EXPLORING THE PROCESS OF BUILDING ACADEMIC VOCABULARY THROUGH ACADEMIC READINGS AMONG ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNERS AT AN ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHING PROGRAM.

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Trabajo de grado presentado como requisito parcial para obtener el título de
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Resumen

Este estudio parte de la hipótesis que contempla la posibilidad de que los textos académicos pueden promover el aprendizaje de vocabulario académico, principalmente al ser expuestos de forma constante a ellos, dentro de un contexto de aprendizaje significativo. Coady (1997) asevera que el desarrollo de vocabulario en los estudiantes depende del nivel de exposición al lenguaje que desean aprender. Cuando a los estudiantes de Ingles se les provee de lecturas ricas en contenido y vocabulario comprensible, se incrementan las posibilidades de que adquieran una buena suficiencia en lenguaje académico.

El programa de Enseñanza de la Lengua Inglesa en la Universidad New Judea proponía las condiciones ideales para explorar, a través de una investigación cualitativa, cómo tres estudiantes interactuaban con textos académicos, y hasta que punto esta exposición, les permitió aprender vocabulario académico nuevo. Mediante el uso de observaciones, entrevistas semi- estructuradas y ejercicios escritos, los participantes expusieron una constante predisposición por aprender vocabulario académico nuevo, diferentes maneras de aprender el significado de dichos términos y una favorable respuesta a la enseñanza explicita de terminología nueva. Los participantes mostraron también como la exposición a lecturas académicas afectó, de una manera directa su aprehensión de nuevos términos académicos.

Los hallazgos de este estudio sugieren que los estudiantes de Ingles tienen voluntad de aprender vocabulario nuevo cuando se les da la oportunidad de discutir acerca de sus significados dentro del salón de clase. Este estudio también resalta la importancia que tienen para los estudiantes los diccionarios (online, en Ingles y bilingües) en el proceso mismo del aprendizaje de nueva terminología académica. Dentro de los hallazgos encontrados en este estudio también podemos resaltar las estrategias cognitivas de las cuales los participantes hicieron uso, tales como la inferencia, la identificación y las conexiones lógicas de términos.

Los resultados de este estudio han señalado, una vez más, la relación existente entre textos y términos de la cual el programa de Licenciatura en Enseñanza de la Lengua Inglesa no puede prescindir. Es importante entonces generar espacios educativos en los cuales el estudiante tenga la posibilidad de ser enseñado en estrategias y herramientas de aprendizaje de términos, los cuales pueden derivar ó no, en una mejor accesibilidad a los textos académicos (Marzano, 2005).

Abstract

This research study departed from the hypothesis that academic readings could foster the academic vocabulary development among learners, mainly by being constantly exposed to them within a meaningful learning context. As it is asserted by Coady (1997) who argues that learners' vocabulary development depends on their level of exposition to the target language. When English Language Learners (ELL´s) are provided of readings rich in content and comprehensible vocabulary, chances are they can easily achieve academic proficiency.

The Teaching of English as a Foreign Language program (TEFL) at New Judea University offered ideal conditions to explore, through qualitative research, how three students interacted with academic texts, and to what extend this exposure engaged them to learn new academic vocabulary. By using observations, semi-structured interviews and the written tasks, the participants posed a constant will to learn new academic vocabulary, different means to come up with words meaning and a good response to explicit vocabulary instruction. Participants also demonstrated how the exposure to academic texts affects, in a direct way, their process of gaining lexicon.

The findings of this study suggest that English Language Learners (ELL´s) are willing to learn academic vocabulary when they are offered with opportunities to discuss about terms in the classroom setting. These findings also highlight the importance that dictionaries (i.e. online, monolingual and bilingual dictionaries) have in the process for learning academic vocabulary. This study also poses the cognitive strategies used by the participants such as inference, identifying and logical relations of terms.

From an instructional point of view, this study suggests that there is a direct relation between reading and vocabulary which should be taken into account in a Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL) program course. Marzano (2005) considers academic vocabulary to be fundamental in the comprehension of the concepts applied in educational institutions and it is important for teachers to get the students understanding new words and terms in order to make easier the interpretation of new information. This study suggests that students could be taught about strategies for lexicon building which consequently will led to a better comprehension of academic texts as Laufer (1997) states that successful reading comprehension cannot be accomplished if there is not understanding of the vocabulary contained in the text.

DEDICATION

We would like to dedicate this thesis to God who has been a major source of
strength during all this process.

Para nuestra familia, padres, madres y hermanos, quienes nos han brindado
los valores y fundamentos que nos han formado como personas humanas.

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INTRODUCTION

This is a descriptive study, which emphasizes on the influence that academic readings have on the process of learning new academic vocabulary, and the interaction between the students and the academic lectures offered by the facilitator in the classroom environment. Three undergraduate pre-service English teachers were observed, interviewed and given written tasks. The data for this study was acquired by the usage of observations, interviews and written tasks.

This thesis study provides very interesting insights about the issue of learning academic vocabulary within a SLL (second language learning) context. In this work we aim at describing the main trends that the participants pose when they have to understand a new academic word, and the following strategies that learners (and sometimes the facilitator) appeal in order to foster a better understanding of the new terminology among the participants. By departing from the hypothesis that the constant exposure to readings with a large content of academic words might improve the reader's lexicon, we are interested in finding out how this possibility could be found into a local context in an SLL setting.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Students' success in higher education depends mainly on their ability to read with clear comprehension (Marzano, 2006). Burns (1999) affirms that pre-service English teachers have manifested that the lack of academic lexicon represents a great obstacle regarding listening and reading skills, and Schmitt (2000) asserts that few language teaching programs have approached vocabulary in a direct way. According to current research, proposing activities that strengthen academic vocabulary among English Language Learners (ELLs) helps them to understand the information they read and hear in class (Marzano, 2006).

As Nation (2001) asserts, vocabulary learning presents a special challenge among English language learners, for this reason there is a growing need of delivering instruction that supplies students with the skills and strategies necessary for vocabulary development (Lehr, Osborn & Heibert, 2004). As reported by the Instituto Colombiano para el Fomento de la Educación Superior (ICFES, 2006), approximately a third of the total of ICFES takers (26,49%) report their understanding by drawing literally from the text. More than half (68,84%) of them, however, demonstrate a higher level of thinking when reading by using inference at words and making connections. For this reason and also considering that academic readings foster high cognitive processes among learners, the Ministerio de Educacion (MEN, 2006), highlights the necessity of accessing academic texts among students in the Colombian academic context, due academic readings foster high cognitive processes

among learners. Since interaction with specialized readings is one of the main strategies for professional development, the access to academic texts is particularly important for pre-service and in-service English language teachers. As Cardenas (2001) states, facilitating students to gain vocabulary competences is an important goal that pre-service and in-service English language teachers should include in their curriculums (Cardenas, 2001).Therefore, it is important for in-service and pre-service teachers, to be conscious of the process and the strategies used by English language learners (ELL) in order to acquire vocabulary, as a first step to strengthen and reinforce them. Taking into account that academic vocabulary is crucial for the learning and acquisition of English language for high school students (MEN, 2006), we consider that its importance increases when it comes to pre-service teachers at an English language teaching program, since vocabulary is a fundamental factor for professional development of the linguistic component for language learning/teaching programs (Gu, 2005) with similar characteristics as in NJU (New Judea University). This descriptive knowledge could lead teachers to foster strategies which might facilitate vocabulary learning, enhancing listening and reading comprehension.

