Understanding Unfamiliar Words In A Text: Do L2 Learners Understand How Much They Don't Understand ?

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The study investigates how accurately learners can assess their understanding of words and whether this accuracy is influenced by the learners' culture, gender and lexical knowledge. The subjects were 106 university students of English in China, Israel and Japan. The study was carried out in three stages. In stage one, the students were asked to read a text and assess their understanding of twenty target words in text context. For each word, the subjects had to state whether they did not understand it, understood it approximately, or fully understood it. In stage two, they were asked to translate or explain these words, in stage three, to self-assess their understanding, as in stage one. The objective scores from stage two were compared with self-assessment scores from stage one and three. We found that all learners over-estimated their understanding of words. The mismatch between the objective and the perceived understanding was not affected by gender, but was related to the country of the learners and their objective lexical knowledge.

INTRODUCTION

Vocabulary learning is a never ending process in one's native language, let alone in a foreign language. In spite of the lexical growth which is characteristic of native or foreign language development, it is impossible to master the entire lexicon in any language. According to modest estimates, native speakers of English who are high school graduates know about 20,000 word families[1], a figure which corresponds to about 32,000 lexical items (Nation 1990). Dictionaries, on the other hand, even if they are intended for learners, contain much larger numbers of words e.g. 56,000 headwords (Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English), 50,000 (Cambridge International Dictionary of English), 63,000 (Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary).

The vocabulary of foreign learners who are high school graduates and even university students does not amount to a quarter of the vocabulary known by their native speaking peers. In Indonesia, EFL university learners are reported to know 1,220 word families after 900 hours of instruction (Nurweni and Read 1999), in Japan, 2,000-2,300 after 800-1,200 hours of instruction (Shillaw 1995, Barrow et al.1999),

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