

Prioritizing deliberate reading to maximize SL learners' vocabulary gain: An example of teaching

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In the context of second language (SL) acquisition, studies on the benefits of teaching vocabulary through reading have yielded significant outcomes, sparking debates over the most effective methods for vocabulary acquisition. Some studies argue that incidental learning helps SL learners acquire the form-meaning connection, as they are exposed to substantial input through reading and listening (Nation & Webb, 2017). Still, we should prioritize deliberate reading within the purview of instructed second-language acquisition (ISLA) if the aim is to teach form, especially formulaic language.

Incidental versus deliberate vocabulary learning

Given the ongoing debate over the efficiency of deliberate and incidental learning and their contributions to SL learning, it is crucial to compare the two before delving into teaching and learning vocabulary. First, let us give some brief definitions. Webb and Nation (2017) argue that incidental learning occurs when we mainly focus on the content of the text, whether oral or written, by encountering the words in the text repeatedly. This way, learning is not intentional since the primary focus is on understanding the input. Conversely, deliberate learning occurs when learners intentionally focus on the linguistic packaging to commit new words to memory or solidify the previously learned lexical items.

If both methods of acquiring vocabulary are efficient, we should, at this stage, examine which one performs better. Incidental learning, on the one hand, needs much input and time. In the case of teaching and learning an SL—or another additional language—learners need sustained exposure to authentic texts, which can be challenging. On the other hand, Nation (2016) contended that graded readers are potentially suitable for incidental language learning; however, it is well known that graded readers do not contain low-frequency words. Therefore, incidental learning cannot consistently aid in learning low-frequency words. As such, deliberate learning is better suited to accompany SL learners throughout their journey, from acquiring

high-frequency words to building a substantial vocabulary of low-frequency words. This stance aligns with Webb and Nation (2017) and Laufer (2003), who argue that deliberate learning may account for most vocabulary growth. To put it briefly, deliberate vocabulary learning may be more efficient than incidental learning, especially in an ISLA context.

What is ISLA?

It is crucial to define what ISLA is before attempting to explore its role in maximizing SL learners' uptake. ISLA, as determined by Loewen & Sato (2024), is a subfield that aims to understand how teaching and learning L2 occur in formal contexts; i.e., it examines how the systematic manipulation of learning mechanisms can work together to help learners acquire a second language in such contexts. It is also worth noting that formal contexts include any instruction that occurs in any classroom, whether four-walled, online, or otherwise.

It is paramount to highlight the crucial role of ISLA in promoting focus on form or meaning, as suggested by Michael H. Long's (1996) three-way distinction about L2 instruction, and we cannot talk about meaning without referring to vocabulary. As mentioned before, instructions occur in formal contexts, where, as we all know, there must be a teacher with their students. The fact that instructions occur within that context does not mean students cannot acquire vocabulary incidentally. However, deliberate vocabulary takes up more space in our L2 vocabulary instruction through reading. Here, the question is: How can teachers make reading activities a primary source to maximize learners' uptake?

Strategies for deliberate reading

Connecting students to texts

As an ESL instructor, I used to rely on my intuition to gauge students' vocabulary when designing the reading materials—namely, the texts—I brought into the classroom. Studies, conversely, have shown that creating a link between students and texts is one of the most effective strategies teachers should implement to promote reading and offer opportunities for vocabulary acquisition. Researchers, such as Mesmer (2007), argue that pairing students with texts has a positive impact on children, including boosting their self-confidence. In other words, we mean by pairing learners with texts combining the ensemble of information about readers with information about texts, without neglecting the salient role of factors such as motivation, attention span, and the importance of attention and focus proposed by Nation (2022). In essence, teachers should select texts that best match L2 interests and proficiency level. Some texts can perfectly serve as mirrors of students' culture, beliefs, and ideology. Other texts, on the other hand, can be good opportunities to explore

different cultures and ideologies, which ultimately lead, in both cases, to L2 vocabulary growth, as texts can be drawn from various sources.

