

A Review of Incidental L2 Vocabulary Learning of English

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ABSTRACT

This article discusses the importance of incidental vocabulary learning in English language acquisition. Incidental learning is an effective method for acquiring new words and phrases naturally through exposure to language input. The article emphasizes the role of incidental learning in increasing vocabulary knowledge and language understanding, and explores its pedagogical implications in language teaching.

KEYWORDS

Incidental; Vocabulary Learning; Second Language Acquisition.

1. INTRODUCTION

Lewis (1993) considered that vocabulary learning is the central task of a second language(L2) and that every language skill, such as listening, reading, writing, and speaking, depends on vocabulary. As one of the essential elements of a language, vocabulary plays a critical role in both L2 learning and the field of L2 acquisition research. According to Cunningsworth (1995: 31), the only three elements that need to be taught are grammar, vocabulary, and phonetics, which are the basis for the many factors that make up the complex process of language teaching[1]. When these three elements are compared, the fundamental element of language is vocabulary. This demonstrates the importance of extending vocabulary knowledge and improving vocabulary abilities in the process of L2 learning. In terms of vocabulary, both incidental and intentional vocabulary learning is common (Hulstijn, 2003). Incidental vocabulary learning is an effective learning method compared to intentional vocabulary learning, and it plays an essential role in increasing the vocabulary of L2 learners. This essay will mainly focus on the research of incidental L2 vocabulary learning in English. Explanation of concepts related to incidental vocabulary learning and a brief introduction to the pedagogical implications of incidental L2 vocabulary learning[2].

2. POINTS FOR DISCUSSION

2.1. Definition of Incidental Vocabulary Learning and Intentional Vocabulary Learning

Expanding vocabulary knowledge and developing the ability to learn vocabulary are significant challenges at every L2 vocabulary learning process stage. L2 vocabulary learning methods can be broadly divided into intentional vocabulary learning and incidental vocabulary learning. The two concepts of incidental learning and intentional learning were applied in the relevant literature of psychology as early as the early twentieth century (Laufer& Hulstijn 2001). In vocabulary acquisition, incidental learning is primarily defined as vocabulary learning as a by-product of any activity not

explicitly geared towards vocabulary learning (Rieder 2003)[3]. In contrast, intentional vocabulary learning is any activity geared at committing lexical information to memory (Hulstijn 2001).

Schmidt (1994) defined incidental vocabulary learning as incidental vocabulary learning is the opposite of intentional vocabulary learning, which is the intentional memorization of words by students. On the other hand, incidental vocabulary learning occurs when students unintentionally acquire words while completing other activities rather than focusing on memorizing them[4]. Obviously, some planned and purposeful ways of learning vocabulary, such as memorizing vocabulary books, doing vocabulary exercises, attending vocabulary courses, and other intentional learning methods, can lead to a certain amount of vocabulary knowledge. Ellis (1994) found that learners can learn over 30 words per hour by reciting the vocabulary list. However, this intentional approach to vocabulary learning is not the most common method used by learners[5]. The most typical form of integrating vocabulary into the L2 vocabulary learning process is incidental L2 vocabulary learning. Gaining vocabulary knowledge via activities including listening, speaking, reading, and writing is the most common input into the L2 vocabulary learning process (Laufer & Hulstijn 2001). In addition, Nation (2022) states that, except for the thousands of common beginning words that learners initially learn require intentional learning. A significant proportion of the vocabulary acquired by L2 learners is acquired by incidental learning. As shown above, in L2 vocabulary learning, incidental vocabulary learning plays a significant role. In addition, research under L2 learning has shown that Learners may acquire vocabulary by reading, listening, and other input methods (Brown and others 2008; Vidal 2011)[6].

2.2. Defining and Distinguishing between the Concepts of Explicit and Implicit Learning

In my search of the literature, I found some confusing uses of the concept. Incidental learning is considered implicit learning, and intentional learning is regarded as equivalent to explicit learning. In fact, there is a distinct difference between these two sets of concepts. Explicit learning refers to the conscious and intentional processing of the information input by the learner. Implicit learning, in contrast, is the unconscious and unintentional processing of input (Hulstijn, 2005: 131). A brief introduction will be given below[7].

