

Title: Teaching Russian Vocabulary: A Study on Learning Context and Proficiency Level

Abstract:

Many in the fields of psycholinguistics and second language acquisition have called for a closer relationship between teaching and research. However, differences in empirical approaches across fields can lead to difficulties in applying results from research to second language (L2) pedagogy. In this study I investigate two widely held assumptions about empirical methods and L2 instructional approaches in two contexts: the laboratory and the L2 classroom. The results show significant differences in initial learning outcomes for novel L2 Russian vocabulary items across contexts and proficiency levels.

The first assumption addressed in this study is that the laboratory can serve as a stand-in for the L2 classroom or other real life environments in psycholinguistic research (Coady, 1997; Doughty, 2003; Hulstijn, 2003; Kaushanskaya, 2012). Though the laboratory is valuable as an empirical context, L2 learning outcomes may differ due to the influence of environment (Jimenez, 2010). The second assumption deals with word-level issues: many instructors assume that teaching novel L2 vocabulary items in semantically related groups, or groups of nouns related to a single context, facilitates learning and encourages retention. Previous research shows that these groupings do not facilitate learning (Finkbeiner & Nicol, 2003), perhaps because this assumption is based on monolingual word-memorization studies, where semantic relatedness encourages memorization. However, these two processes – word memorization and novel word learning – are cognitively separate functions (Altarriba & Mathis, 1997).

The focus of this study is word-level effects on initial L2 vocabulary acquisition in two contexts. Novel vocabulary items were separated into three groupings – semantically related, thematically related, and unrelated -- and were taught to participants in either the laboratory or in their L2 Russian classrooms. (Thematically related groups are defined as groups drawn from a single schema in the speaker's background knowledge (Tinkham, 1997).) The instructional methods and tests were designed to target two specific types of initial L2 word knowledge (Barcroft, 2012): word comprehension and word production. Participant responses on two post-tests, immediate and delayed, were measured for reaction time and accuracy and analyzed quantitatively using linear and logistic mixed-effects models (Baayen, Davidson, & Bates, 2008; Jaeger, 2008). The participants were 43 native English speakers enrolled in L2 Russian language classes at three proficiency levels.

The results show that the effect of word grouping varies significantly according to both proficiency level and learning context. Participants in the laboratory context performed better with the unrelated grouping overall. Semantically related groupings facilitated learning for low proficiency participants, but thematically related and unrelated groupings facilitated learning for high proficiency participants. This indicates that the effect of word-level features on L2 vocabulary learning changes as proficiency level increases. The results of this study begin to address our assumptions about learning context and word-level effects. In order to contribute to the ongoing effort of bringing research and teaching closer together, I will present concrete recommendations for teaching L2 vocabulary in the classroom at different levels of proficiency.