According to MEN, it is crucial for pre-service teachers to be aware that in the Colombian context, teachers' professional profiles must fit in curriculums designed to teach academic texts which lead students to expand their knowledge (MEN, 2006). However, despite the importance of academic

vocabulary, there are few studies focused on this topic in the Colombian higher education context, in the area of English as a foreign language (EFL).

We consider this study important because it might give us strong descriptive evidence about the process that English language learners (ELLs) go through in order to learn academic vocabulary. We agree with Scarcella (2003) who asserts that students who master academic vocabulary, gain strong competences in academic language and therefore, are more likely to be successful in academic and professional settings.

This study is an attempt to describe whether academic readings are connected to the learning of new academic vocabulary and the manner these academic readings are mediated in a classroom setting by the facilitator and the students to learn vocabulary.

The following research questions will help us to develop this study:

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. What strategies are used by the teacher in order to facilitate students´ interaction with academic texts?

2. How do students interact with the texts assigned in the course in order to learn academic vocabulary?

3. To what extent do students' exposure to academic texts and the teacher's mediation help them to learn academic vocabulary?

LITERATURE REVIEW

The conceptual background and findings of three relevant aspects related to academic vocabulary building: What is academic vocabulary, academic vocabulary in the TEFL, (teaching English as a foreign language) context and the importance of academic vocabulary learning in the EFL, (English as a foreign language) context. Relevant definitions and related studies will be portrayed in this section to shed light on the relationship between academic vocabulary and the TEFL context.

What is academic vocabulary?

Academic vocabulary is the vocabulary which is core to understand the concepts of the content taught in schools and academic settings (Marzano, 2005). However, it is important to point out that scholars agree to categorize academic words and separate them based on their usefulness and importance. On the other hand, Bishop, Yopp and Yopp (2009) defined each category as: *General academic vocabulary* and *specialized content vocabulary.* General academic vocabulary is the vocabulary found across all content areas, and it has a high-utility in any of the science subjects, (Yopp, and Bishop, 2000). According to Bishop and Yopp´s (2000) categorization, the specialized content vocabulary includes words specific to a particular area of knowledge; these words are important mainly because they are fundamental concepts or ideas for students to learn

Academic vocabulary at second language learning

Meara (1980) reported a low status in linguistics research for second language (L2) vocabulary learning and Richards (1976) describes how the vocabulary issue has been disregarded in the field of foreign or second language learning. This disregarding attitude toward vocabulary learning might be attributed to the grammar-sound oriented Chomskyan School of linguistics, which began a trend among linguistics who focused their attention on grammar and syntactic issues, and dismissed the importance of the vocabulary learning field.

Richards (1976) argues that linguistics are more likely to approach language through the Universal Grammar and to leave no place for vocabulary matters. Levenston (1979) is another author who criticizes applied linguistics for its lack of interest toward the field of vocabulary learning; this is why he highlights the importance of gaining vocabulary as it is a never ending process in which the students will be encountering new words.

Another element thought to be the cause of the disregard of vocabulary is revealed by Sinclair & Renouf (1988) when they point out that it is laborious to have a syllabus in which grammar and lexicon are contained at the same time; that has been a cause of this apathetic attitude toward vocabulary learning through decades. Coady (1997) asserts that it is not strange that teachers continue neglecting the vocabulary issue, which despite of this avoidance from linguistics, has turned out to be the core of language comprehension and usage

(Hunt & Beglar, 2005). Nevertheless, Gairns & Redman (1986) claim that during the last two decades of the past century, there has been a growing interest in academic vocabulary learning among researchers, mainly in the second language learning field.

The importance of vocabulary learning in the EFL context

Learning vocabulary is an essential component in learning a foreign language, in which the task of using and recognizing words becomes a crucial stage for students in the process of learning a second language, much more than syntactic issues (Singleton, 1999). Academic vocabulary is considered to be an important component in the elaboration of foreign language curricula for educational institutions Marzano (2005). It is important for teachers to get the students understanding new words and terms in order to make easier the interpretation of new information. Coady (1997) argues that learners' vocabulary development depends on their level of exposition to the target language. When English Language Learners (ELL´s) are provided of readings rich in content and comprehensible vocabulary, chances are they can easily achieve academic proficiency.

According to Singleton (1999) learning a language involves picking up diverse language skills, such as syntax, phonetics, grammar rules recognition, etc. Nevertheless, without a strong lexicon on the second language (L2) the language comprehension might be more difficult for the learners. Hunt & Beglar

(2005) also express that vocabulary is the core of language comprehension and usage. Lewis (2000) states that one of the most important parts in learning a language is gaining enough lexicon, as it is critical for students at understanding what they hear and read in the class room.

Vocabulary learning is an element that affects not only the communicative-oral component when learning a language but also the reading factor, which is strongly connected to the specific area of academic performance.

Laufer (1997) states that successful reading comprehension cannot be accomplished if there is not understanding of the vocabulary contained in the text. This does not necessarily mean that reading comprehension depends completely on vocabulary comprehension, but reading is noticeably determined by the learners' vocabulary background, and at the same time, reading has a clear influence on the learner's vocabulary. This fact is particularly significant when approaching academic texts, and lectures that are presented to the learners in an educational context.

Sedita (2005) expresses the importance of vocabulary onstruction as it enhances all the terms that learners must know in order to approach the necessary background knowledge of an academic field. Vocabulary instruction also helps us to express our thoughts, to have an effective communication, and to learn new theories and concepts. Chall and Jacobs (2003) believe that the students´ vocabulary knowledge and reading comprehension may be affected in a negative way when facilitators do not offer vocabulary instruction.

It is well known that reading comprehension is one of the main goals when teaching English as a second language, and in order to achieve successful reading in students, it is important to strengthen the lexicon part. According to Ajideh (2003) readings before the class may be implemented in order to activate and construct background knowledge. Readings before the class also facilitate the vocabulary learning for students, as the learners have to find definition for unknown words for them found in the texts, and that later on will be used in class discussions, besides knowing the meaning of new terms helps students to understand more complex structures in the same texts (Ajideh, 2003)

Cardenas (2001) asserts that when there is a lack of words, foreign language students may suffer of low confidence and also highlights the necessity that students have of words when having conversations.

Common issues like the inadequate use of vocabulary in different social situations, usage of formal vocabulary at an improper moment, incoherent use of vocabulary in conversational settings, etc; are presented when foreign language learners start the process of developing vocabulary. Cardenas (2001) states that it is necessary for teachers to have learners involved in the vocabulary related to the field that they are studying; in this particular study, students from an English language teaching program.

