

INCIDENTAL VOCABULARY ACQUISITION THROUGH EXTENSIVE READING: A REVIEW

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Rezumat

Articolul reprezintă o sinteză a câteva studii ce investighează asimilarea de vocabular prin intermediul lecturii în limba engleză. Trei tipuri de abordări în raport cu trei teorii privind asimilarea de vocabular (ipoteza lui Krashen despre lectură, ipoteza lui Schmidt despre atenție, ipoteza lui Laufer și Hustijn despre nivelul implicării în efectuarea de sarcini) sunt supuse examinării pentru a stabili care dintre acestea produce cele mai eficiente rezultate la nivel de producere: **lectura, atenție la formă, atenție la forme**. Meta-analiza acestor studii relevă că asimilarea de vocabular în limbă străină este direct proporțională cu nivelul de implicare în efectuarea de sarcini productive: **atenție la forme** s-a dovedit a fi cea mai eficientă abordare, în corelare cu ipoteza lui Laufer și Hustijn.

Cuvinte-cheie: lectură extensivă, asimilare lexicală, Ipoteza despre nivelul implicării în îndeplinirea sarcinilor, atenție la formă, atenție la forme.

The criterion we chose to organize this paper is based on exploring several studies on incidental vocabulary learning to clarify what approaches are most suitable in EFL settings. In this regard three main vocabulary learning theories with an emphasis on vocabulary acquisition are considered: *St. Krashen's Reading Hypothesis (1982, 1992)*, *Schmidt's Noticing Hypothesis (1994, 2010)* and *Laufer and Hulstijn's Involvement Load Hypothesis (2001)*.

Learning vocabulary in a foreign language represents an essential aspect since it is through words that concepts are expressed and ideas conveyed. It is the building block on which all the other language skills are developed and facilitated. A rich vocabulary is needed for both effective communication in real life situations and the learning process. McCarthy (1990) points out that “no matter how well the students learn grammar, no matter how successfully the sounds of L2 are mastered, without words to express a wider range of meanings, communication in an L2 just cannot happen in any meaningful way” [McCarthy, 1990, Apud1]

The last two decades have witnessed a real upsurge in research dealing with vocabulary learning/acquisition in foreign language education with vocabulary acquisition strategies lying at the heart of a considerable amount of theories, hypotheses and an ever-growing number of empirical studies aiming at investigating what approaches prove mostly efficient in vocabulary expansion in a foreign language learning context.

Vocabulary learning/acquisition has not always been perceived as central in foreign language education. Currently, the realization that lexical competence represents a priority and the foundation for improving communicative competence has led to a shift in pedagogical views and an emphasis of a strong principled-approach oriented to facilitating its development, producing a large body of studies and knowledge, yet not without controversies and ambiguities. The audio-lingual tradition placed great importance on acquiring the structural aspects of a language, relying primarily on habit formation, so vocabulary was not explicitly approached on the grounds that it would take care of itself, gradually fitting into the slots already formed.

Chomsky's Generative Grammar, although refuting habit formation, did not pay much attention to vocabulary acquisition either. The Communicative Approach to Language Teaching was the beginning of a new perception with more and more voices stressing out the need to focus on the vocabulary needed to express various notions and functions. Up to date there is no consensus in this regard and theorists, researchers and educators alike are concerned with identifying what vocabulary expansion approach is the most reliable one, since it is also one of

the biggest challenges for learners because of the impressive amounts of linguistic material they are expected to deal with in a language that is not theirs.

In foreign language education, *instruction* plays a key part in vocabulary expansion, usually occurring through a remarkable variety of tasks and activities, under the umbrella concept *Vocabulary Learning Strategies*. Vocabulary learning strategies are the “actions, set of techniques or language learning behaviors that learners take to help themselves to discover the meaning of new words and retain them in long-term memory [Cameron, 2001, Apud 1, p.49]. In fact, the biggest part of the time allotted for instruction in foreign language is oriented towards expanding learners’ vocabulary. However, as studies have revealed, not all of the lexical material provided in formal setting is suitable and right for all learners and a very small portion of it is effectively internalized. Since much of the vocabulary learners need to produce effective communicative acts during verbal interactions is not reflected in any way in the mainstream course-books or is even redundant at times, learners acquire it through exposure to different sources of input, oftentimes without being aware of the acquisition process. On the other hand, teachers, who are in charge of deciding what vocabulary units to teach, are often at a loss in front of the magnitude of lexical material to deserve pedagogical attention. One of the dilemmas teachers have to deal with is what approach to adopt in terms of learning vocabulary, considering the variety of theories, which pretty often seem rather contradictory. The central debates revolve mainly around explicit versus implicit learning/teaching.

