Lexical Processing in Second Language Learners

SECOND LANGUAGE ACQUISITION
Series Editor: Professor David Singleton, *Trinity College, Dublin, Ireland*

This series brings together titles dealing with a variety of aspects of language acquisition and processing in situations where a language or languages other than the native language is involved. Second language is thus interpreted in its broadest possible sense. The volumes included in the series all offer in their different ways, on the one hand, exposition and discussion of empirical findings and, on the other, some degree of theoretical reflection. In this latter connection, no particular theoretical stance is privileged in the series; nor is any relevant perspective – sociolinguistic, psycholinguistic, neurolinguistic, etc. – deemed out of place. The intended readership of the series includes final-year undergraduates working on second language acquisition projects, postgraduate students involved in second language acquisition research, and researchers and teachers in general whose interests include a second language acquisition component.

Lexical Processing in Second Language Learners

Papers and Perspectives in Honour of Paul Meara

Edited by
Tess Fitzpatrick and Andy Barfield

Contents

Contributors

Andy Barfield teaches in the Faculty of Law at Chuo University, Tokyo, Japan. His doctoral work focused on exploring second language collocation knowledge and development, and his research interests also cover learner autonomy in second language education. Andy's book publications include *Reconstructing Autonomy in Language Education: Inquiry and Innovation* (coedited with S. Brown; Palgrave Macmillan, 2007) and *Researching Collocations in Another Language: Multiple Interpretations* (coedited with H. Gyllstad; Palgrave Macmillan, 2009).

Huw Bell 'learnt everything he knows about language' while working with Paul Meara at Swansea, where his PhD dealt with the assessment of lexical richness in L2 text. Huw is now a Senior Lecturer at Manchester Metropolitan University, UK, where he is programme leader for the MA TEFL. His research interests include how teacher and learner attitudes affect learning outcomes, particularly in minority/heritage languages.

Atipat Boonmoh is a lecturer in the Department of Language Studies, King Mongkut's University of Technology Thonburi (KMUTT), Bangkok. He has presented conference papers on the use of electronic dictionaries, and wrote his MA thesis on this topic. He is currently studying for a PhD in English Language Teaching at the Centre for Applied Linguistics, University of Warwick. His PhD research focuses on Thai university students' use of pocket electronic dictionaries for academic purposes.

Tess Fitzpatrick is a Senior Lecturer in Applied Linguistics at Swansea University. Her doctoral thesis investigated ways of using word association tasks and word frequency bands to elicit and measure L2 vocabulary, and described the design and implementation of an innovative test of productive vocabulary knowledge. Tess' research interests remain in the areas of vocabulary acquisition, storage and retrieval, with a specific focus on word association studies and vocabulary measurement tools, and she supervises research students working in these areas. A qualified and experienced EFL teacher and teacher trainer, she has also worked on projects exploring extreme language-learning methodologies and the role of formulaic sequences in second language use.

Marlise Horst is an Associate Professor at Concordia University in Montreal, where she teaches courses in applied linguistics, TESL methodology, language testing and the history of English. Her research addresses vocabulary development through reading, computer-assisted vocabulary learning and contrastive language awareness in francophone learners of English. A study of extensive ESL reading, done with Paul Meara as part of her doctoral research (Horst *et al.*, 1998), is cited regularly in investigations of incidental vocabulary acquisition. She also enjoys needlework and is an active member of the Village Quilters of Hudson, Quebec.

Paul Nation is Professor of Applied Linguistics in the School of Linguistics and Applied Language Studies at Victoria University of Wellington, New Zealand. He has taught in Indonesia, Thailand, the USA, Finland and Japan. His specialist interests are language-teaching methodology and vocabulary learning. His latest books include *Learning Vocabulary in Another Language* (Cambridge University Press, 2001), *Focus on Vocabulary* (with Peter Gu; NCELTR/Macquarie, 2007), *Teaching Vocabulary: Strategies and Techniques* (Heinle Cengage Learning, 2008), *Teaching ESL/EFL Listening and Speaking* (with Jonathan Newton; Routledge, 2009) and *Teaching ESL/EFL Reading and Writing* (Routledge, 2009).

