

Playing with words: L2 vocabulary acquisition and the use of popular tales. A perspective from the Involvement Load Hypothesis

Jugar con las palabras: la adquisición de vocabulario en L2 y el uso de cuentos populares. Una perspectiva desde la ILH

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Resumen

Uno de los principales objetivos de la enseñanza en Educación Primaria en España es impulsar la adquisición de, al menos, una lengua extranjera. El vocabulario se considera uno de los aspectos clave para conseguir dicho objetivo. De hecho, se ha comprobado empíricamente que el conocimiento léxico ayuda a desarrollar habilidades comunicativas como la comprensión lectora o la producción escrita. Uno de los recursos utilizados para trabajar el léxico en lengua extranjera en el ámbito de Educación Primaria es la literatura infantil. De acuerdo con la ILH, el grado de implicación que exige una actividad puede incidir en el resultado de aprendizaje de quien la realiza. Nuestra propuesta pretende trabajar el vocabulario a través de una serie de actividades donde el vocabulario se trabaja con distintos grados de implicación según la ILH, tomando como base los cuentos populares.

Palabras clave: Aprendizaje de segunda lengua, cuentos populares, Educación Primaria, ILH, vocabulario

Abstract

One of the main aims of the Primary Education system in Spain is promoting the learning of, at least, one foreign language. Vocabulary is considered one of the key

aspects to reach this aim. In fact, vocabulary knowledge has been proved to help develop communicative skills such as reading or writing. Children's literature is one of the resources for foreign language vocabulary teaching. According to the ILH, the degree of involvement in an activity may affect the student's learning results. Our proposal aims to work with vocabulary by means of a series of activities where vocabulary is dealt with at different degrees of involvement, activities being based on popular tales.

Keywords: ILH, popular tales, Primary Education, Second language learning, vocabulary

The present work aims to measure L2 vocabulary acquisition through the use of popular tales. Accordingly, a pilot study was carried out where twenty ten to eleven year-old students of English as a Foreign Language participated.

Literature Review

The role of literature in formal education

The use of children's literature can be seen in almost all stages of formal education, from kindergarden to Primary and Secondary education. In fact, literature is considered very important in students' integral formation, as it leads them to have contact with their own culture. Thus, literature provides the students with an opportunity to approach several aspects of their environment such as cultural knowledge, the images and symbols of a specific cultural context, and especially their mother tongue⁶ (Colomer 2010). Therefore, if literature appears as a widely used resource in L1 teaching, why not using it in L2 teaching, as well? Authors like Sell (2005) state that children's texts in the L2 classroom introduce certain realities that are more appealing and motivating than other types of texts that can be found in resources such as course books.

Hismanoglu (2005) analyses and develops four reasons why the use of literary texts in the L2 classroom contributes to the L2 learning. These four

⁶ Language teaching cannot be separated from culture or the images that represent it. However, as regards L2 teaching in Spain, both the culture and the images of the popular literature that is dealt with in tales in English is not very different from the Spanish ones.

reasons are: authenticity, cultural enrichment, language enrichment and personal involvement. They are somehow related to Colomer's ideas about the importance of text authenticity and the student's personal interest in his or her own learning process. In fact, according to the authors above, working with literary texts contributes to the development of such a process.

Hismanoglu (ibid.) also mentions a list established by Maley in 1989 where the latter offers seven reasons why literature can be an important resource in L2 teaching: Universality, Non-triviality, Personal Relevance, Variety, Interest, Economy and Suggestive Power, and Ambiguity. The author highlights the relevant role of the literature as a means to learn a foreign language inside and outside the classroom.

Another positive aspect of working with literature in the L2 classroom is the development of the writing skill. Hismanoglu (2005) mentions three ways in which literature may contribute to the acquisition of different writing models: controlled writing, where the student writes small paragraphs as a way to practice a specific grammatical structure; in guided writing students answer different questions in order to complete the narration; finally, reproducing includes the use of paraphrase, summary and adaptation.

