Vocabulary learning in young language learners

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Abstract
This article examines the similarities and differences between first, second and foreign language acquisition. Furthermore, it analyses two ways of learning vocabulary: in an incidentally way and in a accidental one. On the other hand, it highlights the importance of participation in oral conversations on behalf of learners so as to achieve the so-called communicative competence,which is the final goal. Finally, some research in this field is considered as empirical evidences.
Keywords: First language acquisition, Second language acquisition, Vocabulary, Processes, Similarities and differences, Incidentally acquisition, Intentionally acquisition, Empirical research

Título: El aprendizaje de vocabulario en jóvenes estudiantes de idiomas.

Resumen
Este artículo examina las similitudes y diferencias en los procesos de adquisición de la lengua materna y de la segunda lengua o lengua extranjera. A su vez, analiza dos maneras de aprender vocabulario: de manera intencional y de forma accidental. Por otro lado, resalta la importancia de la participación en las conversaciones orales para el logro de la competencia comunicativa. Finalmente, varios experimentos en este campo son considerados como pruebas empíricas.
Palabras clave: Adquisición de la lengua materna, Adquisición de la segunda lengua, Vocabulario, Procesos, Similitudes y diferencias, Adquisición accidental, Adquisición intencional, Investigaciones empíricas.

INTRODUCTION AND JUSTIFICATION

As far as first language acquisition is concerned, when babies turn two, their word development experiences a significant change. Suddenly, their vocabulary begins growing. Some researchers have investigated that before children's second year; they know a few dozen words. However, when they are two years old, their word power grows extremely. During this period of time, babies learn up to ten words a week, while during some particularly precise period of word learning, children learn up to ten words a day. The vocabulary appearance is particularly astonishing, knowing that babies do not get any help during their word learning process. Adults do not use to explaining to a child what a word means. Children directly pick up new words from their own atmosphere, from their environment. Thus, 2-years-old children are capable of figuring out quickly what a word means after hearing it just once and after that, they remember the word. This ability is known as fast mapping. In other words, throughout L1 acquisition, very young children learn new words after being exposed to them once. This vocabulary acquisition increases during the academic years. (Walker, Greenwood, Hart and Carta (1994) and Wells (1986).

Regarding L2 words acquisition, there is testimony that target language words are better acquired when learners pick them up indirect and unconsciously, such as when having a conversation or reading a book, rather than when learners memorize these words with effort. When unconscious word learning takes place, words are acquired as a consequence of another activity. The election between efforts toward learning words and allowing language learners acquire new words through exposure is known as the choice between intentional or incidental vocabulary acquisition. (Gordon, T. 1956)

Many authors emphasize that there are several similarities between the processes immersed in L1 and L2 learning and acquisition. Children, who have practice in drawing upon different types of information source in understanding their L1, also are capable of transferring some of these abilities and strategies to L2 learning. (Brewster, J. Ellis, G. & Gerard, D. (1992), In Coyle 2000).

The most vocabulary items are acquired 'incidentally', that is, as a by-product of the learner being exposure to a listening, reading, speaking or writing activity, and, on the other hand, that few words are acquired by an act of 'intentional' learning, as in the learning of a bilingual vocabulary list. Some educationalists have therefore advocated the

use of activities conducive to incidental vocabulary learning (for instance, massive reading and listening activities). Therefore, using storytelling in classroom provide such a meaningful context in order for children to learn and acquire the language incidentally (Hulstijn, J. H. 2001).

On the other hand, (Ellis 1994, 1995, In Sawada, K. 2009) discussed how a considerable number of vocabulary items are acquired incidentally or intentionally without explicit instruction throughout a person's life and saw experience as being a powerful part of learning. He explained that this is a simple result of use: "*a new vocabulary item whose meaning is apparent from its context is simply understood and learned implicitly or incidentally, without conscious effort to commit it to memory*" (pp. 219)

Other well-known authors such as Ellis (1985) or Swain (1985) stress the importance of the L2 production, as a condition for learning; apart from the understanding. The learners' communicative competence, especially in the early acquisition of a second language, is the result of the child's participation in collaborative conversations that allow the adult "scaffold" their language productions and provide them contingent feedback; which helps learners to enhance their language use's accuracy and their L2 knowledge.

In this sense, Bruner (1982) stressed the importance of adults' role when helping children use the mother tongue socially and culturally appropriate in order for them to learn. Zanón (1992) transferred this principle to the context of the initial learning a foreign language, in which the influence of the teacher will be decisive in determining the use of the new linguistic system by the children. As a result, teachers are the key. They must plan activities in which children have to use the L2 both productively and receptively.

