Specific Language Impairment (SLI) and lexical deficits in the EFL (English as a Foreign Language) classroom

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Children acquire the words of their first language (L1) with rapid speed and ease (Kauschke 2003). The ability of fast mapping (Tiefenthal 2009, Crais 1992) as well as negotiation of meaning (Long 1996) support the acquisition process.

Children with lexical deficits, however, soon fall behind their peers in terms of the number of words in their lexicon and the complexity of the word knowledge they are able to build up. This often results in difficulties in word retrieval from the mental lexicon. (Mayer 2012).

Research has been done on the prevalence (Glück 2007; Motsch et al. 2015), persistence (McGregor et al. 2013), secondary effects (Catts et al. 1999) and symptoms of lexical deficits in first language acquisition (Motsch/Marks/Ulrich 2015). However, there are hardly any studies on how lexical deficits influence foreign language learning and teaching. There are also no findings on the transferability of L1 training programmes to foreign language learning contexts.

In our study, different support measures used in L1 lexical training programmes were applied to the EFL (English as a foreign language) classroom. The support measures were integrated into a unit of ten English lessons on the word field of “farm animals and pets”. The participants of the study were three second-grade classes in a school for special education in Germany. The word learning results of two test groups were compared to a non-treatment control group. All three groups received the same number of English lessons but integrated support measures (the children had, for example, been taught a number of word learning/retrieval strategies) were only implemented in the two experimental groups. The learning effects were measured with a pre-post- and follow-up-test-design. First results suggest that the treatment was successful: Children who had been taught retrieval strategies were able to actively use them and improve their word learning.

Keywords: word retrieval, word learning, lexical training.