

# Bridging the Gap Between Extensive Reading and Intensive Reading: Vocabulary Acquisition



OMURA Yoshihiro  
Kinki University  
yomura@kindai.ac.jp

Omura, Y. (2012). Vocabulary acquisition through Extensive Reading and Intensive Reading. *Extensive Reading World Congress Proceedings, 1*, 37-39.

The past twenty years have produced an array of second language vocabulary acquisition (SLVA) studies, but SLVA lacks a comprehensive theory of how vocabulary is learned. First, let's take a look at how vocabulary is learned in L1 and L2 acquisition. In L1 learning, how do children learn new words? Many claim that children acquire new words through repeated exposure to the words. However, there are others who claim that children learn their first words in moments of insight rather than through repeated exposure as is currently believed. It is true that children learn new words quite effortlessly as with other elements of the language. Elley (1988), for example, found that children learned a significant number of new words only after listening to a story which contained the new words. Even in this case, offering discussion proved to aid the process significantly.

While the processes involved in SLVA are not entirely clear, Nation (1990) claims the processes employed in establishing vocabulary knowledge have three steps: noticing, retrieving and generating:

Noticing involves seeing the word as an item to be learned . . . Retrieval involves recall of previously met items. Each retrieval strengthens the connection between the cue and the retrieved knowledge . . . Generation strategies include: attaching new aspects of knowledge to what is known through instantiation, word analysis, semantic mapping, and using scales and grids. (pp. 221-2)

Certainly, knowing a word is not just knowing the meaning of a word. Nation (2001) lists various aspects of vocabulary including spelling, pronunciation, morphological properties, grammatical functions, relative frequency, associations, collocations and restrictions on the use of the word. They all constitute knowing a word.

Learners gain implicit knowledge by processing second language (L2) input without consciously paying attention to the forms and structures of the language, while they gain explicit knowledge when they process input with the intention of learning the structural rules. Hulstijn (2005) made a distinction between the implicit learning involved in acquiring a first language (L1) and the mix of implicit and explicit learning in L2 acquisition. Explicit vocabulary learning includes 1) studying vocabulary lists, 2) use of dictionaries, and 3) inferring vocabulary meaning

from context, while implicit vocabulary learning is achieved through meaning-focused reading (Hunt & Beglar, 2005). Students, especially those who are in English as a foreign language (EFL) environment, lack an adequate amount of oral and written input and, thus, vocabulary learning through reading should be strongly encouraged. Nation (2001) claims that "incidental learning via guessing from context is the most important of all sources of vocabulary learning" and it can be achieved from "Extensive Reading (ER), learning from taking part in conversations, and learning from listening to stories, films, television or the radio (p. 232)." Thus, this paper focuses on how reading activities can be effectively incorporated in EFL/ESL programs in order to promote SLVA.

In Intensive Reading, the teacher guides through a text slowly, explains new words and phrases, analyzes the grammatical structure, and makes sure students understand every sentence. On the other hand, ER aims at improving students' reading skills and communicative competency and the ER teacher encourages students to read as much and as fast as they can so long as they can grasp the main idea. Many advocates of ER have claimed the benefits of ER, and learners are expected to gain a large recognition vocabulary through ER.

While ER can be implemented to assist implicit and incidental vocabulary learning, intensive reading (IR) can be utilized to promote explicit and intentional vocabulary learning. Studying a vocabulary list has a similar effect to IR in this sense. Through IR, learners

often consult a dictionary and look up pronunciation, meanings, and usages when they encounter new words. In order to reinforce the new words to stay in the learners' long-term memory, it will be extremely helpful if they encounter the same vocabulary in their real reading, i.e., ER. Vocabulary need to be learned through either intensive or extensive reading in which learners encounter the words in a meaningful way. While ER leads to implicit vocabulary learning, intensive reading tends to lead to explicit vocabulary learning because learners are strongly encouraged to consult dictionaries and check the unknown words. There is also a good chance that students may have encountered the same vocabulary when they engaged in intensive reading. Then, they will be able to recycle and develop the use of previously encountered words in meaningful contexts. In this sense, combining intensive and extensive activities will be an excellent approach in promoting SLVA. Nation (2001) claims that intentional learning of vocabulary and incidental learning are complementary activities, each one enhancing the learning that comes from the other. Rashidi and Piran (2011) found the following: 1) both IR and ER are effective, 2) intermediate students benefitted more from IR, and 3) advanced students benefitted more from ER. Horst (2005) found students' vocabulary knowledge increased for both 2000 level words and off-list words. Pigada and Schmitt (2006) found more vocabulary acquisition (spelling, meaning, and grammatical function) is possible through ER.

