Incidental Second Language Vocabulary Learning from Reading Novels: A Comparison of Three Mobile Modes

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ABSTRACT

This paper reports on a study in which incidental English vocabulary learning from three mobile modes (book, e-book and e-book with user modelling and adaptive vocabulary learning support) was investigated. The study employed a crossover design to test for vocabulary gain from reading three simplified English novels among a group of Japanese high school students, learning English as a second language. Small vocabulary gains were noted; however there was no significant difference between the modes in this respect. Participants also gave their reactions to using the three modes. The authors reflect on some possible reasons for the results, and identify some methodological considerations.

Keywords: Adaptive Systems, Electronic Dictionaries, Extensive Reading, Incidental Learning, Mobile Assisted Language Learning (MALL), Second Language, Second Language Learning (L2), Vocabulary Learning

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INTRODUCTION

The acquisition of vocabulary is an essential aspect of learning a language. Research conducted in America (Anderson et al., 1988) found that the median 5th-grade primary school student read approximately 600,000 words of running text in out-of-class reading per year (with exposure ranging from 0 to four million words); based on this finding it is estimated that including in-class reading, on average school students in English-speaking countries read approximately one million words of text per year (Nagy & Anderson, 1984; Nagy et al., 1985; Nagy, 1997). However, learners of English in non-English-speaking countries generally encounter English only as a subject of study and are therefore not exposed to anything like the amount of English text as their counterparts in English-medium education. Given the importance of vocabulary knowledge for language learning, a major issue for learners of English as a foreign language (EFL) is how to increase vocabulary size to a point at which they can read English texts fluently and extensively.

There are two approaches to vocabulary acquisition in EFL learning: direct instruction with memorisation, and incidental learning. Direct instruction is generally recommended in the second language vocabulary acquisition literature for learning the most common words of English that occur frequently across a wide range of texts, whereas incidental learning is recommended to build up a vocabulary that goes beyond the 2,000 or 3,000 most common words of English (e.g., Nation, 2001). This however brings us to the problem of time. If English is taught for only a few hours per week, and if much of this time is spent on listening to the teacher, doing written exercises, or engaging in group work, then how can students progress beyond a basic level of reading vocabulary? Teachers typically encourage their students to access English materials out of class in web or paper form, but the vast majority of EFL school students find authentic written text too difficult to handle. Simplified and graded English novels in book form offer learners a chance to read widely at a level that suits them but may not be convenient for the mobile generation, and typically do not provide glossaries to explain unknown vocabulary.

Here we report an investigation into the effectiveness of incidental vocabulary learning among Japanese high school students. The study employed simplified novels in three different modes:

- A paper book;
- A mobile phone e-book incorporating an online dictionary;
- A mobile phone e-book with enhanced software providing adaptive vocabulary learning support – the English Language Mobile (ELMO) system.

The central research question was, ‘Is the mobile mode in which a novel is read associated with differential ‘incidental’ English vocabulary learning among a group of Japanese school students?’ This paper focuses particularly on some of the methodological issues encountered in setting up and running such a study.

RESEARCHING LANGUAGE LEARNING AND MOBILE DEVICES

This study draws on two distinct strands of research, one being incidental second language vocabulary acquisition, and the other being language learning with mobile technologies.

In the learning of any language, the progressive learning of vocabulary plays an essential part. In the past, learning second/foreign language vocabulary lists by rote was often a favored approach (intentional learning). This has, to varying extents, been supplanted by more communicative and meaning-focused approaches, according to which vocabulary is acquired while the learner is focused on communicative tasks (incidental learning). Two key proponents of incidental learning have been, in the field of second language acquisition: Krashen, who argued that vocabulary is acquired...
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