

Review and Discussion of Learning Strategies of Second Language Vocabulary Acquisition



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ABSTRACT: Learning second language (L2) vocabulary can be a challenge for L2 students. As researchers and TEFL practitioners, we perpetually strive to seek ways to help our students with necessary linguistic tools to be ultimately both productive and resourceful. Moroccan EFL students in L2 are able to use learning strategies, which are valued in the school system, in order to, among other things, expand their vocabulary knowledge for the purpose of being able to communicate verbally and non-verbally. It is complex, however, to determine to what extent these strategies are used. In fact, very few studies have emphasized vocabulary learning strategies. Therefore, this study is of interest to Moroccan university students so as to determine which strategies to use, how often, and whether their use has an impact on students' vocabulary growth.

KEYWORDS: Vocabulary, Second language acquisition, Lexical information, Receptive and productive knowledge, Learning strategies, EF Learners

1. INTRODUCTION

Several researchers from different fields of study have been interested in the acquisition of second languages, such as Schmitt (1997), Nation (2006), Laufer (2009) and Tabatabaei and Goojani (2012) who were more specifically interested in the importance of vocabulary in learning an L2, specifying that vocabulary is extremely necessary for the acquisition of an L2. The teaching of a second language (L2) always needs theoretical and empirical foundations in order to improve teaching approaches. Nevertheless, until the 1980s, research on vocabulary has not truly enjoyed much enthusiasm, and hence has been considered very often as a marginal area. Based on a strong interest in teaching vocabulary in L2, as well as an extensive quest for efficiency, this study examines the relationship between vocabulary learning strategies and vocabulary acquisition. Two objectives guided the development of this study: to determine the nature and frequency of use of vocabulary learning strategies by students of L2 at the college level, and at the same time to understand the relationship between the frequency of use of the strategies and the vocabulary size of students. According to Kumaravadivelu (2008), Pienemann accounts for the relationship between learning and teaching as follows: If the learner is at the appropriate acquisitional stage, instruction can develop acquisition with respect to (a) the speed of acquisition, (b) the frequency of rule application, and (c) the different linguistic contexts in which the rule has to be applied. Consequently, any learning task which contradicts these principles is not learnable; it would ask too much of the learner, and hence it might have detrimental effects on both instruction and developmental readiness of learners (Pienemann 1984, cited in Kumaravadivelu 2008, pp. 77-78). Similarly, (Kumaravadivelu 2008) argues that although the Teaching Hypothesis (henceforth, TH) has led to a growing body of research, it suffers from validity and applicability defects due to the small size of the sample alongside practical constraints, such as difficulty of determining learners' current state of grammar or interlanguage. In fact, learning a new language is a primary need for many people across the globe. However, the experience can be long, arduous and stressful. This is why this linguistic desire is of interest to professionals in several fields such as linguistics, sociolinguistics, psychology and psycholinguistics. They are interested in understanding the convoluted processes of second language acquisition (Saville-Troike, 2006). Studies conducted by different linguists deal with different aspects of second language learning, including vocabulary and learning strategies. According to Sokmen (1997), these learning strategies are considered as techniques to be taught. This view interested several researchers. A few of them were interested in strategies for learning vocabulary, the very object of our study. They made some interesting discoveries, such as they were able to determine that the learning strategies of vocabulary were considered useful, but slightly used by learners (Oxford and Ehrman, 1995; Nation and Moir, 2002; Fan, 2003; Asgari and Mustapha, 2011).

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

In the Communicative Approach (henceforth, CA), vocabulary has not received an important status in second language acquisition. Communication skills were prioritized to the detriment of learning vocabulary and formal aspects of the language (Schmitt, 2008).

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Similarly, the CA did not give specific instructions regarding the teaching of vocabulary, and thus vocabulary could be learned automatically in a communication situation (Coady, 1993). One should know that lexical knowledge plays a key role in oral comprehension (Nation, 2006; Van Zeeland & Schmitt, 2012). The results of research by Van Zeeland and Schmitt (2012) on the correlation between lexical knowledge and oral comprehension show that knowledge of 95% of words in an oral text is required for adequate comprehension of the text. This percentage is equivalent to knowing 2,000 to 3,000 most common word families. In addition, to have an optimal understanding of an oral text, knowledge of 98% of the words in the text is essential. Stæhr (2008) also reported a significant correlation between learners' lexical knowledge and their oral comprehension. His research results show that one needs to know 94% of words in text to score 59% on a comprehension test, a percentage that is equivalent to 3,000 word families.

Knowledge of words is the key to understanding and producing language (Laufer, 1997). Words are at the center of linguistic knowledge, for the communication of a message requires, above all, the combination of words to construct sentences. Without words, communication cannot meaningfully occur (McCarthy, 1990). According to Jiang (2002), there is a linear relationship between the percentage of words known in a written or spoken text and the general understanding of the text's message. The learner needs a large number of words to reach the threshold of comprehension because without knowing the necessary number of words, oral and written comprehension will be affected (Schmitt, Cobb, Horst & Schmitt, 2017).

