

DICTIONARY USE AS A WAY OF LEARNING VOCABULARY IN SLA: A PRELIMINARY STUDY

Three Chinese Learners of English as a Second Language at the University of the South Pacific

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Abstract

Vocabulary learning is important for L2 learners. There are different types of vocabulary and different ways of acquiring them. When learners are left to study vocabulary on their own, two common ways are available to them: to use the dictionary and to guess. Both researchers and teachers tend to encourage the guessing strategy and discourage the use of the dictionary. Yet little is known about what learners actually do when they turn to a dictionary. The hypothesis of the study is that learners have different reasons for using the dictionary. Three Chinese learners of English at the University of the South Pacific were asked to read a passage and to write down the words they looked up in the dictionary and their reasons for looking them up. Follow-up interviews were also conducted. The data also includes my own diary. Results show that learners may use the dictionary to learn a whole new word, or to deal with an old word. They may use the dictionary to clarify their confusion, or to confirm their guess. The use of the dictionary and the guessing strategy do not seem incompatible. The study suggests that some aspects of dictionary use are positive.

Introduction

Vocabulary learning is a very important task of second language learners - maybe the most important one. As McLaughlin points out, vocabulary development is the "prime task of adult L2 learners" (1978:324). This is why adults carry dictionaries, not grammars, when they travel in foreign countries (Hatch 1978, cited by McLaughlin 1978). One can keep the communication going provided one knows the content words needed. The existence of "foreigner talk" and "baby talk", in which a

lot of grammar features (not the content words) are simplified (Ferguson 1971), shows the importance of vocabulary from a different angle.

Vocabulary learning falls into different categories. A distinction is usually made between intentional or conscious learning and incidental learning (Hatch and Brown 1995, Meara 1994). Intentional learning is designed by the teacher or student. Incidental learning is a by-product of learning something else. It is easy to understand that not all the words learners know have been intentionally learnt, and the role of incidental learning is quite productive. Another distinction with regard to vocabulary learning is between receptive and productive vocabulary, also known as active versus passive vocabulary (Crow and Quigley 1985, Hatch and Brown 1995, Meara 1994). Receptive vocabulary are words which the learner recognises and understands when they occur in a context, but cannot produce properly. Productive vocabulary are words which the learner not only recognises and understands, but can also use correctly. Productive vocabulary is usually associated with intentional learning, and receptive vocabulary with incidental learning.

Types of vocabulary and vocabulary learning have an important effect on learners' attitudes towards the vocabulary. During intentional learning and productive vocabulary acquisition, much more attention is expected to be paid than with incidental and/or receptive learning. Learners may only need the basic meaning of a word for understanding it, but need to have knowledge of the syntactic restrictions or collocations if they want to produce the word on their own. Put another way, the learner needs different information for different purposes.

Ways to get information about the word differ. Learners may learn this information from the instruction of their teachers, or work this out by themselves. Using context to guess the information, (usually meaning) and consulting a dictionary to find the information are the two common methods available to learners for dealing with unfamiliar words during independent reading (Carnine, Kameenui and Coyle 1984). Both methods are usually considered to be incidental learning (but see "discussion").

Some previous research suggests that a guessing strategy is better than the use of a dictionary. This is shown in the bulk of studies of good language learners' strategies. For example, the first strategy of good language learners mentioned in Rubin's study is "the good language learner is a willing and accurate guesser" (975:45). Carnine, Kameenui and Coyle (1984) state that, unlike the use of a dictionary or glossary, a guessing strategy does not interrupt the reading process. Politzer and McGroarty suggest that looking up all the unknown words before attempting to read the text is a negative behaviour (1985:122). Twaddell (1973:71) goes further and suggests that rushing at once to a dictionary is the surest sign of a panicky language learner, and does nothing permanent for the learner's skill or resources. Hosenfeld (1984) develops a set of techniques to train learners in ways of making guesses and recommends using the dictionary as a last resort. However, as Urquhart (1994:3786) points out, "though the literature is full of pedagogical advice on what to do about unknown vocabulary, there is comparatively little empirical evidence as to what L2 readers actually do". I understand "what to do about unknown vocabulary" mainly as "how to guess the meaning of unknown words". It is also true that little is known about what actually happens when L2 learners use a dictionary. The literature seems to indicate that the use of the dictionary is very simple. However, this may not necessarily be true. In fact, the hypothesis which motivated this study is that learners have different reasons for using a dictionary. This hypothesis is based on the following two facts.

