

## Vocabulary Acquisition in Second Language Aquisição De Vocabulario Em Segunda Lingua

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### Abstract

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This review article aims to compile and present some results of recent studies on the strategies of foreign language teaching, focusing on vocabulary acquisition from data reported in studies by several authors. After carefully considering the results presented by researchers, organized a list of learning strategies that were tested by them as well as the results obtained.

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**Keywords:** Foreign Language, Teaching Strategies, Vocabulary

### Introduction

Teaching a foreign language in Brazil is a tough task. As in most developing countries, public schools invest their efforts to teach the mother tongue, leaving foreign languages for private schools that hold a minority student population. The difficulties reported by institutions that do not invest in teaching foreign languages are very similar: the high cost of materials, the difficulty in hiring skilled personnel, the lack of interest of the target audience, etc. Within this context, we decided to review the matter seeking information about vocabulary strategies for teaching a second language on seven authors who performed research on second languages learning.

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Studies in the area of second language acquisition (L2)<sup>2</sup> are very important. They permit the discovery of strategies for teaching second language that contribute to the development of learners and facilitate the work of teachers. In public schools of developing countries, the brainpower and material resources are scarce. Within the wide range of pedagogic approaches, we will focus our review on studies that examine the importance of teaching strategies directed to the acquisition of vocabulary in second language.

This review article seeks, first, to trace some recent results of studies on foreign language teaching strategies, focused on vocabulary acquisition and then to compile this information, organizing a roadmap of strategies for second language instruction focused on vocabulary acquisition. Among the authors who deal with the subject, we chose the studies of Qian (1996), Rott (1999), Barcroft (2006, 2009), Webb & Kagimoto (2009), Catalán & Alba (2009), and Lee (2009) to present the data. Finally, after carefully analyzing the elements presented by these researchers, we present a list of learning strategies that have been mentioned by them.

## **Literature Review**

Several variables can be identified on the difficulties faced by second language learners. All of them are somehow dependent on factors such as socioeconomic, ideological and cultural conditions beyond their own teaching / learning and the intellectual characteristics of learners. Research methods seek to address these different aspects and each researcher, from his/her point of view, analyzes groups of informants in an attempt to give contributions to solving the problem.

Qian (1996) study was designed to determine whether L2 words encountered in context are better retained than those presented through decontextualized instruction in the form of a word list. Specifically, the study attempted to find out: i) Between the two learning techniques, namely, learning vocabulary in context, and learning vocabulary in isolation, which is more effective, in terms of the retention of target words ii) What are the levels of immediate, one-week, and three-week retention of vocabulary learned in context and in isolation?

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<sup>2</sup> Second Language Acquisition (L2) is when the person learns another language in his/her own country.

The sample selected by the author were 63 Chinese young adult learners at a major Chinese university who were taking a first-year university English as a foreign language (EFL<sup>3</sup>) course. Students were tested in two parallel classes taught by the same teacher, an experienced instructor with a near-native command of English. The classes were organized based in university's assessment of the students' EFL levels at the beginning of the semester. In this experiment, the two classes were treated as two groups: one group (n=32) learned new words in a contextualized situation, and the other (n=31) in a decontextualized situation.

In order to make the present study comparable to earlier studies on vocabulary retention, the author followed the methodology used in Anderson and Jordan (1928). The data collection was carried out in five steps: pretest, instruction, recall 1, recall 2, recall 3.

In short, the results of the present experiment show that the effect of decontextualized vocabulary learning on later recall is clearly stronger than contextualized vocabulary learning.

The second study analyzed by us from Rott (1999) aims at answering three research questions – i) Do intermediate foreign language learners acquire vocabulary incidentally through reading? ii) If acquired, is vocabulary retained over a longer period of time: 1 week later and 1 month later? and iii) Does frequency of exposure to a lexical item have an effect an incidental acquisition and retention of vocabulary?

