

THEORIES OF VOCABULARY ACQUISITION IN SECOND LANGUAGE ACQUISITION

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摘 要

單字是語言學習的基礎。聽、說、讀、寫是學習語文的四大要素。如果單字的認識不豐富，足以直接影響到聽、說、讀、寫的能力。在我們的英語教學裡，老師或家長們都會囑咐初學英語的中學生準備一本英文字典，告訴子弟們，遇到不認識的字要勤查字典。老師們往往先把新單字從一篇文章中挑出來教學生，然後再讀課文。但是據專家們的研究，最有利的單字學習方法是從文章的上下文中來辨識單字的意義。更而甚者，有專家建議在學習者未完全瞭解文章內容前，不要讓他先學習各個新單字的意義。總而言之經過研究而得知最好的第二語單字學習方法是多讀書、多從上下文中猜測單字的含意。同時，先認識某些出現率較高的單字，將更有助於對其他新單字意義的揣測。

Introduction

McCarthy (1990) states that most language teachers have the same opinion about vocabulary learning. They agree that the biggest unique component of any language course is vocabulary, because if students do not know enough vocabulary to express themselves, their communication in a second language cannot happen in any meaningful way. Also, Krashen and Terrel (1983) mention that vocabulary is the basic factor in communication with other people. If acquirers do not understand the meanings of the key words used by those who talk to them, they will be unable to participate in the conversation. Meanwhile, both of them agree that vocabulary is very important for the acquisition procedure. Acquisition depends crucially on the input which is comprehensible by the learners. And the ability of comprehension depends directly on the ability to understand the meaning of key words in the discourse. Therefore, acquisition will take place only when the vocabulary is meaningful to the learners.

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In Taiwan, English is our foreign language. We learn it starting in middle school. English class is always arranged in the morning, and vocabulary learning is in the first part of every English class. We believe that people usually have the best memory in the morning. So we learn English vocabulary which is separated from the text at the beginning of every English class. It symbolizes that we still remain in the midst of reciting language vocabulary. Recalling my experience, it was so difficult and boring to learn new words in English. Similarly, most students are afraid of learning new vocabulary. I have been trying to find some good ways to acquire new English words for a long time. Now I am so happy to have the chance to do research on this topic.

In this paper, I want to present some effective methods of second language vocabulary acquisition which are suggested by the current scholars. First of all, I will give some descriptions about L1 and L2 vocabulary learning. Secondly, I will mention theories of vocabulary acquisition in SLA. In this section, I will talk about mnemonic techniques, guessing meaning from context, word frequency and building vocabulary from reading. At last, I will express my own viewpoint about second language vocabulary acquisition.

Is L2 vocabulary learning like L1 vocabulary learning? Taylor (1990) states that children generally acquire language in an informal way whereas an adult may learn language by rule monitoring. In fact, whether children do “learn” as well as “acquire” a language is still unknown currently. What we should concern ourselves with is to provide learning type activities by way of discussing the formal aspects of a new vocabulary items, such as working on a definition, affixes or pronunciations. Then we can follow up with freer, acquisition type activities in which the new vocabulary is used in meaningful interaction.

Taylor emphasizes that teachers should introduce new vocabulary into the context that the learners already know, either culturally or linguistically. According to Taylor, mother-child discourse (motherese) and native to non-native discourse (foreigner talk) have the same realities. Both of them use the basic vocabulary to approximate a language. In mother-child interaction, mothers generally do not correct the grammatical errors which their children make; they only consider the conversational content. Taylor states that native to non-native conversations have similar qualities — natives pay attention to the communicative content of speech.

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O'Malley and Chamot (1990) state that memory training in second language learning has concentrated on mnemonic techniques. And mnemonic techniques facilitate vocabulary learning. Training procedures use paired associate techniques in which second language learners use a list of memorized clue words to learn vocabulary or grammatical categories in the second language. This is called the peg-word method. The other is called the key word method in which students learn sets of words through the combination of an auditory and an imagery connection. In reviewing the various mnemonic techniques for memory training, Thompson (1987) recognizes many constraints that can restrict the usefulness of these techniques for strategy training, including the extra effort required to learn the associated relationships, the insufficient meaningful relationships between the items to be learned, potential difficulties with pronunciation, individual differences such as age, previous educational experiences and cultural background, learning style attitudes, task difficulty, and proficiency level of students.