The distinction between explicit and implicit learning in acquiring knowledge is derived from psychological definitions. The ambiguity between the two sets of concepts may be the description of "unintentional acquisition" in the concept[8]. Unintentional can refer to acquisition without an explicit intention (purpose) or to unconscious acquisition. When unintentional is understood to mean without intention (purpose), then unintentional acquisition, in this case, refers to incidental acquisition. Incidental acquisition. When unintentional is understood to mean without consciousness, unintentional acquisition refers to implicit acquisition (Rieder 2003: 26).

Explicit learning may be either intentional or incidental[9]. It means learners can learn a language consciously and purposefully or unconsciously and purposelessly. However, implicit learning can only be incidental. In other words, when learners process input information unconsciously, it can only lead to incidental vocabulary learning. It follows that explicit learning, implicit learning and incidental learning, intentional learning are two different sets of concepts.

2.3. Incidental Vocabulary Learning Through Reading

Most of the research on incidental L2 vocabulary learning has focused on the field of reading. The symbiotic link between vocabulary knowledge and reading ability or reading as both a cause and a result of vocabulary development, is broadly accepted (Stoller & Grabe 1993). There are several aspects involved in studying the incidental vocabulary acquisition of second language learners via reading, each of which will be appropriately discussed in the following sections[10].

Laufer and Hulstijn (2001) studied the effect of completing different tasks after reading on incidental vocabulary learning. They argue that incidental vocabulary learning to read is strongly related to the reading task, in an inductive fashion, with three criteria: need, search, and evaluation[11]. The comprehension of the meaning of certain words that the reader needs to fulfil the objective of the reading or to grasp the meaning of the phrase is referred to as need. The term "search" refers to the activity in which students discover the meaning of a word using various ways, such as consulting a dictionary to learn the definition of the word. Comparing the precise meaning of a word with the meanings of other terms or combining a word with other words in order to evaluate whether or not a word is contextually relevant is an example of evaluation[12]. In the process of completing the task of reading, learners will unconsciously need to search for and evaluate new words. The more times these three processes are performed, the more vocabulary the student can learn.

To find out whether repetition influences incidental vocabulary acquisition in reading, Webb (2007) conducted research with 121 Japanese students[13]. The result shows that significant learning improvements may occur when learners come across unfamiliar words ten times in context. Webb observed that the process of incidental vocabulary learning is progressive and requires numerous encounters with a word to comprehend it fully. In the meanwhile, the author says that a reasonable reader may assume the meaning of some unfamiliar vocabulary but should know the majority of the terms in the book to be able to grasp it properly. This suggests that casual vocabulary acquisition is inappropriate for L2 beginners. Students can only gain incidental vocabulary by reading if they have mastered a certain quantity of fundamental vocabulary[14].

There are many factors involved in the study of reading for incidental vocabulary learning by L2 learners. Pulido (2003) examined the influence of three factors on incidental vocabulary learning, learners' familiarity with the topics in the reading material, learners' L2 reading comprehension and learners' passage sight vocabulary for L2 language texts. Pulido's study concluded that the familiarity with the topic in the reading materials and the learner's L2 reading ability influenced the incidental vocabulary learning[15]. The more familiar the topic, the better the effect of incidental vocabulary learning; The better the L2 language reading ability, the more words are learned through incidental acquisition. The study conducted by Pulido also demonstrates that incidental vocabulary learning is inappropriate for beginner L2 students. Incidental vocabulary learning is more effective when students have a particular vocabulary and learning ability level[16].

Although both academic reading and listening help to develop vocabulary, the current data suggest that reading is a more effective acquisition method. This is especially true for students with low proficiency, who may struggle more with academic lectures that demand real-time processing and may benefit more from written materials over which they have more control[17]. But beginner L2 learners also face some dilemmas, they may linger on terms they do not comprehend and retrace their steps if required (Vidal 2011: 242-243). Research on incidental L2 vocabulary learning in listening, speaking, and writing will be discussed later.