Colombia (2001) conducted a research study in Santo Tomás, a private school of the Vereda Cerca de Piedra (Cundinamarca, Colombia) the purpose

of this study was to help students to learn vocabulary in context, in this particular study, Colombia (2001) highlights the importance of the context used as a strategy for learning vocabulary. Colombia (2001) also notes that learners tend to retrieve on the same words when they have the opportunity to speak in a particular class and have the opportunity to interact; for instance they can easily remember new words used in that moment of interaction. This study reveals us that when students have the chance to experience a different class with a special setting, learning becomes more effective. Findings from Colombia´s (2001) study suggests that it is important to be monitoring the learned vocabulary in a group, as students tend to forget new words when a space for practicing new vocabulary is not offered.

Marzano (2005) asserts that when teaching new academic vocabulary to students, teachers should first center on providing new and unknown terms to students, and second to present methods to review these new terms in detail. A good example of this is the implementation on the classroom of cooperative learning. According to Jacob et al. (1996) the cooperative learning strategy in the environment of ESL (English as a Second Language) has proved to increase the opportunities for learning academic vocabulary in ESL students

Schmitt & Schmitt (1995) consider the vocabulary notebooks to be an effective tool in the EFL setting in order to keep in mind new and target words, in this way students have the opportunity to access words in an explicit way, this fact might raise the awareness of learners on their own process of gaining lexicon. Nevertheless, the study conducted by McCarthy (1990), reported that

there might be a negative effect in the implementation of vocabulary notebooks, as such tool might be inappropriate for the language learning motivation, because such method does not encourage the learner autonomy in the process of vocabulary learning.

When students are provided specific vocabulary there will be more chances to get the academic background required to comprehend a specific area. Marzano (2005) declares that it is a wrong assumption of some teachers to think that students will learn the necessary vocabulary spontaneously.

METHODOLOGY

Context

The chosen institution for this research is the New Judea University (NJU), which has a 5 years English Language Teaching Program (ELTP) consisting of ten semesters, in which the English language is taught based on international standards (i.e. Common European Framework of Reference for Language: Learning, Teaching and Assessment).

The NJU is a public institution located in the urban area of Pereira; a city located in the coffee area in Colombia. Pereira is a multicultural city, with many people coming from different places of the country. Currently there is a population of approximately 400.000 inhabitants. The English language teaching program at NJU started in 2004 and they have already promoted the first 6 cohorts of professional English teachers. As the program mission states; the institution aims at preparing teachers with a high social commitment, well prepared professionals to promote quality English instruction in the region.

The program includes a subject called Language Acquisition which belongs to the 5th semester of the career, and follows the Content-Based Instruction approach(CBI). CBI is the usage of subject matter as a tool for second or foreign language teaching/learning. The competences to develop in the Language Acquisition subject are: *Understand the relationship between SLA research and second language instruction, take an inquiring and analytic approach to the readings and lecture material, provide an in-depth introduction*

to the field of second language acquisition from a Colombian and international perspective, foster critical judgment by developing the ability to apply critical reasoning to issues in the field through independent thought and informed judgment.

In the course, the teacher and the learners have to make oral presentations which are complemented with whole class and small group discussions with the purpose of clarifying the topics that are presented in each session. The material used in the Language Acquisition course is based on material of second language acquisition (SLA) field. This material is expected to be read by the learners before each class, so that students can have enough input for class discussions and activities.

We considered the Language Acquisition course appropriate for data collection in this study because it is a subject with a significant amount of academic readings in English, containing academic terms related to the field of Linguistics.

<div align="center">Participants</div>

The participants for this study were the teacher of the subject and three randomly chosen students from the Language Acquisition course. As it has been mentioned previously the participants take the Language Acquisition course in their fifth semester. At this stage of the process, learners are expected to have a B1 level of mastery in the English language.

Methods for data collection

In this study we used observations, semi structured interviews and participants´ written tasks as methods for data collection.

Observations

Observations offer opportunity to develop awareness of the interactions that take place in the class setting, and to enrich the comprehension of language learning and teaching (Nunan, 1989). Five observations were carried out at the class room setting to observe the following aspects in our participants:

Facilitator's mediation of academic terms

We observed the impact of the teacher´s mediation to enhance students' interaction with the academic texts. This means that we focused on the interactions developed inside the classroom setting, and how these teacher-students, students-teacher interactions took place to promote vocabulary learning.

Mediation of academic terms by learners

Our observation focused on what students did in class in order to figure out the meaning of new words and concepts found in the readings. We focused on the interactions among the learners as a strategy for finding the meaning of academic terms; we also observed the usage that students made of academic vocabulary. We carried out five observations from October to November.

During the observations field notes were made in every session with the purpose to document in as much detail as possible each relevant exchange.

Semi structured interviews

Merriam (1998) considers that as semi-structured interviews are guided by a set of questions or issues to be explored, these allow participants to give flexible responses. The researcher can respond to the situation at hand and obtain the participant's worldview and ideas about the topic to be examined.
We conducted 4 semi-structured interviews to collect information about the students´ awareness and opinions toward academic vocabulary learning. For this study, the semi-structured interview provided data related with the manner in which students interacted with the text, what strategies they used in order to get the meaning of unknown words and the way other learners mediated those meanings.

In these interviews we aimed at analyzing, from the participant´s description, interaction with the text (for that reason participants were asked to bring their reading copies).

We applied five interviews to each one of the participants during the months of October and November in order to find out their process in relation with the construction of their academic lexicon. Their insights and experiences helped us to understand their interaction with the texts.

Written tasks

We applied one written task to two students as a way to find out the vocabulary that learners acquired through the months of October and November. This strategy allowed us to gain data which helped us to identify which set of words students had learned during the time of this study. For that purpose, we asked participants to develop short and simple exercises of comprehension, in the task students were asked to select a word worked in class as a way to find out the usage the participants make of it. Participants were asked to make the written task with a word found in the readings assigned by the facilitator in the course; such readings are related to the Language Acquisition subject.

Researchers' Role

According to Gans (1982), an observer is the one who does not have an involvement in a social situation, thus, he/she can perform his/her role as a researcher. Our role in the project was that of direct observers. This role placed us in a position of making us capable of understanding the process of academic vocabulary learning. Our purpose was to find out the students´ perspectives about the strategies used by them in order to mediate the learning of new vocabulary, and the mediation offered to the learners in order to increase academic vocabulary.

DATA ANALYSIS

To achieve a descriptive interpretation of the participants' reading, we engaged in developing descriptive analyses framed in the Grounded Theory paradigm which is a constructivist approach to research (Hunt, 1997; Phillips, 1997) that allows investigators to construct theory from a personal, yet disciplined, interpretation of a set of qualitative data (Creswell & Miller, 2000). It becomes a strong tool when there is few or no theoretical basis for building hypotheses (Bodgan & Biklen, 1998; Picciano, 2006). The stages to develop at grounded theory are:

Constant comparative process: The analysis started with a point by point coding of isolated documents, making codes for individual concepts found in the material and setting these codes into hierarchies (Charmaz, 2006)

Axial coding: At certain point no new codes come out and attention turns to axial coding to make data simple and more understandable as theoretical approaches come up (Charmaz, 2006)

Saturation: When there are no new codes and the model becomes monotonous, then the result is saturation .This is the stage at which theory can be clearly explained and seems to be more related to the data (Morse et al., 2002)

Conventions for the study

The following abbreviations were used so that readers can understand the collected data: for the researcher (R), for the facilitator (F), for the participant one (P1), for the participant two (P2), and for the participant three (P3). The instruments used during the study will be represented as follow: for the observation (O.#), for the interview (In.#) and for the written task (Wt. #)

FINDINGS

After analyzing the data from the different instruments in relation with our first research question (*What strategies are used by the teacher in order to facilitate students' interaction with academic texts?*) we found the following results:

Teachers' usage of collaborative discussions in class as a strategy to promote the negotiation of meaning among students.