Contrary to different language learning theories, like *input processing* or *task based language learning*, empirical data reveal that a significant amount of language material is internalized (not necessarily turned into output) accidentally, when individuals interact with it on regular grounds thus increasing the possibility of it becoming part of their active vocabulary.

Incidental learning is perceived as the learning that “occurs when the mind is focused elsewhere” [2, p. 289] meaning that the learners are not aware of the learning process in itself. *Intentional learning* describes that type of learning in which the students are completely aware and conscious of the fact that they are participating in a formal learning task [3, 140-141].

The strongest argument in favour of incidental vocabulary learning is the fact that this is how we expand our vocabulary in mother tongue, without all of the lexical items being explicitly taught to us. Despite the many opponents to this kind of approach in a foreign language, it is irrefutable that this is an effective way of getting to grips with a variety of contextual meanings and connotations, and extensive reading serves perfectly to achieve this outcome as it guarantees repeated exposure to linguistic input. This is particularly true at higher levels of language proficiency; at lower levels the explicit, intentional approach should outweigh the implicit, incidental one.

Incidental vocabulary acquisition has long been the essence of many studies in foreign language learning and has led to the emergence of a consistent number of theories and studies, which emphasize that vocabulary can be acquired independently through reading [4, p. 544]. On the other hand, many researchers have found that reading alone does not lead to a consistent increase in vocabulary acquisition [9]. Thus, it appears that extensive reading contributes to a reduced vocabulary pick-up, according to some studies which reveal that this amount is significantly higher when accompanied by some enhancement strategies like glossing, bolding, italicizing etc. meant to catch the learners’ attention and to ensure higher acquisition rates, in correlation with *Schmidt’s Noticing Hypothesis*, which states that the retention of a new word depends on the amount of attention a learner gives to it [13]. Schmidt’s theory which suggests

that linguistic material is fully internalized and ready to be transformed into output only if learners notice it and consciously pay attention to it, has been impactful on vocabulary learning strategies in EFL for about three decades and has generated an extensive body of research, aiming at determining if learning happens only when people pay attention to what they have to learn or if it occurs incidentally as well. Schmidt's theory, although partially in line with Krashen's Comprehensible Input Hypothesis, opposes his Reading Hypothesis. In relation to vocabulary learning Schmidt's Hypothesis correlates more with Zandieh's view who believes teachers should ensure a balanced blending between different approaches, considering the large number of other factors that intervene in the process [Zandieh, 2012, Apud 12, p.164].

The meta-analysis of several research studies reveals that learners show significant vocabulary gains only if extensive reading is accompanied by some output production tasks [7], [10], [11], in line with Nation's theoretical views that claim that explicit vocabulary learning strategies are necessary and helpful in successful foreign language learning and these should be always an essential part of any reading session [8, pp.157-158]. For the most part, these types of activities aim at raising learners' awareness of how to use specific lexical units in different contexts and they are usually implemented as consolidation tasks when the lexical material has been presented through different strategies. In the case of expanding learners' vocabulary through reading, it is possible to apply miscellaneous post-reading strategies oriented towards improving other aspects of the foreign language, but which contain specific lexical units, thus ensuring repeated contextualized encounters with them. It is mostly important to involve learners in production tasks, since receptive ones will only lead to linguistic input becoming intake, which may never convert into output: *the students may very well recognize and understand certain lexical units but be completely incapable of using them in producing their own texts in the target language* [10].