Finally, literature can become the argument for writing (writing on or about literature), in activities such as textual analysis, or even the prompt for writing (writing "out of" literature). The latter is the most interesting option for our proposal. That is to say, changing the literary work or adding new elements to the original text involves knowledge and understanding of the text, as well as creativity and production in a foreign language.

The role of vocabulary in L2 learning and the Involvement Load Hypothesis

Focusing on L2 acquisition, the relevant role of vocabulary in language learning may have been a hotly debated topic in the seventies, eighties and even the nineties. However, at present days that discussion has turned obsolete. Nowadays, nobody can—or should—question the weight of vocabulary in the process of acquiring a new language. Thus, vocabulary is currently considered one of the cornerstones—some would say the cornerstone—of EFL learning and teaching.

An example of this situation is the increasing number of research papers and L2 vocabulary books published since the mid seventies until

now (Richards 1974; Allen 1983; McCarthy 1990; Schmitt 2000; Nation and Gu 2007; Milton 2009). In all those works vocabulary knowledge has proved to be a hallmark in Second Language Acquisition, and a good predictor of L2 reading and writing success (Laufer 1998; Sparks et al.1997; Golkar and Yamini 2007). Not only do researchers and teachers appreciate the relationship between vocabulary and L2 proficiency. Learners themselves regard vocabulary as one of the most important things in L2 acquisition. In fact, learning new words provides them with a feeling of general improvement in the language they are studying (Laufer 1986).

Nonetheless, although L2 vocabulary research is no longer a neglected area, there is still a long way to find definite answers to some key questions within this field. Traditionally, vocabulary acquisition research has largely concentrated on vocabulary itself, viz. what is to be learned or what is in fact learned, rather than how vocabulary is actually learned and what affects this learning.

Admittedly, we have to be realistic and recognize that this amount limits the speaker in some respects. However, despite limitations, the author goes on to say that the 2000 most frequent word families “should still allow satisfying interactions with native speakers on topics focusing on everyday events and activities”. Nation (2001) adds that this figure normally represents 84% of a general, non-specialized text. By contrast, Laufer (1995) is more optimistic and increases this percentage up to 95%.

Unfortunately, several studies reveal that learners do not usually seem to reach this threshold level. For instance, Quinn (1968) discovered that university students had a very low L2 vocabulary level despite having studied it for several years. On average, students had only managed to acquire 1000 words after seven years of instruction. The results uncovered by Jiménez Catalán and Terrazas (2008) and Jiménez Catalán and Moreno Espinosa (2005) did not fair much better. These two studies showed that Elementary school children were really far from expectations in their vocabulary acquisition. Secondary school students, for their part, did not perform much better either. On average, they did not even reach 1000 words after ten years of instruction.

Experts on L2 acquisition have tried to find a solution to improve these low numbers. Some of them point to frequency. We can distinguish between general and specific frequency. The former refers to occurrences in general discourse, whereas the latter corresponds to word occurrences in a given text. In this sense, it is not unusual to find words with a high

specific frequency in a textbook, for instance, yet a low frequency in general discourse, and vice versa. This is common when a second language is learned for a specific purpose, for example Medicine or Law. General frequency has proven to be a determining factor in L2 vocabulary acquisition (Brown 1993). Based on general frequency, Meara (1992) designed a model of frequency profile which seemed to be accurate in the way it characterized vocabulary growth in groups of learners. According to this model, learners are sensitive to the general frequency of occurrence of the words they encounter. Logically enough, words with higher frequency are expected to occur more often in discourse, providing learners with more chances to acquire them.

Yet, a large part of the L2 community learns vocabulary in a non-naturalistic environment, where the second language becomes a foreign language, not an L2⁷. These formal contexts limit exposure almost exclusively to the classroom. The classroom is a microcosm where most learning processes develop. Consequently, the learners' vocabulary acquisition will mainly depend on the input provided by the teacher and the textbook, which may or may not coincide with the frequency levels of general discourse in that language.