2.1 Vocabulary: Meaning and Definition

Vocabulary is made up of words necessary for the use of a language (Schmitt, 1997, p. 204). Knowledge of vocabulary is now considered of paramount importance in learning an L2 as it promotes the use of language on different spoken and written occasions, and simultaneously it allows the acquisition of other items of vocabulary, which encourages language usage, and so forth. In effect, vocabulary has not always played such an important role in language teaching. Neglected for a long time, it is now recognized as central to language acquisition (Lauter, 1997). A plethora of researchers, such as Schmitt, Nation (2006), and Tabatabaei and Goojani (2012) who have demonstrated its importance in many settings. Vocabulary is only one of the many aspects of language proficiency, however, vocabulary size is closely related to language proficiency of L2 learners (Milton, 2013; Nation and Waring, 1997 and Nation, 2006). More than simply linked, the progression of learning depends on vocabulary development of the learner. A weak knowledge of the L2 vocabulary ipso facto causes learning difficulties (Asgari and Mustapha, 2011; Nagy, 1998). In actuality, learning vocabulary in L2 is in itself a big challenge for learners. Therefore, teaching vocabulary is essential in the L2 class. One should know that the effectiveness of explicit teaching of vocabulary in L2 for adults has already been demonstrated (Sokmen, 1997). The solution would be simple if the explicit teaching of the vocabulary made it possible to cover a larger part of language. Teaching vocabulary must, therefore, be made in such a way that learners develop their autonomy in learning (Nagy, 1988). At the college level, for example, given the diversity of disciplines, the L2 English teacher does not have the possibility of explicitly teaching vocabulary specific to each person's needs. Many language programs stipulate that the learner must develop their autonomy and acquire, in L2, vocabulary specific to their field of study during college education. In this case, it is relevant to question different ways of helping the learner to take responsibility for their learning of vocabulary in L2. In this regards, Sokmen offers to teach learning strategies so that learners acquire learning skills and not just vocabulary words in isolation. All in all, since vocabulary is mandatory for the development of L2 skills, it must be part of the teaching content. The teacher must, as a result, suggest techniques, or learning strategies in order to help the learner become autonomous in their learning.

2.2 Learning Strategies

Learning strategies are specific actions, behaviors, steps, or techniques that the learner chooses to use in order to improve their skills (Takac, 2008, p. 52). In L2, these strategies can be used in different ways, including the enhancement of vocabulary acquisition. A learning strategy of vocabulary is, "a specific strategy used for a single purpose of learning vocabulary in language" (Takac, 2008, p. 52).

In order to clarify the concept of language learning strategies, Griffiths (2013) defines learning strategies as a cognitive phenomenon. Language learning is quite different from other types of learning (Griffiths). It is not simply a question of assimilating information, but of assimilating, and then integrating this information and processing it in order to be able to use it. Already in 1989, Chamot and Kupper presented second language learning strategies as a multistep process. "Learning strategies are techniques which students use to comprehend, store, and remember new information and skills" (Chamot and Kupper, 1989, p. 1). Learners do not copy only the information received, but are able to create rules, they learn from their mistakes, create their own interlanguage and metacognitive learning system. In this particular framework, Oxford (2003) even refers to the Greek root of the word strategy which refers to commanders' war plans. Learners use the learning strategies in order to plan their learning and to "achieve the victory of learning". In brief, learning strategies have an important cognitive aspect.

As mentioned earlier, explicitly teaching vocabulary through learning strategies would be one way to help learners meet the challenge of learning L2 vocabulary, while enabling them to be more responsible for their learning (Sokmen, 1997). Learning L2 is a complex cognitive process, requiring mental efforts (Asgari and Mustapha, 2011; Griffiths, 2013). When learners use strategies, they take an active role in their learning. They become fully aware of their own role in learning. This intrinsic motivation is,

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therefore, beneficial for the learner because it allows them to engage personally in their learning (Griffiths, 2013). By becoming an active participant in their own learning, the learner consciously chooses strategies that promote best their own learning. More importantly, the importance of vocabulary in learning an L2 is no longer to be proven. The college student learner being responsible for their learning must find a way to continue learning vocabulary in L2 on their own. The use of vocabulary learning strategies would be a solution to the challenge of this learning. Learners having followed the regular course of teaching English L2 should be able to use its strategies since the training program advocates the teaching of strategies at all grade levels. For educational purposes, it is relevant to determine what the learner uses as a vocabulary learning strategy and whether these strategies are effective in terms of vocabulary acquisition in order to guide learners and teachers (Asgari and Mustapha, 2011). The majority of studies carried out to date in L2 have been carried out within English groups (Spada and Lightbown, 1998; Collins and White, 2011; Trofimovich et al., 2012).

