

POSSIBLE CHANGES IN ATTITUDE TOWARDS VOCABULARY ACQUISITION RESEARCH*

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1 *Neglect of lexis in second language acquisition research*

1.1 *Evidence from the literature*

No language acquisition¹, whether first, second, or foreign; child, or adult, can take place without the acquisition of lexis. Sound patterns of a language which do not form a lexical item are no more than meaningless noise; grammatical rules in themselves, unless they relate particular sounds to particular meanings, are only interesting abstractions with insufficient communicative value.

If then, the learning of vocabulary lies at the heart of language learning, it would be reasonable to assume that language acquisition studies should devote no less scope and effort to vocabulary than to phonology or grammar. However, until very recently, the reality has pointed to the contrary. A brief examination of the content of some classical books and articles in the field will illustrate this.

The abstract section in Hatch (1978) *Second Language Acquisition: A Book of Readings*, lists and summarizes about 100 studies most of which focus on the acquisition of morphology and syntax. Few papers in this section which deal with error analysis in general mention lexical errors, but none of them is specifically devoted to lexis.

Part III of Richards' (1974) *Error Analysis* is entitled 'Developmental studies of a second language acquisition in children'. (Underlining is mine.) But what it actually reports is longitudinal studies of the development of *syntax* in children learning English as a second language. For example, Richards' paper in this section studies the acquisition of verb groups, prepositions, articles, question forms. Jain's article discusses the errors in plurals, aspect, subject-verb inversion, noun clauses and article.

Corder's (1975) extensive bibliography of 114 references on error analysis, interlanguage and second language acquisition, in a survey article entitled: *Error Analysis, Interlanguage and Second Language Acquisition* includes only one article specifically devoted to vocabulary, which deals with lexical characteristics of Swedish student written work.

Research in Second Language Acquisition, edited by Scarcella and Krashen (1980), is a collection of selected papers of the Los Angeles language acquisition research forum. The second half of the book, entitled 'Aspects of second language development', includes papers on communicative competence, prosodic development and syntactic development. But no vocabulary development.

Most of the papers in Ritchie (1978) *Second Language Acquisition Research* seem to deal with language acquisition in general, judging by their titles, e.g.: 'Some remarks on creativity in language acquisition', 'Order of difficulty in adult second language acquisition', 'Evidence of the need for a second language acquisition index of development'. Yet none of the 13 papers in the book talks about vocabulary acquisition, as if 'language acquisition' meant only the acquisition of morphemes and syntax.

Language 2 by Dulay, Burt and Krashen (1982), which is described as "one of the most comprehensive course texts on second language acquisition" does not deal with vocabulary as if vocabulary was not part of second language acquisition.

The content of the above mentioned studies seems to suggest that vocabulary has not been a good source of inspiration for investigators of language acquisition, error analysis, or interlanguage. Whether the research carried out has dealt with the acquisition of a single feature in language, or with the order in which several features are acquired, it has mostly studied the acquisition of morphemes and syntactic structures. No hypotheses, for example, have been made as to the possibility of a 'natural' order, or indeed any kind of order, for vocabulary acquisition. Is it surprising then that Meara's (1980) survey article on lexis is called: Vocabulary acquisition: a neglected aspect of language learning? For Levenston 'neglect' is an understatement. He argues that "second language lexical acquisition has been a victim of discrimination", and justifies this loaded statement by "the frequency with which investigators refer to 'language' or 'interlanguage' when all they mean is 'grammar' or 'interlanguage grammar' (using grammar in its old, pre-Chomsky sense of syntax and morphology)" (1979: 147).

1.2 Paradox of the neglect

This neglect or discrimination of lexis can hardly be justified. It is not only common sense that without adequate lexis there is no proper language competence or performance. Recent findings point to the fact that lexical problems might be even more important than those in phonology and syntax. Meara (1984) reports on a large collection of errors in Utrecht university which showed that lexical errors outnumbered grammatical errors by three or four to one.

Moreover, learners themselves often claim that lexis is their greatest difficulty in L2. Any experienced teacher knows that even after students have more or less mastered grammar, they still face masses of unknown words as they continue to study. The same, by the way, is true for L1 acquisition. A child who has internalized all the grammatical rules of his mother tongue will go on expanding his lexis until adulthood.

As for error gravity, it seems that lexical errors are more serious than the phonological or grammatical. In Johanson's (1978) study and in Politzer's (1978), native speakers of English and German, respectively, graded lexical errors of learners of these languages as most serious and disruptive. Thus, the use of the right words seems to be the most important aspect of communication. And yet, it is the least researched one.

1.3 Possible reasons for the neglect

One can speculate about the possible causes of this lack of enthusiasm about vocabulary, bearing in mind that language acquisition studies have been influenced by trends in linguistic theories language psychology and interests of methodologists.