According to cognitive psychology, deep elaboration of lexical information leads to better retention (Broeder and Plunkett 1994). An elaborated processing of lexical information involves both paying attention – whether intentionally or unintentionally – and somehow noticing. In fact, attention should not be understood as intentional learning. As Hulstijn and Laufer state, “careful attention can be paid to a certain word during intentional learning (e.g. preparation for a vocabulary test) just as well as during incidental learning (e.g. when a word occurs in a text and successful completion of the reading task requires such attention)” (Hulstijn and Laufer 2001: 542).

Previous studies show that activities with a deeper and more elaborated lexical processing are more effective. We can find works by Ellis (1994) and Newton (1995), where it is observed that negotiation in communicative tasks promotes better vocabulary acquisition than those tasks with no negotiation. In the same line, Ellis and He (1999) and Joe (1998) confirmed

⁷ Machón (1987) distinguishes between second and foreign language in terms of three variables: when, how and where language is learned. Accordingly, a second language is learned in the L2 context, whereas the foreign language is learned in a L1 context.

that activities which require production were more efficient for vocabulary acquisition than those activities where production does not occur.

Traditionally, the concepts of Elaboration and Processing have been understood in a general way from the viewpoint of cognition (Baddeley 1997). However, Laufer and Hulstijn (2001) felt the need to operationalize and adapt these notions to the field of L2 vocabulary acquisition. They suggested what they called the construct of *involvement*. According to these authors, it is viewed as able to explain and predict learners' success in the retention of unfamiliar words. This construct includes both cognitive and motivational aspects, adopting the term cognitive as referring exclusively to information processing, excluding affective aspects of cognition.

The three basic components of this construct are *need*, *search* and *evaluation*. The first one corresponds to the motivational non-cognitive dimension of the construct. It refers to the need of achievement. It should be stated here that the notion of achievement should not be understood in the sense of fear of failure, but in a more positive way, as to comply with the task requirements, whether these requirements are externally imposed or self-imposed. Search and evaluation are the second and third dimensions of involvement, and they have a cognitive origin. They are related to noticing and paying attention to the form meaning relationship (Schmitt 2000). Search concerns the attempt to find the L2 form or meaning by using a dictionary or any other authority. Evaluation focuses on deciding whether an L2 word can be used in a specific linguistic context or not. It can entail a comparison of a given word with other words, or a specific meaning with other meanings of the same words. In fact, evaluation implies some kind of decision based on specific criteria.

The aspects of *need* and *evaluation* comprehend three levels of involvement. Level 0 occurs when an aspect is not part of the activity or task. Level 1 is described as "moderated", and level 2 is considered "strong". *Need* is moderated when it is triggered by an external agent such as the teacher. In the case of *evaluation*, it is moderated when there is the possibility of choosing an L2 word among different options. It is given when the learning need comes from the learner himself. As for "evaluation", the strong level appears when the learner uses an L2 word in a sentence or text, without having the possibility to choose among several options, that is to say, the word used comes from the student's mental lexicon. Contrary to the components of *need* and *evaluation*, the aspect of *search* only comprises two levels: level 0 and level 1, indicating no gradation but just whether this aspect is included or not in the activity.

Some of them are theoretically possible, but they would not make sense or would not be very practical. For instance, an activity with involvement load 0 means, among other things, that it has no *need*, something which is theoretically possible but not useful. Given its particular nature, an activity is to be done; otherwise it is obsolete. If an activity has 0 level of *need*, it loses its essence, that is to say, to be done.

All these combinations differ in the involvement load they generate. The so called involvement load is defined by Laufer and Hulstijn (2001: 15) as “the combination of the presence or absence of the involvement factors need, search and evaluation” in different activities. For instance, looking up unknown words in a dictionary while reading implies search, while the same reading with words glossed in the margin does not. In the first type of task the learner pays attention to form in a way that is much more overt than in the second one, where search is not given. In a similar way, a writing task that asks learners to use previously known words to write a composition implies stronger evaluation than choosing among different words offered in the task.

Taking the previous information about involvement into consideration, Laufer and Hulstijn propose what they called the Involvement Load Hypothesis (2001), which suggests that the possibility of learning an L2 word is directly proportional to the involvement load during the word processing. That is to say, the higher the involvement load, the better the acquisition. The authors state that retention of words is conditional upon the aspects of need, search and evaluation explained above. In fact, they state that “other factors being equal, words which are processed with higher involvement load will be retained better than words which are processed with lower involvement load” (Laufer and Hulstijn 2001: 15).

