

Providing Vocabulary Incidental Learning through Reading

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Abstract— *This article looks at how reading in second language learning is beneficial for the learners, saying precisely on the opportunities to learn vocabulary along the reading. As the building block of the sentence, vocabulary plays central position in helping learners learn the new language. Therefore, it is important to help learners acquire vocabulary through appropriate method. One that is considered valuable is through reading. Although in general it is easily said that reading will help learners gain vocabulary, in practice, it is difficult to pin point how reading should be beneficial for vocabulary growth. This article takes particular look on the condition that make reading a reliable sources for vocabulary acquired incidentally. In making it as the best sources for learning, the reading must be chosen by focusing on text familiarity and considering level of difficulty and frequency range, or language proficiency. These two notions are important in helping learners develop interest in reading and ability to guess the unknown words. It is also shown that incidental vocabulary learning occurs through reading, a slow process of gaining new vocabularies, but a powerful one as the vocabulary acquired retains. Moreover, as reading also provide a fun and enjoyable activity, and it also helps developing literacy, the benefit to provide learners with a lot of reading is fruitful.*

Keywords— *input, vocabulary, reading, incidental learning*

I. INTRODUCTION

Vocabulary acquisition plays an important role in determining success in language learning, both in first and in second language. It is crucial for language learners to know a certain amount of vocabulary knowledge, even at the earliest stages of learning, so that they will be able to develop the language skills receptively and productively. It is even mentioned that vocabulary must be acquired first before any learner is able to acquire other specific language sub skills such as grammar or fluency.

There are problems encountered the learning process, which may influence the acquisition of new vocabulary, one of which is on the notion of input. It is important to measure the role of input (Krashen, 1985), in providing ways to acquire

vocabulary. Much research has focused on the use of reading materials, including books, in helping learners acquire vocabularies. However, it is not quite clear how reading can be particularly important in developing vocabulary. This article will take a look at some studies in how reading will provide input for incidental learning, the degree of text familiarity that will enhance the learning, and the power of guessing in providing substantial effort in making reading comprehension easier and more interesting.

II. INCIDENTAL LEARNING THROUGH READING

There is always an assumption that vocabulary in L2 learning is mostly obtained by reading because reading is composed of many vocabularies arranged in meaningful texts (Huckin and Coady, 1999). In this view, learning vocabulary through reading is known as incidental learning, because learners acquire new words incidentally, while they are trying to comprehend the reading. The reading text helps learners to acquire new vocabulary, because learners may be able to guess the meaning of unknown words with the help of the understanding they get from the text. In a contrary, when learners are given an unknown word without putting it in a text, they will not be able to know the meaning, unless they look up the meaning in a dictionary.

Many scholars agree on the importance of texts in vocabulary acquisition, suggesting that except for the basic words, vocabulary acquisition predominantly occurs through extensive reading with the learners guessing at the meaning of the unknown words from the texts (Huckin and Coady, 1999). Through their study, Ramos and Dario (2015) also find out

that second language learners develop much of their vocabulary through the exposure to words in informative context. In other words, the exposure to words are mostly relevant to be given through reading text as it is the text that makes the words informative.

Exposing learners with novel words through reading is also considered more beneficial for the words to be retained, than through listening. In the long run, exposing learners with reading material will affect the vocabulary growth, because print materials have many more low frequency words compared to the spoken words. In their longitudinal study on the benefit of reading for vocabulary growth, Duff, Tomblin, and Catts (2015) illustrate this fact by confirming that learners who are strong readers when they are at their 3rd or 4th grade and continue to be exposed to print materials are becoming stronger readers when they are at their 10th grade due to the possession of large vocabulary knowledge gained throughout the process of reading.

Providing texts as vocabulary input allows learners to achieve substantial vocabulary growth (Elley, 1991). A significant fact to support the idea is taken from Elley's study on book-flood projects. The projects show tremendous positive results on how story books may lift the levels of literacy in Third World countries (Elley, et.al, 1996). The book-flood projects address similar problems; L2 learners are unable to develop adequate proficiency in language learning because of a lack of resources and competent teachers. Hence, they have great difficulty in learning to decode and understand L2 vocabulary. So, the book-flood projects expose learners with many books, so that they can have a contextual access to the L2. These projects show that the amount of exposure to L2 is important in helping learners take the best advantage of the input given.