Researchers and theorists in the field of foreign language learning agree on the idea that after having learnt the first thousand words in target language through instruction, learners achieve significant gains in vocabulary development through extensive reading which entails incidental learning by guessing the contextual meaning of new words and through interacting with informal sources of input. Incidental vocabulary learning is best reflected in the extension of meanings and uses of lexical units learners are already familiar with as a result of instruction [12]. Other views emphasize that vocabulary benefits considerably from *high exposure to reading*, particularly from reading authentic texts, due to the repeated contextualized encounters with some specific lexical units, in line with St. Krashen's Reading Hypothesis, a special component of his notorious Comprehensible Input Hypothesis which states that "more comprehensible input results in more language acquisition [5, p.411]. Krashen's theory highlights that people learn much better if they understand the material they are dealing with and their affective filter is low. This view generated the Natural Approach in language learning pedagogy, which relies heavily on incidental learning, supported by a considerable number of empirical studies that reveal that many students achieve higher levels of language proficiency through reading, oftentimes accompanied by strategies that do not specify clearly they are focusing on particular lexical units.

The main drawback of this approach resides in the fact that extensive reading is more efficient in the case of mid and low frequency words, this is why high frequency ones should benefit from explicit pedagogical treatment in formal settings. Accordingly, despite the manifold benefits of extensive reading proved by a huge amount of empirical data, it is vital for learners to

benefit from some explicit instruction; implicit learning is not always high-quality learning as the students may make erroneous deductions about the meaning of some vocabulary and its contextual usage. Therefore, these two types of instruction are to go hand in hand and complete each other for the best educational outcomes, as suggested by Zandieh, 2012, who contends that they may produce outstanding results if combined jointly in “a virtual learning environment in order to improve comprehension and vocabulary retention” [Apud 12, p.164].

At the same time, it appears that many theories lose track of the manifold factors that affect incidental vocabulary learning, such as motivation, belief, attitude, language learning experience, field of study, course type, class level, language learning environment, language achievement, language proficiency and vocabulary knowledge [1, p.50], learners’ communicative needs, the number of contextualized interactions with specific lexical units, the amount of exposure for successful retention of new units or meanings, guessing and deducing strategies, cognate recognition, the quality of the source of linguistic input and so on, which all interact and produce different outcomes and are generally highly individual. For instance, it is generally believed that a source of linguistic input which sparkles the learners interest will facilitate incidental vocabulary acquisition, in contrast with a text that is perceived as boring and tiresome. Considering this peculiarity, it is vital to encourage learners to select sources of extensive reading that are enthralling in terms of plot, presented in an accessible manner, which in turn will ensure higher rates of vocabulary retention.

For reading to be really effective in terms of incidental vocabulary learning it is essential to:

-Make sure that the reading material does not contain too much unknown vocabulary. According to Nation, 2001, Schmitt, 2008 the rate of unknown words should not exceed 3-5% of the reading material [8], [9].

-Make sure that the new vocabulary appears repeatedly in the text to ensure from 7-to 15 interactions with it [8].

Laufer and Hustijn, 2001, promote the idea that vocabulary retention is highly determined by three key factors: ***involvement, need and evaluation***. **Involvement** is perceived as a motivational-cognitive construct which can explain and predict learners' success in the retention of unfamiliar words [6, p.14] and includes the amount of attention, effort and time a student spends when focusing on new lexical units, be it when they read something by themselves or complete a task set by the teacher. The researchers state that words which are processed with higher involvement load will be retained better than words which are processed with lower involvement load [p.15]. This view is in favour of *the focus on forms* approach, i.e. the lexical material is extensively processed through active participation in the completion of a wide array of tasks which do not necessarily state explicitly what words/phrases are aimed at (for ex: the students engage in a series of different tasks like translating unknown words, matching and particularly relevant and necessary, using these words to create sentences). The mere *Focus on form*, by which we mean the examination of contextual meaning of a given lexical unit, is reported to have produced lesser results, in contrast with *the focus on forms approach*.

Need represents another factor with a significant role in vocabulary acquisition: when students come across words they once needed to express their ideas, they will pay particular attention to them and their awareness of how to use some lexical units increases when dealing with them in a variety of contexts. Learning new vocabulary units does not mean internalizing them effectively so as they become immediately output. Hence, teachers must make sure that the

tasks students participate in include output production ones which will require the activation of latent vocabulary needed to express certain ideas.

