

A Study of Children's Characteristics in Written and Vocabulary

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines children's characteristics in relation to their vocabulary acquisition process in the foreign language. The present study analyzes the vocabulary produced in written compositions students in primary education. The main semantic fields used by them are identified and analyzed taking into account their characteristics. The field of leisure and games was found to be the most recurrent, followed by the fields of school, home and family. Their lexical errors are also analyzed, showing that misspellings, omissions, borrowings and substitutions are the most frequent. The process of vocabulary acquisition and teaching takes a special character when young learners are the recipients of the instruction. The particular cognitive stage of children learning a foreign language influences their use and acquisition of vocabulary. Examination of the lexical errors produced by these young learners provides us with an insight into that vocabulary acquisition process and reveals what areas of the foreign language lexis do young learners have problems with when writing in English.

1. Introduction

Several studies have pointed out an array of children's features, which must be taken into account when teaching English as a foreign language. In this section we are going to review the most relevant factors in children foreign language acquisition. There are many factors influencing children's maturity such as culture, environment, sex and experiences. According to Piaget, children are situated in a concrete operational stage. This means that they can understand concrete aspects and topics rather than abstract ones. Consequently, they can easily understand the meaning of new words whose referents are concrete, such as table, tree and dog. In this way, it is also useful to introduce words whose meaning can be deduced with an action, body language, flashcards, photographs, drawings² and other objects. This happens because they can easily join the meaning to the thing or action it represents. Therefore, words whose meaning is abstract, such as love, justice or hope, have no concrete referents and this makes children's understanding of the word difficult. In addition to this, understanding grammar involves explanations given with abstract terms that students do not understand. In fact, from the point of view acquired by his experience as a teacher, López Rodríguez (2003: 27) criticizes the importance given to grammar in primary education, as it has to do with abstractions. He argues that it is often forgotten that in primary education understanding is mainly semantic. In the same line, Bloor (1991: 129) contends that children learn a foreign language better in situations in which attention is focused on meaning rather than on language itself. So children's learning of a language is better in real context situations rather than in situations that require an intellectual effort. Noteworthy is also his comment that "unfamiliar vocabulary is more easily understood when the objects under discussion are present in the surroundings". This author thinks that the actual presence of objects makes children deduce the new meanings more easily. Therefore, vocabulary related to the student's environment is important. Its referent is not abstract but concrete. Moreover, it is useful because children can understand the new vocabulary without any translations

into their mother tongue. In this sense, stands out that primary education child are good at interpreting the general meaning. Teachers can make use of voice intonation or body language to facilitate the process of meaning understanding.

In the case of English this new knowledge is joined to the real use of language, as that was the way it was known the first time. Therefore, it is used as an instrument of communication. Accordingly, students learn to communicate by communicating. Frequently, this communication is learned in the context provided by role play games. Students are young children who are used to playing and to being involved in different games in which they need to speak in Spanish for their communication. The teacher will provide them with dramatizations and games requiring children to speak English to participate. Children will feel the necessity of speaking in English in order to play with their classmates and to be understood by them. This is the way the teacher helps the students in their process of learning, especially in lexical learning. By using vocabulary in a meaningful way children will acquire it easier than when learning by heart a list of items of vocabulary in English and their translation into Spanish. In the second case, there would be many students who would not store it in long-term memory. In relation to the social aspect, the teacher knows that most children like forming groups and taking part in team activities. This gives them the opportunity of speaking with each other in English. Moreover, children of this age start overcoming their self-centred stage. They are interested about others and in relating themselves to other classmates. This helps the teacher to introduce students to a new culture.

In addition to this, children's overcoming of their self-centred stage helps the teacher to use participative games, which reinforce vocabulary. These ludic activities improve the environment in the class. In this sense, we can stand out Stephen Krashen's affective filter hypothesis. He sees the affective filter as being the emotional disposition of an individual which acts upon the learning processes. A high affective filter causes the learner to be a relatively inefficient learner. This is likely to result from anxieties, disturbances or inhibitions. A low affective filter, which may result from feelings

of relaxation, well-being or success, maximises learning efficiency. In this good atmosphere the affective filter is down and the acquisition of the new language is easier. In addition to this, all learners are involved and their work is valued, which makes them feel comfortable.