The classroom setting offers plenty of opportunities to gain new knowledge and formulate different questions not only to the facilitator but also to partners. This finding reveals a strategy used by the facilitator in order to led students to

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discuss among them within small groups, the differences and similarities of a set of academic words, in order to accomplish a further understanding of them.

This following picture was taken during the observation 1. This image corresponds to a set of academic antonyms related to the subject of language acquisition. The teacher asks learners to get in small groups and encourages the students to discuss and argue about the meaning, differences and similarities of the projected set of words.

Observation 1, photo of the antonyms projected on the wall.
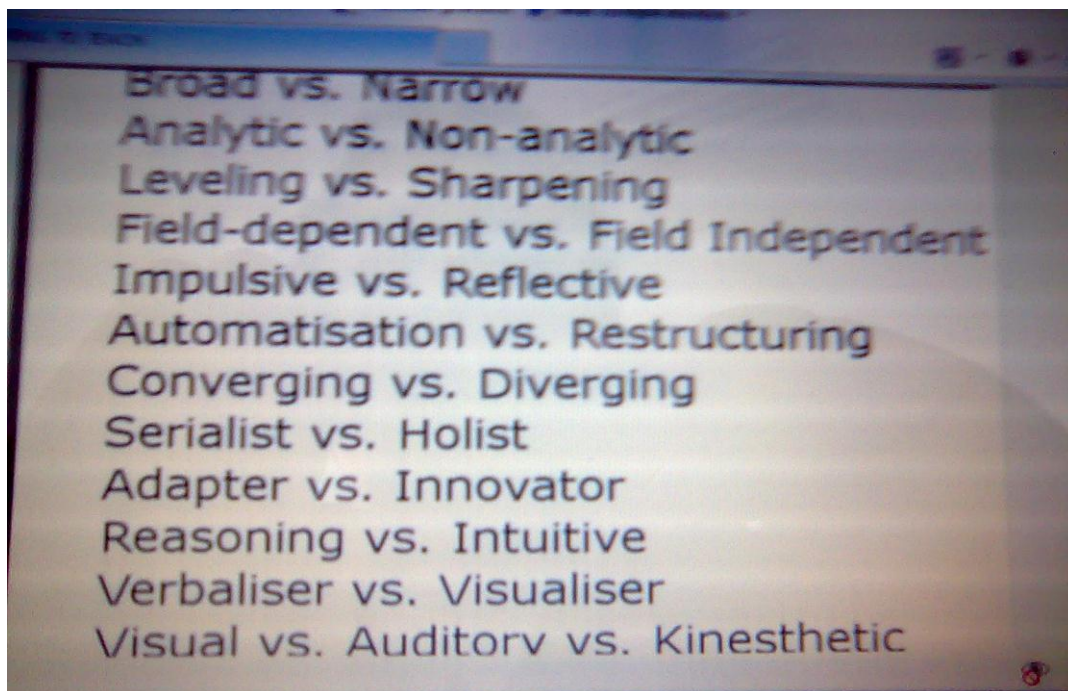
The words projected on the wall were transcribed in order to make the data clearer:

Broad vs. Narrow
Analytic vs. Non-analytic
Leveling vs. Sharpening
Field-dependent vs. Field Independent
Impulsive vs. Reflective
Automatisation vs. Restructuring
Converging vs. Diverging
Serialist vs. Holist
Adapter vs. Innovator
Reasoning vs. Intuitive
Verbaliser vs. Visualiser
Visual vs. Auditory vs. Kinesthetic

Field notes from Observation 1:

"O1-Students were asked to get together in small groups and they were assigned to develop a discussion about 2 different words which were antonyms.

"O1-The facilitator elicited information from the learners about the meaning of the terminology and the ideas that students had about them to be shared with the whole group later in the same class."

As noticed in the data above, the facilitator attempts to foster cooperative learning among students by encouraging team work, in which they are supposed to come out with agreements about the meaning of a set of words

proposed by the teacher. By eliciting information from the students the facilitator complements the small group discussions about the antonyms, and makes sure about the understanding that students made of the new terminology.

The following sample is part of the fifth interview made to the participant 3 by one of the researchers. Participant 3 is asked about the activities that he considers have more influence on his academic lexicon.

Interview 5, made to the participant 3 outside the classroom:

"In.5-R Which classroom activities do you think have a greater impact on your academic lexicon?"

"In.5-P.3 (long pause) I think one of my favorite activities inside the class is when the teacher make us to talk about words"

As we can see on the interview 5, the answer of the participant 3 shows his preference towards collaborative classroom discussions regarding the meaning of academic words. We deduce that because the usage that he made of the words *"my favorite"* during interview 5. Participant number 3 opts for classroom discussions as an activity that exerts influence on his academic vocabulary.

Small group discussions offer students the opportunity to have a high-challenging and demanding activity in which they have to use critical thinking skills, as students have to cogitate and rethink not only the words' meaning but the arguments to defend their own thinking, too. This strategy might lead them

to come up with strong insights about the meaning of the words. During the class time, this strategy demonstrated to be useful for learners at word recognizing.

Facilitator's explicit explanation as a strategy for clarifying new academic terms

During the process of learning academic vocabulary in this particular subject (language acquisition) the facilitator's role was that of helping students to comprehend academic words. This finding explores the explicit explanation delivered by the teacher in order to accomplish this objective.

The data below portrays the interaction taking place between the teacher and b the learners inside the classroom within a regular instruction time. This sample of data belongs to the field notes made for the observation number 3.

Observation 3, entries from the field notes made during the observation:

"-O3*The facilitator asks the learners about the difference between errors/mistakes (words found on the readings). Four minutes later, there is no answer in an accurate way, and then the facilitator begins to explain the meaning of those words on the board.*"

"-O3*When students received an explicit explanation on terms, they stopped asking questions and searching for information on their notebooks, which could be relevant for the answer of the previous question proposed.*"

On the information above from the field notes for the observation 3 we can notice that the facilitator attempts to elicit meaning of words that are contrasted on the board. It was a high cognitive demanding task for the learners to discriminate the meaning and the differences of the contrasted words *"errors/mistakes",* because at first sight they might appear quite similar. It is important to point out that as vocabulary is not the core of the subject, the facilitator had to give celerity to the definitions portrayed in these two words, that is why the facilitator appeals for delivering explicit explanation of the terms in order to make clear academic concepts and move on with the class.