Cohen (1990) and his friend Apeh trained students of Hebrew to recall new vocabulary through paired associations. First, students were given simple instructions on how to use associations to aid in vocabulary recall, then they chose their own words from a reading text and made their own associations for them. Students practiced using the new words in a variety of cloze activities through a period of several weeks. Students most often used the prior association they had made to recall the new words, and this situation led to better performance than using a different association or nothing at all.

Cohen (1990) executed another experiment on seventeen students studying intensive Hebrew at the Jacob Hiatt Institute of Brandeis University in Jerusalem. According to his results, if learners, no matter what their class level or individual proficiency level, used some association patterns for learning vocabulary, the words were remembered for a long time. In other words, even though students had no contact with the word out of class, they retained words successfully by using association linkings.

Richards (1985) reaches similar findings as Cohen. He lists eight assumptions of vocabulary instruction. Some of them are related to associations. For example, he thinks that knowing a word means knowing the syntax associated with the word. And he mentions that knowing a word means knowing many of the variant meanings associated with a word.

According to Robinett (1978), there are categories of lexical items to show the general vocabulary learning orders for most students early in their language learning experience. They are numbers (to tell time and age), colors, kinship terms,

body parts, articles of clothing, days of the week, months of the year and foods. She mentions that guessing the meanings of words from context is an excellent method for building vocabulary. Nattinger (1988) agrees with Robinett's study. He thinks that guessing vocabulary from context is the most useful way to find the meaning of new words. He finds three ways to guess the meanings from context. First of all, guessing is guided by the topic. Secondly, guessing is guided by the other words in the text. Finally, grammatical structure and intonation in oral and punctuation in writing give advance clues. Nation and Coady (1988) give context a definition. Both of them think that

context can be viewed as morphological, syntactic, and discourse information in a given text which can be classified and described in terms of general features. This is the context with the text. But the reader also has background knowledge of the subject matter of a given text (102).

Caissie (1987) emphasizes that the goal of vocabulary in context exercises is to have students acquire a general understanding of a word through contextual clues. This type of exercise reinforces the fact that word meanings change according to the context. The key to understanding is to recognize the word through context instead of memorizing the meaning of every word. Actually, researchers have found that the high proficiency learners guessed between 85 per cent and 100 per cent of the unknown words from context (Carter and McCarthy 1988).

Kruse (1987) mentions that for the native speaker of English, the most general way to acquire vocabulary is guessing from context and/or word formations.

...In short, the basic skill in vocabulary expansion is the habit of guessing from the context, using both grammatical and pragmatic clues. This habit appears to be normal in listening to and reading the native language, for those who really listen and read.... (Twaddell, 1972, p. 174)

Most students' first reaction on facing a new word in a text is to stop and try to find it's definition in a dictionary, even if the rest of the sentence explains it. According to Kruse, the ESL (English as a Second Language) students cannot begin to read with complete comprehension except he has learned to conquer the unknown word by using contextual aids. Using contextual aids mean both the formation of the word itself and the environment in which it is involved.

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Another researcher, River suggests that students should take risks to make intelligent guess about word meaning from the context and/or illustrations. Teachers should not expect students to come up with exact definitions while guessing in this manner (Kruse 1987).

Meanwhile, Twaddell recommends:

Do not focus on words that are likely to be unfamiliar; do not punish guesses which are vague; punish only guesses which are purely random, and then practice correctively with guided guessing using the available grammatical and pragmatic clues in the context (in Croft 1972:276).

Kruse makes a list of various types of contextual aids in vocabulary development especially appropriate for ESL students. First, building the ability of recognizing component parts of words, word families, such as prefixes, suffixes, and roots, and so on is probably the most important vocabulary skill for an ESL student. In this way, students will reduce the number of completely new words and will increase their control of the English lexicon. Secondly, using visual aids, such as pictures, diagrams, and charts, are helpful for the ESL students in guessing the meaning. These clues are also obvious to native speakers. Thirdly, students must learn to notice the many types of highly helpful definition clues, such as parentheses or footnotes, synonyms and antonyms. Fourthly, getting inference clues from discourse is useful in obtaining meanings, such as example clues, summary clues and experience clues. Example clues are where the meaning for the word can be predicted from an example, they are often accompanied by i.e., e.g., and for example. Summary clues are the sum of the information in a sentence or paragraph, and from that the ESL students can understand the meaning of a word. Experience clues mean that the learner can understand a word by recalling a similar situation he has encountered and making the appropriated inference. Fifth, there are general aids, such as knowing the function of a word. They do not help the students with specific meanings but they narrow the possibilities.