Varying resources

If SL teachers can select texts from various sources, deliberate reading can outperform other sources in terms of input. Resources include corpora, L2 materials, glossaries, guided readers, and computer programs. As mentioned earlier, practitioners should not rely solely on their intuitions to select reading material; thus, using a range of resources effectively not only helps teachers find suitable reading materials but also helps students acquire vocabulary when encountering exact words in different texts. It is also worth noting that the list of resources provided here is not exclusive; SL teachers can use other resources if they promote reading and maximize students' vocabulary gains.

First, corpora, for instance, stand out as a crucial resource of authentic language. Pellicer-Sánchez & Schmitt (2010) claimed that reading authentic materials is one way for learners to acquire mid-frequency vocabulary. Many studies consider corpora a significantly valuable source for authentic vocabulary. Corpora provide learners with a range of language from academia, news, and novels, among others. Corpora also provide clear insights into what learners know and what they should know. Pinchbeck et al. (2022) highlighted the importance of word lists they derived from frequency data in large corpora. In their study, they found that these lists serve two main functions: they represent learning targets (RLT) and learner knowledge (RLK). Understanding the roles of these two lists will certainly assist teachers and reading material designers in providing suitable texts, helping learners recognize what they know and what they need to acquire, as argued by Pinchbeck et al. (2022). I can back up the results of that study because the vocabulary learning outcomes exceeded my expectations when I used corpora on various occasions to prepare reading materials for my students last year.

Second, a resource that can help students grow their vocabulary through deliberate reading is their L1. Teachers should unquestionably encourage and take advantage of any opportunity when students use their L1 to negotiate meanings. Blommaert (2010) and Canagarajah (2013) view words as mobile resources rather than as immobile languages. This view highlights the importance of students' linguistic repertoire as a resource for learning L2 vocabulary. When they shuttle between L1 and L2 to understand the form-meaning connection, they are more likely to guess meanings, retrieve vocabulary from prior reading, and ultimately expand their vocabulary with new words. As such, SL instructors should give their students some freedom to use translation tools, including their L2 or bilingual dictionaries. In this regard, some calls for the use of multilingualism to promote biliteracy have recently arisen, such as those of Gentil and Séror (2020), who question the importance of L1 or any other additional language in developing biliteracy.

Drawing on this study, it is no wonder that some teaching practices should have no place in the classroom when it comes to reading. One example of these practices is when ESL and French teachers at my school do not recommend novels that students have read in either language. Suppose SL teachers allow students to read the same texts in different languages. In that case, it will be easier for them to learn new vocabulary, as they no longer need to focus on understanding the content of the texts. They will therefore spend more time negotiating meanings and perhaps other linguistic features of words, drawing on their linguistic repertoire. Nevertheless, teachers should continually raise students' awareness of the misuse of L1, especially when they use loanwords or false friends.

Third, glossing, which focuses on defining words in the same target language, is another essential source of vocabulary. Glosses are usually found in the margins of texts, but sometimes students can find a glossary at the beginning or end of the text, which provides definitions for all unknown words, or they may need to click on a link if they are reading online. SL teachers should guide students and assist them when definitions in glosses exceed their proficiency levels, helping them acquire new vocabulary by providing more straightforward explanations.

Fourth, guided readers unquestionably stand out as an excellent source for SL vocabulary development. The importance of guided readers as a source of vocabulary resides in their alignment with the lexical coverage recommended by studies. They are designed to align with studies on learners' vocabulary size. When students are exposed to texts, as suggested by studies such as Nation (2006), they should be familiar with between 95% and 98% of the words in a text to understand it. The words that are beyond their knowledge offer them an opportunity to guess their meanings. Another core tenet of guided readers is that students have opportunities to encounter high-frequency words repeatedly, which strengthens understanding, retention and retrieval.