There is also another advantage for using reading as the sources of vocabulary acquisition. Although most vocabulary learning through reading is apparently incidental, and therefore the vocabulary acquisition process is slow and the outcomes for the given words are unpredictable (Wesche

and Paribakht, 1994), it is also shown that that giving input in text helps learners to develop and enrich already known vocabularies (Wesche and Paribakht, 1994). In that way, reading is also more advantageous for proficiency, and not only for gaining new words per se (Wesche and Paribakht, 1994; Morrison, 2004).

In addition, although learners do not acquire more vocabulary from reading rather than from the other technique, the reading exhibits superior retention rates for particular words. This also explains why advance learners are able to acquire a large number of vocabularies without intentional vocabulary learning (Horst, Cobb, and Meara, 1998, Giridharan and Conlan, 2003). As their sense for words in the context of L2 has developed remarkably, the advanced learners are able to quite easily learn new words from a text. Another positive effect of reading for L2 learning is that extensive reading promotes a positive attitude toward reading.

III. TEXT FAMILIARITY

There are some arguments, however, that not every text is useful in helping learners gain new vocabulary in L2 learning (Hulstijn and Laufer, 2001; Waring and Takaki, 2003; Kim, 2003). Rapaport (2000) argues that there are two conditions for a reading text to be powerful for vocabulary acquisition. First, learners should be able to internalize the text. This means that the level of difficulty in the text suits learners' ability. Second, the text should relate to readers' prior knowledge. When learners do not have prior knowledge relates to the information in the text, it will take more effort for them to understand the text, hence they are not able to pay more attention on the unfamiliar words.

Taking readers' prior knowledge into account, it is essential to acknowledge the importance of text familiarity (Baddeley, 1998; Pulido, 2003; Pulido, 2004). Pulido (2004) works on the idea that for vocabulary acquisition to occur through reading, readers must also attend to the connections between new lexical forms and their meanings and integrate the new linguistic information into their developing L2

system. If the new words appear in the type of passages that learners encountered previously, the words are likely to be learnt (Baddeley, 1998). From her study, Pulido shows that there are differences in the nature of relationship between passage comprehension and intake (the actual amount of words from input which are acquired and are able to be retained). The differences illustrate that when learners are familiar with the text, they tend to be able to comprehend the passage better. Because comprehending the passage is not difficult, learners are likely to pay more attention to word by word rather than giving general attention. This process increases the intake.

The major obstacles in gaining new vocabulary from reading are the high number of unfamiliar words in the text, and the insufficient number of repetitions of a target word. This shows that text familiarity is also supported by the less number of unfamiliar words in the text. A text contained a certain type of information may have particular words or registers that are used particularly for that information. For example, reading about mechanical engineering may contain words that are not commonly used in other readings such as in agriculture, or economics. When learners are getting familiar with a certain type of information in the texts, they will also notice that they become more familiar with the words commonly appear in the text.

Hazenbergh and Hulstijn (1996) mention that university students need at least ten thousand familiar words to understand academic text in L2, although they also mention that the numbers depend on the proficiency level and frequency range. Comparably, Coxhead (2000) shows that the average frequency of particular words in a text depends on the type of the text. From his study on the use of technical terms in a text, he finds that an academic related text can enclose 8, 5 % of technical terms to make the text familiar. However, the percentage reduces to 4 % for newspaper types of text, and only 2 % for novels. Since academic related texts are prepared for readers who have related background with the academic information in the text, it will not be so difficult for them to

understand the technical terms in the text. On the contrary, the newspaper or novel readers may not have the background knowledge related to the technical terms commonly occurs in academic reading. Thus, if the newspapers or the novels contain many technical terms, it will be difficult for the readers to understand it.