Honeyfield (1987) emphasizes the importance of context in vocabulary learning, also. He agrees that attempting to infer the meaning of the word provides for meaningful learning and it is more efficient. This is because the attempt to infer brings the unfamiliar word into contact with an active searching and thinking process which involves consideration of possible definitions of the word. Honeyfield advocates three kinds of exercises for ESL students vocabulary acquisition. One is cloze

exercises. A cloze exercise is a suitable length of paragraph which some words have been deleted. Another one is word-in-context exercises. A word-in-context exercise is a suitable length of reading paragraph which contains some unfamiliar words to the students. The other one is context enrichment exercises. These exercises give students a much greater chance to guess the meaning of an unknown word through reading more and more context. All of them enable students to infer word meanings from context clues.

Honeyfield mentions another study of ESL vocabulary learning. He talks about word frequency. In his research, if a student knew nearly 3000 English words, he would already know 80 or 90 percent of the words in almost any given text of English. In his opinion, if there is a relatively small number of words viewed as to be highly helpful, then systematic vocabulary selection and teaching would look to be a practical task. According to his study, even a very smart ESL student who acquired 3000 selected words from a course, there are still about 10 and 20 percent of words which are unknown to him in that course content. In general, students will learn most of the frequent words, and some of the less-frequent words. But in real situations, there will still be an enormous number of infrequent words which are unknown. Students may encounter those infrequent words in reading at any time. People can never solve this problem by making effort to increase the content vocabulary. To solve this problem Twaddell (1972) writes,

the reader or listener encountering a 'new word' can panic, especially if he has been trained to panic. Or he can have acquired the skill of inferring from context....(274).

Twaddell's solution is that to infer an unfamiliar word from context.

Fox's study (1987), in most ESL textbook series, usually present 1500 to 2000 words in the first three years of English class. But this number of vocabulary is still far from an adequate reading vocabulary. People only could say that the learners have successfully completed phase one of their language learning, and they are ready to go on to phase two now. They are making the transition from reading simplified to reading unsimplified English. According to Fox, it is unfortunate because many ESL students never reach phase two. They drop from phase one directly into phase three (reading unsimplified English) and tend to sink or swim. Many of them obviously sink. How can ESL students learn language from phase one through phase two until phase three? Based on Fox's viewpoint, he suggests that reading should be introduced early and students should be given a great number of reading at all

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levels. It is important to take the time and extensive practice in order to developing vocabulary and reading skills. Fox believes that at the college level, students should be assigned to read at least seven books a semester and hand in comprehension questions, exercises, summaries, etc., for each book.

Haastrup, Faerch and Phillipson (1984) reminds us that anyone who tries to give the exact definition of a word will run into many difficulties, because every word has its potential for meaning. And they believe “only specific meaning in specific contexts” (78). Nattinger (1988) suggests that it would be important in the beginning to make learners not have to know all the words of a text before they can understand its meaning. If the text has some unknown words, it will not prevent comprehension. To understand the context will be the greatest assistance in decoding these unfamiliar words. He emphasizes that learners need not know all the meanings of any particular word. Usually, they can figure out the general meanings of those words from the context. In his opinion, a dictionary should only be used as a last method in finding the meaning of a new word.

In Taiwan, a very important task of facing the first English class in middle school is to prepare an English-Chinese translation dictionary. When students encounter an unknown word, they check the word in the dictionary immediately. Ridiculously, some students spend a lot of time reciting all the words listed in the dictionary in order to learn the English vocabulary. Really speaking, until now I still believe that memorizing is a necessary process to acquire language vocabulary. But we must know how to use the mnemonic techniques for the associated linking among the words, not just reciting every word. And the most effective way to acquire language vocabulary is reading a lot, guessing meaning from the context and paying attention to the word frequency.

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