Introduction

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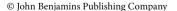
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Introduction

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Over the last twenty years much has been done in the field of vocabulary in the context of the acquisition of foreign or second languages (L2). Recurrent research themes over the past two decades include: the construct of vocabulary knowledge, e.g. the distinction between receptive and productive knowledge, and between knowledge and use (Henriksen 1999, Read & Chapelle 2001); the relationship between vocabulary knowledge and language proficiency, particularly in respect to reading (Hazenberg & Hulstijn 1996, Hu & Nation 2000); the role of word frequency in vocabulary learning, e.g. the cost benefit of learning frequent, infrequent and specialized words (Coxhead 2000, Nation 2001); task effect on learning, e.g. task induced involvement (Hulstijn & Laufer 2001, Laufer & Hulstijn 2001); the use of dictionaries, paper and electronic, (Bogaards 1991, Chun & Plass 1996, Knight 1994); interactive tasks (Ellis, Tanaka & Yamazaki 1994); explicit versus implicit learning (Ellis 1994); incidental versus intentional learning (Ellis & He 1999, Horst, Cobb & Meara 1998, Kelly 1986, Qian 1996); learning new words versus learning new meanings of already known words (Bogaards 2001); patterns of vocabulary development over time (Laufer 1998, Meara 1997, Palmberg 1987, Schmitt 1998); strategies used by learners to comprehend and learn new words (Cohen & Aphek 1981, Sanaoui 1995, Schmitt 1997); and testing vocabulary knowledge: size and depth, receptive and productive (Bogaards 2000, Laufer & Nation 1995, 1999, Nation 1983, Read 1993, 2000, Wesche & Paribakht 1996). The growth of interest in L2 vocabulary since the days of 'a neglected aspect of language learning' (Meara 1980) has also been reflected in authored and edited books specifically devoted to vocabulary (Arnaud & Béjoint 1992, Bogaards 1994, Coady & Huckin 1997, Hatch & Brown 1995, Nation 1990, 2001, Schmitt & McCarthy 1997, Schmitt 2000, Read 2000).

Most of the contributions that have been selected for this volume are papers that were presented at the Second-Language Vocabulary Acquisition Colloquium, which took place at Leiden University in March 2002, and which was organised under the auspices of the European Second Language Association (EUROSLA) by the editors of this book. This Colloquium was sponsored by the University of Haifa, the Universiteit Leiden Center for Linguistics (ULCL), the Leids Universiteits Fonds (LUF), and the Universiteit van Amsterdam.

1.   Overview

The contributions that appear in this volume have been grouped under three themes:

- – Selection
- – Acquisition
- – Testing

We will first provide a brief summary of the three sections and then address the issues of agreement and differences between the contributors that result in an agenda for further research.

The first section is devoted to the selection of words to be taught. Paul Nation presents a comparison of two frequency lists: the General Service List, supplemented more recently by the Academic Word List, and the new, more up-to-date lists of words compiled on the basis of the British National Corpus. Tom Cobb and Marlise Horst raise the question whether a word list similar to the Academic Word List in English can also be found in French. Svenja Adolphs and Norbert Schmitt study the coverage of frequent words in different spoken contexts.

The second section is devoted to questions of L2 vocabulary acquisition. Frank Boers, Murielle Demecheleer and June Eyckmans investigate whether etymological elaboration can be exploited to enhance the learning of figurative idioms. Jan-Arjen Mondria and Boukje Wiersma examine whether the extra effort that is necessary for bi-directional learning from L2 to L1 and from L1 to L2 is more beneficial for the retention of word meaning and form than unidirectional learning. In a controlled experiment, Nan Jiang demonstrates the pervasive influence of L1 semantic structures on L2 semantic development, and shows that semantic transfer continues to mediate L2 word use in profi-

cient L2 speakers. Jean-Marc Dewaele addresses a feature of lexico-pragmatic competence, the use of colloquial vocabulary in L2 speech, and shows that such use is not only related to L2 proficiency but also to personality factors. Though David Qian's paper does not address vocabulary acquisition as such, it is, nevertheless, relevant to the topic since it examines the strategies learners use when encountering unfamiliar words in a text, particularly the strategy of inferring meaning from context. Researchers often claim that inferring a word's meanings is the first step to its acquisition, and that to infer the meaning properly one should use clues from the global meaning of the text. Qian, however, shows that though learners think they use global clues, they most often do not. In fact, they practice a variety of different strategies.