What is more, up to now, research about the involvement construct has almost exclusively focused on learners with intermediate or advanced L2 level, and their results are somehow conflicting. For instance, Folse (2006) studied the effects of different writing tasks on the learning of L2 words by university students whose proficiency levels ranged from lower intermediate to advanced level. Curiously enough, his results were against the Involvement Load Hypothesis, since the tasks involving strong and moderate evaluation were equally effective. On the contrary, Keating (2008) found that beginning Spanish learners completing a sentence-writing exercise after reading obtained better retention of meaning and form than by means of a blank-filling exercise. Nevertheless, the first condition scored comparatively lower on the delayed form-retention posttest than the

second condition. More recently, Lu (2013) have shown that the blank-filling task was more beneficial to vocabulary learning than the composition task for lower-intermediate learners, probably because of time constraints in FL classrooms.

Our proposal has a double aim. On the one hand, it consists of the use of popular tales as the basis of creative writing (Rodari 2010). Rodari (2010) states that using folk stories can be an interesting way to deal with literature creativity, both from an oral and written perspective. In this line, we suggest working with a well-known story that belongs to the folk tradition. This tale will constitute the basis for creating a new story. In this sense, students will be encouraged to produce texts through playful activities consisting of exchanging, modifying and characterizing.

The Workshop

Our proposal is structured into different stages:

Stage 1. Collective Reading

The first part of our workshop consists of a collective reading of a traditional tale. The tale can be a graded reader or can be adapted by the teacher. Reading can be done in small groups of students under the teacher's supervision or by the teacher who will read the tale aloud. In this case, the only component of the ILH that is found corresponds to "need" in a strong level. No search or evaluation is given here. In other words, the teacher does not ask students to do anything with the vocabulary in the story. They just read it or listen to the teacher in a relaxed environment.

Stage 2. Identification, exchanging, searching and inventing

After the first contact with the tale by means of collective reading, students will be asked to identify and underline the adjectives that describe the main characters of the story. This part of the workshop can be done individually or in small groups. We recommend group work as students can collaborate and help each other.

Once adjectives have been identified, students will work with them in three different ways. In the first place, they will be asked to make a list with the adjectives that they have underlined and use them to describe a different

character. We expect them to obtain unusual combinations in traditional tales such as “shy prince” or “strong girl”. In this case, the “need” is moderate because the fact of exchanging adjectives is encouraged by the teacher. Students may not do it naturally.

In the second place, students will be encouraged to find opposite adjectives to the ones that have been previously identified. In order to do so, students can ask the teacher the L2 words that they need or they can even use a bilingual dictionary. This second part is mainly related to the Involvement Load Hypothesis (ILH) “search”. At the same time, there is moderate “need” as this activity is suggested by the teacher.

As the last part of this stage students will be able to characterize the protagonists with new adjectives they can think of. The teacher will be guiding this part and can help recall adjectives that may be already known by students. This is mainly related to the ILH strong “evaluation”. The term “evaluation” here must be understood, as it is in the ILH, in the sense of selecting the right term among all the terms that are in your mental lexicon. That is why this activity, which consists of recalling the L2 words that students know, can be related to this part of the ILH. This third part of stage 2 is the one that requires the highest cognitive effort as no options are offered to students (see table I).

Stage	Description	Involvement Load		
		Need	Search	Evaluation
1	Collective reading	2	0	0
2	Identification, exchanging, searching and inventing	1	1	2
3	Creating a new tale	1	1	2

Table I. Involvement Load in activities of each stage

Stage 3. Creating a new tale

This last stage consists of the collective writing of a new tale in small groups. First, students will be immersed in a brainstorming process, where they can give ideas on how the new tale is going to be written, and how the project is to be developed. The role of the teacher is especially important here. S/he has to guide students as they may not be used to this type of work. In this activity the three aspects of “involvement” are found together. There is moderate “need”, “search” and strong “evaluation”. Put another way, “need” appears the moment the teacher asks students to create their

own story. “Search” may also be given in this case, as students will be encouraged to use the dictionary or ask the teacher in order to find words they want to use. Finally, “evaluation” in this case is strong as students have to use their own mental lexicon to produce their own story. Once the new tales have been created, they will be shown to the rest of the class, and one member of each group will read aloud the story to the rest of students. All new creations will be voted in order to choose the best written, the best read aloud, or the best illustrated.