2.3 Lexicon in L2 Acquisition

The word lexicon is regularly associated with vocabulary, which is in fact a synonym more often used when it comes to language in its system and not oral discourse (Tréville, 2000). Lexicon refers to the set of words in a language while vocabulary refers to the set of words known to an individual in a language. The lexicon is, as Polguère (2008) would say, a blur set whose content cannot be calculated. Vocabulary would, hence, be more easily calculated since it is possible to inventory an individual's knowledge. The term vocabulary will be used in this research since we are interested in the knowledge of learners. Additionally, the mental lexicon refers to the way words are organized in the brain (Sripada, 2008). Meara (2009) considers the lexical organization as a network and the lexicon mental as a system of points connected to each other. According to Schmitt (2000), this approach runs counter to classical models which viewed the mental lexicon as a collection of individual words and meanings. The mental lexicon is often thought of as a dictionary, whereas it is rather an organized network based on a set of links between words that represent a complex web of associations. According to Bonin (2004), the relationships between words are determined according to phonological, morphological, semantic, syntactic and orthographic representations. These representations give rise to various associations between words.

As suggested by several researchers including Milton (2013) and Schmitt (1997), knowledge of a word, or the result of its acquisition is one of the most important aspects to define in L2. In an article published in 2008, Schmitt presents different aspects to consider when learning a new vocabulary word. The learner must first know the form and meaning of a word in order to be able to understand it, but he/she must also know several other aspects of the word if he/she wants to be able to use that word. This would pose difficulties additional to vocabulary learning. To know a word, a learner should know the concepts and referents associated with the word, the written, oral and grammatical form, the use of the word and the constraints of grammatical use, and the collocations associated with that word. The more aspects the learner knows, the more he/she knows the word in depth (Nation, 2006).

The results of L2 studies have generally supported the idea that the mental lexicon in L2 is fundamentally different from that in L1. Meara (2008), based on the results of association tests in his studies, concludes that there are significant differences between the mental lexicon of an L2 learner and that of a native speaker. In fact, the results of Meara's studies indicate that the connections between words in an L2 learner's mental lexicon are less stable than in a native. In addition, the role that phonological knowledge plays in L2 learners seems much more important in comparison with that of native speakers. Finally, the organization of semantic links between words in the mental lexicon in L1 and L2 systematically differs. In fact, the semantic network of L2 learners is less developed than that of natives. Fitzpatrick (2006) reports that natives produce more precise synonyms and collocations, while L2 learners produce associations based on the shape of words. Wolter (2001) also argues that for partially known words, the phonological connections in the mental L2 lexicon appear to be stronger than the semantic connections. However, according to the research analysis, as lexical knowledge increases, this trend seems to be reversed and the semantic and phrase structure becomes more and more dominant.

In L2, the nature of the relationship between vocabulary and grammar is different, as learners already have knowledge of L1 which could influence the assumptions they make about unfamiliar words they encounter and this influence may persist until an advanced level of learning L2 (Nagy, 1997). The interdependence between vocabulary and syntactic knowledge is also observed in L2. The other knowledge related to the semantic and syntactic representations of words is morphology. The next section presents the role that morphology plays in vocabulary development.

2.4 Acquisition of Lexical Information

Vocabulary being one of the most important aspects of second language, it has been studied as we have seen by several researchers. Recently related to vocabulary learning strategies, it turned out that in some cases the strategies could lead to vocabulary acquisition. Krashen (1989) believes that the only way to acquire words is through exposure to the input of the language. In this comprehensive review of research, he argues that incidental vocabulary acquisition occurs through reading which provides the sufficient and understandable input that naturally leads to acquisition. Moreover, the input hypothesis is at the heart of the Krashen Monitor model. According to this hypothesis, one learns the language in only one way: To understand L2 messages conveyed through an understandable input that is slightly beyond the interlanguage (level of knowledge of the language) of the learner. Exposure to the

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rich and understandable input allows for unconscious acquisition, especially when communication is focused on meaning rather than form (Krashen, 1982, 1989).

Krashen's (1989) input hypothesis argues that acquisition occurs only when the learner's attention is focused on the overall meaning of the text. Yet, as Huckin and Coady (1999) point out, many theorists, such as Ellis (1994) and Robinson (1995) argue that learning vocabulary requires attention to both meaning and form. Meaning-centered input exposure, such as during reading, allows the learner to develop comprehension skills, without however resolving any difficulties with pronunciation and the morphological and syntactic aspects of L2. Without denying the positive effects of reading, researchers believe that it is not sufficient for learning vocabulary.