According to Lewis (1993), vocabulary is at the centre of language usage and language instruction. Schmidt (1994) considered incidental vocabulary learning a phenomenon in which learners acquire vocabulary incidentally due to the use of vocabulary involved in performing language tasks such as listening, speaking, reading and writing. In L2 learning, incidental vocabulary learning refers mainly to the learning of vocabulary as an accessory to the reading process (Laufer & Hulstijn 2001)[18]. This means that learners can naturally acquire new words as they focus on how to understand a text as a whole. As a result, intentional vocabulary learning, which takes effort and much time, becomes unnecessary (Ellis 1994). As shown above, the essence of incidental vocabulary learning is that learners are able to acquire vocabulary naturally without the goal of learning it. As can be seen, incidental vocabulary learning is more concerned with the specific activities on which acquisition is based (Paribakht & Wesche 1999). Moreover, by reading, the incidental vocabulary is remarkable. However, the more often a word is encountered when reading, the more probable it is that it will be learnt[19].

2.4. A Study of the Incidental Vocabulary Learning in the Listening, Speaking and Writing Process

Most studies on incidental vocabulary learning have focused on reading, in contrast to listening, speaking and writing, where there has been little research on incidental vocabulary learning. Each of these topic areas has been briefly discussed below[20].

Listening input enhances the acquisition of incidental vocabulary in L2, and like reading, frequent exposure is required for learning (Feng and Webb 2020; Vidal 2011). Listening has been shown to have a disadvantage compared to reading in terms of L2 vocabulary acquisition. Brown and others (2008) contrasted graded readers' vocabulary increases through reading, listening, and reading-while-listening. They discovered that both written and mixed written and auditory input types contributed considerably more to vocabulary knowledge growth than aural input alone. Vidal (2011) contrasted incidental vocabulary learning via academic reading and listening. The results show that the reading mode scores are significantly higher than the listening mode. This indicates that listening is not effective in facilitating the learning of incidental vocabulary[21].

The acquisition of vocabulary incidentally may also be facilitated by learners verbally discussing the meaning of words with others. More interestingly, not only did those who engaged in the conversation gain the language but so did those in the audience who did not speak, illustrating the function of 'hearing' in the accidental acquisition of vocabulary. This shows that listening and speaking are often closely intertwined in incidental vocabulary learning (Vidal, 2011). Incidental vocabulary is affected during listening and speaking.

Several corpus studies have begun to investigate the possible advantages of audio-visual input for incidental vocabulary learning (Rogers and others 2015; Perez 2020). There is growing evidence that L2 learners acquire new vocabulary via video viewing (Perez, 2020: 749). One of the main advantages of television is that it offers learners with extensive real L2 input (Webb, 2015). In addition, Rodgers and others (2015) discovered that recurrent contacts with low-frequency phrases were much more prevalent in related TV programmes, such as episodes from the same TV show[22]. That is why Webb (2015) argued that intensive TV watching inside and outside of the classroom and substantial reading should be regarded as a beneficial vocabulary acquisition approach since it may assist L2 learners in enhancing their vocabulary load and speaking abilities at the same time.

Studies that promote incidental vocabulary learning of vocabulary in the writing process are generally comparative studies. Laufer and Hulstijn (2001) study deal with reading versus writing. Laufer and Hulstijn (2001) considered that learners could also do incidental vocabulary learning when writing independently. Students should know the forms for certain words while writing in a second language and expressing concepts. At the same time, students have to judge which of the words they find is most appropriate to the context. This procedure will enhance the expansion of L2 students' vocabularies. In summary, listening, speaking and writing also affect incidental vocabulary learning, but not as much as incidental vocabulary learning through reading[23].

3. PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS CONCLUSION

Ekaterina (2020) compared two modes of incidental and then intentional or intentional and then incidental, which is more conducive to vocabulary learning. Ekaterina 's target group is first-year university students whose mother language is Spanish. Overall, the 'incidental + intentional' group performed better than the 'intentional + incidental' group. It follows that for some advanced L2 learners' incidental vocabulary learning is more effective. For advanced L2 learners, the use of incidental vocabulary learning is increasingly widespread.