First, a learner's knowledge about a particular word may not be all or none. Receptive and productive vocabulary, as mentioned above, refer to two types of words in a learner's lexicon. Yet there are other types. Acquisition of a word does not appear to be a simple shift from not knowing to knowing, or from receptive to productive; rather, "there seems to be a continuum of knowledge about any word and a learner can be anywhere along the continuum" (Hatch and Brown 1995: 371). If we take the factor of time into consideration, the picture becomes much more complicated: "An L2 learner may be able to use a word easily today, but next week it may have retreated to the edge of competence, and three weeks later, for no apparent reason, it may come

readily to mind when required" (Meara 1994: 3728). Given the complexity of the status of different words in their lexicon, learners may well have different reasons for looking up different words in a dictionary.

The second fact underlying the hypothesis is that "dictionaries often supply information about the language not found elsewhere" (Marchkwardt 1973: 369). This information not only includes meaning, spelling, and pronunciation, but also grammar, usage, synonym discrimination, and application of derivative affixes. It must be pointed out that the dictionary in Marchkwardt's (1973) consideration is written entirely in English, and aims to deal with the entire language. However, a good bilingual dictionary contains the information mentioned above, although it may not be as detailed.

The present paper attempts to test the hypothesis by analysing two kinds of data. The first is obtained from an investigation of three Chinese English learners, with my own diary serving as supplementary data. Although the relatively small number of subjects makes it hard to generalise the findings, my main interest is in setting up a typology of reasons for using a dictionary.

Methodology

Participants: All three subjects are from mainland China, Zha is a 35-year-old graduate from a university in China. She has been in Fiji for about 5 years. Jin is a 27-year-old part-time student at the University of the South Pacific. She has been living in Fiji for about 2 years. Pan is a first-year student at the USP, 21 years of age. His majors are Accounting and Computing Science.

Pan, the youngest informant, was a year one university student when he came to Fiji. His English was not very good at that time, but he enrolled in a 16-week ESL full-day programme in 1996, and he studied English very hard before he started his programme at the USP. Zha has not had as much formal instruction, but has been exposed to English for a longer time. Jin had just graduated from a university at the time she came to Fiji, and English is compulsory for university students in China.

So, roughly speaking, the three subjects are at the same level of English proficiency.

My diary was the record of some of the words I looked up when I did my academic reading. I wrote down the words and my reasons for looking them up, and in some cases I also made comments on them (see "results" for examples).

Instruments: Each of the subjects was given an extract to read. The extract was taken from a journal article about the coping strategies of ESL students in writing tasks. The 13-page-long extract is the descriptive part of the article and does not contain many technical terms. Some background information about the article was provided. The subjects were told that this was an investigation for my SLA research paper, and they were asked to read the extract and underline the words they looked up in the dictionary. They were instructed to provide in Chinese reasons for the words being looked up, in as much detail as possible. They were also informed that there was no time limit for the reading, and that I wanted them to use their normal reading method. The instructions given to the subjects were in Chinese.

An interview was conducted with each subject after they had finished the reading selection. There were seven questions in the interview. I hoped the answers to these questions would help my understanding of the results from the silent reading. The interview was conducted in Chinese, and was not recorded.