Finally, another hallmark of developing students' vocabulary through reading is the use of computer programs. Teachers or course designers, as suggested by Nation (2016), should use computer programs such as *AntWordProfiler* to analyze a text and estimate the number of unknown words it contains. By doing so, teachers will help students avoid reading burdens, enabling them to focus more on learning new vocabulary rather than struggling with the text's meaning. Another advantage of using computer programs is that they help teachers identify mid- or low-frequency words that need attention, and one way to do so is to have students notice them.

Having students notice new vocabulary

Another quintessential strategy that SL teachers should use to help learners expand their vocabulary size is noticing. According to Schmidt's noticing hypothesis (2010), learners should consciously notice the input so that intake can occur. This means that vocabulary acquisition may not happen if learners do not recognize words and notice them. Accordingly, SL teachers should find various ways to make that happen. For instance, they can write unknown words on the board, ask students to look them up in a dictionary, explain the words, and then ask students to put them into sentences. Alternatively, they can repeat those words along with their definitions for some time. As mentioned before, word repetition is one of the key features that help students notice and, hence, learn. Pellicer-Sánchez and Schmitt (2010) conducted a study showing that after more than 10 exposures, L2 readers could recognize the meanings and spellings of words at rates of 84% and 76%, respectively. Also, Nation and Gu (2019) argue that encountering a word multiple times helps retention, emphasizing spacing as a key factor in reading. Their claim also aligns with Nakata's (2015) research, which stresses the importance of spaced repetition. According to this research, spaced repetition leads to better long-term retention than massed repetition. In a similar vein, SL should know that the quality of meeting words is also paramount. According to Nation and Gu (2019, p. 27), retrieval occurs only when the mental processing involved during learning is deep and thoughtful. By knowing that, SL should expose learners to meaningful reading contexts that help them notice, ask for clarification, understand, and use the unknown words in follow-up activities. Webb and Nation (2017) consider time a key factor. They claim that when words are not re-encountered for an extended period, knowing the previously encountered words will potentially decay. In essence, promoting noticing is crucial and may be more effective in teaching and learning formulaic language.

How to teach formulaic language to expand learners' vocabulary

Before we offer humble practical guidance, it is now legitimate to start with the view that deliberate learning has an advantage over incidental learning. When SL instructors intend to teach formulaic language, such as collocations, chunks, or lexical bundles, deliberate reading may be the most effective approach. Some researchers, such as Frank Boers, Murielle Demecheleer, Averil Coxhead, and Stuart Webb (2014), argue that deliberate attention should be given to collocations because they are challenging to learn incidentally, as most collocations are low-frequency multiword units. Again, intentional vocabulary acquisition cannot be achieved without providing explicit instructions or a warning of a test. Therefore, teachers should make the vocabulary learning objectives, in this case, learning formulaic language, clear to students. In this regard, we should ask: Why should students learn formulaic language? The answers will revolve around

two reasons, as argued by Schmitt (2010): They are essential for functional use, such as apologizing or complaining, and they can help start a new conversation or sustain the flow of a conversation, as with *nice weather today*. A third reason is that teachers should teach multi-word units to help students achieve high levels of proficiency in a second language.

Teaching formulaic language through deliberate reading activities is not significantly different from teaching individual words. However, laudable efforts should be made to teach formulaic language; SL teachers should tailor their vocabulary-teaching strategies to ensure high exposure to these multi-word units, thereby increasing the likelihood of their uptake. One of the most appealing strategies is giving explicit instructions to students. Siyanova-Chanturia and Pellicer-Sánchez (2019) aligned with a study by Peters (2009), in which two groups of students were provided with lexical units typographically enhanced and glossed. One group was explicitly instructed to focus on new vocabulary, while the other was instructed to focus on collocations. The result was that both groups could potentially learn collocations. It is also worth noting that the text enhancement helped those groups learn collocations.