The following data is part of the interview 4 in which participant 3 was asked about the strategies that the facilitator uses in order to clarify meaning of unknown academic words.

Interview 4, made to the participant 3 outside the classroom:
"In.4-R *How does the facilitator clarify the meaning of academic vocabulary to you?"*
"P3- *If we don´t know the meaning of a word, we just ask about it, and then the teacher gives us kind of similar words or synonyms to reinforce the understanding of it.*"

We can infer from the data above that the facilitator not only makes use of explicit explanation to clarify the meaning of unclear academic terms for the learners, but also provides synonyms and related words in order to strengthen and informed the understanding of the concept. The collected data suggests that delivering formal instruction about academic vocabulary is one of the strategies used by the facilitator that aims at grounding the understanding of academic words that are not clear enough for students. This finding reveals that vocabulary explicit instruction has the potential to provide students with the opportunity to know how a new word is similar or different from related concepts. This strategy is used as a complementary approach to enhance the new terminology learnt by the students.

Teacher's use of students' background knowledge as a strategy for teaching new academic terminology.

 The subject of language acquisition offers plenty of academic readings and documents rich in academic concepts and terms. This finding explores a strategy used by the facilitator, in which she recalls from previous readings assigned in class, in order to introduce and socialize to the learners unknown academic vocabulary on the language acquisition subject, and strengthen a deeper understanding of them.

The data below was taken from the field notes made during the observation 4. This sample depicts the way in which the facilitator elicits information from the

learners about key concepts treated in the texts (in this case the word *"anxiety"*) that she has assigned to them previously in the language acquisition class.

Observation 4, in which the facilitator (F) and the participant 2 (P2) have a short interaction:

"O4-F *Ok guys, what is anxiety? Who can tell me?*

P2 *Me, me teacher!!*

F *Ok, go ahead!!*

P2 *Anxiety is related with frustration, bad feelings, and shyness"*

By asking the meaning of a word contained in previous readings (anxiety), the facilitator attempts to find out if the students have comprehended the documents assigned previously. The strategy of assigning readings to the students seems to increase among the learners the opportunity to be in contact with relevant definitions and terms which are key for the topic they study. The observation 4 shows that the participant, who read the documents before the class, was more likely to know the meaning of the word that was developed during the class activity.

The following data makes part of the interview 5, in which the participant 3 was asked about the way in which the facilitator introduces new academic vocabulary to him.

Interview 5, made to the participant 3 outside the classroom:

"In.5-R *How does the facilitator introduce new academic vocabulary to you?*

P3- *The teacher introduces the new vocabulary first by asking the prior knowledge related to the word, after that she gives us some examples in order to have a clear idea about the new vocabulary.*"

Although the goal of the subject is not teaching vocabulary but language acquisition theory, the strategy of delivering readings before the class gives enough input to support readers´ inference skills. In that way they will be provided with more opportunities to get the meaning from the context and their own prior knowledge. This finding reveals that the facilitator departs from the readings assigned with the purpose of eliciting from the students their personal opinions and insights about the possible meaning of the new terminology.

In order to answer the second research question *(How do students interact with the texts assigned in the course in order to learn academic vocabulary?)* we have set apart the following two findings:

Students' exchange with the texts assigned by the facilitator, out of the class room setting.

In this thesis study we aimed at observing the interaction that students had with the texts assigned by the facilitator. For this particular finding we focus on

an interesting excerpt in which we observe an exchange between the participant and the text itself.

The following data from the observation 4, shows how the participant 2, by himself, writes down small pieces of written exchanges on the back of the documents he was assigned, as a strategy for gaining a better understanding on academic vocabulary.

Observation 4, the following image corresponds to the documents assigned by the facilitator; it is worth to mention that the clarifications given in this picture were not delivered by the teacher:
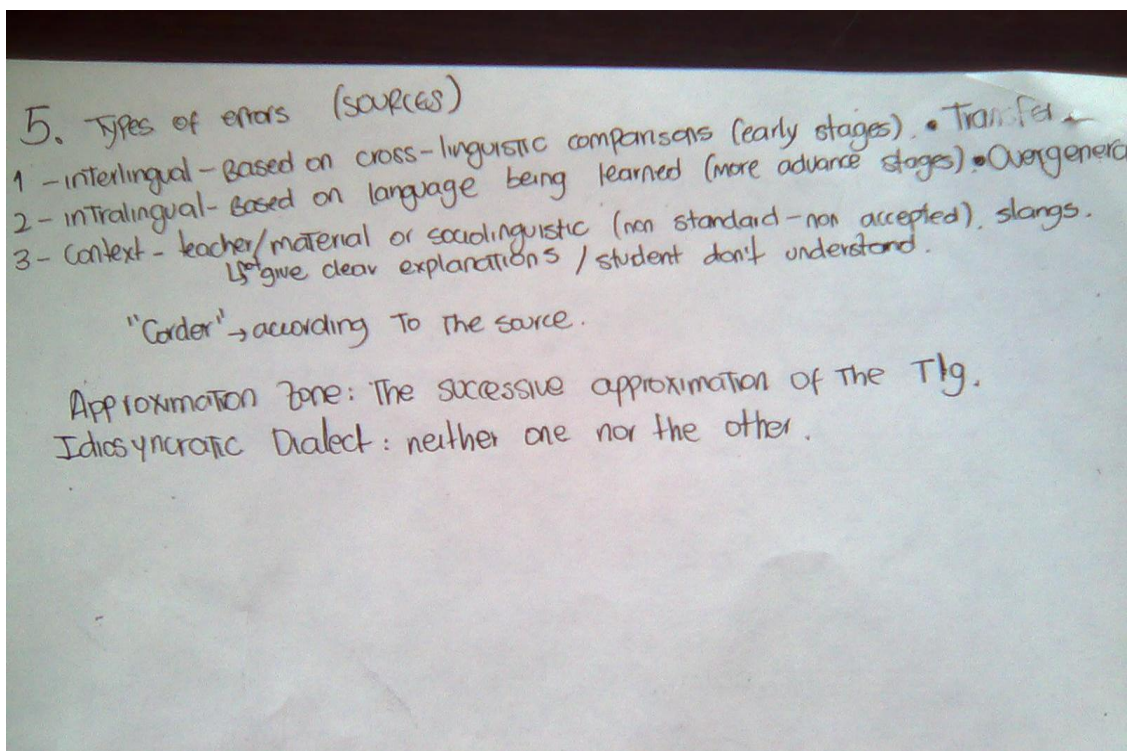
The following is a transcription of the data above in order to make the information clearer:

> 5. *"Types of errors (SOURCES)*
>
> 1- *interlingual-Based on cross-linguistic comparisons (early stages). Transfer*
>
> 2- *intralingual-Based on language being learned (more advanced stages) Overgeneralization*
>
> 3- *context- teacher/material or sociolinguistic (non standard-non accepted).slangs.*
>
> > *not give clear explanations / students don't understand.*
>
> > *"Corder"-> according To The Source.*
>
> > *Approximation Zone: The successive approximation of the Tlg.*
>
> > *Idiosyncratic Dialect: neither one nor the other."*

The collected data suggests that participant 2 has the tendency to write down on the text itself relevant characteristics which are related with the meaning of a certain set of academic words, by making a sort of logical connections among specific terms and the vocabulary that he is trying to assimilate. From this finding we may assume that the participant appeals to correlate two academic concepts found in the text, through a short of explanation. Departing from the collected data, we infer that the student is aware of the strategy of connecting terms, by using a rational sequenced explanation, in this way he links the words and facilitates to himself the understanding of the terms. Apparently this participant uses this strategy as a way to remember in a more successful way the academic words´ meaning and its possible co-related term.