Results

The words that were looked up are provided in Table 1. It is interesting to note that the three subjects have different considerations in terms of reading in general and consulting the dictionary in particular. Zha thinks that the biggest problem with reading in English is that her vocabulary size is too small, and the purpose of her English reading is to improve her vocabulary. "Reading in English is a kind of learning, not enjoyment", she says. The main strategy she adopts is guessing. She does not like to look up every new word she encounters. What she

usually does is to see whether the word is crucial to the context. If her lack of understanding of the word does not affect overall comprehension, she just carries on reading. If it does, she tries to guess the meaning first. About half of the words she looked up are those, she says, "which are definitely new for me, and the meaning of which I could not work out from the contexts".

Table 1
The use of the dictionary as a way of learning vocabulary in SLA
Words being looked up by the three subjects

Participants

Reasons	Zha	Jin	Pan
for meanings of new words	constellation, timid, syllabus, cognitive, surreptitiously, reluctance, criteria, rhetorical, plausible.	hypothetical, niche, distraction, surefire, antithesis, synthesis, tripartite, plausible, delate, stereotype, trivialise, etch, prosaic, surreptitiously, elicit, assiduously.	assiduously, prosaic, hem, elicit, ad hoc constellation, palate.
for the usage of new words			hem...in
for confirmation of meaning	ad hoc, sophisticated, stutterer, synthesis, thesis, antithesis, audiology pathology.	surefire, tripartite, delate, stereotype.	stutterer, appeal cognitive rhetorical cleft lip
for confirmation of meaning	strategy resistance		
for clarification			compliment (implement)
for pronunciation and/or stress	audiology pathology	behavioural methodology stutterer	
for new use of old words		prompt	stereotype

Jin pays a lot of attention to stress and pronunciation. She says she is often criticised by her husband, who says that there is no stress or intonation when she speaks English. She points out that she knows "behavioural" is a word related to "behaviour", but does not know where the stress is. She consulted her dictionary specially about the stress in "behavioural"! The main difficulty for her when reading in English is that sometimes the sentences are too long, and the size of vocabulary is the second problem. She distinguishes intensive reading from extensive reading. For extensive reading, she only looks up the key words. When it comes to intensive reading, her main consideration is frequency. If a word occurs very frequently, she not only looks it up in the dictionary - although in some cases she can guess the meaning - she also reads all the definitions in the entry for that word, chooses the most common uses, copies them down, and learns them by heart.

Pan is doing four courses at the USP, which is quite heavy for him. His purpose in reading in English is rather passive. "The university asks you to read in English", he comments. But he also considers that reading in English can help him acquire knowledge directly, since one does not need to wait for a translation into Chinese. He also distinguishes between intensive and extensive reading. But the strategies he uses are different from Jin's. He tries to guess as much as possible. He only uses the dictionary occasionally, rarely reads the definitions, and does not care about the pronunciation. He does this for speed. More than forty percent (6 out of 14) of the words he looked up in the investigation fall under the category of confirmation. His difficulty when doing academic reading is that sometimes he does not know which meaning suits the context. Another problem is sometimes he feels a lack of background knowledge:

List of Reasons for Using the Dictionary

Looking for meanings of new words: When encountering a new word, the subjects' attention seems drawn to the meaning first. Given the purpose of reading - "building a mental representation of the content of the text" (Mackinnon 1994: 3467), this is very natural behaviour.

Looking for the Usage of New Words: This strategy was used only once, by Pan, when he noticed that "hem" went with "in". If learners know that a collocation is an idiom, they may just choose the strategy of learning it by heart, which is rather simple.

Confirmation of Meaning: The phenomena under this category are quite diverse. There are at least three subcategories: (1) the words Zha confirmed are those which look like words she knows; (2) some of the words Pan confirmed are new words. He first made guesses about them, then checked them up in the dictionary; and (3) Jin adopted a quite careful strategy for frequent words. Even if she can guess the meaning and is rather sure about her guess, she looks them up for confirmation. There is one example in Pan's data which shows that he made a reasonable guess, but actually it was not correct (the word concerned is underlined).

