Discrete word learning: How L2 learners of different proficiency levels find meaning in the form of new words

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Creating a link between the form and meaning of unknown words is the initial step in vocabulary learning, enabling learners to build up receptive and productive knowledge of these new words. Research has shown that prompting learners to elaborate on the appropriateness of form-meaning links can be an efficient vocabulary learning exercise (Deconinck, Boers & Eyckmans 2015). In this paper we wish to shed more light on the mental processes that occur during this specific elaborative task by investigating the influence of vocabulary size on the type and number of elaborations that learners make.

To this end fifty Dutch-speaking EFL learners rated the congruency they perceived between the form and meaning of 24 English words on a 6-point Likert scale. The motivation of their scores was elicited by means of a think-aloud protocol whose transcriptions were analysed with regard to the type of elaborations made. Both receptive and productive vocabulary size were measured through the LexTale test (Lemhöfer & Broersma 2012) and the Productive Vocabulary Levels Test (Laufer & Nation 1999).

Awareness of the types of elaborations learners produce can help us to unravel the mental processes behind form-meaning mapping. We identify four main types: cross-lexical associations, sound symbolic associations, word form comparisons and lexical decompositions. The research reveals the influence of vocabulary size on the frequency of occurrence of these different types of elaborations.


Keywords: second language acquisition, vocabulary learning, Cognitive Linguistics.