Hilary Nesi publishes in the fields of corpus linguistics and dictionary design and use, and is a Professor in English Language at Coventry University. Paul Meara supervised Hilary's PhD studies and coauthored two papers with her (1991: 'How using dictionaries affects performance in multiple choice EFL tests' *Reading in a Foreign Language* 8:1, and 1994: 'Patterns of misinterpretation in the productive use of EFL dictionary definitions' *System* 22:1). Hilary is now a supervisor herself, and is coauthoring a chapter in this book with Atipat Boonmoh, a PhD student from Thailand.

Richard Pemberton is Associate Professor in TESOL in the School of Education at the University of Nottingham. Previously he taught for nearly 15 years at Hong Kong University of Science and Technology, and before that in Papua New Guinea, Zimbabwe and the UK. His PhD thesis investigated the ability of Hong Kong learners to recognise very frequent words in connected English speech. His research interests include spoken word recognition, and technology-assisted vocabulary learning in formal and informal settings. He has coedited *Taking Control: Autonomy in Language Learning* (Hong Kong University Press, 1996) and *Maintaining Control: Autonomy and Language Learning* (Hong Kong University Press, 2009).

John Read is an Associate Professor and Head of the Department of Applied Language Studies and Linguistics at the University of Auckland, New Zealand. He has taught applied linguistics, TESOL and English for academic purposes at tertiary institutions in New Zealand, Singapore and the USA. His primary research interests are in second language vocabulary assessment and the testing of English for academic and professional purposes. He is the author of *Assessing Vocabulary* (Cambridge University Press, 2000), as well as numerous articles and book chapters on aspects of vocabulary learning and assessment. He was coeditor of *Language Testing* from 2002 to 2006.

Jim Ronald's interest in vocabulary began with work as assistant editor on the second edition of Collins COBUILD English Dictionary. His main concerns since then have been with two aspects of the use of dictionaries by language learners. The first is the use that language learners make of dictionaries: choices they make regarding dictionary use and factors that affect these choices. The second aspect is the effect of dictionary use on the vocabularies of language learners. This has also been the focus of his doctoral research and the topic of his PhD thesis, completed in 2006.

John Shillaw is Professor of English Language Education at Nanzan University, Nagoya, Japan. John's interest in lexical research stemmed from his work on the use of corpora for selecting words for vocabulary tests. John's PhD studies examined Yes/No vocabulary tests as a measure of learners' vocabulary size. The results of his early research threw up a number of issues that seriously questioned the validity of the test format. Using the Rasch model to analyse large sets of test data, John's later studies demonstrated that a simpler form of checklist test was valid and more reliable than the Yes/No format.

Clarissa Wilks is Associate Dean of the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences at Kingston University. She studied with Paul Meara first on the MA in Second Language Learning and Teaching at Birkbeck College, London and then on the doctoral programme at Swansea, completing her PhD in 1999. Her research interests are in second language lexical networks and in attitudes to discriminatory language in France.

Brent Wolter is Assistant Professor and Director of the TESOL program at Idaho State University. He was awarded his PhD in 2005, which focused on developing a computer test for assessing depth of word knowledge. His research interests include using psycholinguistic and cognitive approaches to understanding lexical acquisition. His work has been published in journals such as *Applied Linguistics*, *ELT Journal*, *Second Language Research*, *Studies in Second Language Acquisition* and *System*.

Alison Wray was part of Paul Meara's PhD supervisory team at Swansea from 1996 to 1999, but Paul's considerable positive influence on her research began almost a decade earlier, when he acted as a valued informal mentor during the last stages of her doctoral work, in which she developed and described a new model of language processing (University of York, 1988). The main focus of Alison's current research is the status of multiword items (formulaic language) as part of the lexicon, and how, in the L2 context, different approaches may be taken to their learning and processing. She is now a Research Professor at Cardiff University in the Centre for Language and Communication Research.

Preface
A Research Network Model

ALISON WRAY

Between 1996 and 1999 I had the privilege of working as Paul Meara's colleague in the Centre for Applied Language Studies, University of Wales Swansea, where I assisted with the running of the PhD programme of the Vocabulary Acquisition Research Group (VARG). It was a tremendous training for me, a young academic with much to learn about how research can and should be conducted, and how best to nurture postgraduate students. Without question, it has made me a better supervisor than I would otherwise have been. In this short account, I shall try to pinpoint what makes the VARG programme so special, and show how Paul has distilled into its design – and the practice of its day-to-day management – the essence of excellent research training.

