Use or Lose—On Second Language Vocabulary Attrition

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The author tries to find how well the students master the new words the teachers teach in class. The result is some disappointing since many words are undergoing partial or complete attrition. The survey suggests that words of high frequency are not easily forgotten.

Keywords: word, vocabulary, erode, attrition

Introduction

In English class in the Chinese colleges, teachers spend a fairly amount of time in teaching the vocabulary and the students also spend a lot of time memorizing the vocabulary learned in class. However, do the students really acquire the vocabulary? The author tries to explore this field based on some data collected from some college students in Shanghai, China.

Research in Language Attrition

Language attrition has gained importance in research and caught many researchers' attention since a conference held at the University of Pennsylvania on the attrition of language skills. At that conference, language attrition is broadly defined as the loss of any language or any portion of a language by an individual or a speech community. The study of language attrition has a history of over 30 years and many theories and approaches have been put forward. The savings paradigm hypothesis assumes that even for linguistic knowledge that can no more be recalled or recognized. There are still residues that are reserved and can be stimulated once more. "Savings" has been defined by Nelson (1978) as a relearning advantage of old items over new items. According to him, a high level of activation is needed for recall; a lower level of activation is sufficient for recognition. If the activation or stimulation drops, then the information can no longer be retrieved or accessed. However, through the relearning of previously known material, old knowledge will become reactivated and brought to a level that makes it retrievable or recallable. On the other hand, in the learning of items that have not previously been known, learners will not be able to reach that same level after a relatively briefer learning duration. Based on his hypothesis, things learned need to be activated or stimulated for recall or recognition.

The General Situation in Second Language Vocabulary Teaching and Learning in China

In China, English is not used in daily life for most people. Rather, people learn English mainly for travel, further education, or working opportunities. English is not an official language in China but only a language taught mainly in the classroom. Consequently, it is difficult to cultivate a good environment for people to learn

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English. English learning, which is seen as the second language learning, is a great task for the Chinese to deal with.

Generally speaking, when the teachers teach in college English class, they usually teach new words that appear in the texts. They will first make clear about the pronunciation, the meaning, and sometimes the collocations. And in most cases they will illustrate the words with some sample sentences. They will also ask the students to do some exercises to get more familiar with the new words. This is what most of the teachers do in class when dealing with the new words. Some teachers will give the students a dictation of the newly learned words, and some will give them extra exercises to help them memorize the new words.

The students will underline the new words in the text, write the Chinese versions, and make notes of the collocations in class. After class, they will do some exercises related to the new words to get a better idea of the new words. They will try to remember the pronunciation, the Chinese meaning, and the collocation. That is basically what the students do with the new words.

On the whole, this is what the vocabulary teaching and learning is like in college. Teachers teach the new vocabulary in order to make the students understand the text better and pass exams. Students learn new vocabulary to understand the text better or pass exams. Both of the parties spend some time on the new vocabulary, and that is it.

The Questionnaire

During the years of teaching, I have come to realize that the college students do not acquire many new words which they should have. This leads me to do a survey about how many new words they have mastered during the college years. With the help of a student of mine, we make a survey among the English majors to see how well they master the new words in the class of Intensive Reading.

Two groups of English major students are chosen as the research objects. They are sophomores and juniors respectively. Forty-two students take part in this questionnaire including 37 girls and 5 boys. Specifically, the constructed questions are divided into two sections. In part one, students' demographic details are gathered including the name, grade, age, etc. Part two is vocabulary test. Thirty new words are chosen from *Integrated English Book I* and *Integrated English Book II* (the textbooks they use during the first two semesters). The 30 words are: confront, anguish, expediency, spacious, contract, recipe, stylish, contend, impart, invincible, plague, boisterous, entail, polarization, blur, glamour, toss, oasis, peril, whereabouts, mortgage, reconciliation, resonate, mingle, unkempt, indebt, quintessence, easygoing, blurb, emission. Four options are given: (1) I never see this word; (2) I once saw the word, but I forgot the meaning; (3) I once saw the word, and I can guess the meaning; and (4) I know the word, and its collocation. Four options stand for the four levels of word attrition. Option (1) stands for the complete attrition; option (4) stands for zero attrition; option (2) and option (3) indicate partial attrition. They may be half forgotten, beyond recall and be awarded a completely unrelated meaning. More often, they are mistaken as another word that is similar in sound, form or meaning.

