Research on Second Language Vocabulary Acquisition and Learning: An Introduction

The crucial role that lexis plays in second language learning and teaching has been repeatedly acknowledged in theoretical and empirical second language acquisition (SLA) vocabulary research. Hence, in the introduction to his seminal book on the mental lexicon, Singleton states that "the major challenge of learning and using a language –whether as L1 or as L2- lies not in the area of broad syntactic principles but in the `nitty-gritty´ of the lexicon" (Singleton, 1999:4), an idea also shared by Hunt and Beglar (2005:2), who argue that "the heart of language comprehension and use is the lexicon". Other authors have gone even further in arguing that "the single most important task facing language learners is acquiring a sufficient large vocabulary" (Lewis, 2000:8), or that "the most striking differences between foreign learners and native speakers is in the quantity of words each group possesses" (Laufer, 1998:255).

The relevance of the lexical dimension of SLA justifies the explosion of theoretical and empirical research in the area, particularly since the 1990´s (cf. Bongaards & Laufer, 2004; Carter, 1987; Cenoz, Jessner & Hufeisen, 2003; Coady & Huckin, 1997; De Groot & van Hell, 2005; Lengyel & Navracsics, 2007; McCarthy, 1990; Meara, 2002; Nation, 2001; Schmitt & McCarthy, 1998; Singleton, 1999). Collectively, this research has shed light on various themes in the domains of theory and pedagogy.

From the perspective of *theory*, a central focus of scholarly discussions and empirical investigations has been the very concept of vocabulary knowledge and lexical competence (see Pavlenko, 1999; Nation, 2005; Singleton, 1999), together with the related question of whether or not the unit of analysis/teaching should be the "word" (Gardner, 2007; Hunt & Beglar, 2005. See Almela & Sánchez, this volume), or the question about the dimensions of breadth and depth in lexical competence (Laufer & Goldstein, 2004; Nation, 2005; Wesche & Parabut, 1996). Another area of contention relates to the nature of the mental lexicon,

particularly regarding the debate as to whether or not the languages in the bi/multilingual mind are represented separately (cf. Cook, 1992; Dijkstra, 2003; Kroll & de Groot, 1997; Navracsics, 2007; Singleton, 1999, 2007; Smith, 1997; Schreuder & Welten, 1993), the lexicon's internal structure, and   its accessibility in comprehension and production (see Altarriba, 2006; Chapelle, 1998; de Groot, 2002; Meara, 2005). Considerable efforts have also gone into the empirical study of vocabulary strategies in terms of which strategies are employed by L2 learners in their attempt to acquire and use their L2 vocabulary, the effectiveness of their deployment, and the variables influencing their use (see Nation, 2005; Nyikos & Fan, In press/2007, for recent reviews). Closely related to this last issue is the study of the role played in vocabulary acquisition/representation by individual differences such as gender-, age-, and proficiency-related differences (cf. Cenoz, 2002; Ferré, Sánchez-Casas, & Guash, 2006; Grace, 2000; Gu, 2002; Henning, 2003; Jiménez Catalán, 2003; Pulido, 2003; Schmitt, 1997). Finally, researchers have also explored the role of context (i.e. second vs. foreign language contexts) in vocabulary acquisition (see Kojic-Sabo & Lightbown, 1999).

From the perspective of *pedagogy*, questions have evolved around the "what" and the "how" of vocabulary teaching (see Read, 2004, for a recent overview of second language vocabulary teaching). Much attention has been devoted to ascertaining the best pedagogical practices in promoting the students´ lexical development. Echoing general discussions in SLA research as to the nature and function of explicit and implicit learning processes (see DeKeyser, 1998, 2003; Doughty, 2003; N Ellis, 1994; and Manchón & Roca, In press/2007 for an overview), one issue is whether or not explicit attention to vocabulary is necessary in vocabulary acquisition (see Huckin & Coady, 1999; Hulstijn, 2001; Hunt & Beglar, 2005; Laufer, 2005; Nation, 2005). The consensus seems to be a compromise between explicit and implicit lexical instruction. The former would be implemented via activities such as the study of decontextualized lexis, the use of dictionaries, or inferring meaning from contexts (Hunt & Beglar, 2005), whereas implicit instruction would involve engaging students in language use activities, particularly reading and listening (but see Manchón *et al*., this volume for the vocabulary learning potential of writing). This consensus is summarized by Nation (2005:585) in his assertion that "every course should involve some deliberate attention to vocabulary as well as opportunities to meet the words in meaning-focused use".

Both theoretical and applied dimensions and implications are involved in two further areas of research in vocabulary studies, i.e. the fields of testing and assessment (Chapelle, 2006; Laufer & Goldstein, 2004; Meara, 2005; Read, 2000; Read & Chapel, 2001; Schmitt, Schmitt, & Clapham, 2001).

