

The Effects of Classroom Interaction on Vocabulary Development

Mastoor Al-Kaboody

Northern Arizona University

**Abstract**

A partial replication of Plonsky and Loewen (2013), this present study aims to investigate the effects of classroom interaction on vocabulary development. Nine targeted words were selected from a classroom textbook. Two subsequent classrooms were audio recorded in order to capture the interaction. Pre-, post-, and delayed post- test were given to the participants to measure gains in vocabulary. The audio recordings were transcribed into a small corpus. Similar to Plonsky and Loewen, the results showed that even though frequency and interaction are significant factors in vocabulary development, they cannot account for all students gains and retention of the targeted vocabulary.

### **Background**

This study replicates Plonsky and Loewen (2013), which investigated 32 students taking a Spanish summer course to examine their lexical development, particularly students' development in seven specific Spanish words as measured on a pretest and posttest. The treatment consisted of normal class lessons that lasted for a whole semester in the summer. The classes were audio- and video- recorded and the recordings were transcribed for analysis. The researchers found a complex and non-linear relationship between frequency of word occurrence in classrooms and its subsequent gains. Specifically, some high frequency words were recalled by learners while other high frequency words were not. They argued that "no one factor in itself (frequency, explicitness, recycling) was sufficient for learning" (pp. 18-19). Overall engagement was one of the salient factors in their study. In addition, they argued that learners' engagement could be increased by words that are more "inherently interesting to learners" (p. 19).

### **Research Question**

How can classroom interaction effect vocabulary development?

### **Methods**

#### **Participants**

The participants of this study were 16 students and one teacher. The students were between 19 and 28 years old. There were 8 female and 8 male students, whose nationalities were Arabic, Chinese, Korean, and Brazilian. Their first languages were Arabic, Chinese, Korean, and Portuguese, respectively. Participants were enrolled in an Intensive English Program at a public American university.

The teacher, a female native speaker of English, has been teaching English for ten years. She has a master's degree in Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages. She was working as a full time instructor in the Program in Intensive English (PIE).

**Instruments**

Three pencil and paper tests, a pre- post- and delayed post- test, were designed to measure the students' vocabulary knowledge. The tests ask the participants to rate their understanding of the targeted words on a four-point scale. The test also allowed them to give an L1 translation or L2 synonym of the word (see the item below). The pre- post- and delayed post- tests used identical lexical items; however, the organization of the words differed in the pre- and post- tests in order to exclude extraneous factors such as order or practice effects.

**Procedure**

Prior the treatment sessions, a pretest was administered. After the pretest, the treatment session began and the two subsequent classrooms were audio recorded. A microphone was attached to the teacher to record classroom interaction. A posttest was then administered two days after the treatment sessions took place in order to measure vocabulary gain. Then a delayed posttest was administered nine days after the posttest in order to assess students' retention of the target words. The pretest, posttest, and delayed posttest all took place in the classroom during class time.

**Results**

The results showed an intricate relationship between frequency of word occurrence, focus on form episodes, and vocabulary gains. Even though all students showed some varied gains in their vocabulary acquisition, it is difficult to account for the reasons behind these gains. The posttest displayed that students gained in all the targeted words even in those words, such as hence, which did not occur at all in the spoken corpus. Moreover, high frequency words and low frequency words displayed gains at different levels. The results in this study demonstrate that

frequency is an important factor for L2 vocabulary development. However, frequency by itself is not an exclusive factor (Plonsky & Loewen, 2013). The findings in this paper indicate an important aspect of frequency that is the quality of frequency or quality of exposure. Therefore, the results in this study support the possibility of learning vocabulary from classroom interaction (Plonsky & Loewen, 2013; Dobinson, 2001; Horst, 2010).

Another important finding in this study was that the combination of both meaning-focused and form-focused classes resulted in better acquisition of vocabulary through interaction.

### **Relevance to PIE and Second Language Learning**

This small-scale study has important implications for the Program in Intensive English and second language learning. Interaction has been confirmed to aid vocabulary development. Most importantly, interaction can help even those students who did not get involved in the interaction itself. The findings will raise teachers' awareness, either in the PIE or elsewhere, that even those most frequent words cannot necessarily be learned because they occurred several times in class interaction. The quality of frequency of exposure to the targeted words is important. In this study, the words that received both form-focused and meaning-focused episodes displayed higher gains and retention rates. Further, this study showed that the more interesting the vocabulary are to students, the better they are learned. Therefore, teachers can approach teaching vocabulary with these notions in mind so that they can teach vocabulary more effectively.

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