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Extensive reading and vocabulary development

Lingwistyka Stosowana / Applied Linguistics / Angewandte Linguistik nr 3,
177-183

2010

Artykuł został opracowany do udostępnienia w internecie przez Muzeum Historii Polski w ramach prac podejmowanych na rzecz zapewnienia otwartego, powszechnego i trwałego dostępu do polskiego dorobku naukowego i kulturalnego. Artykuł jest umieszczony w kolekcji cyfrowej bazhum.muzhp.pl, gromadzącej zawartość polskich czasopism humanistycznych i społecznych.

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1. Foreword

Foreign vocabulary acquisition is often discussed in the literature in connection with *intensive* and *extensive* reading, which is the traditional, the most general division of the reading types. The latter type in particular is regarded as contributing to large vocabulary gains and the processes are described as reciprocal, i.e. the better reader one is, the more vocabulary s/he acquires, and conversely, the more vocabulary one knows, the better reader s/he becomes. However, as the results of studies discussed in this article show, the relationship between those two processes is much more complicated.

It was estimated in research that texts created for extensive reading should not include more than 5% of unknown tokens (i.e. all individual words which are counted each time they appear in a text even if they are repeated), excluding proper names, for expanding lexical knowledge, not more than 2% so that the text would be comprehended and guessing from context would take place, but not less than 1 – 2% so that there was new vocabulary to be learnt (I.S.P. Nation 2001: 150). Continuous texts on the same subject, in which the vocabulary is repeated, are optimal conditions for learning. Vocabulary acquisition in such circumstances is regarded as a gradual process of learning from one word encounter adding to, or strengthening small amounts of knowledge gained from previous ones. That is a very „fragile” process. If the small amount of dictionary knowledge gained is not strengthened with the next encounter of the word soon, then the knowledge will be wasted. For educational practice and long-term retention of new vocabulary there must be the multiplicity of exposures to the words through great amounts of materials to read and additional direct vocabulary studying or rehearsal after the initial encounter.

2. Incidental vocabulary learning

It is claimed that native-speakers acquire words „incidentally”, but it has to be pointed out that the term *incidental* is not used in the meaning of „subconscious”

here. In the latest literature the topic is also discussed in terms of *implicit*, „as learning without awareness of what is being learnt” (R. DeKeyser 2003: 314) and *explicit* learning. However, the implicit/explicit division refers only to a body of information which can be perceived as such during learning. Hence, the meaning of words is learnt deliberately and it requires deep processing at the semantic and conceptual levels paying attention to the form-meaning connections. More successful learners use sophisticated metacognitive learning strategies, as e.g. inferring word meanings from context and through semantic features or imagery, i.e. more elaborately (J. R. Anderson 1995). Such processing results in retention of new lexical information in long-term memory. N. C. Ellis (1994, 1997) claims that semantic aspects of words are acquired while focusing attention on them, what can be learnt incidentally, however, is the form, collocations as well as phonetic and phonological features of new words, following frequent exposures and the articulation of word forms, which develops as a result of practice. In the studies on this topic *implicit*, i.e. „incidental” learning, is most often regarded as the condition in which the students are not pre-warned about the following test on the target items.

The researchers, such as W. E. Nagy, P. A. Herman and R. C. Anderson (1985), carried out studies on vocabulary learning during intensive and extensive reading by American native-speakers. They concluded that such big vocabulary gains as they had would not be possible through explicit vocabulary instruction. Similarly, the studies on incidental learning of words through listening confirm this claim (W. B. Elley 1989). However, in the studies where incidental vocabulary gain was considerable the researchers noticed that the probability of it is higher, the sooner the retention of the words is tested. For example, in the research by M. Horst, T. Cobb and P. Meara (1998) the learners were given tests shortly after completing the reading task. The results, however, do not tell us if the words were retained by learners in their long-term memory and the research was not described from psycholinguistic perspective – there is no insight into how the subjects process the words in the text while reading.

