

EXPLICIT VOCABULARY INSTRUCTION : USING A WORD LIST TO FOCUS ATTENTION

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Introduction

In this article I will describe the vocabulary needed for ESL learners to read academic texts in English, review some aspects of the distinction between explicit and implicit learning of L2 vocabulary, outline a vocabulary learning program I used with a group of students who were studying English for academic purposes, and report the results of a study involving those students working with a list of words frequently used in academic texts.

Background

Academic vocabulary : Word frequency and range are two factors that have been extensively studied with regard to text readability. While it is true that an ESL learner's ability to read a given text depends on much more than simply vocabulary level, readability studies do show that vocabulary knowledge is one of the most important aspects of learning to read in a second language (Nation, 1990). With this in mind there have been many attempts both to determine a minimum, or threshold, level of vocabulary necessary for true reading to take place and to compile lists of frequently appearing words for pedagogical purposes. One such study suggests a vocabulary of 3000 word families constitutes a lexical threshold for reading comprehension (Laufer, 1992). Other studies examine the coverage provided by a certain number of words. For example, a vocabulary of the 5000 most frequently occurring word families provides about 90% coverage of academic texts (Nation, 2001).

The recent development of computer-generated corpora has led to the compilation of various word lists intended for use by teachers. However, West's *A General Service List of English Words* (1953), although now almost fifty years old, is still considered one of the most useful. There is a good deal of overlap between West's list of the 2000 most frequent words and more recent lists. It's also now possible to assemble lists of specialized vocabulary; for example, there are lists of vocabulary items that occur frequently in fields such as

business, science, law, and medicine. A list of words frequently used in academic texts has been compiled by Nation (1990).

Nation calls his list of academic vocabulary the *University Word List*. This list contains 836 word families. About 8%-10% of the running words in a typical academic text can be found on the UWL. The 2000 most frequent words in English account for about 80% of the running words in academic texts. Therefore, knowing the most frequent 2000 words and the words on the UWL will provide a learner with about 90% coverage of an academic text. Another 4%-5% of an academic text will consist of technical vocabulary from the field covered by the text. Students would be expected to learn the technical vocabulary on their own, as part of their study of their particular discipline. With 95% coverage resulting from knowledge of the 2000 most frequent words, the UWL, and the technical vocabulary, only one in twenty running words will be unfamiliar (Nation, 1990).

Implicit and explicit learning : The distinction between implicit learning and explicit learning has long been an area of interest for SLA researchers and theoreticians. Implicit learning is the acquisition of knowledge that takes place naturally, simply, and without conscious operations. Explicit learning is a conscious operation wherein the learner makes and tests hypotheses about the target language (N.C. Ellis, 1994). Over the years the “pendulum” has swung back and forth in second language education between methods that emphasize explicit instruction and methods that favor implicit learning. The grammar-translation method depends on explicit instruction. The audio-lingual method and more recent “communicative” approaches posit an implicit model of second language learning. This distinction between implicit and explicit learning forms the centerpiece of Krashen’s model of SLA. Krashen allows that both explicit and implicit learning take place, but denies that there is any interface between the two (Krashen, 1981); explicit, conscious learning cannot be converted into acquisition. Others, notably R. Ellis (1990) and Schmidt (1990), believe that explicit knowledge plays an important role in second language acquisition.

The debate over the effectiveness of implicit versus explicit instruction and learning also applies to L2 vocabulary acquisition. Again, Krashen (1989) is a representative of the extreme implicit position. On the other hand, West’s compilation of the *General Service List* is based on the assumption that explicit learning has value. In addition, over the past fifteen years researchers and methodologists have devoted a great deal of time and effort to the development of strategies for explicit vocabulary learning and instruction. There are also some who find that both explicit and implicit processes take place in vocabulary acquisition, with each playing a different role. N.C. Ellis (1994) claims that “the recognition

and production aspects of vocabulary learning rely on implicit learning, but meaning and mediational aspects of vocabulary heavily involve explicit, conscious learning processes.” The vocabulary learning program outlined in this article is based on a recognition of Ellis’ insight in that explicit and implicit processes are seen as being complementary and are both considered important for L2 vocabulary acquisition.

