may be partially attributed to the lack of cooperation or agreement among experts. On the one hand, psycholinguists have a particular interest in vocabulary development and exploration of the formal models of vocabulary acquisition, and ignore the L2 vocabulary literature *because* it is model-free. Applied linguists, on the other hand, are mainly concerned with the descriptive aspects of vocabulary and do not draw on existing psycholinguistic models of bilingual lexicon even when this implies an immediate pedagogical significance. Differences in the research focus have caused the two fields to develop at different rates, which has led to an even larger gap between them. It is, therefore, extremely difficult to list all the significant factors and the ways in which they influence vocabulary acquisition. In this section, a selection of the factors most frequently discussed in the relevant literature is presented.

Linguistic Features of Lexical Items

When it comes to linguistic features of lexical items, several issues need to be taken into consideration. To begin with, there is the problem of defining a 'word'. Intuitively, vocabulary could be defined as a 'dictionary' or a set of words. This general view is reflected in the lexicographical approach to the traditional way of listing words in a dictionary. However, it is obvious that for linguistics and L2 acquisition theory this interpretation is far too simplistic and limited. Linguists' attempts to specify what speakers of a language traditionally regard as a 'word' have resulted in so many formally different definitions of this term that their number alone suggests the complexity of the problem.

Firstly, according to the orthographic definition, a 'word' is '... any sequence of letters (and a limited number of other characteristics such as hyphen and apostrophe) bounded on either side by a space or

punctuation mark' (Carter, 1992: 4). Its flaw is not only its limitation to the written language, but the fact that it is formalistic, inconsistent and incomplete because it neglects differences in meaning and the issues of polysemy, homonymy, grammar functions, etc.

Secondly, based on semantics, a word can be defined as the smallest meaningful unit of language (Carter, 1992). As there is still no satisfactory definition of what 'meaning' is, i.e. what is the relationship between the linguistic sign and what it denotes outside the language, this definition is not reliable enough. Namely, some units of meaning consist of several words (e.g. *bus conductor*), for some the meaning cannot be determined without looking into their function in structuring and organising information (e.g. *if*, *but*), and certain 'integral' parts of words cannot stand on their own even if we know their meaning (e.g. the prefix '*re-*' in *retell*).

Thirdly, by the same token, the definition that restricts a word to a single stressed syllable allows for many exceptions: words like *if* and *but* do not have a stress, and *bus conductor* would be regarded as a single word in this view.

Next, Bloomfield's definition, according to which a word is a minimal free form, i.e. the smallest form that has a meaning when standing on its own (Škiljan, 1994), encompasses most of the categories and, without excluding further reduction of forms, provides a word with a degree of stability. Again, the problem of marginal cases arises and undermines every attempt to define a word in a formalistic way: firstly, items like *a* and *the* appear only in contextual relations to other words and secondly, idiomatic expressions, which consist of several orthographic words and cannot be reduced without radically changing their meaning (Carter, 1992).

Furthermore, McCarthy (1994) claims that a word, as a free meaningful unit of language, must contain at least one potentially freestanding morpheme. From this view a conditional definition of a word may be derived: a word is a combination of morphemes that comprise a firm unit suitable for the formation of higher level units (Škiljan, 1994). In addition, in Carter's view (1992), one of the greatest problems of defining a word, along with the above-mentioned constraints, is the fact that words have different forms that would *not* intuitively be regarded as different words. Moreover, words can have the same form with completely different and unconnected meanings.

Finally, by way of attempting to solve this problem, a neutral term *lexeme* or *lexical unit* has been introduced. It is an abstract unit that includes various orthographic, phonological, grammatical and semantic

features of a 'word'. Thus, this term covers inflections, polysemy, as well as multi-word items with different degrees of fixedness, such as compounds, phrasal verbs, and idioms. The difference between holistic multi-word items and other kinds of strings (i.e. multi-word inflectional forms, such as verb phrases *are going* or *has been chosen*) may be determined by applying the following criteria: institutionalisation or lexicalisation (the degree to which a multi-word item is considered as being a unit by the language community), fixedness (the degree to which a multi-word item is frozen as a sequence of words) and non-compositionality (the degree to which a multi-word item cannot be interpreted on a word-by-word basis, but has a specialised unitary meaning) (cf. Moon, 1997: 44).