The last section of this book is devoted to testing. Anne Vermeer presents a Measure of Lexical Richness (MLR), which takes into account the difficulty of the words used by the learners. Tine Greidanus, Paul Bogaards, Elisabeth van der Linden, Lydius Nienhuis and Tom de Wolf study the content and concurrent validities of a deep word knowledge test for advanced learners of French. In the last chapter, John Read discusses three distinct lines of development in the application of depth to second language vocabulary acquisition: precision of meaning, comprehensive word knowledge, and network knowledge.

2.   Some items for a research agenda

Although all the papers address one of the three themes of selection, acquisition, or testing, they often diverge on the conceptualization of central issues. We will now examine these points of divergence and suggest that they constitute a starting point of a research agenda in the next decade. We will also offer an additional perspective on some issues discussed by the authors in the hope that this too will inspire future researchers of L2 vocabulary.

The basic unit selected for vocabulary research is different for different researchers. Whereas Nation mainly deals with word families, the study by Adolphs & Schmitt is, for practical reasons, about individual word forms. Mondria & Wiersma present one-word verbs and nouns as learning material, whereas Boers, Demecheleer & Eyckmans examine idiomatic multi-word expressions. In the acquisition section, the words to be learned have, in most cases, one particular sense, or several closely related meanings (Jiang). However, the different formats discussed in the section on testing all have to do with aspects of polysemy. In a comprehensive theory of L2 acquisition, one that explicitly

takes the lexical component into account, these different aspects of the lexical material will need to be integrated. Studies in lexical semantics conducted from an L2 perspective may lead to more explicit stands on this subject.

In the domain of selecting vocabulary for language syllabi and tests, several questions arise with regard to using word frequency as the basic criterion for selection. We do not contend that the most frequent meanings appear in most texts that learners read. But in some contexts, these frequent words can be used in a less frequent, possibly non-related sense, or else be a part of an idiomatic expression that has to be understood as a whole. If this additional sense goes unnoticed, lack of comprehension may occur. In productive use, on the other hand, knowledge of the most frequent sense(s) of a lexical item does not necessarily imply that the learner will be able to use it properly. One research avenue can therefore explore how unknown word properties hinder comprehension and production, particularly with respect to advanced learners. A question of inquiry would investigate what aspects of meaning, grammar, phonology, and discourse would still have to be learned to enable correct comprehension and correct use of frequent vocabulary items for which the learner already possesses a single or several central meanings.

A related theoretical question concerns the effect that multiple meanings have on a word's frequency. Words with several meanings, polysemes or homonyms, may appear higher up on frequency lists than monosemous words by virtue of the combined frequencies of their multiple meanings. Hence, the content of these lists cannot be taken to be homogeneous in terms of learner tasks. More learning effort must be invested to acquire words with multiple meanings.

From the learner's point of view, a crucial factor in L2 vocabulary acquisition regardless of word frequency, is word 'learnability'. This is the ease or difficulty with which a particular word can be acquired. Two words may have the same frequency, but one may be more difficult to learn than the other due to factors which have to do with the features of the word, or with other words related to it in the target language, or in the learner's L1 (Laufer 1990, 1997, Swan 1997). For example, a word which is a cognate in a learner's L1 may be infrequent, but it may present no difficulty in learning. On the other hand, a word that is frequent in L2 which has no semantic equivalent, or is lexicalized differently in L1 is hard to understand and acquire (cf. Jiang, this volume).

