

Lexical acquisition in a multi-media context

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Background to the study

I have realized over my teaching years that in spite of deliberate attempts at providing students with the tools to acquire a specific lexicon — e.g., by asking them to keep a vocabulary notebook, by presenting materials in which selected items appear repeatedly, by asking them to complete specific tasks requiring them to use the selected items, etc. — when it comes to L2 production, the students tend to revert to their already-established internal lexicon and rarely seem to use the words they have been taught.

It remains the case, however, that one of the principal challenges in teaching an L2 is that of promoting the expansion of the L2 vocabulary base. Most of us would (for once, perhaps) agree with Krashen (1982) when he suggests that there is no substitute for extensive real world experience for enlarging and enriching the learners' knowledge of words. The hard fact is, alas, that for many learners, exposure to the L2 proceeds largely — sometimes, indeed, almost exclusively — in classroom settings rather than in the 'real world' of the L2 community. It is therefore of considerable importance to attempt to come to some conclusions about the most effective ways of presenting materials in order to maximize acquisition and recall of new items.

For decades the primary concern of teachers was to focus on morphosyntactic accuracy and pronunciation. As pointed out by Beheydt (1987), the teaching of vocabulary came as an 'appendage' to the more important tasks of teaching grammar and phonology. The success of wartime military language programmes appeared to vindicate the behaviourist approach to learning and led in the 1950s and 1960s to the production of 'audio-lingual' language-teaching materials suitable for schools and colleges. For a very long time teachers appeared to be more concerned with practice than with the manner in which the materials were presented, whereas researchers typically have had their priorities the other way around. Audiolingualism prioritized morphosyntax and phonology as 'more serious

candidates for theorising' (Richards 1976: 77), more central to linguistic theory, and more critical to language pedagogy. Accordingly, even though 'vocabulary is central to language and of critical importance to the typical language learner' (Zimmerman 1994: 1), studies of L2 vocabulary acquisition and processing remained neglected until the 1980s.

The classroom has long been seen as providing a highly suitable site for L2 learning research. Unfortunately, the focus of many of the first serious classroom-based studies in the 1960s was on demonstrating the merits of technologically-based teaching approaches rather than on genuinely exploring the possibilities for learning furnished by given methodologies. Keating's 'Study of the effectiveness of the Language laboratory' (1963) was one of such early longitudinal empirical study. In fact, it failed to prove the superiority of the audiolingual method. What it did instead was to lead to much questioning of the validity of methodological comparisons as a research procedure and to fuel the case for the development of alternative approaches to the problem of conducting worthwhile classroom-based L2 learning research.

As more and more empirical studies were conducted, it became evident that there was no escaping the need to go beyond a concentration on mere product. It was concluded that more evidence about process was called for, and so teachers and learners began to be invited to introspect about their experience with a view to throwing some light on the particularities of their behaviour and performance. Such moves were further encouraged by development in research in educational cognitive psychology, which had shifted attention from a preoccupation with specific process skills to an interest in how such process skills are most efficiently acquired. The topic of 'learning to learn' (Resnick and Klopfer 1989) has since then, of course, become highly fashionable.

It may be regrettable that research in L2 vocabulary acquisition remained neglected for so long. The new interest it has enjoyed since the mid-1980s came at a time of much progress and advances being made in the wide field of theoretical and applied linguistics. It could draw upon well-established theories from a range of disciplines.

Lexical competence is at the heart of communicative competence. However, the ways of measuring the size and nature of the L2 lexicon offer a challenge to the researcher. Many publications tend to contain notions derived from the general traditions of

educational psychology rather than on an attempt to synthesize research findings.

Obviously, one cannot learn a language without vocabulary, and it is now a well accepted fact that difficulties in both receptive and productive use of L2 arise mainly from an inadequate knowledge of vocabulary (Nation 1990). One time-honoured method of lexical learning, in both first and second language learning, has been the use of dictionaries; this has come in for much critical attention (see, e.g., Anderson and Nagy 1991). Another long-standing and widespread approach, 'word-for-word' translation, has also been the butt of criticism, notably by Nation (1990). Unfortunately, though the effectiveness of specific traditional approaches such as the above may be questioned, the state of observational or experimental research in this area is not such as to conclusively license any particular alternative.

