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The Effects of Instruction on the L2 Acquisition of German Compound Nouns

Abstract:

Many studies have focused recently on the question of how exactly words are organized in the brain. According to Genesee (2000) and Park et al. (2012), L1 and L2 do not represent two different and independent language systems in the brain but are organized in a similar manner. Drawing upon this theory, one could conclude that L2 instruction should mirror native-like acquisition. Accordingly, L2 learners would not need explicit instructions to acquire a new lexicon for already existing phenomena in their minds. In contrast, an experiment by Abutalebi et al. (2001) shows a significant effect on L2 of proficiency on L2 acquisition. The results of 11 neuroimaging cases among early and late bilinguals have proven the assumption that the late bilinguals showed a clear opposition between advanced speakers and beginners. Consequently, the proficiency might be linked directly to additional brain activation for beginners mostly because of “a lack of cognitive control and the need for greater cognitive effort in those who are not fluent in L2” (Park et al., 2012, 689). This leads to the conclusion that if low proficiency requires additional brain activation, it should be mirrored in a teaching approach that is focused on making the new acquisition of vocabulary and rules easier.

This paper discusses L2 vocabulary learning processes. In particular, it focuses on the learning of German compound nouns, which can often be a source of confusion for learners. It investigates the following key questions: (1) Which strategy of vocabulary instruction (explicit or implicit) allows students to correctly use compound nouns in German? (2) How well do learners apply their knowledge of grammatical rules about the formation of compound nouns in novel contexts? Students enrolled in second- and third-semester German courses at a large research university were studied. Two groups of participants were exposed to either explicit or implicit instruction in the formation of German compound nouns, and a third group received no instruction. A set of non-compound nouns was presented in instruction, and the participants wrote a vocabulary test two days after instruction and then again eight days after instruction.

Preliminary results indicate that participants who were in the explicit-instruction group more accurately used complex compound nouns in the test. A post-instruction (“think-aloud”) discussion revealed that participants in the explicit group were better able to articulate and understand rules for the formation of German compound nouns, while students in the implicit group failed to recognize such rules. This study has important implications for the acquisition of L2 vocabulary. The experiment shows that the acquisition of a lexicon is complex and requires varied types of instruction.

References:

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