I would like to suggest the following monthly ER module for classrooms. It is a combination of ER and IR to promote both explicit and incidental vocabulary acquisition. First, it is necessary to assess students' vocabulary level as well as their English proficiency in general using commercially available tests. Then, we can assign students which level ER books to read. Birch (2007) recommends choosing "readings that contain only a limited number of new words. Readings should be considered comprehensible input (p. 163)." On the other hand, it is possible that students may not encounter a single unknown word if they choose to read a book which is too easy for them. Reading very easy graded readers may help to get started with the habit of ER, but it will not benefit them much to increase their vocabulary. Thus, it is important for the instructors to assess learners' current vocabulary level, size, and their needs so that they can provide

learners with appropriate new words.

Choosing appropriate ER books is one of the hardest jobs for a teacher. The easiest starting point would be to choose a specific theme or a topic and look up books that share the same theme or a topic. Today, there are many ER books, and, therefore, students can be instructed to read ER books in a specific field when they engage in ER. For example, if the participants belong to a school of business, the pilot program may assign students to read ER books whose topics or themes have something to do with business scenes so that they will encounter the same words at least a few times.

In order to choose the target vocabulary, it is necessary to electronically scan the ER books. To complete the goal of sampling words from at least a dozen candidate ER books, the first 20 pages can be scanned. Although scanning the entire books would be preferable, it is assumed that a large proportion of lexical items occurring in a particular text would have already been introduced on the first 20 pages.

After scanning the books, lexical profiling will be conducted to see what kind of business related words will be encountered in the selected ER books. Using an on-line version of Lexical Frequency Profiling (LFP) software, the scanned files of ER will be analyzed to classify the words into four frequency categories: 1000 most frequent, 1001-2000 most frequent, Academic Word List, and off-list words. (Since our students have passed the 3000 word level test, the focus of lexical studies here will be AWL and off list words.) Also, at this point, it is a good idea to create a bilingual vocabulary list and distribute it because it is highly unlikely that we can find an IR passage that contains all the target words. In this way, students can anticipate what kind of words to encounter in both IR and ER texts. Then, we can assign an IR passage that contains the same words as in their ER by browsing through textbooks for IR and choosing a chapter based upon the chosen theme or topic. Then, we will choose a theme for each month and let the students read one ER book every week from the list. And finally, we should administer multiple types of vocabulary quizzes to make sure students have acquired the target vocabulary.

There were several limitations to this approach. First of all, it is very difficult to choose appropriate ER books. Also, it is suspected that limiting book choice

may affect students' motivation to read freely. And lastly, it is not easy to prepare and manage ER and IR books. However, through this program, students will first encounter new words through IR (including vocabulary explanation by the teacher). Then, they will find the same words used in a longer passage in a meaningful way. Thus, it is hoped that they will learn many aspects of the new words. I believe combining IR and ER is an excellent reading practice.

### References:

- Birch, B. M. (2007). *English L2 Reading: Getting to the Bottom*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Elley, W. B. (1988). New vocabulary: How do children learn new words? *Research Information for Teachers*, 1, pp. 1-4.
- Horst, M. (2005). Learning L2 Vocabulary through Extensive Reading: A Measurement Study. *Canadian Modern Language Review*, 61, 355-382.
- Hulstijn, J. H. (2005). Theoretical and empirical issues in the study of implicit and explicit second-language learning. *Studies in Second Language Acquisition* 27(2), 129-140.
- Hunt, A. & Beglar, D. (2005). A Framework for Developing EFL Reading Vocabulary. *Reading in a Foreign Language*, 17, 23-59.
- Nation, I. S. P. (1990). *Teaching and Learning Vocabulary*. New York: Heinle and Heinle.
- Nation, I. S. P. (2001). *Learning Vocabulary in Another Language*. Cambridge University Press.
- Pigada, M. & Schmitt, N. (2006). Vocabulary Acquisition from Extensive Reading: A Case Study. *Reading in a Foreign Language*, 18, 1-28.
- Rashidi, N. & Piran, M. (2011). The Effect of Extensive and Intensive Reading on Iranian EFL Learners' Vocabulary Size and Depth. *Journal of Language Teaching and Research*, 2, 471-482.