In this study, the author selected 95 learners of German as a foreign language all in the fourth-semester at the University of Illinois. To test them, she used 12 lexical items selected as target words (TWs), which referred to items and actions of every-day life (but did not entail new target culture-specific concepts for learners). To certify that the words were unfamiliar for participants, she offered them a list of 50 lexical items (12 TWs and 38 distracters) and she instructed them to attempt a translation of each of the words and skip only those items they had never encountered before.

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<sup>3</sup> English as a Foreign Language (EFL) is when a foreign person studies another language in another country.

After that, she wrote six different paragraphs using this 12 TWs following some criteria as the same extension and unit of content (for example, the ideas in each paragraph were developed clearly, with concrete subjects and situations). Participants were exposed 2, 4 or 6 frequencies with texts. Then, she presented for them the same list of words used in the pretest to test the effective gain of vocabulary. They repeated the supply-definition task, whose results indicated that from two encounters with unknown words while reading is already a significant gain in vocabulary; but more significant results both for learning and retention of news words were to be better observed from six meetings with these items.

Next, the topic of vocabulary acquisition was treated in an article research by Barcroft (2006), the author examined effects of word writing on second language vocabulary learning. Two experiments were conducted with 20 participants, who are native American learning Spanish as a second language in two second-semester Spanish classes at a public university in the Midwestern United State.

Experiment one consisted in each participant attempting to learn 12 words in the word-writing condition and 12 words in the no-writing condition during word-picture vocabulary learning. The experiment included a pretest; a language background questionnaire; a page with general instructions; 24 numbered flash cards for the learning phase and 24 numbered flash cards for testing; an audiotape; a word-writing sheet; and posttest. The 24 words consisted in concrete nouns that were presented twice for 6 seconds each time for the no-writing condition. In the word-writing condition, participants were instructed to write each word once in the appropriate numbered box on the sheet.

Experiment two was a partial reapplication of Experiment 1 on participants of the same classes at a private university in the Midwestern United State. Differently of the first experiment, the researcher used a computer-based presentation program and had 46 Spanish students.

The findings of both experiments indicated that copying target words negatively affected productive L2 vocabulary learning. In this study, word-writing scores were approximately 0.34 times lower – Experiment 1 – and 0.21 times lower – Experiment 2 – than no-writing scores. The present findings suggest that forcing learners to produce output without access can detract from learning new L2 words.

Next, in a recent article, Bancroft (2009) examined the effects of synonym generation on second language learning during reading in both *incidental*<sup>4</sup> and *intentional*<sup>5</sup> vocabulary learning context with Spanish-speaking adults learners of L2 English at low and high intermediate levels. The participants in the study were 114 Spanish-speaking university students learning L2 English at a university in Mexico City.

Without receiving instructions that the experiment was about vocabulary learning, data of the participants were collected in regular classroom according the procedures: all of the participants received one learning packet, which corresponded to one of the four learning conditions – i) incidental; ii) intentional; iii) incidental-semantic; and iv) explicit-semantic.

This packets contained a language background questionnaire; an activity one sheet with four activities in each the 10 target words for the experiment had been embedded; an activity 2 instruction sheets to read a passage for meaning and specific instruction for each learning condition; the passage *The date that was not meant to be!* with or without spaces for writing synonyms next to Spanish translation of target words; a 15 question comprehension quiz; and a post experiment questionnaire on the participants' opinions about how well they learned the translated words and how well they had comprehended the text. The participants were given 10 minutes to read the text; 2 minutes to complete each vocabulary quiz; and 15 minutes to complete the 15 question comprehension quiz.

The results showed that the effect of task by recall type on L2 word learning during reading in both situations – incidental an intentional – and task –semantic and +semantic had gained vocabulary. Further, the scores of test in the –semantic and intentional conditions were much higher than in the +semantic and incidental conditions. The results for the text comprehension were higher in the -semantic condition than in the +semantic condition and higher in the incidental condition than in the intentional condition.

