

# L2 Vocabulary Acquisition: Investigating the Key to Lexical Comprehension

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***Abstract:** L2 researchers have debated the significance of the lexicon in addition to the relevance of acquiring syntax, in the learning of an L2. (Huckin et.al, 1993; Haastrup, 1991) and other researchers in the field of SLA recognize the fact that learners' knowledge of words from context assists them in the comprehension of unfamiliar words that they encounter in their reading materials. Academic reading materials tend to be cognitively demanding and often require language in which contextual cues for meaning are reduced. Research in lexical acquisition has gained significant grounds lately, comparable to that of studies in the acquisition of syntax, which have played a prominent role in SLA.*

*This study investigates the strategies employed by L2 learners towards their lexical development. It specifically addresses questions such as:*

*Do learners acquire vocabulary through guessing from meaning?*

*Do they retain the new words learnt in phrases?*

*Do they employ the use of dictionaries?*

*How significant do they consider the acquiring of vocabulary in their L2 learning?*

*What are the strategies employed by the learners to gain a broader vocabulary?*

*Tests that attempt to measure the learners' vocabulary competence were administered to 70 students from the Foundation Program at Curtin University of Technology, Sarawak Campus. In addition, questionnaires elicited numerous responses in their approach to lexical acquisition. This study provides a framework for a discussion of the various aspects of vocabulary acquisition among L2 learners. The findings from the analyses of the tests designate that vocabulary learning occurs through extensive reading and that learners with prior vocabulary knowledge often used topic knowledge and clues to understand unknown words from context, among other facts.*

**Keywords:** L2 Vocabulary, Acquisition, lexical comprehension,

## Introduction

Vocabulary learning is seen as an integral area of language teaching by linguistic researchers. "Words are the basic building blocks of language, the units of meaning from which larger structures such as sentences, paragraphs and whole texts are formed" (Read, 2000:1). Context is referred to as morphological, syntactic and discourse information in a given text, which can be classified and described in terms of general features (Nation & Coady, 1988: 102).

Linguistic theories such as that proposed by Krashen's Input Hypothesis (1989) assume that learners acquire language by understanding messages. He states that "language is subconsciously acquired- while you are acquiring, you don't know you are acquiring; your conscious focus is on the message, not form" (Krashen, 1989:440). Therefore, the processes involved in integrating new L2 words in a learner's mental lexicon are assumed to be complex. The readability of a text can be assessed by its vocabulary difficulty and vocabulary difficulty can be measured by 'word frequency', 'familiarity' and 'word length' (Chall, 1958 as cited in Nation & Coady, 1988). Davis (1968,1972) had conducted in-depth research into identifying sub-skills within the general ability to read. His empirical co relational studies and factor analysis reveal four obvious factors.

1. Recalling word meaning
2. Determining meaning from context
3. Finding answers to explicit questions
4. Drawing inferences

Nation and Coady (1988) emphasize that the presence of low frequency vocabulary in a text has negative effects on comprehension. This is further elaborated by Marks *et.al* (1974) who affirms that replacing 15% of the words in a reading text with low frequency words led to a significant decrease in comprehension. Other researchers like Freebody and Anderson's (1983) studies on the impact of placing low frequency words in important parts of the text as well as in the unimportant parts reveals a decrease in the understanding of the whole text. On the contrary the placing of difficult vocabulary in unimportant sections of the text resulted in more "adult like summaries"(Freebody & Anderson, 1983:19). The explanation provided is that students instead of processing many low frequency items had their task made easier in terms of length that further assisted them to focus on more significant items that were useful in the formation of summaries. This does indicate that readers seem to skip over unknown words if they did not play an integral role.

Repetition of words also appeared to affect learning. Pre-teaching of vocabulary for instance enhanced the effect of increasing the saliency of words in readings. (Omanson *et.al* 1984 as cited in Nation & Coady 1988). Other researchers like Cowie (1988: 126) states that meanings of words and sentences are typically 'negotiated' through interaction between speakers and that the concept that this negotiation is interpreted by one speaker through 'cooperative adjustment' to the 'assumptions and knowledge' of another, has not only been well received by many who advocate the communicative approach to language teaching but also by curriculum writers and methodologists. Brumfit (1985) argues that an understanding of vocabulary and the structure of the language is needed by readers to negotiate meaning well. While exploring the complexities of language however, L2 learners often encounter in addition to familiar phrases at the literal sense, idioms that by constant re-use has undergone radical changes in meaning. This could create conflicts in their understanding. Nevertheless, Cowie (1988) states that the existence of many thousands of multi-words and their repetition over long periods in practically unchanged form gives adequate support to the notion that stability is an all-encompassing factor of normal vocabulary usage. Cowie further elaborates that word combinations can be divided into two major groups that vary according to the kinds of meaning which their affiliates convey and to the structural level at which they operate. The first group largely as how they function in discourse where as the second group function as uniform units in grammatical constructions. These expressions have been 'semantically' specialized or become 'idiomatic' that their meaning and form have become constant (Cowie,

1988: 132-133). This view is also advocated by researchers such as Halliday and Hasan (1976: 163) who refers to 'reiteration' as the role of repetition of a word, synonym, superordinates – or different types of lexical items of which some have a more general sense than others. 'Collocation' on the other hand is referred to as a feature of lexical cohesion that has a relationship between language items that regularly 'co-occur'. Halliday and Hasan (1976) acknowledge this close knit quality of lexical relations and classify lexical ties under reiteration and collocation.