The linguists have preferred to study grammar and phonology since these are closed systems and therefore lend themselves to much more abstraction and generalization than vocabulary, which is not a closed system but an open set. Every statement in lexis would have to be based on many observations and yet account for fewer events than a statement made in grammar. And since a good theory is the one that accounts for the largest number of events as simply as possible, this means that the theory of grammar is more powerful than the theory of lexis. Halliday et al. explicitly say that "in making a description of any language we try to bring as much as we can within the framework of the grammar" (1964: 23). It is probably because of the influence of linguistics on language acquisition studies that researchers have concentrated their efforts on the same phenomena that have interested the theoretical linguists.

As for psychology of language, Levenston points out that psycholinguists "have been reacting against the earlier tendency of learning-theory-oriented linguists to concentrate on vocabulary learning, explainable as associative learning, rather than grammar acquisition which needed

rules" (1979: 148). Indeed, since the rise of Chomskyan hypothesis of linguistic universals, the inductive theory of language learning, which is a modified form of stimulus-response learning theory, has lost a lot of its attraction. And as vocabulary learning has been associated with imitation, practice, generalization and reinforcement rather than with processes of hypothesis formation and testing, which is characteristic of grammar, it lost its attraction too. If it could only be shown that vocabulary learning is a rule governed behaviour, not a matter of habit, and that what we learn while learning words is not responses but rules for making responses, the attitude of psycholinguists might have been different.

As for the interaction between methodologists and language acquisition researchers, until recently the main interest of both seemed to be in the beginning stages of language learning (Marton 1977). It was assumed that at those stages it was more important to concentrate on grammar. Vocabulary teaching could be delayed until later. Besides, it is only at more advanced stages, with the 'lexical explosion' that vocabulary problems arise. If, therefore, teaching beginners was considered more interesting than teaching intermediate and advanced learners, then again, it was the learning and teaching of grammar that induced interest in language acquisition research, not vocabulary.

2 A possible change in the step-child status of vocabulary acquisition research

2.1 Evidence from the literature

There is a good chance that vocabulary acquisition will gain importance in the Applied Linguistics research in the near future. Among the recent empirical studies on vocabulary are studies on lexical simplification (Blum and Levenston 1977 and 1978); on transferability based on learners' intuition by Kellerman (1978); in interference in L2 vocabulary learning (Ringbom 1978 and 1982); learners' word associations (Meara 1984); concept learning and vocabulary learning (Af Trampe 1982); lexical inferencing (Haastrup 1984).

Methodologists too are beginning to openly state the importance of vocabulary though, intuitively, they must have recognized it long ago. Rivers says that the time has come to "consider carefully how we can provide even our elementary learners, and much more so our advanced learners, with the means to 'get across meaning', even before they can express discriminatingly fifteen ways to ask that the door be opened" (1983: 120). Allen (1981) says that in the 1980's vocabulary is likely to receive more attention than in the recent past. Students will be given more responsibility for vocabulary learning, teachers will help them develop their own mnemonic strategies, more time will be spent on context clues and the use of dictionaries; there will be a revival of interest in lists designed to show which words are most useful.

If such is the feeling among educators, language acquisition researchers will have little choice, but to relate to it by investigating the area of vocabulary learning.

2.2 Possible reasons for the change

a. Development of semantics

Linguistic theories of grammar have given impetus to work on grammar acquisition. It is plausible that the recent work on semantics (Fodor 1977, Lyons 1977, Lehrer 1983) will provoke a wealth of research on vocabulary acquisition since, as was mentioned earlier, language acquisition studies are inspired by linguistic theories. The development of semantics, sociolinguistics and pragmatics changed the view of language from abstract and idealized to more social and functional. Therefore the interest has shifted from sounds and structures to meaning, discourse and speech acts. Since all these involve an adequate use of words, an interest in the learning of word-use is bound to develop.

b. Holistic view of language acquisition

There has also been a change in psychologists' view on language acquisition. Current theories of language learning accept the importance of habit formation together with the assimilation of language rules. They recognize the importance of inductive learning (the creation and storage of linguistic information through a process of generalization, classification and association) together with deductive learning (the discovery of linguistic information by a process of applying linguistic universals to particular data). If vocabulary acquisition was given inferior status in the past because it was considered to involve inductive learning and habit formation, there is a good chance nowadays that such attitude will not persist.

c. Interest in the advanced learner

In the late seventies the focus of interest shifted from FLES (foreign language in the elementary school) to more advanced learners, advanced in age and in language level. This change is reflected, for example, in the second edition of Valette's *Modern Language Testing* (1977), as compared with the first edition of the same book (1967). In the first edition, a portion of the book is devoted to special tests for FLES and beginning classes in general; the second edition does not treat beginning language learning separately from the intermediate and the advanced.