The second issue that needs to be discussed arises from the lack of an unambiguous and universally accepted definition of a word: vocabulary of any language consists of a wide range of lexical forms. Thus, many linguists and theorists of L2 acquisition agree that vocabulary is made up of a variety of forms, such as morphemes, both free and bound (e.g. *laugh*, or the prefix *un-*), their combinations, i.e. derivatives (e.g. *laughter*, *unbelievable*), compounds (e.g. *bus conductor*), idioms, i.e. units that cannot be reduced or changed, and whose meaning cannot be retrieved from individual meanings of their components (e.g. *to bite the dust*), and other fixed expressions, such as binomials and trinomials (e.g. *sick and tired*; *ready, willing and able*), catchphrases (e.g. *they don't make them like that any more*), prefabricated routines or prefabs (e.g. *if I were you*), greetings (e.g. *How do you do?*) and proverbs (e.g. *It never rains but it pours*). This list of formal categories indicates a tremendous heterogeneity and a wide range of lexical items, but is by no means complete and absolute, nor are the categories strictly demarcated: their overlap is inevitable. It is this aspect that places vocabulary on the boundaries between morphology, syntax and semantics.

The third issue takes into consideration the fact that lexical items can hardly be viewed in isolation from each other, for they enter, semantically speaking, into various relations. These include hyponyms (lexical items within the same semantic field, i.e. at content level), synonyms (two or more lexical items that have the same or nearly the same meaning but different form), antonyms (lexical items of opposite meanings) and homophones (lexical items that have the same form but different meanings).

Meaning can be studied by means of the so-called componential analysis, which is based on the assumption that the meaning of a lexical item can be broken down into a set of meaning components or semantic

features. The meaning of a lexeme is determined by a number of distinctive semantic features, namely their absence (marked by '−'), presence (marked by '+') or irrelevance for the definition of a lexeme's meaning (marked by '±'). This approach shows which features of lexical items from the same semantic field overlap or differ, and is therefore suitable for the exploration of synonymy. A disadvantage of componential analysis is not only its failure to cover all meanings, but also the fact that it reduces the meaning components to binary oppositions that cannot always be precisely determined, and the fact that it may result in an indefinite list of a lexical item's relevant features.

The above-mentioned cases exemplify a paradigmatic relationship. This is the relationship between a lexeme and other lexemes that could be substituted for it in a sentence. A different type of relationship which lexemes enter into – called a syntagmatic relationship – is characterised by linear sequencing of lexemes. Such combinations of lexemes, however, are restricted. These restrictions (or 'collocations') determine which lexical units may be selected to form semantically acceptable combinations of two or more syntactically combined lexical units. Some collocations are entirely predictable (e.g. *blond* and *hair*); some lexical items have a wide range of collocations (e.g. *letter* collocates with *alphabet*, *box*, *post*, *write*, etc.), and some lexemes appear in so many different contexts that it is practically impossible to predict all of their collocations (e.g. verbs like *have* or *get*). To be noted is the fact that collocations differ from free associations of ideas: associations are highly individual, whereas collocations are lexical connections established in the same way by all speakers of a language. The study of collocations can be effective if it is conducted on large amounts of data, which is inevitably associated with corpus studies,[1] because collocations are not merely random combinations of lexical items, but are part of their meaning in the broadest sense of the word (Moon, 1997).

Finally, other factors influence the learning of a lexical item and make the acquisition of vocabulary difficult. According to Laufer (1997), the factors that affect the learnability of lexical items include pronounceability (phonological or suprasegmental features), orthography, length, morphology, including both inflectional and derivational complexity that increase the vocabulary learning load, similarity of lexical forms (e.g. synforms,[2] homonyms), grammar, i.e. part of speech, and semantic features (e.g. abstractness, specificity and register restriction, idiomaticity and multiple meaning). Table 1.1 gives an overview of the intralexical factors and their effect on vocabulary learning (facilitating factors,