List learning of L2 vocabulary : One example of an explicit strategy for vocabulary acquisition is learning words from a list. This was once a common practice but has now for many years been unfashionable among language teachers. However, recent research indicates that working with a word list can be a very efficient means of acquiring L2 vocabulary (Nation, 1995; Meara, 1995). Griffin and Harley (1996) have tried to describe some of the psychological processes that take place in list learning of second language vocabulary. Shillaw (1995) reports success in a semester-long project using word lists with students at a Japanese university. Thornbury (2002) points out that the value of list learning may have been underestimated and suggests several techniques for using word lists in the classroom. This recent research into list learning and the development of new pedagogical methods for exploiting lists suggest that teachers of second languages are taking a renewed interest in using word lists for vocabulary instruction. The study that I will describe in this article was designed to test the effectiveness of vocabulary acquisition among students working with Nation’s University Word List.

The Study

Purpose : The purpose of the study was to explore the benefits of using a word list in vocabulary instruction. The results of the study also invite consideration of the roles of explicit learning and implicit learning in second language vocabulary acquisition.

Subjects : This study was carried out with a class of 14 Japanese college students. These students were enrolled in a special nine-month long program designed to prepare them for study abroad at a university in the United States. The program consisted of both ESL classes and classes on academic subjects. In their academic subject classes the students were required to read the same texts as those used in the corresponding classes in the American university. I taught these students in an ESL reading skills and vocabulary development course. Their TOEFL scores ranged from 420-480.

Procedure : The vocabulary program was made up of both explicit learning activities and opportunities for implicit vocabulary acquisition. The goal of the program was to help the students take their first steps toward learning to read authentic academic texts in English. As already noted, a good base of vocabulary for reading academic texts would be

knowledge of the most frequent 2000 words, the words on the *University Word List*, and the technical vocabulary for the academic subject being studied. In addition, I hoped that the students would have a chance to extend their vocabulary knowledge into the 3000-5000 word range of most frequently occurring vocabulary.

At the beginning of the course the students' vocabulary levels were assessed using the Vocabulary Levels Test developed by Nation (1990). This test evaluates vocabulary knowledge at differing levels of word frequency: 2000 words, 3000 words, 5000 words, and the UWL. An interesting description and discussion of this test can be found in Read (2000).

The test results revealed that the students' knowledge of the words on the *University Word List* was weak. This fact, and the time constraints of the course, led me to decide that explicit vocabulary teaching would be confined to the words on the UWL. The students were expected to increase their knowledge of the other levels implicitly, through the large amount of reading required both in the reading and vocabulary development course and in their academic courses. The technical vocabulary would be learned in the respective academic courses.

The UWL is divided into 11 sections, each containing about 75 words. The words on list number one have the greatest frequency and range. The students were given one of these lists every two weeks. They were also given an accompanying set of example sentences that demonstrated usage of words on the list. The students were expected to learn the meaning of these words on their own. At the end of a two-week period the students were given a simple multiple-choice test on those words. The purpose of the test was not so much to assess successful vocabulary acquisition as to motivate the students to study the list.

In addition to working with the word lists, the students were exposed to the academic vocabulary in other areas of their course work. Words from the UWL appeared frequently in the authentic texts that they were reading in their academic subject classes. There were also opportunities for students to work more directly with academic vocabulary in their writing class, where they were expected to produce written work that would meet the academic standards of the university they would eventually attend. All in all, with regard to the words tested on the Vocabulary Levels Test, the students had many opportunities for explicit learning of the words on the UWL. They had fewer chances for such explicit learning with the words in the other levels. Finally, the large amount of reading required in all classes in this program ensured that there would be many opportunities for implicit vocabulary acquisition.

Results : The Vocabulary Levels Test was readministered at the end of the course, eight months after the students had first taken it. The students were not given any advance

notice about the tests and therefore did not have a chance to study directly for them. The results of the tests are in Table 1.

Table 1

	2000 word level	3000 word level	5000 word level	UWL
1 st testing	15.3	13.4	9.0	5.4
2 nd testing	16.4	15.1	10.8	9.3
improvement	1.1	1.7	1.8	3.9
The Vocabulary Levels Test tests 18 words at each level. The figure 18 would represent a perfect score for a given level. The figures in the table represent the averages of the scores for the 14 students who took the tests.				