R. Ellis (1995), in his analysis of the research results, found out that there must be made a distinction between *comprehension* and *acquisition* of vocabulary or retention of some knowledge after the task completion, and that there is a weak relationship between them „there were many cases where comprehension was high but acquisition low ... and, conversely, cases where comprehension was quite low but acquisition high” (R. Ellis 1995: 424f). He claims that the acquisition increases with the rise of the number of contexts in which the word appears. R. Ellis in his studies clearly distinguished „comprehension” assessment from that of the „acquisition”. The former was assessed by questions while reading or listening, the latter by tests – two days, one month and 2,5 months later.

There are considerable effects of having access to a bilingual dictionary on vocabulary learning while reading. The findings from studies show that the students with the access to the computerised dictionary, especially those of low ability,

acquired more vocabulary knowledge than those who did not. As it is claimed, however, the use of dictionary definitions in teaching is mainly driven by the need of written language use for communication and by the desire to achieve the level of precision in terminology by scientists. Hence, it can be more appropriate in the situation of teaching Languages for Special Purposes (LSP).

C. Brown (1993) in her experiment with the use of video-disc program found out that if the words are salient, there is more probability of learning them. Similarly, D. M. Chun and J. L. Plass (1996) in their study investigated the use of multimedia programs and visuals such as pictures and video clips illustrating the words, which were used apart from textual forms. In the case of words for which a picture to show the meaning was used without textual or video annotations, the score was better on the later acquisition tests. They drew conclusions that good static images are recalled better over time. The findings also point to the fact that the format of the test similar to the stimulus material facilitates their retention (J. H. Hulstijn 2003).

3. Types of contextual information available to the readers for inferring word meanings

While dealing with the problem of unknown vocabulary during reading, teachers have a few techniques at their disposal. Apart from the most popular ones such as pre-reading activities in the form of vocabulary presentations, using glosses with the text or presenting the meaning using native language equivalents, students apply their own strategies for inferring word meanings, especially outside the class. The most basic metacognitive strategy involves evaluating whether or not the unknown lexical item is worth figuring it out. However, inferring the meaning from information available in the text is regarded as the most important strategy among many. It involves deeper processing which contributes to the comprehension of the text and vocabulary learning. In their study D. F. Clarke and I.S.P. Nation (1980) suggest the following steps as strategies that can be taught and used when dealing with the unknown word:

- identifying its class,
- scanning the surrounding sentence for collocations,
- looking for cohesive devices linking the sentences in the text,
- analysing its morphological structure.

R. J. Sternberg and J. S. Powell (1983) proposed a comprehensive framework that distinguishes between „external” and „internal” context of the unknown word that students can make use of while inferring the meaning of a word. They categorise the former according to the information available in the surrounding text. The latter concerns the morphological structure of the word, i.e. prefix, stem and suffix.

If the word occurs in many contexts, it is more guessable because then the contexts provide useful clues, depending on the density of the unknown words in the text. This is the situation when considering external context, but in the case of internal context, the mediating variables are similar. The strategy of using internal context for inferring the meaning is encouraged if there are many words in the text that are internally interpretable. For example, if someone has knowledge of Greek or Latin, it can provide internal clues for academic vocabulary items as they often come from these languages.

However, R. J. Sternberg and J. S. Powell's framework is not exhaustive (J. Read 2000). As it was found out, it lacks the category of those clues used by learners which relate to the structure of the text. The strategies connected with them can be divided into: (i) syntactic – which is identifying the part of speech of the word and searching for grammatical clues, (ii) discoursal – which is looking for expressions of functions such as: definition, comparison, contrast, cause–effect, question–answer or main idea–details.

Most of the types of clues facilitating inferring word meanings from context apply both to L1 and L2 readers, as the research shows (e.g. I.S.P. Nation and J. Coady 1988). However, in the L2 studies, in comparison to the situation of native speakers, an important factor influencing the effective use of inferencing strategies is the level of the learners' language proficiency. If it is low, there is a large number of unknown words, i.e. their density is high. It is typical for a second language reader who may be unable to make use of contextual clues because the words providing them may be unknown themselves. One of the most convincing estimations for the necessary vocabulary threshold needed for second language readers of English is the vocabulary of at least 3000 word families, which is required in order to know about 95% of running words in a text (B. Laufer 1992). It was concluded on the basis of research that knowing such a number of words, the density of unknown words is one in twenty, on average.

