

Beyond A Clockwork Orange: Acquiring Second Language Vocabulary through Reading

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This replication study demonstrates that second language learners recognised the meanings of new words and built associations between them as a result of comprehension-focused extensive reading. A carefully controlled book-length reading treatment resulted in more incidental word learning and a higher pick-up rate than previous studies with shorter tasks. The longer text also made it possible to explain incidental learning growth in terms of frequency of occurrence of words in the text. But the general frequency of a word was not found to make the word more learnable. Findings also suggested that subjects with larger L2 vocabulary sizes had greater incidental word learning gains. Implications for incidental acquisition as a strategy for vocabulary growth are discussed.

INTRODUCTION

In first language acquisition research, it is well established that reading is one of the main ways of learning new words, and that people who do more reading know more words (Sternberg 1987a, West & Stanovich 1991). Reading is important for first language development and it is assumed to be important for second language development as well. Language teachers believe that extensive reading helps their students acquire new vocabulary, and second language acquisition researchers have determined that learning new words from reading should be possible (Krashen 1989, Wodinsky & Nation 1988). But as learners read, does word learning occur to any practical extent? And, given a choice of methods, is reading extensively more effective than direct vocabulary instruction, as Krashen (1989) has argued? It is important to establish what extensive reading can actually accomplish in the way of imparting new vocabulary knowledge.

Unfortunately, the experimental support for incidental vocabulary acquisition through reading in a second language is weak and plagued by methodological flaws. Furthermore, the research has done little to explain how acquisition occurs. Teachers need substantive answers to questions like: What kinds and amounts of reading facilitate incidental vocabulary acquisition? What makes a learner a good incidental

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