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<sup>4</sup> Learners acquire news words while intending to do so.

<sup>4</sup> Learners acquire new words from context without having the intention of doing so.

In another research by Webb and Kaginoto (2009), three specific questions were addressed— i) To what extent are reading and cloze tasks effective as tools for explicitly teaching collocation<sup>6</sup> in the language classroom? ii) In what ways do the differences in the type of learning condition (receptive and productive) influence learning gains in receptive and productive knowledge of collocation and meaning? iii) What do the results show us about the nature of the relationship between collocation and meaning? - about three main areas concerning the teaching of collocation in the language classroom: the extent to which reading and cloze tasks are effective tools for explicitly teaching collocation, the influence of the type of learning condition (receptive or productive) on the ultimate learning goals and the general nature of the relationship between collocation and meaning.

The methodology used by these authors has to select 145 Japanese native speakers learning English as a EFL in nine first-second, and third year classes at two universities in Fukuoka, Japan. To test the abilities of the learners, two experimental groups of 117 participants were assigned— encountering collocations in three glossed sentences and writing the same collocations in a cloze task – and 28 participants were assigned to a control group, which did the pretest and the receptive knowledge of collocation posttest. Amongst the learners in the study, 62 were classified as higher level learners. In addition, 55 learners were classified as lower level learners. To ensure that there was a valid comparison between the two treatments the participants were assigned to the experimental groups according to their pretest scores. The reading and cloze groups, and their subgroups – higher level and lower level – all had statically equivalent scores on the pretest. The methodology applied was three weeks before the experiment, all participants took the pretest and they were given as much time as they needed to complete it – 24 target collocations were chosen for this experiment. The mode word in each collocation was a verb with a noun as its collocate.

Verb noun collocation were used in this study because previous research indicated that they had caused difficulty to EFL learners (Chan and Lion, 2005; Nesselhauf, 2003). All collocations were comprised of high frequency words that the participants were likely to know. The scores on the tests measuring collocation indicate that reading glossed sentences and completing a cloze task may both be effective and efficient methods of learning collocation.

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<sup>6</sup> Regular combination of words.

The results of the current study indicated that there was little difference between the effects of the receptive and productive tasks on knowledge of collocation and meaning. There may be three reasons to the difference in results between the two levels.

In another study about vocabulary acquisition by Catalán & Alba (2009) the main objective is to ascertain whether there are differences or similarities regarding the number and the kind of words produced by male students compared to those produced by female students in response to cue words from a lexical availability task. For this, 210 Spanish sixth grade students (105 females and 105 males), with ages ranged from 11 to 12, were designed. They were studying English as a foreign language in four schools located in a middle class in the north of Spain, and they received a total of 625 hours of English instruction.

The authors used a questionnaire containing fifteen English cue words or phrases (e.g. parts of the body, clothes, parts of the house, food and drink). The students were given thirty minutes to provide responses – two minutes for each cue word.

The authors proceeded to edit the data according to the following criteria: i) made correction in the spelling errors and retained grammatical errors; ii) repeated words were counted only once for each cue word; and iii) unintelligible words and responses in Spanish were discarded. After that, the words produced by female and male students for each cue word were classified according to alphabetical order as well as word frequency (using WordSmith Tools). Finally, the authors proceeded to count the total of words types and calculate the number of items provided by females and males.

The results indicated that, on average, students are capable of generating 109 English words in thirty minutes by means of a lexical availability task. Among the words provided by students, most words are nouns, a few are verbs, and none are adjectives and adverbs.

Finally, the research by Lee (2009) had as goal to ascertain whether vocabulary acquisition in uninstructed silent reading of a short story with and without a vocabulary list followed by a story rewriting task. The participants were 70 intermediate multi-L1 and multi-grade students (n=39 experimental group and n=31 comparison group) of a Greater Vancouver public secondary school.

