Field: Vocabulary

Lexical Processing Strategies and Word Retention

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There is a general agreement that reading plays a significant role in L2 vocabulary learning. Research has shown that L2 vocabulary can be incidentally learned from context in the course of reading for comprehension, although amounts of learning are small (Hulstijn, 1992; Krashen, 1989; Parry, 1991). Moreover, recent studies show that vocabulary learning from context can be enhanced, when a learner has access to a dictionary or marginal gloss (Knight, 1994; Luppescu & Day, 1993).

In many of these previous studies, however, vocabulary learning while reading was examined in relation to only one of the three lexical processing strategies, either consulting or inferring. Lexical processing strategies (LPSs) are the strategies that a learner uses to cope with unknown words while reading, such as consulting a dictionary or another individual, ignoring and continuing to read, and inferring word meanings on the basis of linguistic and contextual cues. When learners encounter unknown words in natural contexts, they seem to combine the three strategic options. Therefore, studies are needed to examine how these strategies work together.

Several studies (Fraser, 1999; Paribakht & Wesche, 1999) investigated how learners used the three LPS options while reading. However, these studies looked into the LPSs used by students in ESL context. There is more to learn about students' LPS use in EFL context like Japan.

This study examined the LPSs that Japanese learners of English used to deal with unknown words while reading a newspaper article. The retention of words was also examined. Students read an article and answered comprehension questions. Then they participated in an interview that elicited a retrospective think-aloud protocol of the LPSs they had used to deal with unknown words. A week after the reading session, the students took two types of vocabulary tests to assess word retention. After the protocols and tests were coded and scored, the rates of use of
each LPS, success rates of determining word meanings when students consulted and/or inferred, and rates of word retention were calculated. Then these rates were compared between high- and low-proficiency students.

The results showed that on average, Japanese university students looked up in a dictionary 69% of unknown words, inferred 52%, looked up after inferring 31%, and ignored 10%, although wide variability was found. These results showed that the students consulted more words and ignored fewer words than those in previous studies (Fraser, 1999; Paribakht & Wesche, 1999). Furthermore, this study found that the mean success rates of determining the meanings of unknown words ranged from 46% to 85%, depending on the strategy used and the scoring system. The mean rates of word retention ranged from 55% to 71%, according to the test format and the scoring system. The success rates, as well as the retention rates, are as high as or higher than those found in previous studies (Fraser, 1999; Hulstijn, 1992; Krashen, 1989).

Overall, the high- and the low-proficiency students did not significantly differ in the rates of use of LPS options. However, the high-proficiency students were more successful in determining word meanings than the low-proficiency students. A closer examination suggests that the higher-proficiency students were more skillful than the low-proficiency students in the use of wider context across the sentence, which may explain their higher success rates.

This study seems to indicate that overall, Japanese university students actively dealt with unknown words by consulting a dictionary, and their consultation was generally successful. The success rate of consulting, as well as the high rate of inferring, suggests that they did not use a dictionary mechanically ignoring the context. As a result, students appeared to learn many words from reading the text. The results suggest the importance of dictionaries for Japanese students’ learning of English. However, some low-proficiency students failed to use wider context when they consulted a dictionary and/or inferred word meanings. This finding indicates the need of training in how to use various cues to determine word meanings.