

Language in Performance

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Saskia Kersten

The Mental Lexicon and Vocabulary Learning

Implications for the foreign language classroom

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The Mental Lexicon and Vocabulary Learning

Language in Performance **43**

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List of Abbreviations

- BIA** Bilingual Interactive Activation
CEF Common European Framework of Reference for Languages
CL Cognitive Linguistics
DST Dynamic Systems Theory
EEG electroencephalography
EFL Early Foreign Language
EFLT Early Foreign Language Teaching
ERP event-related potential
FLA first language acquisition
FLT foreign language teaching
fMRI functional magnetic resonance imaging
IAM Interactive Activation Model
K-S test Kolmogorov-Smirnov test
LL learners
L1 native language
L2 second or foreign language
LTM long-term memory
PET positron emission tomography
SLA second language acquisition
STM short-term memory
T teacher
TOT tip of the tongue

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Chapter 1

Introduction

Lexis was for a long time swept under the carpet in foreign language teaching (FLT), but over the last 20 years, this has changed.

In the literature concerning vocabulary acquisition, there are accounts of what it means to know a word (see Chapter 5.1 and Table 5.1). However, much less attention has been paid to the way learners acquire such knowledge. Different conditions thought to promote or impede vocabulary acquisition have been studied (as is partly done in this book), but the process itself has seldom been the focus of study (De Bot et al. 1997).

Unlike grammar, which is fairly much acquired to serve most communicative needs by the time most learners leave school, new words are continually being acquired throughout a person's life. Vocabulary learning never stops, as "a person is unlikely to ever run out of words to learn" (Schmitt 2000, 4).

Many people have at least some experience of learning a foreign language and, in the process, learn new vocabulary. Interestingly, learning vocabulary is still strongly associated with rote learning in many parts of the world, that is, the repetition of items, usually using lists. For many learners, this is the only activity they associate with vocabulary learning. Over the past 20 years strong arguments for a focus on words instead of 'language' rules have been put forward, but this has not necessarily filtered down to the schools.

In German, *Wortschatz* (vocabulary, often in relation to vocabulary size) expresses well what it means to know words: the more we know, the more abundantly our treasure chest of language is filled, enabling us to communicate on a variety of levels (Stork 2003). *Vokabeln* (a cognate of vocabulary, albeit with a narrower meaning) fill most learners with dread (Aßbeck 2002). *Vokabeln* are generally associated with having to

learn long lists of pair associations (generally consisting of the target language word and a native language translation) (Aßbeck 1996; Knapp-Potthoff 2000). This can be very demotivating as the mindless repetition of translation pairs are often perceived as being pointless and boring. These lists could and can still be found at the back of the course books used in the English language classroom.

Even in primary school teaching of English, a fairly recent development in Germany and therefore more open to modern approaches and methods than other types of formal instruction, this focus on vocabulary is often absent. This is despite the fact that current research has shown that time spent teaching vocabulary is time well spent (Read 2004b). In a German school context, learning vocabulary in class is generally referred to as *Wortschatzarbeit* (vocabulary work), suggesting that this is fundamentally different from learning *Vokabeln* (Knapp-Potthoff 2000; Stork 2003).

The practical implementation of theoretical considerations in formal language instruction, whether these considerations are linguistic or cognitive, is still rare, although many course books, for example, *Discovery* (Behrendt et al. 2004a,b) and *Sally* (Bredenbröcker et al. 2005a), claim that they base their methodology and curriculum on findings of linguistics, especially Cognitive Linguistics. The actual content of the course books, however, often does not reflect research findings in this area.

The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEF), when describing the linguistic competence a learner has to reach, does not only relate this competence to the range and quality of knowledge (e.g. in terms of phonetic distinctions made or the extent and precision of vocabulary). It also relates the acquisition to the cognitive organisation and the way this knowledge is stored (e.g. the various associative networks in which the speaker places a lexical item) and to its accessibility, that is, activation, recall and availability (Council of Europe 2001, 13). The CEF does not, however, state how these aims can be achieved.

This issue is addressed in Cognitive Linguistic research and outlined in this book, as its objective is to give a description of the theoretical background of the lexical knowledge humans possess and the organisation of this knowledge in the mono- and bilingual mind. The processes of second language acquisition and learning¹ will be discussed, with particular attention paid to Cognitive Linguistic models, including usage-based

¹The delineation between acquisition and learning in a second or foreign language is not always clear. I will use the terms interchangeably, although acquisition is generally associated with unconscious processes (see e.g. De Bot et al. 2005; Lightbown & Spada 2006; Johnson 2008).

approaches to language acquisition (see e.g. Kemmer & Barlow 2000; Tomasello 2003). By connecting this research to studies conducted in the area of vocabulary learning and teaching, suggestions for an implementation of the theoretical assumptions in Early Foreign Language (EFL) classrooms will be put forward.

At a time when research in the areas of the bilingual mental lexicon was still in its infancy, Meara (1993, 295) held the view that the "study of the bilingual lexicon is just not well enough developed for it to be able to tell practitioners what to do in classrooms". He continues by saying that it might be regarded as "esoteric and difficult" (*ibid.*) by hands-on language teachers. Over subsequent years, however, further research has made it somewhat easier to access the research on the bilingual lexicon and use it to design informed lessons. In the intervention study outlined in this book, the focus is to do exactly this: to adapt laboratory findings and other research results in order to devise a way to teach vocabulary that might prove to be beneficial for foreign language learners.

The Cognitive Linguistic perspective on foreign language learning in general and the acquisition of vocabulary in particular is a growing research area. The implications of Cognitive Linguistics for FLT are manifold and promising, offering both ease of learning and more profound knowledge of the target language (see e.g. Niemeier 2008).

These suggestions form the basis for the intervention study carried out in two German primary schools. The study investigates whether lessons enabling learners to elaborate on words and thereby process the vocabulary more deeply lead to better long-term retention of these items. Young learners were chosen as the subjects of this intervention because the main focus of empirical studies in vocabulary acquisition, learning and teaching still lies in the analyses of adult learners at intermediate or advanced levels, although some studies regarding SLA in young learners have been published. It has been shown that young learners may also benefit from teaching that is based on Cognitive Linguistic models (see e.g. Piquer Píriz 2008).

In this context, the issue of measuring vocabulary knowledge will also be discussed, since no standardized vocabulary tests for young EFL learners have been proposed yet, although suggestions on how this can be done have been put forward (Becker et al. 2003, Niedersächsisches Kultusministerium [Lower Saxony Ministry of Education] 2006).

The results of this empirical study, and their implications for future research, form the basis for evaluating the relevance and benefits of the theoretical implications of vocabulary research for primary school learners of English.

The Mental Lexicon