This paper looks at the strategies employed by L2 learners to understand contextual clues in text for the comprehension of vocabulary. It offers a framework for discussion of the various skills L2 learners employ to facilitate not only comprehension of low frequency vocabulary but also to promote retention of these words.

## **Learner Background**

L2 learners who read extensively are knowledgeable about low frequency vocabulary. It is undeniable that reading promotes vocabulary acquisition. Moderate to low frequency words turn up much more often in text than they do in discourse and it also gives the opportunity for the learner to look for contextual clues and to refer to dictionaries to infer word meanings. However that being said, learners do read an L2 text for various reasons; L2 learners read for fun, for specific purposes such as finding out scientific information or read for text comprehension. In many cases, the reading purpose does not specifically direct the learners' attention to vocabulary. Furthermore, it is not necessary to derive the meaning of low frequency vocabulary in order to achieve the reading function. Reading ability in L2 learners have demonstrated significant effects on recognition and use of contextual information and to derivation of word meanings (Carroll & Drum, 1983).

Other researchers such as Stanley and Ginther (1991) based their research concerning the interaction of reading ability, reading purpose and vocabulary learning on the concept that readers with lower aptitude are not as skilled as good readers at adjusting their reading strategies to fit the reading function.

The innate ability of the learner is a significant aspect of classroom second language learning (Giridharan, 2002). Implicit learning is defined as "acquisition of knowledge about the underlying structure of a complex stimulus environment by a process, which takes place naturally, simply and without conscious operation" (Schmidt, 1994: 164 as cited in Giridharan, 2002). Explicit learning on the other hand is a more conscious process where the individual makes and tests hypotheses in a search for structure. It is understood that attention to input plays a fundamental role in both implicit and explicit learning.

## **Methodology:**

Looking at the fact that L2 learners come from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds, it is important to acknowledge that they employ diverse methods to assist them in vocabulary comprehension.

Seventy students from the Foundation Programme at Curtin University of Technology, from three groups (two groups from Foundation Engineering and one group from Foundation Commerce) participated in the study. All the respondents had studied English as a second language through primary and secondary school level, prior to entering pre-university. The researcher was the lecturer assigned to the teaching of English Communication and Academic Writing to these groups. Therefore classroom observation, tests to assess their vocabulary

standards, questionnaires to elicit the strategies employed, and personal interviews were included in the methodology.

In order to measure the vocabulary competency of the students, initially a vocabulary test was administered. This is in accordance with the fact that the measurement of progress in a learner often includes an assessment of the range of words a learner knows. The target standard for the test was ESL Upper Intermediate-Advanced Learners level as the Foundation Programme students correspond with this group of learners. The test provided multiple-choice answers for sentence completion. The test was followed by questionnaires to elicit responses from students to investigate the approaches students undertook to facilitate vocabulary acquisition. Classroom observation and personal interviews were also conducted to gain a better understanding of their the vocabulary acquisition processes.

## Findings and Discussion

The process of constructing textual meaning by a reader, can be delineated through the following sequence: firstly the reader processes the information of the text and then uses the language meaning for building a propositional basis of the text meaning. Text comprehension can be done by a learner in both the *bottoms up process* which refers to the latter or through a *top-down process* which is analysis assisted by word associations and predictions based on additional knowledge resources and on the information already processed ( Brown & Yule 1983:234). However, the reader continually tries to interpret new information in a way that is consistent with his/ her current mental model. This is evidenced by some of the responses made by the L2 learners in the open- ended questions. Some questions posed to the respondents, attempted to sequence their vocabulary acquisition process, complicated nonetheless, by their varied responses. In general, the learner who had a love for reading seemed to follow a top-down approach, implicitly looking for context clues, trying to use them in their writing or discourse and also felt confident about their usage in text thereafter. Students who were placed in higher groups based on their performance in their *SPM* (Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia) or Secondary School Leaving Examinations, by and large scored well in the vocabulary assessment tests. The strategies employed by high achievers reflected planning and organization.

Most learners who had higher scores in their vocabulary competence tests followed an approach that relied on contextual clues and tended to use low context vocabulary for practice. Furthermore, these learners referred to English-English dictionaries instead of bilingual dictionaries. They also expressed confidence about retaining knowledge of the new words acquired and showed intrinsic motivation to the acquiring of vocabulary. Most of the motivated learners acknowledged that developing better reading skills was a practice imperative to their learning experience.