Schmidt (2008) asserts that what the learner notices in the input becomes available for analysis and storage in long memory term. This consideration is an essential condition for acquisition. There are two forms of consideration: Notice the forms of the target language in the input and notice the gap between interlanguage and L2. Read (2007) considers that the first phase of learning vocabulary through reading is taking into account the gap between one's lexical knowledge and that of the lexical form encountered in the text. In order to promote the taking into account of the new vocabulary, it could be made salient. There are several measures to increase the salience of vocabulary, such as emphasizing it in writing or pronouncing it with a specific intonation or increasing its frequency when spoken. The more prominent pronunciation is, the more chance it has to be noticed. Milton (2009) asserts that knowledge of a vocabulary word can translate into knowledge of its written and phonological form. As this study is mainly interested in the use of vocabulary learning strategies, only the recognition of a written word will be taken into account. The written form is also easier to test.

2.5 Relationship between vocabulary and reading comprehension

In the present study, the researcher has emphasized the importance of vocabulary in reading comprehension. There is a reciprocal link between vocabulary and reading comprehension: A larger vocabulary facilitates comprehension as much as text comprehension favors inference of the meaning of unknown words and the development of vocabulary in L1 (Anglin, 1993) and in L2 (Hu & Nation, 2000). Moreover, according to Nation (2009), the lack of lexical knowledge is the cause of poor reading comprehension. However, the nature of this link remains to explain. Anderson and Freebody (1981) evaluated three hypotheses about the relationship between vocabulary and reading comprehension, namely the instrumental hypothesis, the knowledge and the aptitude assumption. The instrumental hypothesis assumes that there is a direct causal link between knowledge of the meaning of vocabulary words and reading comprehension. The proportion of words known in a text is a decisive factor in determining the degree of reading comprehension. Research in vocabulary domain has largely corroborated this hypothesis (Hu & Nation, 2000). On the contrary, the knowledge hypothesis assumes an indirect link between the knowledge of words and reading comprehension. According to this hypothesis, it is a correlational link moderated by a third factor, namely conceptual knowledge. According to the aptitude hypothesis, vocabulary and reading are indirectly linked through their common skills and abilities (Nagy, 1997).

The relationship between vocabulary and reading comprehension raises the question of vocabulary learning through reading and that of the effectiveness of incidental word learning from reading text compared to that of an intentional learning of various aspects of lexical knowledge in the development of vocabulary of L2 learners.

Zimmerman (1997) examined the effects of teaching interactive vocabulary after reading vocabulary learning texts. Thirty-five L2 English learners in the United States are divided into two groups of reading-only and reading plus interactive vocabulary instruction. During 10 weeks of intervention, in addition to reading activities, the interactive teaching group receives three hours of vocabulary instruction per week involving several kinds of exercise and vocabulary exposure (e.g. oral and written word usage). Knowledge of the 45 target words is assessed before and after the intervention by means of a self-assessment sheet comprising four levels of knowledge. The first being lack of recognition of the word and the last being the use of the word in the phrase. The results indicate that interactive vocabulary teaching combined with reading activities results in better vocabulary learning than reading without vocabulary teaching.

In another study, Amiryousefi and Kassaian (2010) examine the effectiveness of reading activities compared to that of reading plus vocabulary learning activities. Sixty L2 English learners in Iran were divided into two reading and reading groups plus exercises (use of words in context). The participants of the reading group plus exercises read short texts, answer the questions of comprehension, and then do a series of exercises on the vocabulary encountered during reading. The participants in the reading group read the same texts and answer the comprehension questions, and instead of doing vocabulary exercises, read additional text with the target vocabulary. The authors claim that the additional text serves to expose participants once again to the target vocabulary and to standardize the length of the intervention across the experimental conditions.

3. CONCLUSION

It is very important to consider all components of a vocabulary course. Recursive exposure to lexical items through reading or listening activities, as well as productive use of learned vocabulary seems to enable learners to use words correctly both in spoken and written settings. It can be reaffirmed that none of these components, taken separately, will be sufficient to develop lexical skills

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in L2. Therefore, it is up to teachers to properly manage and allocate class time and offer vocabulary teaching and learning activities while taking into account the needs, motivations and interests of the learner. In fact, one can say that the natural need for each learner to acquire a foreign language is to be exposed to its lexicon in order to be eventually able to communicate with other speakers.

3.1 Recommendations

It is suggested that the time required and the efforts of teachers and students together should vary depending on the learning strategies. It is also important to plan preliminary and/or complementary activities in order to prepare and equip students when carrying out different strategies. It is necessary to plan sequences and exercises aimed at familiarizing students with the most common prefixes and suffixes and their respective meanings. To properly prepare students for the design of a word network, it is necessary to provide activities allowing students to know a variety of categories. For the word map strategy, students should know how to define a word. Finally, it is advisable to improve the teaching process with images, themes and words having cultural referents of students and teachers together.

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