1. If you are a stutterer, you don't want to speak.
(Leki 1995: 243.)

Pan thought that "*stutterer*" meant "dumb person". Another example from my diary:

2. When using think-aloud with L2 readers, certain cautions must be added. Of special concern is that reports may be incomplete due to lack of language proficiency or additional processing demands. In spite of this caveat, much useful information has been collected when using think aloud to study the reading of second language speakers (Block 1992: 323).

I thought "*caveat*" meant "incomplete reports, not so useful information". Here we have an example of the fact that "readers from certain cultures are conditioned to expect certain text organisations" (Williams 1994: 3767). In Chinese in the sentence pattern *chu le*, which is the counterpart of "*in spite of*", the phrase in the position of "*this caveat*" is usually semantically opposite to the phrase in the position of

"useful information". So the guess I made was influenced by my knowledge of Chinese. A more complex situation exists with regard to confirmation.

3. There is no way to know for certain why Ricky reads in this plodding fashion, but several explanations are plausible (Hosenfeld 1984: 238).

I guessed correctly that the meaning of "*plodding*" was "strenuous". But at the same time I also thought that the original meaning of "plod" is "plough", and since ploughing is not easy, it can be used to refer to "strenuous, difficult". In cases like this (I conjecture that it is not that rare), it may be enough for the present comprehension if the learner just relies on the guessing strategy, but in the long run it may not be good for the acquisition of the word "*plod*". The importance of the distinction between comprehension and acquisition is well supported by this example.

Confirmation of Usage: Zha knows "*strategy*" in the sense of "military strategy". The context in the extract is "learning strategy". So she wondered whether this is a new use of "*strategy*" or if the word has another meaning. Here cultural background also plays a role. In Chinese the equivalent of "*strategy*" is "*ce jue*" and rarely combines with "learning". Here are two examples from my diary.

4. Though she was a shy, seemingly timid person, she successfully appealed for help to a U.S. student in the class who seemed friendly and with her help was able to successfully complete the assignment (Leki 1995: 242).
5. Leki and Carson's (1993) survey of ESL students' perceptions of their writing needs attempts to gauge how well EAP writing courses articulate with writing demands across the curriculum (Leki 1995: 236).

I knew the meanings of "appeal" and "articulate", but I was not so sure about the collocation used in the sentences. Furthermore, the combination "articulate with" made me have doubts about my knowledge of "articulate". I checked in the dictionary to make sure that "appeal for...to..." and "articulate with" are idioms. The confirmation of usage is especially important for learners to turn their receptive vocabulary into productive vocabulary.

Clarification: When encountering a word, another word which has some similarities with the first may appear in the learner's mind, and these two words may confuse him/her. Pan says that when he read the word "compliment", he thought it was "implement". An example from my diary:

6. Note the examples of this in the excerpt in (2), above, from the Long (1981a) study (Larsen-Freeman and Long 1991: 122).

I knew exactly the meaning of "excerpt". However, two words came into my mind and I consulted the dictionary to clear them up. Is "extract" the word which has the same meaning as "excerpt"? Are there any other differences between "excerpt" and "except", like pronunciation, including stress?

Looking for Pronunciation and/or Stress: This strategy is most often used by Jin. She looked up three words (*behavioural*, *methodology*, *stutterer*) specially for pronunciation and/or stress. It would be reasonable to infer that she also paid attention to the pronunciation of other words she looked up. An example from my diary:

7. But also of human beings negotiating the exhilarating and sometimes puzzling demands of U.S. academic life (Leki 1995: 235).

My diary records that I checked the pronunciation twice and copied the phonetic symbols down the second time.

New Use for Old Words: Jin explains that she knows "*prompt*" as a verb, but in the extract "*prompt*" is used as a noun. Examples 8 and 9 are from my diary:

8. Ah, take one consideration with another, the teacher's lot is not a happy one (Marckwardt 1973: 369).
9. For anyone on the outside to imitate it would smack of affectation (Marckwardt 1973: 373).