Furthermore, Siyanova-Chanturia and Pellicer-Sánchez (2019) argue that Szudarski (2012) demonstrated that incorporating exercises into reading materials enhances the acquisition of collocations. Teachers can design exercises such as linking words, filling in gaps, or matching word units to their meanings. Similarly, SL teachers should encourage students to incorporate word units into their output and recommend effective memorization strategies. One memorization strategy is to connect the abstract meanings of word units to their literal meanings. Siyanova-Chanturia & Pellicer-Sánchez (2019) give an example of the idiom *take a back seat*. They argue that helping students understand the connection between the abstract meaning of idiom and its literal meaning aids in their memorization of the idiom. Students should know that allowing someone else to decide is like allowing someone else to drive. Here, a question arises: Should the SL teacher introduce the abstract or the literal meaning first? The answer may depend on two factors: the difficulty students have in understanding the literal meaning of the idiom, and how those words are individually familiar to them. Another example of fostering memorization, or retrieval, is highlighting the sound patterns of word units. When introducing word units such as *fast and furious*, *lifelong learning*, and *time will tell*, SL teachers should highlight the sound pattern, which, in this case, is alliteration.

Teaching word units to beginners

Students should be exposed to a range of texts to maximize their encounter with lexical chunks. Examples may include dialogues and short texts on different themes, to name but a few. In the Pre-reading phase, teachers should activate learners' prior knowledge, without explicitly targeting the formulaic language, and they can also pre-teach two or three chunks. This way, teachers can smoothly guide their students to the

next step. In the While-reading phase, teachers should incorporate activities to spark the hunt for chunks. The activities may include working in pairs or small groups to find and highlight word units for polite requests, such as *Can I get...?*, to describe the weather, like *heavy rain*, or to hand something, like *Here you are*. Other activities may include providing students with a version of the exact text with some word units missing and then asking students to write or recite the missing words. In the post-reading phase, students receive explicit instructions to aid in memorization. Teachers may ask students to match word units to their contextual uses, filling in the gaps and labelling them. In a follow-up activity, students may be asked to apply retained chunks in various contexts to maximize their understanding.

Conclusion

The debates over incidental and deliberate vocabulary learning continue to capture attention, as do studies on their effectiveness. Some researchers, such as Laufer (2003) and Lin and Hirsh (2012), argue that intentional approaches lead to greater vocabulary gains than incidental learning. In contrast, Nation and Webb (2011) suggest that incidental learning through extensive reading helps develop skills such as reading comprehension and fluency. To briefly explain the difference, learners may unintentionally acquire new vocabulary when their focus is on understanding the input. Deliberate learning occurs when learners are instructed to focus primarily on a language target. It is worth noting that clear instructions and deliberate learning cannot occur beyond the context of instructed second-language acquisition. This accords with our view of developing learners' vocabulary through deliberate reading, and, more precisely, through teaching and learning formulaic language.

Teaching lexical chunks depends not only on the SL teacher's expertise but also on the learner's level of proficiency. To help learners expand their understanding of lexical bundles, teachers should employ a range of strategies and create high-quality reading materials. To successfully do so, teachers should pair students with interesting texts that provide frequent exposure to the target word units, varied reading resources, and opportunities to notice. Again, teaching which word units depends on students' proficiency levels. When beginners are exposed to authentic texts, they not only encounter high-frequency words but also learn chunks and their contextual uses. Teachers may incorporate a variety of activities throughout the reading session to solidify learners' understanding of formulaic language.

As we mentioned earlier, the blurry boundaries between the effectiveness of incidental and deliberate vocabulary learning make the novice SL teachers' job more challenging. Some experienced teachers use incidental learning, while others use deliberate learning, despite a lack of studies showing that one approach outperforms the other. Other instructors use both methods. The primary concern here is that little is known about the effectiveness of combining the two learning approaches; hence, we need more future studies

to address how formulaic language can be learned and understood in the context of incidental versus deliberate learning.

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