Text selection and frequency: Comments on Pigada and Schmitt (2006)

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Pigada and Schmitt (2006) are to be commended for creating a plausible environment in their study for their participant to learn target vocabulary. Not only was the participant not living in an English-speaking country at the time of the study, but he had also passed some time without French between instructional units. Furthermore, the researchers chose an easy passage, which was likely to be less stressful for the participant to read. This is a plausible context for a study on vocabulary acquisition.

Interestingly, the participant was a speaker of two other languages. As Pigada and Schmitt had already commented, this seemed to suggest that his ability to pick up vocabulary and, if nothing else, his capacity to learn another language was probably already highly enhanced. However, the choice of participant in Pigada and Schmitt's study was not quite likely to influence the general direction of their results.

The results are particularly notable in that they demonstrate the power of frequency of input. The authors commented that "only at the extremes of frequency do we see a noticeable effect." Although I agree with the authors on this point, frequency may deserve a bit more praise because Table 3 shows a consistent augmentation of scores, especially in terms of grammar. To be sure, Table 3 shows one directional hitch in the scores for both meaning and spelling, but this is to be expected when a variety of words are used. Nevertheless, a general pattern does appear to support the frequency of input. Of course, the other tables show less consistent patterns than Table 3 does.

For a future study, I cannot help but wonder whether reading aloud for a few minutes each day over a period of time would result in a similar outcome. In a small-scale, non-extensive reading study, I found that two intermediate learners of French learned lexical items while reading aloud (Taylor, 2000).

Perhaps one of the main indirect points of Pigada and Schmitt's study is that, irrespective of reader level, thoughtful selection of a second-language (L2) text is paramount to vocabulary being gleaned from it. Pigada and Schmitt also seem to demonstrate that teachers can encourage L2 vocabulary learning by recommending readings corresponding to L2 learners' competency levels. In choosing more difficult texts teachers tend to stretch their students too much, resulting in less motivation on the students' part to read more extensively.

References

Pigada, M., & Schmitt, N. (2006). Vocabulary acquisition from extensive reading: A case study. *Reading in a Foreign Language, 18,* 1-28.

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