Lexical problem-solving behaviour in processes of lexical attrition in multilinguals

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Language learners are often faced with a lack of lexical knowledge when writing in a foreign language. They might never have acquired a lexical item to express a certain idea, or they might have simply 'forgotten' it. The latter is related to the phenomenon of lexical attrition: non-use of a language may result in delayed lexical retrieval or in temporary inaccessibility of lexical items (Ecke, 2004). Experienced language learners have developed various kinds of lexical problem-solving behaviour to cope with this lack of lexical knowledge, e.g. L1 use, backtracking, reformulations or avoidance. However, little is known about the ways in which lexical problem-solving behaviour develops in processes of language attrition.

The present study explores if lexical attrition is observable in L4 writing after a period of non-use of L4. It also examines if there are any changes in lexical problem-solving after this period.

The study includes 30 young quadrilingual (German, Italian, English and French) adults from South Tyrol, Italy. The research design is longitudinal: the participants performed a letter-writing task in L4 French before and after a 1-1.5 year period of non-use of L4. The study is based on the writing products and on introspective data on the writing process in the form of concurrent and retrospective protocols.

An analysis of the writing products failed to show a significant decrease in lexical diversity. However, an increase in the occurrence of lexical problems in the concurrent protocols indicates that lexical attrition did take place. Furthermore, it was observed that participants displayed similar lexical problem-solving behaviour at both test times. It is suggested that the lexical problem-solving behaviour of experienced language learners might compensate for lexical attrition to some degree.

References


Keywords: lexical problem-solving behaviour, multilingualism, lexical attrition, composing strategies.