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The impact of reading on three aspects of word knowledge: spelling, meaning and collocation

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Abstract

This study investigates the degree to which intermediate EFL learners can acquire knowledge of spelling, meaning and collocation of 100 target words with different frequency from reading the authentic novel *A Little Princess*. The results show that the average number of acquired words was 16.52 or 25.54% and that there was improvement in all three aspects of word knowledge: spelling (15.34 words or 24.23%), meaning (16.5 words or 25.97%) and collocation (17.75 words or 26.44%). The word frequency affected the vocabulary learning gains. The biggest gains in all three aspects of word knowledge were found for words which occurred from 11 to 20 times in the novel.

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1. Introduction

Learning a foreign language involves learning a large number of words. However, despite the numerous studies on vocabulary learning it is still not clear how vocabulary is acquired (Schmitt, 1998) and what are the best ways of learning vocabulary. Studies in first language acquisition have shown that children learn vocabulary at a fast rate and that between grades three and twelve they learn about 3.000 new words a year (Nagy et al., 1987: 237). On the other hand, classroom observations have shown that the number of words learned in the classroom could only be a few hundreds a year (Nagy & Herman, 1987: 33), which leads to the conclusion that most of the words are learned incidentally from reading and listening.

A number of studies in first language acquisition have shown considerable vocabulary learning gains from reading (Jenkins et al., 1984; Nagy et al., 1987; Saragi et al., 1978). One of the most cited studies is the study carried out by Saragi et al. (1978) in which twenty native English students read the novel *A Clockwork Orange* by Anthony Burgess and were subsequently tested on their knowledge of 90 'nadsat' words (Russian slang words). The results of the study showed impressive learning gains of 76% of the target words. The authors concluded that words needed to be encountered at least 10 times in order to be acquired.

Research in second/foreign vocabulary acquisition has also demonstrated that learners can acquire vocabulary while reading for meaning. Horst et al. (1998) found that while reading the simplified version of *The Mayor of Casterbridge* by Thomas Hardy the participants learned the meaning of 20% of the unknown target words, and that words needed to be repeated at least eight times in order to be learned. Waring and Takaki (2003) investigated the vocabulary learning gains from reading the simplified version of the novel *A Little Princess* by Frances Hodgson Burnett using three types of tests. The results showed that the participants recognized the word form of 61.2% and the meaning of 40% of the target words immediately after the reading, and were able to provide translation of 18.4%