While incidental vocabulary learning is beneficial for most advanced learners to acquire vocabulary, intentional teaching is required for starting learners whose reading skill is restricted (Hunt and Beglar

as cited in Alemi and Tayebi 2011: 81). According to research on both first and second language development, the majority of vocabulary acquisition happens organically when learners strive to grasp new words they hear or read in context. In contrast, since learners have such a limited vocabulary to work with, beginners are less likely to pick up new words independently (Paribakht & Wesche, 1999: 196). Therefore, incidental vocabulary learning is often not suitable for beginner L2 learners.

According to Kirschner and others (2006), unguided or poorly directed instructional techniques are less successful than guided teaching in reading. When it comes to learning to read, many students feel compelled to practice without support. Especially when students cannot comprehend age-appropriate reading materials on their own, reading may be difficult, which can gradually lead to a dislike for the activity. Therefore, in the early stages, especially with younger students, teachers have an important role in guiding students through learning unfamiliar vocabulary by reading. Moreover, L2 instructors should choose books that are suitable for their student's abilities so that novices do not feel pushed to read and so that they may acquire as much incidental vocabulary as possible by reading.

Language growth and usage rely heavily on vocabulary knowledge. Nevertheless, the prerequisites for incidental vocabulary learning in L2 are often overlooked, especially in the study of incidental vocabulary acquisition in reading. For a student to acquire a certain amount of vocabulary incidentally in reading, the student should first have a vocabulary of 2000-3000. The student at the university level needs to have a vocabulary of 5000-6000 (Nation 2022). This is because incidental vocabulary learning relies heavily on the ability to guess words; students with large vocabularies are often able to make full use of the clues provided by the context to guess the meaning of a word. Furthermore, in order to have a chance of guessing the correct word, learners must know more than 95 % of the terms in the text. This implies that a beginner L2 learner with less than 2000 will find it challenging to acquire vocabulary incidentally in reading. Therefore, incidental vocabulary learning is unsuitable for beginner L2 students with limited ability.

Although the importance of vocabulary has gained academic consensus and has become a top priority in L2 language teaching, the lack of vocabulary remains a fundamental problem for learners in learning English (Nation 2022). Improving L2 students' vocabulary is a critical topic that L2 teachers should address. However, vocabulary, like other language abilities and components, requires a series of studies to improve. Griffiths and others (2008) states that in addition to strategies, many other learner qualities, such as aptitude, learning style, motivation, age, belief, culture, gender, personality, metacognition, and autonomy, may impact the outcome of language learning efforts. Therefore, L2 teachers should adapt their instruction to the demands of beginner and advanced students when it comes to vocabulary knowledge.

It is worth noting that incidental and intentional vocabulary learning are only two ways of acquiring vocabulary. There are no advantages or disadvantages to these two learning ways, and so L2 teachers should not simply emphasize one to the exclusion or criticism of an alternative approach. The teacher should combine the two approaches in order to find the best way of learning L2 vocabulary under different conditions.

To sum up, this essay starts with incidental vocabulary learning and some related definitions and combines with some previous research. In particular, mainly focuses on incidental L2 vocabulary learning to reading by L2 learners and incidental vocabulary learning in listening, speaking and writing, also provides an overview of theories of vocabulary incidental acquisition. Incidental L2 vocabulary learning is a phenomenon that occurs when L2 learners' complete other tasks related to L2 learning while not focusing on memorizing words. It is crucial to highlight that incidental vocabulary learning is not always more successful than purposeful vocabulary learning, nor is intentional vocabulary learning always more effective than incidental learning (Brown and others 2008; Nation 2022). Whether incidental vocabulary learning or intentional vocabulary learning, both play an essential role in promoting the growth of L2 students' vocabulary. Teachers need to be aware

of the need to tailor their teaching to the needs of their students. As English learners are at different levels, learners with lower language proficiency may find making complex cognitive sense of vocabulary difficult. Therefore, teachers should complete the curriculum design and teaching activities according to the students' specific circumstances L2 Teachers may consider expanding the amount of reading students do to increase the amount of input material they receive, thus increasing the opportunities for incidental knowledge of vocabulary.

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