In general terms, it is admitted that most children are uninhibited. They do not behave like shy teenagers do. The young student can learn fluent and natural English without strain, embarrassment or, even effort. Young children do not usually get embarrassed. They like getting involved. They are curious. They behave in a very extroverted way. This feature helps them learn more rapidly and more successfully; it follows that it is easier for them to start speaking in English. Lacking the inhibitions of their teenage years, they have more opportunities to practice their English, to learn from their mistakes and to obtain more input. These young students like role-playing and dramatizations, even when performing them in English, in front of the rest of their classmates. Most young children like repetition and imitation. They enjoy repetitive kinds of language activities. They love to imitate. Repetition gives them a sense of achievement and assurance. This happens because children have to repeat the same thing all the time, but with slight differences. For example, each couple of students or group of students performs their dramatizations, repeating exactly the same words. However, as every performance is carried out by different students each of them adds something new to the dramatization such as a gesture, an intonation and so on. Most of the students in the class take part in it and everybody enjoys it.

2. Child Vocabulary

Child vocabulary was measured at Wave 1 using a question from the Communication and Symbolic Behaviour Scales. Parents rated the question 'About how many different words does this child use so that you know what he/she means?' on a 5-point scale ranging from 'none' to 'over 30'. The Communication and Symbolic Behaviour Scales checklist scores have been found to have good test-retest stability and concurrent and predictive validity. At Wave 2, child vocabulary was measured using the MacArthur Communicative Development Inventory III. The MCDIII asks parents to check words their child says on a checklist and provides a valid measure of expressive vocabulary for children aged 30–37 months. For the Australian version used in the LSAC the words 'reindeer', 'cracker' and 'sidewalk' were replaced with the words 'kangaroo', 'biscuit' and 'footpath' and the words 'kite' and 'away' were omitted, resulting in a 98-word checklist.

3. Children's Vocabulary Development

Children's oral vocabulary knowledge is an important indicator of language development and subsequent reading success or failure during formal schooling. Several studies have attempted to capture individual differences in the timing and rate of vocabulary development using a longitudinal approach, but most have traced such development for toddlers (before 46 months) over a relatively short period of time. However, children's oral vocabulary continues to grow rapidly and to overlap with reading acquisition in primary school. Understanding the path of children's vocabulary growth after early childhood and its associated potential precursors has both theoretical and applied relevance for instructional

approaches. The primary focus of this 8-year longitudinal study was to trace trajectories of Chinese children's oral vocabulary development from ages 4 to 10 years old in mainland Chinese children. In Perfetti's DVC (Decoding, Vocabulary, and Comprehension) triangle model, vocabulary knowledge falls between word identification and reading comprehension. Multiple studies have supported this view by showing a close relationship between vocabulary and word reading or reading comprehension (. In a recent longitudinal study of 262 Chinese children, Zhang, Tardif et al. (2013) found those children's vocabulary abilities at age 4 and age 5 mediated the effects of SES on children's word reading ability in the third grade. At a higher-order level of reading, children's vocabulary knowledge at ages 6, 7, and 8 can discriminate typically developing controls from poor reading comprehenders in both English and Chinese. There is likely a bidirectional relationship (vocabulary–reading development) year by year. Children learn more vocabulary through reading, while vocabulary knowledge also helps children to read. A second goal of the present study, therefore, was to explore the relationship between natural vocabulary development and later reading skills.

Previous studies have often focused on vocabulary growth of toddlers or children in early childhood. These studies have typically used receptive picture naming tasks to measure children's vocabulary breadth. Children's vocabulary ability continues to develop rapidly after they enter school, and large individual differences in vocabulary knowledge have been observed. Given this situation, Perfetti (2009) suggested that variance in knowledge of word meaning might be taken into consideration for older children. In order to detect lexical development both before and after the beginning of literacy skills, in the present study we chose an expressive vocabulary definition measure. This measure focused on children's knowledge of word meanings and has been used in a number of previous studies as a reasonable indicator of Chinese children's vocabulary development from ages 4 to 9. There is consensus that substantial individual differences exist in the rate and shape of vocabulary growth. Vocabulary varies widely in the initial size and growth rates between children; some start slow and speed up, while others start fast and continue at a steady pace. Therefore, initial size and developmental speed may be two meaningful indices of vocabulary growth. In one study, individual differences in initial vocabulary size were observed for both L1 and L2 learners at age 7; such differences could predict the subsequent growth of reading comprehension skills. Moreover, modeling individual growth rates can provide a sensitive measure of differences between catch-up versus delayed groups and can determine which factors best predict patterns of such group differences. For example, Fernald and Marchman (2012) found that late talkers with efficiency in lexical processing at 18 months showed more accelerated vocabulary growth over the following year compared with late talkers who were less efficient in early speech processing. They also divided children's vocabulary development into four subgroups demonstrating different initial vocabulary size and rate. Such clustering analyses help to clarify the extent to which subgroups of children with different developmental patterns can be identified using early cognitive skills. By using a data-driven approach, we sought to chart individual variation in both initial vocabulary size and growth rate and establish subgroups of lexical growth over a long

period of time. In particular, we wanted to determine whether children with low vocabulary knowledge at age 4 would remain delayed after they entered primary school or, alternatively, would catch up with development.