Discussion

Results : As can be seen in Table 1, the greatest improvement came with the words on the UWL. From this we could infer that the explicit instruction devoted to the UWL helped the students achieve greater acquisition than the purely implicit approach taken with the words at the other levels. However, other explanations can easily be imagined. As has been noted, in research of this sort slight changes in participants, tasks, and materials can result in variations in data (Griffen and Harley, 1996). Rather than attempting to make far-reaching quantitative claims on the basis of a limited study. I would prefer to consider the qualitative nature of the vocabulary acquisition that took place among the students during their nine months in the program.

The process of vocabulary acquisition : N.C. Ellis (1995) has suggested the following possible explanations for the process of vocabulary acquisition:

- 1) According to the *strong implicit vocabulary learning hypothesis* new words are acquired totally unconsciously.
- 2) A *weak implicit vocabulary learning hypothesis* holds that it is at least necessary for learners to notice that a word is new to them.
- 3) A *weak explicit vocabulary learning hypothesis* suggests that even when words are learned implicitly, some active processing is also taking place.
- 4) A *strong explicit vocabulary learning hypothesis* holds that learners consciously apply metacognitive strategies in acquiring new vocabulary.

According to Ellis, each hypothesis explains different aspects of vocabulary acquisition.

The *strong implicit hypothesis* can explain a learner's ability to recognize and produce words. This ability is a skill developed through repetition. The students in my program were given opportunities for this type of learning in the large amount of reading they were required to do. My giving the students a word list, inducing them to notice the target vocabulary, is a teaching strategy informed by the *weak implicit hypothesis*. Ellis claims that learning meaning is a conscious process that requires at least a *weak explicit* approach or, more probably, a *strong explicit* approach. These hypotheses would explain the effect of whatever metacognitive strategies the students independently employed in working with the word lists.

Noticing : The discussion in SLA literature on explicit and implicit acquisition is related to more recently developed hypotheses concerning “noticing” and “attention.” Schmidt (2000) encapsulates these views as follows: “Since many features of L2 input are likely to be infrequent, non-salient, and communicatively redundant, intentionally focused attention may be a practical (though not theoretical) necessity for successful language learning.”

To date, almost all the SLA research on noticing and attention has been concerned with acquisition of the grammar system. However, there is recent interest in applying these notions to vocabulary learning (Laufer and Hulstijn, 2001). Examining the results of the study reported here we might conclude that the students' improvement at each level tested was a result of implicit processes, but that the greater improvement at the UWL level was due to their having worked with the word list, which led them to notice and focus their attention on relevant data in the input.

Decontextualized vocabulary learning : As previously noted, many teachers criticize the practice of presenting new vocabulary in word lists. The feeling seems to be that new words should be introduced to learners in context. However, there is research dating back to the 1930s that supports the idea that learning words from a list is an efficient means of acquiring second language vocabulary (Carter and McCarthy, 1988). Using word lists can also provide motivation since most students seem to see vocabulary development as one of the most important aspects of second language learning and many of them feel their greatest difficulties in reading stem from limitations in their vocabulary.

Conclusion

The results of the study lend support to the claim that decontextualized learning of vocabulary from word lists has some value in second language instruction. A review of the literature on implicit versus explicit learning reveals that many SLA researchers and methodologists have found that explicit instruction promotes acquisition. Considering the

students involved in this study, I would conclude that the large amount of extensive reading they did as part of their preparation for study abroad was a crucial factor in their acquisition of new vocabulary and that this was an implicit process. However, this implicit learning was enhanced by the explicit instruction provided through word lists.

The present interest in corpus studies and the research being done on explicit and implicit learning processes have encouraged a growing interest among materials developers and teachers in explicit forms of vocabulary instruction. Coxhead (2000) has compiled a new version of the academic word list used in this study and several different versions of the vocabulary levels test have been developed (Nation, 2001). Laufer and Hulstijn (2001) have proposed a theoretical construct for L2 vocabulary acquisition and have highlighted the need for more empirical research on the noticing and elaboration hypotheses with respect to L2 vocabulary learning. This increasing attention paid to explicit vocabulary learning has pedagogical implications that should be of interest to ESL teachers, especially those interested in reading instruction.

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