In 8 "*lot*" in the meaning of "person's fate" was new to me, so the phrase "*the teacher's lot*" looked quite odd when I confronted it. My comment in the diary under sentence 9 is: "By looking up a familiar word in a dictionary, the result sometimes can really surprise you and make you aware that in fact you are not really familiar with the word concerned. This is the case of 'polysemant'".

Putting each of the above examples into a certain category is just for the convenience of discussion. Some overlapping among the categories is expected. Here is an example: I put the word "*exhilarate*" under the category of "looking for pronunciation", but since this was also a new word for me, it would also be reasonable to classify it as "looking for meanings of new words". Another problem of classification is the relatively ambiguous distinction between "old words" and "new words". The criterion adopted in the study is whether the word is encountered for the first time or not. I have had the experience of sometimes believing I am confronting a new word, yet it turns out that it is not. I had marked the word some time before in the dictionary. Maybe the practical way to solve this problem is to classify the word as a new one if the reader has no recollection of the word at all at the moment s/he reads it.

Discussion

The results of the study bear out the hypothesis that learners have different reasons for using the dictionary. When a learner encounters a

new word, his/her attention seems to be first drawn to the meaning of the word, usually the meaning related to the context. As the knowledge of the word increases, the learner starts to pay attention to other aspects of the word, such as its pronunciation, usage, and association with other words. In this section, I discuss three issues related to the question of the dictionary use: (1) the task-driven aspect of reading and the use of the dictionary; (2) the guessing strategy and the use of the dictionary; and (3) dictionary use and the good language learner's strategies.

Urquhart (1994) states that in studies of reading skills versus language proficiency "there is little realisation that reading is task-driven, and that performance may depend on the particular task being attempted" (3784). Two of the informants in the study distinguish between extensive and intensive reading, and adopt different strategies to deal with the new words they encounter. As far as L2 readers are concerned, comprehension is not the only task, or even the most important one. Zha comments that reading in English is a kind of learning and the primary purpose of her reading is to improve her vocabulary. Jin also states that her purpose in reading in English is to improve her English proficiency. I assume that they are not the only learners who think like this. If, so to speak, the learners' main purpose in reading is to improve their language, then the most widely noticed disadvantage of using the dictionary - it is time-consuming - may not necessarily be a disadvantage for them all. By using the dictionary, they turn the incidental learning (usually associated with reading) into intentional learning, and may acquire more knowledge, at least as far as vocabulary is concerned. No wonder Jin reads all the definitions of the words she looked up and Zha complains that the examples in her dictionary are not enough. A recent study in Hong Kong which followed the reading and dictionary use of students (cited by Hatch and Brown 1995: 376) found that "the better learners used the dictionary extensively to learn not just the word they originally started to look up but also related words or words nearby in the dictionary". To sum up, the task of reading usually depends on the reading material, but learners can also assign some tasks to themselves, depending upon their individual purposes in reading. It is these tasks that determine learners'

way of reading, and the way of referring to a dictionary.

The reason for the emphasis on guessing word meaning is that some researchers believe that "a willingness to guess is characteristic of good learners and readers" (Williams 1994: 3768). However, as Williams (1994: 3768) points out, first, skilled readers, both in L1 and L2, find it impossible to guess more than a small proportion of words. Second, inaccurate guessing can have negative effects on comprehension. The results of the present study show that these are cases in which the use of a dictionary is inevitable: (1) Researchers have pointed out that a learner has to be "willing to tolerate a considerable degree of vagueness in his understanding of sentences and phrases" (Twaddell 1973: 77), and a guessing strategy is very helpful for "general comprehension" (Dulin 1970: 442). However, if a particular word is too crucial for the reading, or if a teacher wants to pursue accurate rather than general comprehension and does not want to tolerate the vagueness, resorting to a dictionary is the only choice left. (2) Sometimes context clues are not useable, and guessing in these circumstances is almost impossible. On the one hand, context clues may be sparse, as in the following example (from my diary):

10. In the sentence, "He sank into contemplation with his arms across", is *with his arms across* idiomatic? (Marckwardt 1973: 370).