PhD Programmes: The Challenge

We must begin with a consideration of the wider context in which the VARG programme operates. The PhD is a different creature in different countries but in the UK financial constraints and established traditions tend to funnel full-time students into three years of narrow and solitary investigation. In many other countries, less speed and more breadth would be the norm, with a mixture, over a longer time frame, of PhD research and taught components focused on both academic content and research training. In the UK, the training component is normally undertaken first, as a Masters course in research methods, and one obvious disadvantage is that it precedes the development of the student's own empirical work.

In truth, the most effective learning will occur during the process of carrying out research for oneself. The combination of front-loading the training and imposing a tight completion deadline sometimes means that UK PhD students gain rather little breadth of practical research experience. Some projects entail only one, large, data collection, and therefore the design of only one investigative instrument and only a small number of analytic techniques. Even the extent to which a student learns to engage critically with the research literature is not uniform. Critical skills take time and experience to develop, and are best nurtured through tightly focused vignettes that receive detailed feedback from the supervisor. Many students, unfortunately, launch directly into an

extensive, under-focused literature review that favours quantity over critical quality, and they can miss out on the opportunity to draft and redraft their account until it fully and appropriately integrates with their own investigatory aims.

Given the intractable constraints of time and resources, how can supervisors provide the best possible training experience for their PhD students? There are certain design features that a programme needs, if it is to support the development of critical insight, facilitate the acquisition of breadth and depth in research experience, and create a solid knowledge-base for original ideas. These features include a good balance between freedom to explore one's interests and hunches and a structured operational space; regular feedback on work from specialists in the field; opportunities to air one's ideas in a safe environment; a strong sense of community; and *time*. I think it is no accident that the VARG PhD programme at Swansea, expressly designed to provide this combination of experiences, is dedicated entirely to part-time students.

The Marks of Success

The success of the VARG PhD programme can be measured in many ways:

- a spectacularly high pass-rate at first submission (PhDs in the UK often do not pass first go);
- excellent onward career trajectories for its graduates;
- the respect and recognition of international experts in the field;
- recognition from the Economic and Social Research Council as a research training programme eligible for its studentship funding;
- an international reputation amongst would-be students, resulting in a highly competitive application process and a waiting list for places.

VARG students think for themselves, question everything, and view not only other people's but also their own work with critical circumspection. VARG graduates tend to display a striking combination of confidence founded on real knowledge and insight, and modesty derived from their understanding of where their own work fits into the bigger picture.

So, what is it about the programme that reliably produces these markers of success? Many things: its design, the expertise and commitment of its staff, the calibre of the students it recruits, and, importantly, the maintenance of just the right number of students to balance experience with renewal. The numbers on the VARG programme have settled, through trial and error, at around 25. Typically, in any given year, four new entrants begin the programme and three to four people complete it.

Commitment from a team of experts

VARG is unquestionably Paul Meara's programme, and his strong leadership is integral to its international stature. But he has drawn in colleagues over many years to share ownership and responsibility, thereby providing them with an opportunity to develop their own skills in supervision and teamwork, while broadening the base of expertise offered to students. In-house staff supporting VARG have included (in chronological order) Jim Milton, Ann Ryan, myself, Nuria Lorenzo-Dus, Geoff Hall, Chris Butler, Chris Shei, Tess Fitzpatrick (a VARG graduate herself) and Cornelia Tschichold. In addition, many academic visitors from home and overseas have made valuable contributions, most notably by being 'stars' at the annual conference (see later).

Valuing the part-time student

The entire VARG enterprise is geared to the constraints and opportunities associated with part-time, distance study. Other than on the UK's excellent Open University programmes, part-time distance students in the UK often get something of a raw deal. Unable to attend seminars, reading groups and so on, they may often feel like unwelcome interlopers on the full-time programme. VARG, however, recognises and exploits the many advantages of being part-time. For example, students usually take part-time registration because they have a full-time job. Often construed as a problem, in fact it means they are financially solvent and can factor in the work-study balance from the start, in contrast to the many full-time postgraduates without scholarships, who find their need to earn money in direct conflict with their study. Furthermore, as most VARG students don't have just any old job, but a career – usually in language teaching – they have a clear rationale for their study, can see tangible benefits in completing it, and have a professional future planned out. They have, in short, both security and motivation. A third benefit is that, working in an environment directly relevant to their research, VARG students normally have no difficulty gathering linguistic data – often finding research subjects in their own classroom – whereas a full-time student may have to make considerable efforts to access a cohort of subjects.