The author used as pretest and posttest a sentence-making and a multiple-choice test on 82 single words and 21 lexical phrases. No dictionaries or translators were allowed in both tests. For the pedagogical intervention the author selected a short story – *The return* by N. wa Thiong'o. This choice was based on the fact that the story was not familiar to the students. Both groups performed a story rewriting task after reading the short story: the experimental group read the story with a vocabulary list while the comparison group read without a vocabulary list.

The results showed that in silent uninstructed reading followed by story rewriting task, with or without vocabulary list, the experimental group attained significantly greater learning than the comparison group. Improvement was noticed in both variables: in listed single words and lexical phrases.

In order to present the strategies in a more clear way, a Table of strategies was organized. This Table is not considering the efficacy of the results of these strategies; it is only a synthesis of them.



Table 1 - Strategies to vocabulary acquisition

<b>Author</b>	<b>Teaching Strategies of New Words</b>
Qian (1996)	In contextualized situation (in a reading passage) and decontextualized situation (list of words form).
Rott (1999),	Using a list of 50 words (12 target words + 38 distracters) to translate, skipping unfamiliar ones. After that, six short paragraphs were created with the 12 target words and students were exposed 2, 4, and 6 frequencies with texts. Finally, the same list of words was presented to them to translate and check if they retain the target words.
Barcroft (2006)	In the word-writing condition and no-writing condition.
Bancroft (2009)	In four conditions: incidental; intentional; incidental-semantic and explicit-semantic.
Webb & Kaginoto (2009)	Using a task that they encounter collocations in three glossed sentences and write the same collocations in a cloze task.
Catalán & Alba (2009)	Using a questionnaire containing 15 English cue words or phrases (e.g. parts of the body, clothes, parts of the house, food and drink) to the students provide responses.
Lee (2009)	In a reading and also rewriting a short story with and without list of words (glossary).

## Conclusion

The literature on different authors on strategies for vocabulary acquisition in second language refers to some reflections. Firstly, there is a small number of existing studies - especially with a significant number of participants to be able to generalize the results. What can be found are isolated initiatives at different levels of schooling and these findings, for being punctual and using similar teaching materials, add little to the subject.

Anyway, there are some strategies for teaching vocabulary during the acquisition of L2/EFL presented by the authors that deserve attention by the possibility of replicating these studies in different circumstances. Analyzing the Table 1 to teaching strategies for new words presented in the previous section, together with the results of studies compiled in the literature review, you can forward some conclusions.

For example,

- the effect of decontextualized vocabulary learning on later recall is clearly stronger than contextualized vocabulary learning (Qian, 1996).
- the copying target words affected productive L2 vocabulary learning negatively, that is, forcing learners to produce output without access can detract from learning new L2 words (Bancroft, 2006).
- the effect of task by recall type on L2 word learning during reading in both situations
- incidental an intentional – and task –semantic and +semantic had gained vocabulary. The scores of the test in the –semantic and intentional conditions were much higher than in the +semantic and incidental conditions (Bancroft, 2009).
- the text comprehension were higher in the -semantic condition than in the +semantic condition and higher in the incidental condition than in the intentional condition (Bancroft, 2009).
- there was little difference between the effects of the receptive and productive tasks on knowledge of collocation and meaning (Webb and Kagimoto, 2009).
- on average, students are capable of generating 109 English words in thirty minutes by means of a lexical availability task. Among the words provided by students, most words are nouns, a few are verbs, and none are adjectives and adverbs (Catalán & Alba, 2009).
- in silent uninstructed reading followed by story rewriting task, with or without vocabulary list, the experimental group attained significantly greater learning than the comparison group. Improvement was noticed in both variables: in listed single words and lexical phrases (Lee, 2009).

These results, therefore, are contrary to the findings of Qian (1996) with respect to strategies for learning vocabulary in second language acquisition. In this author study the linguistic context (the text) has not contributed to increase the performance of students. These divergent results in different studies reinforce the need for such studies be replicated for different participants in different contexts of learning L2/EFL.

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