Learning a foreign language requires opportunities to understand and produce language significantly. From this perspective, the demand for activities that are meaningful to students has led to recent methodological proposals based on topics or tasks (task-based Approaches). In these approaches, the language is learnt in interactive and cooperative contexts, from conducting exchanges, at first must be primarily oral. For this reason, the teaching units should be based on centers of interest that are relevant for children to program activities that generate the use of language, and not vice versa. Within this framework, the stories are included as a key element for teaching and learning a foreign language and not simply as a complementary activity. (Coyle 2000)

According to (Ellis, R. 1999) interaction serves as a means of attaining the type of mental activity needed for new material to be stored in long-term memory. Interactions, which are the conversation that learners participate in, are important because it is in this context where learners obtain information about the correctness and, more important, about their incorrectness of their utterances (VanPatten, B. & Williams, J. 1998). Negotiation for meaning, and specifically negotiation work that unleashes interactional adjustments by interlocutors, promotes acquisition because it connects input, internal learner abilities, exclusively selective attention, and output in productive ways (Long 1996, In VanPatten, B. & Williams, J. 1998). As a result, implicit feedback, which includes metalinguistic explanations and corrections, is very important to make the input comprehensible. Three examples of strategies to reach it are described below.

- Clarification requests; expressions created to elicit clarification of the interlocutor's preceding utterances.
- Comprehension checks; expressions that are used to confirm and corroborate that an interlocutor has understood.
- Recasts; a rephrasing of a non-target-like utterance utilizing a more target-like form while keeping the original meaning (VanPatten, B. & Williams, J. 1998).

EMPIRICAL RESEARCH

Pica, Young & Doughty (1987), did an experimental study trying to check the level of understanding achieved by non-native students under the two following situations: receiving a simplified input or an input with adjustments in the interaction. With the results obtained, it was statistically determined the superiority of input that is received in situations of interaction.

Further, empirical research in Japan has examined a college's students Japanese learning English as a foreign language. This study found that the degrees of understanding were higher when repetitions were used, and it also found that the level of understanding was similar when students listened to version syntactically simplified and the not simplified version but with repetitions used. This fact leads the authors to claim that: "*Listening texts are often syntactically simplified to aid comprehension. Although this may aid comprehension, this modification may not be necessary if other modifications, such as repetition are employed*" (Cervantes & Gainer 1992, In Peñate & Bazo 1998, pp.31). Other research has gone even a

little further and have stated that interactive input achieved a greater degree of understanding, being precisely the use of repetitions one of the main characteristics in that interactive input (Pica et al. 1987, In Peñate & Bazo 1998).

The use of comprehension checks it is also necessary to make input comprehensible. (Long & Pica 1986) did a comparative study in which it was appreciated a significantly higher degree of understanding by the students whose teachers used questions intended to assess their degree of understanding. In this sense, (Lynch 1988, In Peñate & Bazo 1998) compared how one teacher told a story to native and non-native students of different levels. They detected a significant increase in checks on the ability to follow the story when the level of the listener decreased. As a result, comprehension checks become one of the teacher's key strategies to strike up a genuine interaction with the class, due to the fact that doubts arise spontaneously.

Within the interactional adjustments and in addition to repetitions and comprehension checks, the non-linguistic aspects as a support of presenting input, are also very important. The studies that have attempted to identify and analyze the teacher's role in the L2 classroom have paid little attention to the use he/she makes of non-linguistic aspects. Perhaps the only exception in this area has been the analysis of the use of visuals aids such as objects, pictures, and so on, that the teacher makes. This use is very frequently in the L2 learning context. (Tardif 1994, In Peñate & Bazo 1998), in order to analyze the input used by a kindergarten teacher in a language immersion context, stands out as one of the teacher's main characteristics his use of drawings, objects, people, etc., as elements that allow create a context which facilitated the children's understanding and comprehension.

Further confirmation can be found in the report made by Mueller (1980), who investigated the effect that could have or not, the fact of having a visual aid on the level of understanding of the L2 by German learners. The results detected two aspects that are interesting: if the visual aid was before or immediately after the linguistic input, the understanding's level by the students increased significantly; the visual support increased the understanding inversely proportional to the students' linguistic level. Therefore, the visual support is essential in the early stages.

In contrast, the study of body movement (facial expressions, hand movements, mime, etc.) has been almost completely ignored. However, the teacher can convey in a conscious or unconscious way a lot of information through really exaggerated gestures. Therefore, the teacher should transform his/her body language in an educational tool to help students understand the oral input given. This body language that aims to help students in their understanding is obviously much more emphatic and exaggerated as the one used in real life (Peñate & Bazo 1998). (Al-shabbi 1993, In Peñate & Bazo 1998, pp. 36) proposes the following example that corroborates this theory *"the teacher may extend joined hands while saying, Open your book, but certainly does not wish students to use this gesture in the real world".* In this sense (Wesche & Ready 1985, In Peñate & Brazo) emphasise that *"gestures are used more frequently and in a more exaggerated way in the L2 presentations".* As a result, it is clear the need to pay attention to body language as a pedagogical instrument that allows students a better understanding of the oral speech.

All in all, it is necessary to highlight that interactional adjustments to facilitate and make input comprehensible play a relevant role in vocabulary acquisition. In order for children to acquire new lexis, a lot of repetitions, gestures, rhetorical questions, visuals and comprehension checks are needed. As a result, several exposures to new vocabulary are required in order for young learners to acquire novel words.

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