Twenty-one sophomores participate in this questionnaire. There are 2 boys and 19 girls. About 9.07% of the students choose option (1). 32.25% students choose option (2) and 16.89% students choose option (3). 41.79% choose option (4). So altogether, almost half of students cannot remember the meaning of the words. They know they must have learned the words; however, they cannot recall the meanings. They just guess the meaning. Actually, about 3/4 of them can guess the right meaning. This means that many words are partially eroded. Twelve students choose option (2) to the word *expediency* and *contend*. Eleven students choose option

(2) to the words *spacious*, *reconciliation*, and *quintessence*. Thirteen students choose option (2) to the word *mortgage*. With time going by, they cannot recall the meanings of these words. For the words *confront*, *contract*, *recipe*, *peril*, *mingle*, *easygoing*, and *emission*, more than half of the students choose option (4). Eighteen students choose option (4) to the word *confront*. Thirteen students choose option (4) to the word *mingle*. Sixteen students choose option (4) to the words *easygoing* and *emission*. Eleven students choose option (4) to the word *contract*. *Confront*, *contract*, *peril*, *mingle*, and *emission* are the key words teachers mention in class, so students keep in mind well. *Recipe* is the word we usually find in some reading materials and the daily life. *Easygoing* is the compound that student can guess the meaning easily.

Twenty-one junior students, 3 boys and 18 girls, take part in this questionnaire. Junior students' choices among the four options are averagely distributed. About 22.27% of the students choose option (1). 23.64% choose option (2). 21.5% choose option (3). And 28.73% choose option (4). Specifically, 15 students choose option (4) for the word *confront*. Four students choose option (3). Sixteen students choose option (4) for *contract*. Four choose option (3). Thirteen choose option (4) for *easygoing*. Five choose option (3). Fourteen choose option (4) for *emission*. Four choose option (3). About 10 students choose option (4) for words like *spacious*, *stylish*, *contend*, *toss*, and *mingle*. No one chooses option (1) for these words. While 14 students choose option (1) for *boisterous*; six choose option (2); one chooses option (3); no one chooses option (4). About 11 choose option (4) for words like *polarization*, *unkempt*, *quintessence*, and *blurb*. Again no one chooses option (4) for these words. This means that after two years' English study, every student's vocabulary experiences different levels of attrition. More than half of the students do not know *boisterous*, *polarization*, *unkempt*, and *quintessence*. These long words are difficult to remember for the students. For the words *confront*, *recipe*, *contract*, *toss*, *easygoing*, and *emission*, about 66.66% of the students choose option (4).

The Analysis of the Result of the Questionnaire

Based on the data collected from the questionnaire, it is obvious that the sophomores do a better job than the junior students. According to the ratio of the students choosing option (4) and option (1), there are more sophomores choosing option (4), while more juniors choose option (1). It seems that time plays a very important role in students' vocabulary attrition. For the words that the sophomores do not remember well, the junior students also show difficulty in recovering. For the words that the sophomores remember clearly, the juniors also show a tendency of recovering them more easily. These easy words are those that are emphasized in class by teachers and appear more frequently in their textbooks. And the meanings of some easy words are easy to guess, such as *easygoing*. Meanwhile, those difficult words are those that teachers also teach in class, but do not appear frequently in their textbooks later. Since China is a country that is not very English-friendly, where students get English exposure basically from class, not from their daily life, and some words only appear in their textbooks once or twice, it is really hard for them to acquire those words with so little exposure. For the highly-frequent words, the students can encounter them several times in their textbooks later and use them when reading or writing. This will help them remember the words better. It is also obvious that half of the chosen words are partially eroded, since half of the students involved choose option (2) or option (3). They are not sure about the meanings but they can guess the meanings of the words right. From this, it is safe to say that the teachers' work in class is highly efficient, but with time passing by and the little exposure to the new words taught in class, the attrition begins gradually.

To sum up, it can be safely concluded that: (1) The new words taught by the teachers in class have not

been acquired completely by the students; (2) With time going, the students show a tendency of forgetting more words, as the data show clearly. More junior students choose option (1) and less junior students choose option (4); (3) The words that do not frequently appear in class or life are more easily forgotten than those key words that do frequently; and (4) A large number of words are undergoing partial attrition.

Conclusion

The current methods the teachers and the students use when handling the new words are not so highly efficient, since with time passing by, more words are eroded partially or completely by the students. The data suggest that words of high frequency are not easily forgotten. So, maybe frequent use or review of the words which is activation or stimulation is the key to fighting against the attrition. The result of the current study supports Nelson's Savings Hypothesis. But the current study has a lot of limitations in that the number of the students involved is not big, and it has only given the students only a questionnaire; more follow-up studies need to be done to learn how the attrition happens and why.

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