A pilot study

We decided to carry out this project in a real context in order to check its effectiveness. We show here the main features of our pilot study.

Participants

Our pilot study was carried out in a summer school in Murcia where twenty ten-to-eleven-year-old students (12 girls and 8 boys) participated. They had just finished their fifth year of Primary Education and belonged to three different public schools. Nevertheless, their level of English was similar. They all had A2, according to the Common European Framework of Languages (2001).

Materials

Snowwhite was the traditional tale selected for our study. We considered this piece of literature a good sample, as we could find a high number of adjectives that characterize the two main protagonists. Another positive aspect of this tale is that it hardly needed adaptation. The structures and vocabulary were simple and the thread of the story was easy to follow.

Students were tested in two moments. First, a receptive and a productive pretest were carried out just before students had access to the story. We wanted to know whether students were familiarized with the target words that they were expected to learn. That is to say, we wanted to know whether they recognized or could recall those words. At the end of workshop, students were tested again and with the same tests. The tests contained 15 adjectives that characterize the two protagonists of the tale (see table II). These tests consisted of finding the equivalent to the target words, both in the L1 (receptive test) or in the L2 (productive test). This type of tests was

chosen for several reasons: first, they were familiar to the students, they provide direct and valid information about the vocabulary knowledge to be assessed, and they are considered a reliable instrument for assessing productive vocabulary knowledge (Takala 1984; Read 2000). Furthermore, the use of the first language in vocabulary testing is especially recommended in the case of students with an elementary level of the foreign language, as it “allows learners to respond to vocabulary items in a way that does not draw on second language knowledge” (Nation 2001: 351). What is more, we agree with Nation that resorting to the L1 as a stimulus is a “very efficient” (Nation 2001: 352) way of eliciting the L2.

Beautiful	Marvelous
Brave	Shy
Clever	Soft
Elegant	Strong
Fair	Tender
Friendly	Young
Handsome	Wonderful
Lovely	

Table II. Target vocabulary

Results and discussion

Both the receptive and productive pretests showed that students were not familiarized, or at least, could not recognize or recall any of the 15 target words. After the workshop was finished, the same tests were distributed. We could observe a considerable rate of acquisition both in receptive and productive knowledge of the target vocabulary.

Productive acquisition went up to 68.6%, whereas recognition increased up to 85% (see figure I). As we can see, in global terms results are quite positive. However, we should pay attention to the difference between receptive and productive knowledge. The former is significantly higher than the latter. This difference is expected as recognition is normally easier than production. Nevertheless, both post-tests show encouraging results after students took part in the workshop.

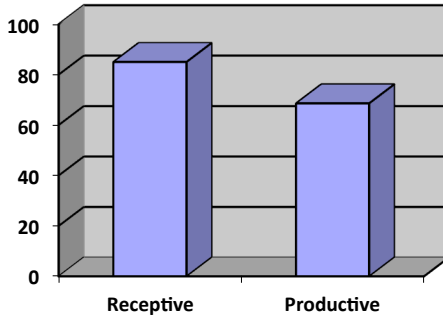


Figure I. Tests results of receptive and productive vocabulary acquisition

Final remarks

To conclude, our proposal aims at encouraging students to be creative at the same time they learn a foreign language. Our proposal can be adapted to different groups and levels. In this case the workshop is focused on adjectives, but it can be used to work with other linguistic categories such as nouns, verbs or adverbs.

In addition, one of the most interesting aspects of this proposal its interdisciplinary character, as it is an attempt to nicely combine language and literature in a L2.

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