One such alternative, which has been much discussed, is the notion of contextualized lexical learning. This is not a new idea (cf., for example, Krashen 1982), but it has recently begun to be intensively investigated. Thus, for example, Coady has addressed the question of whether context is useful to L2 readers and has proffered the conclusion that 'there is no clear cut research which demonstrates how such contextual learning takes place' (Huckin, Haynes and Coady 1993: 7). There is nevertheless strong support for the notion that the integration of meaningful context into second language instruction may assist the learner in calling up appropriate and facilitating background knowledge. One tool available to us which can provide the student with meaningful situation-based activities which can indeed place the student in a simulated real-world situation through the variety of inputs it gives is the computer.

Fries (1945: 43) argued that words are linguistic forms, 'symbols that derive their whole content and their limitations of meaning from the situations in which they are used. Such a remark is based on the assumption that the meaning of an individual word is difficult to determine when it is separated from the context of other words, which in turn would argue against the use of traditional vocabulary lists. As far as the question of comprehensible input sufficient for lexical development is concerned, the consensus appears to be that while simple exposure to words in context will result in the retention of a limited number of words, the rate of retention can be greatly enhanced by activities occasioning deeper processing of the items in question (see Paribakht and Wesche 1997). It would,

however, be premature to conclude that all L2 lexical problems are essentially input problems, and that more experience of the lexis — including deeper processing-inducing experience — will solve them, as more research is needed in this field. There seem to be other factors, which come into the picture in terms of hampering and facilitating acquisition.

The experimental study

The general aim of my current research is to bring together the researcher, the teacher, and the learner with a view to establishing connections between set L2 lexical input and the process of L2 lexical acquisition in the context of applied language learning/teaching. My starting point is my interest in pedagogical issues; however, it is clear to me that in order to come to some conclusions about these issues, I need to focus on the essential nature of lexical operations. There follows a description of some elements of the pilot phase of the study, together with a report on some of my early results.

Overview

The study sets out to explore the issue of lexical acquisition in an L2 learning situation. My intention is to investigate the ways the facilitation of lexical acquisition is addressed by various L2 teaching materials and types of pedagogical activity, with particular reference to the nature and the effects of the learner-centred approach to L2 lexical learning made possible by accessibility to a multimedia centre. Clearly, this will involve me in paying close attention to the psycholinguistic dimension of L2 vocabulary learning.

Subjects

The subjects are drawn from the 1st year B.Sc. in Hospitality Management. They are full time students who have all taken French to Leaving Certificate level or equivalent (end of secondary level). The average standard reached in their Leaving Certificate varies. They will have to take 3 hours of French per week for the full academic year in all four years of their course. The majority of students are female (80% of the group of 40 students). Their needs in terms of the lexical component of the French course they take are

relatively straightforwardly derivable from the well-defined domain in which they will be using French professionally. Finally, the students are aware that fluency is essential and that they will need a broad vocabulary to be able to deal with the wide range of situations they will have to face in their future role as managers.

Experimental treatments

The pilot research in which I have been engaged has concentrated on two approaches to teaching and learning vocabulary. In the one case, exposure was in the context of traditional 'frontal' teaching, and in the other, the encounters with the words in question occurred in the course of activities being engaged in by the students in a relatively independent manner using audio material and CD-ROM material in a multimedia room. In neither case was a particular lexicon presented as the focal element of the teaching/learning.

In each case the activities were designed to facilitate the acquisition of a list of 10 words. During the traditional 'frontal' classes the students were presented with the task of writing a letter to apply for a summer job. They were given a set of seven letters which would serve as models, containing the relevant vocabulary pertaining to this particular task. On the other hand, the activities offered in the multimedia centre focused on written exercises dealing with catering vocabulary.

In the 'frontal' approach the teacher was completely in charge of the class, directing every stage of the process and assuming, in most interactions with the students, the role of initiator. In the context of the multimedia room, on the other hand, the tutor's role was that of guide and helper, and did not include interfering with the students' own learning experience. The material had been pre-selected but the students were free to choose what they wanted to concentrate on and were able to work at their own pace according to their own needs.