Most importantly, part-time registration takes the pressure off that tight three-year window, and creates many opportunities for reading, investigations and reflection that the frantic full-timer can easily miss. Data collected from a cohort of language learners might reveal patterns that invite a follow-up of the same cohort a year later, or a comparison with the next cohort. A part-timer's scope to do that is much greater than a full-timer's. Part-timers also get more bites at the cherry when it comes to annual conferences.

Structure, routine, progression, feedback

Of course, part-time registration has potential disadvantages too. One inherent difficulty for many students is that, with other calls on their time and such an apparently distant thesis submission deadline, weeks or months easily go past with very little work being done. The VARG programme's solution is to impose across the entire five-year registration period a highly structured schedule of small, manageable pieces of work with set deadlines. These mini-projects are in response to two strands of activity: a personal annual programme of work, based on a template but adapted to the individual's stage and research trajectory; and the monthly mailing, sent out to all students. For a busy part-timer, it is a lot easier to start and complete a series of small, well-defined tasks than to motivate oneself regularly to put time into a single, open-ended activity of unknown duration. Small tasks have other benefits too: the chance to try out new skills and new ideas, get feedback, and try again. Rather than investing all one's hopes in one huge analysis of a single dataset, it becomes possible to try out different approaches, and develop insights and confidence along the way.

The monthly mailing is the means by which the set tasks for the entire cohort are administered. All students are required to complete at least six of the eight tasks set during the year (there are eight 'monthly' mailings per year, to allow for vacations). The tasks are strongly focused, following a particular theme within the area of vocabulary acquisition (e.g. lexical richness, word association). They usually entail the critical evaluation of a research paper or part of a book, written up as a short report. The responses are read and commented on by the staff member that set the task. In the next mailing, some of the responses are circulated, along with the staff member's own commentary – both on the paper itself and on how the students engaged with the task. In this way, a kind of virtual seminar takes place. Students receive not only feedback on their own work, but also the opportunity to see how others approached the same activity. Over a period of time, the effect is to induct students into an approach to critical evaluation that emulates best practice. In short, VARG students learn not only to regard with healthy scepticism and a discerning eye aspects of published papers that others might accept on trust, but also to justify their criticisms in a structured and explicit way. One particularly valuable aspect of these exercises is the fine-tuned examination of statistical analyses. Most Applied Linguistics students lack experience in, and confidence with, statistics, but VARG students soon learn what to look for, and thereby develop the ability both to understand reports of quantitative analyses, and to run their own statistical tests.

The annual schedule for each student focuses on targeted reading and the building of a portfolio of empirical studies, each written up at the time, to become part of the final thesis. In Year 1, the student undertakes a modified replication of a published study. Replications are a highly valuable, and typically much underused, tool for learning: by developing an existing design and analysing the data in a comparable way, one is guided safely through the investigatory process and comes out the other end with results that can be compared to the original. One learns much about what can arise in the course of investigations, and one also learns how important it is to write up one's own work in a way that will allow others to replicate it. From Year 2, students undertake their own original experiments or other investigations. Usually they will conduct one investigation in each of Years 2 and 3, and increase the number to two per year after that.

For some students there is a natural progression from the first experiment to the second and onwards, as different variables are manipulated, or as the same cohort is tested on successive occasions. For others, each experiment comes at the central question in a different way, so that the final write-up provides several windows on a phenomenon, reflecting the student's developing understanding of complex issues. There is a good chance that, in the course of creating the investigatory portfolio, a range of different designs and analytic tools will be needed, and several statistical tests will be used. Through this structured apprenticeship, VARG students are initiated into many of the different practices of the Applied Linguistics community, and provided with the means to become experts in their field of enquiry.

There are other components, too, of the annual schedule. Everyone writes a book review, subsequently circulated to the group and often submitted to a journal for publication. Students are encouraged to review books that others on the programme might otherwise not access, including ones written in languages other than English. Students are also required to prepare presentations for conferences: typically a poster in Year 2, and papers thereafter.

The portfolio approach to research means that there is never a point at which the student has to face a blank page – or empty computer screen – with the challenge of 'starting to write up'. Rather, the 'writing up' phase is essentially a matter of joining into a coherent narrative the work that has been done. Thus the danger of not completing the thesis is minimised.

The annual conference

The annual VARG conference is a major and highly significant part of the programme. Students and staff meet over three days to present and