Such change in interest is bound to draw attention to vocabulary learning since, as was mentioned earlier, most of the interesting lexical problems occur at more advanced stages of language learning.

d. Communicative approach to language teaching

But the most important source of the possible impetus to vocabulary acquisition research in the future is the rise of the communicative approach to language teaching, specifically the principles which will be discussed below.

i. Fluency rather than accuracy

Brumfit and Widdowson (1981), Krashen and Terell (1983) stress the importance of the development of fluency – even at the possible expense of grammatical correctness. Brumfit (1984) even suggests two different syllabi – one for fluency, one for accuracy, the former being more important. Valdman (1982) states that semantic notions should be given the highest priority in language teaching since these are essential for communicative competence. For Krashen and Terell fluency is the manifestation of knowing the language, which is not the same as knowing about the language. The latter would lead to accuracy but not necessarily to fluency.

If fluency means the ability to convey a message with relative ease and comprehensibility, then it is vocabulary correctness and adequacy that matter more than grammatical accuracy. Widdowson (1978) points out that native speakers could understand ungrammatical utterances which had the correct lexis better than utterances correctly structured with the wrong words. It is reasonable, therefore, to assume that those who advocate the supremacy of fluency over accuracy will also realize the supremacy of lexis over grammar.

ii. The input hypothesis

This hypothesis presumes that we acquire language only when we understand the input that contains some language items a bit beyond our current level of competence. By 'understand' Krashen means understanding for meaning, focusing on the message, and not form. Processing the input for meaning is likely to occur when the input is interesting and/or relevant for the learner. Grammatical sequencing of the input is not necessary. It would be hard to constantly expose learners to comprehensible, interesting and relevant input without expanding their vocabulary. Comprehensibility seems to be severely hampered without adequate vocabulary

(Laufer and Sim, 1985); interest and relevance of the input are created when the content and the activities based on the input "strike 'deep' enough", to use Krashen's own words (1981: 103). And what strikes 'deep' is words, not structures.

iii. The development of functional and notional syllabi

The argument that the input or a syllabus should not necessarily be grammatically sequenced is not new. Functional and notional syllabi have used thematic and situational criteria as the guiding principles of the organization of the teaching material, or input². And the decision as to what to include in each unit of such materials must have been semantic more than grammatical.

A concomitant development of the switch from structurally-graded to notionally-functionally-based syllabi is the LSP (language for specific purposes) curricula and courses. An important feature of such courses is vocabulary pertinent to the special area: academic, technological, vocational, etc.

iv. Focus on the learner

It has been recognized that a lot of success in language learning depends on the participation of the learner in the learning process. A proper model of language learning, according to Titone (1981), is holodynamic, i.e. consisting not only of behavioural and cognitive components but also of personality features. So, researchers have investigated affective factors that seem to influence language acquisition, such as personality type, world-view, learning style and especially motivation. Motivation, it is argued, can be increased if the students feel that their specific needs and wants are being catered to by their teachers and teaching materials. Rivers regards needs analysis as essential in the future instruction. "Unless the students, with their needs and wants become central to our planning and implementation, we will be re-echoing the old adage: the more things change, the more they stay the same" (1981: 87). It was already mentioned that students, particularly in the intermediate and advanced stages, feel that lexis is their greatest difficulty and need. In my own teaching experience, students reported a feeling of achievement most often when a particular lesson or unit of material increased their vocabulary control. If the current methodological trend is to focus on and satisfy the learner's needs, then vocabulary instruction and consequently research into vocabulary learning are bound to gain importance.

3 Conclusion

Until very recently vocabulary has suffered from step-child status in language acquisition research. The reasons for this plight might have been the linguists' preference of closed systems describable by rules, the reaction of psycholinguists against the associative and the stimulus-response theories of learning and the interest of the methodologists in the beginning stages of language learning.

There is a good chance, however, that, in the near future, vocabulary learning will be given at least equal, if not greater, attention in language acquisition research. Developments in semantics, a more balanced view of language learning and interest in more advanced learners are some of the causes of the possible change. But most of the impetus to future research on vocabulary acquisition is likely to stem from some principles of communicative language teaching. There can be no fluency without a solid vocabulary base; no comprehensible, interesting and relevant input with poor lexis. Notional and functional syllabi and the various LSP's reflect the shift from emphasis on grammar to emphasis on meaning. Learner-oriented approach to teaching and work on motivation gave rise to the analysis of learner's needs by both the teacher and the learner. Such an analysis is bound to show the need for better vocabulary learning; and the realisation of particular needs usually results in their research.

Research is beginning to show that the lexical errors outnumber all other errors, that lexical errors are judged most serious and disruptive by native speakers, that learners themselves feel that without adequate vocabulary there can be no communication or comprehension. Vocabulary acquisition, the step-child of language acquisition research in the past decades, has now all the hope of attracting attention and care, of becoming the natural child of the field.

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Notes

1. 'Acquisition', in this study, will be used interchangeably with 'learning'. Though Krashen's distinction between the two might be valid for grammar, it seems difficult to draw the line between 'acquisition' and 'learning' in the case of vocabulary.
2. In practice, it is hard to imagine a syllabus without any grammatical basis. Therefore the most recent programmes are a synthesis of grammars, themes and situations.

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