Insights into Non-native Vocabulary Teaching and Learning

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Edited by
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Chapter 1

Vocabulary Teaching and Learning: Introduction and Overview

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Introduction

Traditionally, research in language teaching and learning methods devoted less attention to vocabulary than to other aspects of language as a communication system. Other language elements took precedence, and vocabulary tended to be presented in a way that favored the introduction of grammatical elements (O'Dell, 1997). There was a general consent that grammar should be taught and that in due time learners would 'acquire' the vocabulary necessary to deal with specific communicative situations through their exposure to the target language. In addition, under the influence of structuralism, L2 teaching approaches and methods often preferred to conceive language as a 'closed' and manageable system with a limited number of communication options to be taught, that is, a series of grammar rules rather than an 'open' and unlimited subsystem, such as vocabulary. Grammar teaching tended to receive more attention than processes related to vocabulary teaching (O'Dell, 1997; Pérez Basanta, 1996; Wotjak, 1999; Zimmerman, 1997). Vocabulary is sometimes not so easily controlled by the language teacher who may have more difficulty dealing with it than with grammar rules. During the 1980s, however, interest in vocabulary teaching and learning grew, and during the 1990s, a great deal of attention was given to vocabulary as a key component in L2 learning for successful communication. Laufer (1986) pointed out:

> Until very recently vocabulary has suffered from step-child status in language acquisition research. The reasons for this plight might have been the linguists' preference for closed systems describable by rules, the reaction of psycholinguists against the associative and the stimulus–response theories of learning and the interest of the methodologists in the beginning stages of language learning. (Laufer, 1986: 73)

In fact, the treatment of vocabulary as a 'second class' issue that learners will deal with in due course is not justifiable. Vermeer (1992) and Laufer (1998) emphasized the importance of the lexical component in order to acquire full competence in various registers and contexts. Vermeer (1992) pointed out that the main concern, if a high level of proficiency in the L2 is to be acquired, should be vocabulary, and Laufer (1998) affirmed that the main difference between language learners and native speakers of the target language was precisely their lexical competence.

Some studies comparing native and non-native speaker interaction (Braidi, 2002; Burt, 1975; Khalil, 1985; Sheorey, 1986; Tomiyana, 1980) show that vocabulary knowledge and use play an important role in successful communication and that it is one of the domains where non-native speakers can equal native speakers and, on some occasions, surpass them.

Toward a Model of Lexical Acquisition in an L2

The lack of a general theory explaining the processes involved in lexical acquisition – and later vocabulary retrieval in both its receptive and productive dimensions – seems to be one of the common concerns in language teaching and learning. In Paul Nation's words:

> There isn't an overall theory of how vocabulary is acquired. Our knowledge has mainly been built up from fragmentary studies, and *at the moment we have only the broadest idea of how acquisition might occur*. We certainly have no knowledge of the acquisition stages that particular words might move through. (Schmitt, 1995: 5) (emphasis added).

Several attempts have been made – without much success – to provide a theory or model that can explain vocabulary learning. However, the acquisition of the lexicon involves highly complex neurobiological processes that are still to be described and require the coordinated work of linguists, SLA researchers, psychologists and neurobiologists. This whole process becomes even more complex if we think of distinctions between young or adult learners and monolingual or bilingual subjects. The fragmentary nature of the studies that were carried out up to the mid-1990s (Schmitt, 1995) as well as the complexity of the systems SLA researchers are trying to decode – human language ability and the functioning of the human brain – make it extremely difficult to provide conclusive evidence of underlying lexical processing in our brains. Unfortunately this situation has not changed much over the last decade. In this respect, Meara argued that:

> The L2 research literature contains lots of examples of what might be broadly described as descriptive research on vocabulary acquisition, but very few examples of explanatory, model-based research, which attempts to account for this learning. (Meara, 1997: 109)

Meara (1990, 1997) proposed a multidimensional model in which vocabulary acquisition is to be understood as a cumulative activity, that is 'unknown words' would be those that lack any connection to the language learner's lexicon, whereas 'known words' would have different connections both in number and nature. Thus, degrees of depth of knowledge would be determined by the quantity and type of connections of a given word to others, and this should have an impact on lexical availability both in receptive and productive terms.

Singleton (1999) offered some guidelines for future research in the field of lexical acquisition and he postulated that a coherent model of lexical acquisition should emerge from a coherent model of lexical learning based on linguistic theory, computational linguistics, psycholinguistics, second language teaching and language assessment. In fact, lexis seems to be at crossroads of the aforementioned disciplines and a good model should also embrace both quantitative and qualitative research methodologies. Singleton (1999) added that most research conducted in the area of the lexical component included cross-sectional studies and that more longitudinal, or at least long-term, studies were needed.

Another aspect to be taken into consideration when developing a theory for lexical acquisition and mental processing is that it probably involves different operations both in L1 and L2, so L1 lexical processing does not necessarily match L2 lexical processing. Conceptualization, that is the creation of new concepts, is one of the main developments in child lexical acquisition whereas in non-native language acquisition, the relabeling of already known concepts and words seems to be the most common procedure, and as Jiang (2004) indicates, adult L2 learners often rely on their preexisting semantic system. In this latter case, the mother tongue also plays an important role as cognate languages are presumably easier to acquire even if deceptive cognate words come up (Chacón Beltrán, 2001).

