L2 Vocabulary Acquisition through Extensive Reading

J. Coady

Coady studied the possibility of learning vocabulary through reading in a second language. While proponents of the input hypothesis claim that the best way to learn second language vocabulary is through extensive reading, some research has indicated that this may not be true. This researcher sought to explain the research on extensive reading and how extensive reading might be best applied.

Theory

Proponents of incidental vocabulary learning claim that vocabulary is learned gradually with repeated exposure. They estimate that second language learners need about ten to twelve exposures to a word in a comprehensible context over time in order to learn it well. While some L2 vocabulary acquisition research indicates that this can happen through reading, most of these studies did not provide adequate controls and were conducted with intermediate to advanced level learners. Other studies have failed to show any benefits from extensive reading to vocabulary acquisition. These explain the foundations of the beginner’s paradox, which is Coady’s focus here.

Findings

The beginner’s paradox comes from two competing ideas in the L2 literacy acquisition literature. The input hypothesis states that a second language learner can learn vocabulary through reading. However, bottom-up processing research has indicated that there is a vocabulary threshold for reading. Learners cannot read in a second language at a level of comprehension sufficient to learn new words from context until they have gained a certain threshold of vocabulary in the second language. This threshold has been estimated to be in the range of 3,000 to 5,000 word families, or 5,000 to 8,000 lexical items. Before attaining this level, it will be impossible for readers to comprehend with accuracy. This is the paradox: beginning language learners need to read to gain vocabulary, but they need to gain vocabulary to read.

Coady suggests that special attention be given to vocabulary learning until learners have reached the vocabulary threshold. He also suggests that top-down processing will be more effective—and better able to overcome the effects of limited vocabulary—if the student reads texts that are personally interesting and familiar. He suggests that the bottom-up processing instruction in vocabulary and structures be complemented with an emphasis on reader interest and a match between the text and the reader’s background knowledge.

Comments on the Study

The article clearly explains the nature of the beginner’s paradox and the need to support beginning students through both vocabulary and reading instruction. It articulates a rationale for attending to both bottom-up and top-down processing in literacy instruction. It also emphasizes the fact that different learner background knowledge may preclude the possibility of effective homogenized instruction at the beginning level. Beginning level readers especially need to read texts that match their background knowledge, as they will already have the structure needed to understand the reading, thus freeing resources for lower-level vocabulary processing. When learners have mixed backgrounds and interests, instruction will have to be individualized to allow for comprehension and vocabulary learning.

Implications for Practice

The study suggests that teachers should incorporate vocabulary instruction in high-frequency English vocabulary for their learners. Also, teachers should match texts to student experiences, and facilitate the more exact transfer of schema when students may not have sufficient bottom-up processing capacity to activate appropriate schema on their own.

Downloaded from http://www.cal.org/ncle/readingbib/