Not so many context clues can be used to guess the unfamiliar word *contemplation*. On the other hand, the supposed context clues may themselves be difficulties for learners:

11. Since fragility would render the raft useless, it was to be constructed of the stoutest, heaviest, materials possible. (Dulin 1970: 444).

Dulin explains, "'fragility' is contrasted with 'stoutest'. and the desired effect - a 'useful' raft - demands an appropriate cause - sturdy construction" (1970: 444). It just happened that "*fragility, raft, stout*" together with *sturdy* were all new words for me.

(3) Pronunciation information is not usually available in written material, and the existence of irregular words, coupled with the complexity of the grapheme-phoneme correspondence in English, make it very hard, if not impossible, for learners to work out the correct pronunciation of an unfamiliar word through the use of phonological knowledge.

Another finding of the present study with regard to the guessing strategy is that guessing word meaning and using a dictionary are not mutually exclusive. Learners can, as Pan did, guess word meaning first, then consult a dictionary to check on the guess. Thus learners may avoid the negative effects imposed by inaccurate guessing. Moreover, learners can benefit a lot in terms of vocabulary learning from this guessing-and-checking strategy. In cases of accurate guessing, the two steps will reinforce learners' impressions of the word. On the other hand, if the guessing turns out to be inaccurate, this will force them to notice the gap between the guess and the correct meaning. And noticing, as recommended by Schmidt and Frota (1986, cited by Ellis 1994: 361) is a crucial step for intake.

The common view that frequent dictionary use is a negative behaviour seems to be weakened by the results of the present study. It is important to notice that the subjects in this study did not use the dictionary very often. I infer that this is mainly due to their rather high language proficiency. Unlike Ricky, the subject of Hosenfeld's (1984) study, they do not need to look up words such as "work, many, Sunday, people, heart, in the morning". This appears to corroborate William's (1994: 3767) suggestion that some of the "extremely intensive style" of reading will disappear as the learner becomes a more fluent reader and at the same time more proficient in the language. Moreover, some of the strategies (described as "reasons for using the dictionary" in the paper) - namely, using the dictionary for confirmation and clarification, for pronunciation and new uses of old words - fit in the category of good language learners' strategies. Ellis (1994: 546) suggests that there are five major aspects of successful language learning: (1) a concern for language form; (2) a concern for communication; (3) an active task approach; (4) an awareness of the learning process; and (5) a capacity to use strategies flexibly in accordance with task requirements. The use

of a dictionary for pronunciation and clarification shows learners' concern for language form. The confirmation function of dictionary use contributes to the concern for communication (meaning). Paying attention to the new uses of old words by consulting a dictionary demonstrates learners' active approach to the learning of language. If we view language learning as a whole in reading - not just the comprehension aspect - then the use of the dictionary is more positive than negative.

Nevertheless, more studies are needed in order to elucidate the phenomenon of using the dictionary, a behaviour whose complexity is usually underestimated. For example, all the reading materials involved in the study are academic in nature. Are the categories of dictionary use in other kinds of reading (e.g. novels, instruction manuals and newspapers) the same as those in this study? More importantly, are there any other differences in the use of the dictionary, apart from frequency, between learners of different language proficiency? However, the results of the study have theoretical and pedagogical implications. Cohen and Hosenfeld (1981: 299) report that "students did not have particular difficulty with educational vocabulary", rather, "they did have difficulty with nontechnical vocabulary and nontechnical vocabulary used technically in a particular field". The findings of this study suggest that students' difficulties with these types of vocabulary may differ. It is possible that for technical vocabulary, they do not know meaning; while for nontechnical vocabulary the difficulty is that they are not sure about them. The present study also has something to say to classroom teachers. I propose that (1) students need to be informed that there are different ways of using a dictionary, and (2) the way to use a dictionary depends on the particular tasks learners are engaged in, and as learners, they can sometimes choose tasks for themselves.

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