In looking at the efficacy of the strategies employed by L2 learners, it is crucial to examine if the methods implemented only bridge discontinuities for textual coherence and are therefore only engaging in efforts to fill conceptual gaps. Conversely, if such practices could lead to achieving a mental mode that is sufficiently coherent, then the learner has evidently made advancements in vocabulary acquisition. If the principal goal of the learner while reading is text comprehension, then it is prudent to assume that emphasis on low frequency words are made for comprehension focus. If the learner, on the other hand, focuses on finding out the

meaning of an unknown word independent of text comprehension due to interest, it can be attributed to intrinsic learning motivations.

Respondents who had lower scores in the vocabulary competence tests were found to use both bilingual dictionaries and English-English dictionaries to facilitate vocabulary acquisition. Nevertheless, there is reluctance in many of the L2 learners in this group to read and this is reflected in their lexical abilities. The general lack of readership in the Malaysian students heightens the perspicacity of their lack of language proficiency. Students in Malaysia regard learning as an academic task, hence the exercise does not lead to any significant social development (Pandian: 2000 as cited in Giridharan, & Enriquez 2002). Pandian's (2000:6) study on the reading habits of secondary and tertiary level students in Malaysia reveals, "80.1% of University students are reluctant readers of English language materials".

Many respondents with lower language proficiency declared that reading was key to developing better vocabulary but displayed reluctance to initiate good reading practices. Additional vocabulary development exercises were provided to these learners on request to encourage them in the process of incidental vocabulary acquisition, taking into consideration constructivist approaches, which perceive comprehension and learning as an active construction process. The learner applies structuring processes such as forming or assigning new knowledge schemata, reorganizes and generalizes knowledge structures to reconstruct knowledge (Norman, 1982).

Most respondents stated that among the factors that influenced vocabulary acquisition, frequency of occurrence of words in readings and more contextual clues provided the impetus for new word acquisitions. Repetitions of words clearly affected learning. Coady (1979: 5-12) has argued that successful ESL readers use a psycholinguistic guessing approach. The reader *samples* the *clues* in text and tries to re-construct a mental representation of what he or she thinks the text means. This type of analysis by a "synthetic approach to reading has been described as a top-down model of reading (Nation & Coady 1988) Contrary to this approach, the more traditional approach to reading through the decoding of letters as sound and then its meaning is seen as a bottom-up model. Adams (1982) theorizes that both approaches are integral to learning. Clarke & Nation, 1980 as cited in Read 2000: 53 identifies strategies for guessing words in context that can be taught to learners through,

"Steps such as identifying the word class of unknown word, scanning the surrounding sentence for other words that collocate with it, looking for cohesive devices that link the sentence with other sentences in the text and analysing the structure of the word itself into prefix, root and suffix...."

While eliciting the responses of L2 learners with poor decoding skills, it was discerned that correspondingly they had limited vocabulary knowledge. Perfetti & Heskold (1979), state that when a reader has poor word recognition skills, his/ her short-term memory is too burdened to take full advantage of context, as they could not recognize words in isolation. Henning (1973 as cited in Read 2002: 40) states that learners at a low level of language learning acquire vocabulary according to the sound of words compared to more advanced learners who acquire words according to meaning.

All the respondents agreed that the use of dictionaries was fundamental to their understanding of unfamiliar or low frequency words in academic readings. L2 learners utilize the dictionary to check for meanings, spelling and usage of the word in sentences. The dictionary is a

powerful analytic tool that provides definition of the word and gives examples with context provision. Johnson-Laird and Watson, (1977) argues that definition of words provides the mental activity involved in *unpacking*. Definitions of words facilitate the implanting of words and its concepts into the student's mind, especially when it is supported by examples. Proponents of communicative teaching and curriculum writers support Cowie's (1988) concept that meanings of words and sentences are typically negotiated through cooperative interaction between speakers.

## Conclusion

Vocabulary acquisition can be best conceived as a process in which L2 learners negotiate word meanings from a text level to a word level. This shift is necessary so that the learner can form a mental connection between the word form and his/her meaning premise. L2 learners who use scaffolding strategies such as inferring word meanings through contextual clues and determining word meanings through dictionary reference stand to benefit. A single encounter of a low frequency word is not likely to lead to the acquisition of the new lexicon, as evidenced from the responses of the majority of respondents, however several instances of processing the same word is necessary for the learner to form the connection between the form and theoretical structure. This process requires motivation on the part of the learner or in other words there is a need for the learner to acquire the word *deliberately*. The learner also needs to form word associations and repeatedly be confronted with low frequency words for word retention. An organized attempt to memorize the form and meaning of the word with the assistance of bilingual dictionaries has expedited the procedure by which L2 learners increase their vocabulary. On the contrary, L2 learners with higher language ability acquired words incrementally as they encountered them in context through reading and listening activities quite similar to the way native speakers of a language expand their vocabulary. This could be regarded as incidental vocabulary learning. Based on the responses of all the L2 learners who participated in the study, it can be assumed that extensive reading promotes vocabulary acquisition. This form of knowledge provides teachers with methodologies that can be used in the classroom to facilitate L2 learners' understanding of English text. Since the key to vocabulary acquisition can be seen as a mediation of meaning, teachers can assume roles to mediate such acquisition using methodologies and techniques that help to focus the attention of L2 learners to better vocabulary.

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