Evaluation comes into play when learners weigh the appropriateness of the lexical units they use and make the necessary changes to express their ideas clearly and precisely. The findings provided by a considerable number of studies conducted in this regard indicate that lexical acquisition is significantly higher if teachers adopt a blending of the three approaches. Reading alone has proved to yield weaker results in terms of vocabulary acquisition, since learners need at least from 7 to 15 encounters with a new word to internalize it and be able to use it for output production. For this to happen through reading alone, a lot of time is needed. Consequently, a much better way of achieving this objective consists in implementing different enhancement tasks, more so as while and post-reading activities.

The investigation of the three highly influential hypotheses in foreign language pedagogy and the analysis several research studies aiming at determining what the best approach to vocabulary expansion is, indicates that there is no clear-cut, unambiguous perception of what vocabulary learning should entail. The findings lead to the conclusion that, in keeping with the extensive number of factors that come into play, it is teachers' responsibility to make sure they implement a mixt approach, especially with extensive reading, which may be effective in terms of vocabulary retention if lexical units are processed with *a focus on forms*, not just *form*. Empirical studies provide quite controversial results, which suggests that both incidental and intentional vocabulary learning strategies through reading are relevant and necessary, provided that certain specific conditions are observed, particularly that the learners engage in the receptive and, most specially, productive tasks, as postulated by Laufer and Hulstijn. When referring to vocabulary increase through extensive reading, in order to ensure higher retention rates, it is essential for language teachers to engage the learners in miscellaneous activities, which indicate that the lexical units aimed at are fully internalized and ready to be transformed into output.

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Online resources

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USO DELL'INTERNET NELL'APPRENDIMENTO DELLA LINGUA ITALIANA

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Rezumat

Utilizarea Internetului în predarea-învăţarea limbii italiene presupune formarea competenţei digitale, bazată nu atât pe cunoştinţe informatice, cât pe capacitatea de a descoperi potenţialul didactic al instrumentelor online în activitatea curriculară şi în procesul de studiu. Valorificarea Internetului în predarea-învăţarea limbii italiene îi atribuie profesorului rolul de tutore, formator, evaluator. Astfel, se precizează necesitatea introducerii în curricula de formare continuă a cadrelor didactice, formarea şi dezvoltarea competenţei digitale, privind creşterea calităţii şi a relevanţei învăţământului online.

Cuvinte-cheie: internet, competenţa digitală, web 2.0, instrumente didactice online, limba italiană, glotodidactica.

Le nuove tecnologie, negli ultimi tempi, sono riuscite a rivoluzionare il campo della comunicazione e dell'informazione, loro sono riuscite radicalmente cambiare il modo di vivere e la modalità di apprendimento.

Il settore dell'insegnamento delle lingue straniere, fa largo uso delle nuove tecnologie, accanto al manuale, che è già diventato multimediale, si sviluppano diversi strumenti digitali come aggiunti progressivi per la glottodidattica classica. Secondo G. Freddi “le tecnologie glottodidattiche sono aggiuntive e non sostitutive dell'incontro insegnante-apprendente” [4, p. 151].

Così, possiamo affermare con certezza che la glottodidattica ha assunto una configurazione multimediale, alternando la strumentazione cartacea a quella audiovisiva e adoperando, ultimamente, la strumentazione informatica.

La vera novità degli ultimi tempi è nella possibilità di riversare in unico supporto tutti i formati previsti da ciascuna strumentazione. Quindi l'Internet diventa lo strumento didattico superiore per eccellenza, in quanto incorpora tutte le precedenti strumentazioni.

Per determinare correttamente l'Internet nell'era informatica è opportuno parlare dell'integrazione e dell'interattività, che servono come parole chiave in questo contesto.

La possibilità che offre Internet è di integrare diversi sistemi simbolici come *il testo scritto* (programmi di videoscrittura), *le immagini statiche* (fotografie e disegni digitalizzati), *immagini cinetiche* (filmati digitalizzati), *suono* (file audio digitalizzati). L'interattività del software didattico viene realizzata tramite l'apprendente e il gadget (tablet, laptop, smartphone ecc.). Si possono, insomma, compiere operazioni di *manipolazione di testi scritti* consentiti dai