Implicit and Explicit Vocabulary Learning

Nick Ellis (1994) distinguished two possibilities in relation to the processing of new vocabulary, the implicit vocabulary learning hypothesis and the explicit vocabulary learning hypothesis. The former would be related to behaviorist approaches and would argue that new vocabulary is acquired without the language learner being aware of it, especially when reading or due to oral input arising during interaction. This hypothesis refers to an unconscious process where the lack of intentionality is the main feature:

> An *implicit vocabulary learning hypothesis* would hold that the meaning of a new word is acquired totally unconsciously as a result of abstraction from repeated exposures in a range of activated contexts. (Ellis, 1994: 219)

The latter hypothesis, meanwhile, would support the relevance of explicit attention to new words by means of a number of conscious and planned strategies:

> An *explicit vocabulary learning hypothesis* would hold that there is some benefit to vocabulary acquisition from the learner noticing novel vocabulary, selectively attending to it, and using a variety of strategies to try to infer its meaning from the context. Furthermore there may also be advantage from applying metacognitive strategies to remember new vocabulary, to consolidate a new understanding by repetition [...]. (Ellis, 1994: 219)

Even if the two hypotheses presented above embody opposing views of vocabulary learning, at the moment most SLA researchers would probably agree that, as far as L2 learners learning vocabulary are concerned, a combination of the two processes is needed (Schmitt, 2000), resulting in a combination of incidental and explicit learning. The latter has always been perceived as a way to enhance and contribute to the learning process, especially in a foreign language context. A great deal of recent research into second language vocabulary teaching and learning has been devoted to the comparison of explicit and implicit approaches to vocabulary learning and the identification of techniques that can favor and enhance the learning process; these trends continue to be explored nowadays.

As a rule, vocabulary teaching and learning research has been especially prolific in two areas: (1) the teaching of vocabulary through extensive reading, that is exposure to contextualized and real samples of the language containing relevant vocabulary; and (2) an approach based on the teaching of vocabulary carefully selected for the language learner according to criteria such as relevance, frequency and usefulness in accomplishing certain tasks.

The implicit approach based on reading has traditionally been one of the main ways to learn languages, especially before the arrival of new technologies, which now offer an array of possibilities for language learning and easy exposure to samples of real language. Learning vocabulary through reading often implies a cognitive process in which hypotheses about the meaning of unknown words are formed and subsequently checked. This is an unconscious and automatic process, which proves to be a very useful strategy if the number of unknown words is not too high. From a pedagogical point of view this strategy for vocabulary learning can be very convenient: the cognitive process of reading is not interrupted as it is not necessary to check the dictionary for the exact meaning. Some empirical studies within this approach to vocabulary teaching are Elley (1991), Krashen (1989, 1993), Maruyama (1995), Na and Nation (1985). Lao and Krashen (2000) seem to have found new evidence to support the effectiveness of extensive reading tasks. Huckin and Coady (1999) supported the idea that most vocabulary known to any person, either in the L1 or the

L2, has been acquired incidentally through reading and the inference of meaning through context. Huckin and Coady (1999) also emphasized three main advantages in incidental approaches to vocabulary acquisition based on reading, as opposed to explicit approaches to vocabulary learning.

(1) Words are contextualized and the language learner receives a higher amount of information (meaning and use) on each lexical unit. Along the same lines, Ooi and Lee Kim-Seoh (1996) observed that 'Vocabulary taught through reading would give the learner more opportunities to process language use at a deeper level and to develop semantic networks and other kinds of associative links that will ultimately enhance learning' (Ooi & Lee Kim-Seoh, 1996: 57).

(2) It stimulates reading at the same time that new vocabulary is presented and previous vocabulary is fixed with more contextualized information on it.

(3) It favors autonomy in language learning and stimulates individualized language learning at the students' own pace. Qian (2004) shows that guessing new vocabulary from context is one of the most common strategies for L2 learners when dealing with the meaning of unknown words, even more frequent than dictionary use.

Knowing a word is not an easy task; Paribakht and Wesche (1998) pointed out that the complexity and the amount of information needed to have perfectfull knowledge of a word is very large. The lexical learning process requires various forms and levels of mental processing that cannot be attained spontaneously by occasional exposure through reading. A reading-only approach, and an incidental approach to vocabulary learning, may be useful for a syllabus that only aims at developing reading comprehension skills, but that does not seem enough if the aim is to develop a deep processing of vocabulary and the development of productive skills.

> Learning a new word involves establishing relationships between its form, meaning(s) and function(s) in utterances and texts, the elaboration of knowledge about individual words so that they can be used in appropriate contexts, the linking of the word with other words through various kinds of associational networks, and the gradual automaticity of this knowledge leading to fluency in use [...]. This outcome implies the need for diversity and level of mental processing over time, which cannot necessarily be expected from multiple exposures through reading. A reading-based, incidental learning approach may be adequate for an L2 teaching program, which has the development of reading proficiency and related receptive vocabulary as primary objectives. However, *for programs which aim at rapid vocabulary expansion and development of learners' production skills, and which also seek to maintain a measure of influence over what vocabulary is learned, more is needed*. (Paribakht & Wesche, 1998: 205) (emphasis added)