The following data is an extract of the In.4 in which the participant 2 was asked about the strategies that he used with the purpose of understanding the meaning of new unknown terminology.

Interview 4, made to the participant 2 outside the classroom:

"In.4-R *What strategies did you use in order to find the meaning of these words? (Referring to the ones from the image above O.4)*

P2 *I first underline the word and then I write the explanation of it, if I find it in the text, but if not I look in the dictionary and write it in the copies. (Short pause) Sometimes with the explanation that the teacher gave us, was more easy to understand.*"

The data above suggests that participant 2 interacts with the texts assigned by the facilitator, in order to comprehend as much as possible the meaning of key concepts and definitions which are closely related to the subject he is studying (language acquisition). The interaction in a first stage is simple, "*I first underline the word*" (In.4) in this way he focusses his attention to the words that might appear unknown for him, then he looks for the meaning in two different ways, he searches in the text itself or he appeals for the dictionary, in this way he makes sure he has a definition or an explanation of the term; and finally he writes it down in the same text he found the word. We infer that the student makes this in order to have an aid when he is reading the text, with the purpose to facilitate to himself the new term in the middle of a reading.

Inference from the context as a strategy for academic vocabulary learning.

The context is an important factor when identifying words and at recognizing the author´s usage of terms. This finding explains the participant´s trend to use the context and schemata, in order to make inference of the meaning of new words as a strategy for academic vocabulary comprehension.

The following sample was collected from field notes made during the observation1, in which we can observe a piece of interaction between the facilitator and the students in a regular class time, the teacher is presenting two related terms unknown for the learners, by appealing to the learners' inference skills, one term is contextualized in order to facilitate the meaning of the other term.

Observation 1, in which the facilitator (F) and the participants have a short interaction around the terms "global error" and "local error":

"O1 *the professor presents new terminology to the students in the class. The terms "Global error" and "Local error" are among that new vocabulary."*

"O1The facilitator gives the definition of the term "Local error", after that, she *asks to the class if they know the definition for the term "Global error", then*

students start giving the meaning of such term by making an inference task based on the information given by the facilitator in the previous term."

We found out that, despite the students´ lexical limitation, they were able to use the context to figure out the meaning of new academic terms. This fact might be one of the reasons why inference could be assumed as a compensation strategy, which enables learners to use the new language for either comprehension or production, despite limitations in knowledge.

The sample below makes part of the interview 3, in which the researcher asks to the participant 2 about the strategies that he used in order to find out the meaning of new academic terminology.

Interview 3, made to the participant 2 outside the classroom:

"In.3-R: What strategies did you use in order to get the meaning of those new words?"

"In.3-P2: The first strategy is that I tried to figure out the meaning of the word by the context in the reading, and the second strategy I tried to identify before hand what part of speech is the word if it is an adjective, a noun, verb or something else. The third strategy if I can figure out the meaning of the word, I look out the word at the dictionary and if I don´t get the word in the dictionary, I go the internet."

From the data above, we can conclude that participant 2 does not need to be suggested by the facilitator in order to use inference, it is noticed in his answer ("*The first strategy is that I tried to figure out the meaning of the word" In.3)* that he makes use of inference from the context, as his first choice in order to get the meaning of the word. As we can see in the In.3 participant 2 also uses other strategies to gain academic vocabulary comprehension, nevertheless, it was also noticed that he uses inference as a first tool in that sense, it is noteworthy to mention that the participant appeals to inference as a cognitive strategy, since cognitive strategies are the steps or operations used in learning or problem solving that requires direct analysis, transformation and synthesis of learning materials, and it does not automatically lead to learning, although it has the potential for doing so. Inference is a high cognitive demanding task as the participant 2 had to follow a cognitive sequence to succeed at it.

With the purpose of answering the third research question *(To what extent do students' exposure to academic texts and the teacher's mediation help them to learn academic vocabulary?)* we separated the following finding:

The positive effect of teacher's mediation and exposure to academic readings on the student's lexicon.

This study was built under the assumption that the teacher's mediation of academic readings and a constant exposition to them could affect in a positive

way the improvement of learners' academic lexicon. This finding explains the existing relation among the academic readings in the language acquisition subject, the teacher's mediation of the new terminology and the learners' lexicon improvement.

The following piece of data was taken from the interview 5, the participant 2 was assigned a reading by the teacher of the subject (language acquisition).The goal of the researchers was to find out which words from that text were new for the participant 2, and also if the participant 2 knew the meaning of some academic terminology (juxtapose, pervasive, and withstand) before he read the documents.

Interview 5, made to the participant 2 outside the classroom:

"In.5-R *Which unknown words did you find in the last reading assigned by the teacher?"*

"In.5-P2: *I find, I found some words that I don´t understand, I didn´t understand but I take the general idea of the text and I don´t pay attention to the words."*

"in.5-R: *Did you know the meaning of the following words before you read the text? Juxtapose, pervasive and withstand"*

"In.5-P2: *Yes, because the teacher explained that, juxtapose is like side by side.*"

We can deduce from the interview 5 that some unknown words were not an obstacle for participant 2 to get the general idea of the text assigned by the facilitator. However we assume from the answer of the participant 2 that he had an evident first exposure to unknown academic terminology. We deduce that this first encounter could facilitate a future exposition to these specific terms. The teacher's mediation seems to have a positive effect on the student's lexicon because as we can notice on the answer for the second question from the interview 5, the participant made an accurate definition of the word juxtapose, such word was mediated in a previous session by the facilitator.

More evidence about this interpretation is found in a written task designed by the researchers, in which the participants were asked to develop a word in three different ways. Participant 1 had to try giving the meaning of the word (awareness), after giving the meaning of the word, participant 1 had to put that word into a phrase, and finally participant 1 was asked if there was any difficulty when expressing the meaning of the word and if so, why. By giving this written exercise to the participant 1 we aimed at exploring the degree of understanding of the term developed by the participant 1.