Knowledge of the first language vocabulary while reading the second language text can also be the source of clues. L. C. Seibert (1945) was a pioneer in writing about lexical inferencing based on the use of cognate words shared by Western European languages. In his studies both the students' mother tongue and the target language originated from this group. He showed that the speakers of one of these languages can guess the meaning of many words from the other.

4. Inferring word meanings using clues available in a natural text

In the study conducted by M. Bensoussan and B. Laufer (1984), the researchers analysed the context for 70 target words from an „unedited” text, i.e. not specially

written to offer clues aiming to give the learners a chance of guessing the words successfully (J. Read 2000), of about 600 words. They found out no contextual clues for 41% and only 19% of the remaining ones were clearly cued by the surrounding text. Some other studies, for example by E. K. Schatz and R. S. Baldwin (1986) also point to the conclusion that the assumption of understanding unfamiliar words being necessarily made easier by the presence of context, may be false. In the research on the effectiveness of lexical guessing, the results are not consistent and they depend on whether the subjects have been trained in it before or not. Also the study by M. Bensoussan and B. Laufer (1984) shows that learners make guesses on narrow basis and the inferred meaning has little relationship to the wider context of the text.

C. F. Van Parreren and M. Schouten-Van Parreren (1981) found out that learners operated on four identified linguistic levels, in the following order from the lowest to highest: syntactic (i.e. the structure of the sentence in which the word occurred), semantic (i.e. meaning found in the immediate and wider context of the word), lexical (i.e. the form of the word) and stylistic (i.e. the exact usage of the word in this context).

In the study, the researchers mentioned above adopted the procedure, following which pairs of learners, matched according to their language proficiency level, produced „think-aloud” accounts of reasoning processes while inferring the meanings of the unknown words. Focusing on differences between „strong” and „weak” learners, it was found out that the weaker ones who have generally more limited knowledge, have more difficulty in integrating information from different sources. The research also shows that the inferences based on partial knowledge can be misleading and the learners often fail to check their guesses against the wider context.

The authors introduced strategy training in their studies as a way of developing learners’ lexical inferencing skills. The experiments show convincingly that the skill is not easily acquired. They concluded that strategy training is a complex activity and it is difficult to evaluate the effectiveness of training in lexical inferencing alone separated from other strategies concerning reading comprehension. Significant reviews of research on learner strategies were also written by J. M. O’Malley and A. U. Chamot (1990) or R. Oxford (1990) who support this view.

In sum, it must be stated that the multiplicity of issues connected with reading and vocabulary acquisition makes this area fascinating both for the researchers and teachers. Although many of the aspects researched appear to be quite problematic, they are worth investigating. It should result in better understanding of the mental processes involved in lexical inferencing, vocabulary acquisition as well as strategy use by the learners. As a consequence, it may also result generally in working out more effective ways of facilitating foreign language acquisition and use.

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Czytanie ekstensywne a poszerzanie zasobu słownictwa

Artykuł ten prezentuje zagadnienia związane ze zjawiskiem tzw. domysłu leksykalnego i z przyswajaniem słownictwa podczas czytania ekstensywnego. Omówione są rodzaje wskazówek w tekstach, zarówno w tych specjalnie stworzonych, jak i autentycznych, którymi powinni się uczniowie kierować. Wiele badań wskazuje na fakt, iż umiejętność domyslenia się znaczeń słów w tekście niekoniecznie wiąże się jednak z zapamiętywaniem tego słownictwa. Z analizy wielu tekstów oryginalnych wynika też, że nie zawsze istnieje duża ilość wskazówek naprowadzających uczniów i umożliwiających domyslenie się znaczenia konkretnych słów. Z tego względu nauczyciele mogą stosować szereg technik ułatwiających domysł leksykalny oraz prowadzić treningi tego typu strategii wśród uczniów. Przedstawione są też wyniki badań dotyczących treningu strategii mających na celu domyslenie się znaczenia nieznanego słownictwa w trakcie czytania. Autorka podkreśla, że istnieje tu wiele problemów związanych z zagadnieniami poruszonymi i badanymi przez naukowców, jednak warto podjąć ten temat w celu podwyższenia efektywności uczenia się i nauczania języków obcych.