Individual differences in children's vocabulary growth can be explained in terms of experience-based factors, such as family socioeconomic status (SES), parent language input and home literacy. Studies across languages have also "demonstrated that children's early vocabulary growth is associated with certain cognitive skills, such as working memory, phonological processing skills and morphological awareness. In the present study, we tested whether and how children's initial vocabulary and vocabulary growth are affected by both environmental factors and these cognitive skills. Because vocabulary and reading development overlap after children enter school, we also included some other reading-related cognitive factors, including rapid automatized naming and orthographic awareness. We thus investigated whether and how environmental and cognitive factors might jointly account for individual differences in Chinese children's vocabulary development. The role of vocabulary knowledge in reading development has attracted much attention in recent years. Perfetti's Decoding, Vocabulary, and Comprehension triangle model emphasizes the central role of vocabulary by assuming that it has respective reciprocal relations with both decoding and comprehension. This theoretical explanation has led to many studies focusing on the relations between vocabulary growth and reading development. The present longitudinal study allowed us to investigate the relationship between vocabulary growth and later reading skills.

4. Process of Vocabulary Acquisition

Lexical errors serve as insight into the process of vocabulary acquisition, since they provide information about the aspects of lexis that are most problematic for learners, and in turn about the aspects they already master. By identifying, describing and classifying lexical errors we may learn much about what type of lexical items the learner knows or does not know, what is the source of the problem, or how to tackle that problem. In the same line, Karmiloff and Karmiloff-Smith (2001: 28) assert that "the types of errors and modifications that children make when imitating speech provide us with vital insight into the child's level of linguistic knowledge. If the teacher knows the kind of mistakes his students make he is in a much better position to prevent his students from making those mistakes again". Lexical errors as observable interlanguage phenomena are an important source of information about L2 vocabulary acquisition. They are landmarks in the process of vocabulary acquisition and as such they reveal the main characteristics of that process pinpointing how it develops and highlighting the learning features of the learners involved. Lexical errors serve as a reliable instrument to investigate the organisation of the mental lexicon in L2 and to find out more about vocabulary development. They show how vocabulary knowledge develops, what stages it goes through and what happens in the mind of the learner when

producing vocabulary (mental processes underlying lexical competence).

5. Conclusion

It is generally acknowledged that vocabulary is an important aspect of the learning of a foreign language. In fact, knowing vocabulary helps the learner to communicate in the target language, at least at a basic level. The goal of this study is to shed light on the process of acquisition of vocabulary when learning English. According to Channell (1988: 83), "there are now theories of L2 vocabulary acquisition, a wide (and growing) range of teaching techniques available, and a greatly increased awareness on the part of most teachers (and learners) of the importance of vocabulary development. At the same time, understanding of the psychological aspects of L2 vocabulary acquisition and vocabulary use is still rather limited". We believe that this study helps to extend that limit. The description of the main characteristics of young learners helps us to understand them better. Its knowledge can help the teacher to motivate them in class. For our study these features shed light on the lexical fields the young students can make use of. Words related to free time, school and family are the most reiterated ones in their written productions. The first semantic field has to do with activities, which involve their movement, as they are physically active. The second one shows their social world (outside their homes) which starts being important at their age. Finally, the last one shows the relevance given to their family, especially to their grandparent's role. In general, one can assert that all the semantic fields they use in their compositions have to do with the characteristics of these young participants already comment above. In addition to this, their main types of lexical errors have been described. This fact is important as these errors reveal the participants' level of linguistic knowledge. They are misspellings, omissions, borrowings and substitutions. Identifying them helps the teacher of English to prevent the students of this age from making them. In general terms, the participants of this study make these errors reiteratively. Once these errors are described and identified, the teacher can make the students work on activities in order to reinforce the correct forms. As we have observed, the influence of the mother tongue is recurrent and for children saying something is more important than how to say it. From the findings of the present study we can conclude that teachers should encourage learners to use compensatory strategies to balance for lack of vocabulary. Furthermore, explicit teaching of vocabulary and spelling conventions is also called for. Practicing low frequent words can have important consequences in the learners' use of vocabulary in compositions. More frequent words are more easily learned and used, because learners need them to express their ideas since their outmost goal is to communicate rather than to write error free compositions. Future research should concentrate on exploring the progress of learners (older and more proficient learners) in their vocabulary use as the semantic fields and vocabulary errors are concerned.

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