Written task, image from the written task developed by the participant 1:
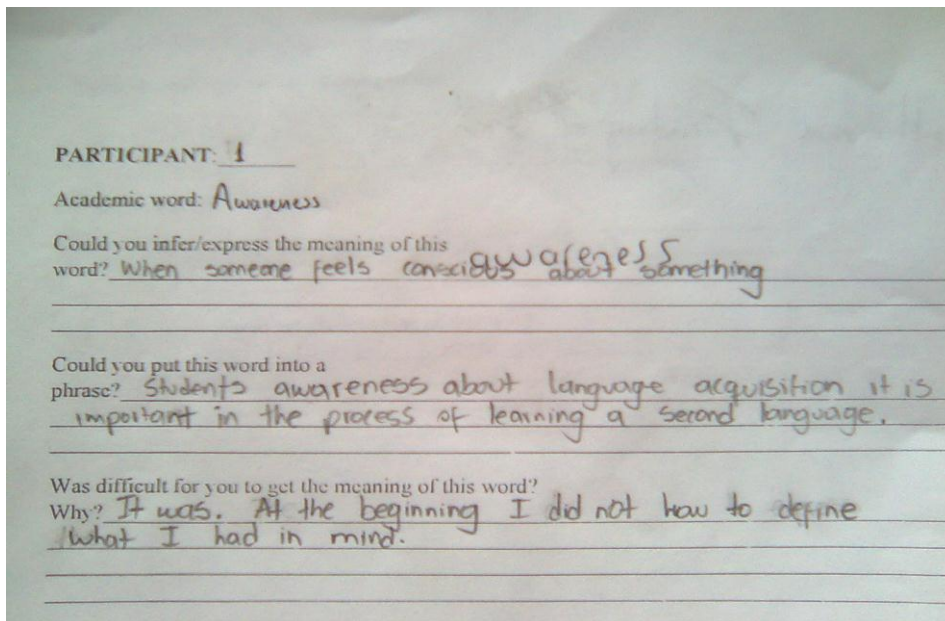
The image of the written task above was transcribed for a better comprehension:

PARTICIPANT: 1

Academic word: Awareness

Could you infer/express the meaning of this word? When someone feels conscious about something

Could you put this word into a phrase? Students awareness about language acquisition it is important in the process of learning a second language.

Was difficult for you to get the meaning of this word?

Why? It was. At the beginning I did not know how to define what I had in mind.

Departing from the written task, we can deduce that despite the student knew the meaning of the word "*awareness*", he still had struggled at expressing the meaning of the term. This fact could be attributed to the difficulty that writing production demands from an English language learner. Nevertheless, he

seemed to have all the time a closed idea in his mind about the meaning of the word. During the time this study was held, the word awareness was not worked by the facilitator through an explicit explanation, the facilitator might have assumed that students had learned this word already in previous subjects. The language acquisition subject may give direct or indirect academic vocabulary input to the students. With this written task we were exploring how the student applies the new learned academic concepts, and the accuracy of the usage itself.

The following sample was taken from the entries of the field notes made for the observation 1. After finishing the activity proposed, the facilitator started to ask to the students in order to elicit information about academic terminology as a way to assess the effectiveness of the previous activity on the students' academic lexicon.

Observation 1, these field notes were made during a regular class time to the participants in a whole group activity:

"O1-Students were asked to get together in small groups and they were assigned to develop a discussion about 2 different words which were antonyms.

"O1-The facilitator elicited information from the learners about the meaning of the terminology and the ideas that students had about them to be shared with the whole group later in the same class."

The data above suggests that the mere activity of discussing the meaning of terms to promote the learning and understanding of new academic terminology might not be enough. This is why the mediation offered by the facilitator ("*the facilitator elicited information from the learners about the meaning of the terminology" O.1)* represents a valid complementation regarding vocabulary learning in which eliciting information and explicit explanation of academic terms, such as providing synonyms and antonyms or simply short explanations of words, might help the students towards the learning of new academic terminology.

DISCUSSION

With the participants' contribution on this thesis study we have gained a further comprehension on the process of academic vocabulary construction and the strategies which are more common among the ESL learners when students are exposed to academic readings and explicit instruction about certain terminology. This study highlights a set of very interesting findings, in which the most outstanding ones are related to the interaction of students with academic texts. Student's enactments and answers were a strong data that evidenced the

importance of academic vocabulary lexicon among learners within an English language teaching program. The following headlines are the findings to be discussed in this section: *Teachers' usage of collaborative discussions in class as a strategy to promote the negotiation of meaning among students, facilitator's explicit explanation as a strategy for clarifying new academic terms, teacher's use of students' background knowledge as a strategy for teaching new academic terminology, students' interaction with the texts assigned by the facilitator outside the class room setting, inference from the context as a strategy for academic vocabulary learning and the positive effect of teacher's mediation and academic readings on the student's lexicon.*

Teachers' usage of collaborative discussions in class as a strategy to promote the negotiation of meaning among students.

This finding tried to explore the strategy used by the teacher consisting on collaborative discussions, which were meant to promote the negotiation of words meaning among the learners. After having the first observation (O.1), we noticed that when students are provided with opportunities to make a meaningful exchange with the words they are learning, the chance to gain a

deeper understanding of the terms they are developing increases. However, Fowler (2003) claims that small group discussions on words meaning might led students to develop misconceptions that later on could obstruct an accurate understanding of the terms. Withal, this finding reveals that the strategy was completed when the facilitator elicited information from the learners, in order to settle the standard and accurate meanings among the participants. Still, Dawson (1999) asserts that it could be a mistake to rely on students critical thinking skills when the teacher has not been in charge of the learners in previous processes. Nevertheless, this finding shows how at the end of the activity, this strategy demonstrated to have a positive impact on learners academic lexicon, as academic words were facilitated not only by their partners but also through a more conscious cognitive process. This finding agrees with (Bedoya, 2009) who claims that when students are provided with tasks requiring high critical thinking skills, learners tend to get a better understanding of the topic they study. During this study it was also noticed what Colombo and Fontaine (2009) observed, they claim that students are motivated and willing to discuss in regards the meaning of the words which consequently led them to have a better word recognition. The activity consisting in small group discussions was a demanding task in which learners had to use critical thinking skills in order to develop a better understanding of academic terms.

Facilitator's explicit explanation as a strategy for clarifying new academic terms

This study seems to demonstrate that the teacher's explicit explanation of vocabulary may help students to understand academic terminology that is not clear enough, and according to Duffy (2002), explicit instruction also provides learners with the opportunities to use what they learn through reading activities. However Dellar (2004) expresses that through explicit explanation the facilitator might be giving to the learners information which they could be able to find out by themselves, and that there may be no indication that the students have comprehended. Folse (2004) also presents teacher's explanations as something that can led the students to under-involment, therefore the learners may lack of concentration and they could find the class boring and tedious. Nevertheless Hadley (1993) asseverates that the teacher's explanation if presented in a natural way may engage the students with the text or the topic that takes place at the class, and Nation (2000) considers that explicit explanation helps language to be presented in context, and to present the language in context is something that can be mediated by the facilitator rather than through readings or other activities.

Teacher's use of students' background knowledge as a strategy for teaching new academic terminology.