One must bear in mind that the students would have been more familiar with the traditional 'frontal' approach, to which they would have been subjected in secondary school. On the other hand, extra motivation may have been associated with the introduction of CALL because of the novelty of using computers and playing vocabulary games in class such as 'Hangman'. Computers are fully integrated in the management course being taken by the students and are therefore not problematic.

Questionnaire data

One dimension of the pilot study was to seek the learners' own reactions and insights using questionnaires. I felt that anonymous questionnaires would encourage the students to express themselves frankly and give an honest evaluation of their classes. I submitted the following after the first weeks of term. My aim was to establish the overall perception the students had of the two approaches and comment on their language learning experience.

The questionnaires were designed to elicit the type of activities undertaken during the class as well as the new lexis encountered. The students felt that 'a lot of information was conveyed during the lecture' and stressed the fact that 'the interaction with the lecturer enabled them to discuss any problem that arose'. They felt also that the 'overall communication was good' and that they 'learned a lot about grammar'. On the negative side, some students realized that a momentum existed within the group and that some students had difficulties in following the pace of work. One comment summarizes a set of remarks collected: 'it is hard to get the class to speak out. There are some people who try while others just sit there. It is annoying as you feel held back'.

On the other hand the multimedia centre appears to offer more freedom — 'we have a choice in what we do' — as well as a change 'from the traditional way of learning French'. The students appreciated their 'involvement in learning', the fact that they felt 'more responsible for their own learning' and the element of 'fun in learning' provided by the computers. However, in spite of enjoying the variety of tasks offered by the multimedia centre, students appeared to have difficulties adapting to the new approach to learning. They seemed to work in isolation and to be unable to change tasks despite being free to do so. They expected to be directed by the teacher and missed the interaction with the other members of the group as their attention is concentrated on the computer.

Word recognition test data

With regard to the word recognition tests, 10 words given during lecture time and 10 words extracted from the material the students had worked on in the multimedia centre were presented in two separate tests. The words were inserted in each case in a list of 40 words. The tests were given with an interval of one week. In order

to remove any stress associated with the test completion, the students were informed that the test results would not contribute to their assessment and that they did not need to enter their names on the answer sheets. They were asked to place a tick beside the words they recognized and then to give a translation to confirm they knew them. The results did not yield striking differences between the words presented during the traditional class and the vocabulary encountered in the multimedia centre. One interesting factor was to note the high level of inferencing based on formal similarities with known L2 and L1 expressions. The words were presented in isolation and students were very frequently prepared to take a guess. For example *sommelier* was translated as 'sleepy' (cf. *avoir sommeil* 'to be sleepy'); *avoir lieu* was translated as 'to have something' or 'instead of' (cf. *au lieu de* 'instead of'); and *le siege social* was translated by 'social revolution' (cf. English *siege*).

It is worth noting that the students were not monitored in the multimedia room and that it may well be that some did not complete the exercises prescribed and concentrated on other tasks such as watching videos in which the 10 selected words did not appear. In fact too many variables came to play an important role not foreseen. For example, the two lists of 10 words were established on the basis of their high frequency in the catering domain. While some of these items may be encountered again in the catering industry, the words on the letter-writing list would have little chance of being used in another context. Furthermore, the semi-autonomous approach to learning would most certainly have played a positive role in some cases while having an adverse effect on other students not at ease with this new approach. The lack of possible control over the use made of the material offered could also have led to some discrepancies in the results.

Conclusion

As outlined in the introduction, this pilot research set to establish if the pedagogical approach to teaching/learning had an incidence on the acquisition and recall of new vocabulary. It also set to establish the role of the environment on language learning. The results remained inconclusive. However, there appeared to be major deficiencies in the pilot methodology. Major changes need to be introduced to retain solely one variable. The material presented to the students

ought to be controlled in both the 'frontal' and the multimedia class. Students would remain in charge of their own pace of learning and use of the material but the teacher in charge ought to monitor carefully that the exercises are successfully completed in both instances. One must also bear in mind that the introduction of change, such as a new approach to learning, may not yield the expected results.

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