IV. THE ACCURACY OF GUESSING IN READING

Although it is true that learners learn new vocabulary better when they are familiar with the text (Deghan and Sadighi, 2011; Jalilehvan and Samuel, 2012), it is also important to notice that learners who have particular level of language proficiency may be able to connect meaning from unfamiliar words with the help of the sentence pattern and the schema existed in the text. Horiba and Fukaya (2015) conducted a research on testing which is superior in determining the intake of new vocabulary by looking at whether it is language proficiency or topic familiarity that is more beneficial for the learners. They conclude that topic familiarity facilitates the learning of the new words at particular extent but it does not seem to help increase the understanding of text; in the sense that language proficiency was stronger predictor for reading comprehension. The familiarity of the text helps learners to connect their reading with their existing knowledge, and they therefore consider particular familiar words interesting and relevant, thus such words are retained. On the other hand, due to a better language proficiency, learners are able to gain better comprehension, and thus easier to guess the meaning of new vocabulary based on the relation of those words with the surrounding words (Horiba and Fukaya, 2015)

Horiba and Fukaya's study cited above indicates that learners acquire new vocabulary from guessing or inferring the meaning of an unfamiliar word based on their understanding from the text. With that notion, it is necessary to inquiry the accuracy of the guessing. How often should learners have chances to guess the meaning of an unknown word in the text so that they finally make a correct understanding of the word's

meaning? Rapaport and Kibby (2002) state that the more often the unknown word is exposed to the learners; learners have more opportunity to revise their understanding on that word. As the unfamiliar word occurs several times in different sentence along the passage, learners have better insight in understanding it. From the understanding they get from each sentence, learners will be able to understand the meaning of new word better. So, the question is how often then the word should be repeated so that learners will finally be able to acquire it? Jenkins, Stein, and Wysocky (1984) show the figure of 10 encounters, so that the word can be retained. Another figure is proposed by Nagy, Herman, and Anderson (1987) which shows that it takes 15 times for a word to be repeated so that learners are able to acquire it. All of these different figures show that there is no fixed answer for the frequency of an unknown word to be repeated so that it can be acquired. Except for Nation's study, there is no explanation for in which type of text the word occurs. Within different texts, the word may be perceived differently too. So, it is important to know in what type of text a certain word needs to be repeated, possibly 6 times, 10 times, or even 20 times. Zahar, Cobb, and Spada (2001) explain that what is more important to be noticed is the type of the text and their target readers. It is also important to notice that vocabulary introduced to speakers at varying proficiency levels will need to be treated differently (Horst, Cobb, and Meara, 1998; Horst, 2000).

Monheimer (2004) explains further on how learners actually learn word from a text by acknowledging the bottom-up and top-down theories; that learners acquire new words by decoding the reading (bottom-up), which can be done with the support of their world knowledge (top-down). Her study demonstrates that the following strategies, namely ignoring the unfamiliar word, inferring or guessing the word from the text, and consulting the dictionary, do not show significant differences in assisting comprehension. On the other hand, they show differences in assisting retention, revealing that ignoring strategy lags behind. This study explains that the way learners comprehend the text is not really influenced by their

manner in which they treat the unfamiliar word. When the purpose of learning is to comprehend the text, they may ignore the unknown words as long as the context can be used to comprehend the passage. However, when the purpose of learning is to retain the unfamiliar words, ignoring the unknown words will undermine the purpose. It is impossible to retain the words if their existence in text is ignored

V. CONCLUSION

As a source for learning second or foreign language, reading is a remarkable tools to help learners gain, and importantly retain, new vocabulary. The most important benefit for giving reading for vocabulary learning is that learners may acquire new vocabulary incidentally, a process which makes superior retention rates for the vocabulary acquired although it is considered slow and unpredictable. This way, reading helps learners to be more proficient, and in the long run it promotes vocabulary growth. That is why the advanced learners are able to learn new words quite easily without learning them intentionally. The new words are acquired incidentally through the text they are reading.

There are two important things that need to be considered in making the reading fruitful for vocabulary acquisition to occur; text familiarity and language proficiency. Both are needed as pre-existing condition so that learners are able to develop interest in reading and to guess the meaning of difficult words they encounter during reading. This study has come to conclude the condition of reading for incidentally vocabulary learning. Many other areas also need to be studied on. How reading may promote literacy even in second or foreign language is the next important stage for using reading for learning. Being aware that reading promotes incidental learning may help to develop good attitude in reading because the more vocabulary are acquired, the better learning condition can be created.

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