In this finding we attempted to describe the strategy that the facilitator uses in order to present new academic vocabulary to learners and the usage that she made of the texts she assigned before the class which, according to this particular finding, seemed to be helpful at providing input on academic terms to the students. This argument is corroborated by Ringler & Weber (1984) who claim that texts assigned before the class provide the students with enough vocabulary input in order to comprehend the topic of the session and the unknown words they might encounter ahead. Even so, Cotterall (2000) argues that before appealing to learner's autonomy at reading, it is needed to enhance students´ readiness for the changes that students must do towards to their beliefs and behavior. However, this finding shows that participants were willing to read and to comprehend the terminology which might be unknown for them. On the other hand, this finding also reveals that the facilitator departs from the readings previously assigned in order to inform the answers elicited by her during the class sessions; this approach is refuted by Sore (1990) who states that background knowledge might be substantially different from one learner to another nonetheless, because of the apparent homogeneity that the facilitator has worked inside the classroom with the group, this finding seems to disagree with Sore´s (1990) hypothesis. This particular study seems to agree with Chastain (1988) who presents reading assignments before the class as

activities that encourage the students to read, and prepare them to be able to read, and interact with new background knowledge.

Students' exchange with the texts assigned by the facilitator, out of the class room setting.

The data collected in this study suggests that learners are conscious of the strategy of interacting with the readings in a more evident way (i.e. reading the texts, writing on the readings, discussing the lectures). This finding suggests that students make short connections between two terms related in order to figure out the relation they have. This study agrees with Cross (1999) who asserts that learning is about making connections. By using the strategy of assigning readings outside the classroom, the students can mediate themselves the academic words which are unknown for them. Nevertheless, it should not be assumed that the strategy of assigning texts outside the classroom will help most of the students to increase their academic vocabulary. According to Doyle (2008), many students do not read the texts assigned outside the classroom because they assume that the facilitator will present the most relevant information of the lectures in class, and Leamnson (1999) argues that many students lack the reading comprehension skills that are necessary for university-level texts. Nonetheless efficient facilitators aim at designing guidance to learners that help them to develop reading skills, therefore their

vocabulary skills too. In agreement with Boyd (2003), well designed reading guidances may help students to make a connection between the assigned texts and the class, it means that the learners will link the new words, terminology and concepts found in the assigned text to the discussion of the text in classroom.

Inference from the context as a strategy for academic vocabulary learning

In this finding, we aimed at describing the strategy in which students used the context as base to inform their own inference on unknown academic terms. This finding revealed that students are likely to use inference strategies for gaining new academic vocabulary learning, as it provides them chance to make connections between pre-existing word knowledge and new terminology. Notwithstanding, Sore (1990) aims at saying that inference might be a "double-edged sword", because by overusing this strategy, students can make misconception on terms and unknown words, this fact could make students struggle with the terms in a future. However, there is a key point in this particular finding that disagrees with Sore´s (1990) statement, this study reveals that learners are aware of the strategy, which according to G. Brown & Yule (1993) seems to be one of the most important stages for students in order to make a successful achievement of a new word, this finding presents inference as an important component in word learning at reading, as Monzo & Calvo

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(2002) claim, it is one of the central cognitive process in reading comprehension. This finding confirms what Nation (2001) points out, a relationship between learners' vocabulary knowledge and their subsequent learning of vocabulary through reading, in the middle of a conscious cognitive process based on making connections.

The positive effect of teacher's mediation and academic readings on the student's lexicon

According to the collected data during this study, when the facilitator offers mediation of terms, and the students are exposed to academic texts, the students are likely to increase their academic lexicon. Patterson & Pearson (2004) consider that specific readings promote vocabulary acquisition, as through readings learners are constantly exposed to new vocabulary within the context. Nevertheless the mere exposure to readings seems to be not enough for a successful achievement of vocabulary, as we noted in this particular study and in agreement with Lugo-Neris, Jackson, & Goldstein (2010) who pointed out that constant approaching to academic documents might be not enough for a successful and deeper knowledge on academic words. Lightbown (1983) also expresses that the facilitator's mediation may intervene with successful acquisition, rather than contributing to it. In such cases the mediation offered by the teacher represents a valid complementation regarding to vocabulary

acquisition. In this scenario it is important to refer to the evidence exposed by Elley (1989) who reveals that explicit explanation of academic terms, such as providing synonyms and antonyms, or simply short explanations of words, have been demonstrated to be effective for vocabulary learning among students. When students read academic texts (college-level), chances are that they will increase their lexicon, because they will find too many new words and terminology which they did not knew before (Long & Porter 1985).

RESEARCH AND PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

Research Implications

This study describes the influence that academic readings and teacher's mediation have on students´ academic vocabulary construction in a Colombian English as a Foreign Language Program (EFL). It could be interesting for further research to find out which specific words are easier for learners to understand or what makes a word more likely to be understood for students in a Colombian context. In this way, facilitators could obtain a further understanding on word learning which might led them to develop strategies to facilitate academic vocabulary. Another aspect, which is worthy to be examined, deals with the approaches that facilitators should implement in order to take into account the relation between readings and vocabulary and how this relation could be enhanced among learners in order to have a better access to academic readings in second language (L2).

Pedagogical Implications

This study has proved once more the direct relation between words and reading comprehension, in this specific case academic words and academic texts. Our suggestion for English language teachers is to be more aware of this relation and the emerging need of having a curriculum with strong and rich vocabulary content in early stages of English as a Second Language programs. EFL programs should provide learners with a permanent support towards

academic vocabulary learning, as it might help students to use English academic terminology in demanding tasks, the academic context, and to carry out daily scholar conversations.

CONCLUSIONS

This study reveals that having students exposed to academic readings is not enough for a deep understanding of academic terms, but it also shows that giving explicit explanation does not provide enough context for students to get the meaning and the functionality of the words in a text. This is why the teacher's mediation is important, as he/she may integrate both, the exposure of students to academic readings and the explicit explanation of academic terms in an appropriate way, so that learners can achieve successfully new terminology and concepts related to the readings. As the relation is reciprocal, we consider that facilitators must be aware of it in order to improve the methodology to mediate not only readings but academic vocabulary too.

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PARTICIPANT:_____

Academic word:

Could you infer/express the meaning of this
word?_____

_____
_____
_____
_____

_____

Could you put this word into a
phrase?_____

_____
_____
_____
_____

_____

Was it difficult for you to get the meaning of this word?
Why?_____

_____
_____
_____
_____

_____

APENDIX 2: SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

INTERVIEW 1: TO PARTICIPANTS

What is academic vocabulary for you?

What is vocabulary acquisition?

How do you get the meaning of new words?

Which unknown words did you find in the last reading assigned in the class?

INTERVIEW 3: TO PARTICIPANTS

Which unknown words did you find in the last reading assigned by the teacher?

Did you know the meaning of the following words before you read the text? Juxtapose, pervasive and withstand:

What strategies do you use in order to get the meaning of new words?

INTERVIEW 4: TO PARTICIPANTS

Which unknown words did you find in the last Reading assigned by the teacher?

What strategies did you use in order to find the meaning of these words?

OK, was it a bilingual or a monolingual dictionary?

How does the facilitator introduce the new vocabulary to you?

INTERVIEW 5: TO PARTICIPANTS

What strategy did you use in order to get the meaning f unknown words?

Is it bilingual or monolingual dictionaries?

And when looking for them on the web, are these pages translators or monolingual web pages?

Which unknown words did you find in the last reading assigned by the teacher?

Do you think that your academic vocabulary lexicon has improved during this semester?