Because of the aforementioned limitations of frequency lists in terms of text coverage and word learnability, we feel that frequency lists cannot be the sole basis for the selection and gradation of vocabulary for language instruc-

tion. Further research should explore other factors that may determine selection, such as word learnability, or the specific needs of particular learners.

As to the acquisition section, it is noteworthy that the different chapters stress different aspects of the learning process and present rather different learning conditions. Whereas Boers, Demecheleer & Eyckmans (with the exception of one of their tests) investigate receptive vocabulary learning, Mondria & Wiersma study receptive as well as productive learning. Jiang measures the speed of response, the degree of confidence in providing an answer, and the learner's perception of task difficulty. Dewaele counts the proportion of colloquial words in a sample of speech. Qian investigates the mismatch between what learners think they do when encountering new words and what they actually do. Furthermore, the subjects in Mondria & Wiersma's experiment learn vocabulary intentionally, whereas Boers, Demecheleer & Eyckmans look into forms of incidental acquisition, defining incidental vocabulary learning as learning words without the intention to learn them, as a by-product of another activity. While most researchers of incidental learning use reading texts as context for new words, Boers, Demecheleer & Eyckmans use a computerized program. Further research could compare the various media (reading, listening, CALL) to see to what extent they would make a difference in acquisition. Following one of Dewaele's ideas, relating proficiency to the use or non use of a certain type of vocabulary, further research could address the phenomenon of lexical avoidance in a developmental perspective.

Vocabulary learning has been measured, not only immediately after the learning session, but also after some delay: two weeks in Mondria & Wiersma's study, and one week in Boer, Demecheleer & Eyckmans's study. The fact that the effectiveness of different learner treatments is no longer exclusively measured immediately after the learning, as was the practice not very long ago, is an important step forward.

The papers differ in their approach to what is traditionally called 'semantisation', i.e. the process of getting acquainted with the meaning of the items to learn. Mondria & Wiersma present their subjects with translations in the other language. Boers, Demecheleer & Eyckmans' subjects had to infer the meaning of the idioms from their membership in a particular category of source domains and they were provided with feedback to their answers. In Qian's study, the task was to infer meaning from text context using all possible clues, but without verification of meaning. Qian's finding that learners don't use contextual clues properly, together with what is known about the perils of guessing without verification of meaning, suggest that semantisation through

guessing alone may not be appropriate in vocabulary research, let alone vocabulary instruction.

The importance of instructional intervention is convincingly demonstrated by Jiang. Multiple exposures alone are sometimes not enough to overcome learnability problems and plateaus in semantic development. Further research could seek empirical evidence for the effectiveness of instruction which takes into account interlingual semantic differences.

One of the most important phases in vocabulary learning which has not been researched sufficiently is consolidation of knowledge after initial presentation, with or without a word focused task. Without such consolidation, the number of words learnt is bound to be low. The results of the studies in this book show that this is indeed the case. The overall recall results on the delayed test showed not higher than 50% retention, even in the intentional learning condition. Further research should investigate the efficiency of various consolidation tasks. This is essential to our understanding of vocabulary acquisition, as in real life, new words are rarely remembered after practice in one task, or after one or several exposures in a single text.

The testing section demonstrates the importance of conceptualizing the construct of word knowledge, as stated by Read. Perhaps good correlations between the depth, breadth and lexical richness tests indicate that we are basically testing the same construct of knowledge. A more rigorous definition of vocabulary knowledge in the future will also provide a better insight into the tests used by researchers. The chapters by Greidanus et al. and by Vermeer clearly show that the construction and validation of vocabulary tests is an intricate and time consuming endeavour, but one that will be crucial for all types of vocabulary learning research.

We hope that the papers in this book will provide a useful contribution to the ever growing research on second language vocabulary, and will inspire students and scholars to pursue the various research avenues that the field can offer.

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