The present volume is an attempt to further the debate in the various strands of research mentioned. The contributions delve into the structure of the L2 learner´s mental lexicon (Meara); the unit to be used in the teaching of vocabulary (Almela and Sánchez); implicit/explicit vocabulary acquisition issues (Alcón); individual differences in vocabulary development (Miralpeix); the influence of contextual factors in the development of lexical competence (Jiménez Catalán); vocabulary assessment (Read; Moreno Jaén), and lexical retrieval processes and strategies (Manchón, Murphy, and Roca de Larios). In addition to their focus, the contributions also vary in type: the volume features two position papers (Meara, Almela and Sánchez), 4 empirical studies (Alcón, Jiménez Catalán, Miralpeix, and Moreno Jaén) and two literature reviews (Read; Manchón *et al*.). In the empirical investigations we gain insights into various programmes of research conducted by Spanish applied linguists in which the exploration of L2 vocabulary acquisition is central.

AN OVERVIEW OF THE VOLUME

Paul Meara´s contribution continues his previous work on the internal structure of the mental lexicon. More precisely, he describes a set of simulations of word association behaviour, and he examines the operation of various differentially structures model lexicons. This analysis leads him to the conclusion that the crucial factor in word association behaviour seems to be the overall number of associated links in the lexicon, rather than its local structure. Meara makes suggestions as to the possible theoretical and methodological implications that this type of research can have for our understanding of the manner in which words are connected in the L2 speaker´s mental lexicon

The contribution by **Moisés Almela and Aquilino Sánchez** is embedded in the theoretical and applied debate as to the unit of analysis in researching and teaching vocabulary. The main aim of the paper is to draw implications from corpus-linguistics research into lexical semantics for second language vocabulary teaching. The authors provide a comprehensive review of the single word/unit of analysis in lexicography, which they then relate to the "word-centred" versus "collocation-centred" approaches to vocabulary teaching. After reviewing the arguments for and against each of these two positions, the authors advance a two-way conclusion: if the aim of FL/L2 vocabulary teaching is to promote the learner's construction of mental representations which match those of the native speakers, the word can be consolidated as a suitable unit; if the goal is to assist the student in engaging successfully in communicative events using the L2, then the 'extended lexical unit' seems to

be   a more appropriate and efficient tool. In conclusion, both the word-centred and the collocation-centred approaches can be complementary in that they may contribute to the development of distinct aspects of second language lexical competence.

Eva Alcón contributes an empirical study on incidental vocabulary learning in a foreign language setting. The study offers further empirical evidence on the intentional/incidental vocabulary learning issue referred to earlier, representing at the same time an important contribution to focus-on form SLA studies, a strand of research in which, first, scant attention has been paid to vocabulary issues and, second, Spanish EFL settings have not been represented in empirical investigations. It also adds an interactionist perspective to this volume. The exploration of teachers´ incidental focus on form on vocabulary learning was based on the analysis of various data sources provided by the teacher (audio-recorded teacher-led conversation) and a group of 12 adolescent Spanish EFL learners (learners' diaries, post-test translations, and delayed post-test translations). The results revealed that teachers' pre-emptive focus on form episodes (FFE) had an effect on the learners' noticing and subsequent use of vocabulary items. Interestingly, it was also found that the teacher reactive FFEs did not seem to facilitate noticing (as measured by learners' reporting of vocabulary items), but they did facilitate vocabulary learning (as measured by subsequent use of vocabulary items in the post-test and delayed post- tests). Alcón interprets these results as suggesting a positive effect of incidental focus on form for vocabulary acquisition.

Inmaculada Miralpeix presents a study which is part of a wider project into age-related differences in SLA (the BAF Project. See Muñoz, 2006). As in Alcón´s case, Miralpeix's study is a contribution to the field of both SLA and vocabulary studies, given the scant attention paid to vocabulary issues in age studies, and the scarcity of studies on age-related differences in vocabulary research. The researcher set out to investigate possible effects of 3 independent variables (age of starting, cognitive maturity, and amount of exposure) on the productive vocabularies of three groups of Spanish EFL learners (who differed with respect to the independent variables of the research) as measured by their performance on 4 tasks, three oral (an interview, a storytelling task and a roleplay) and one written (a composition). As found in other areas of research within the BAF project, the results obtained show that, given the same amount of exposure to the L2, early contact with the L2 does not bring about substantial benefits as far as productive and receptive vocabulary use is concerned. The author draws implications for school curricula.

Rosa Jiménez Catalán presents a study which again is relevant to various fields: vocabulary acquisition (with its focus on contextual variables), instructed SLA (with its focus on the effects of two instructional approaches, one of which is the widely discussed CLIL – Content and Language Integrated Learning), and L2 writing research (given the lack of empirical studies with young learners). What is more, the study develops a very interesting angle in the field of second language vocabulary acquisition since it attempts to provide an account of the possible impact of two supposedly different instructional contexts on the lexical cohesion devices used in L2 writing by EFL young learners. Two groups of 30 primary EFL learners provided the data (a written test), which were submitted to textual analysis. Results showed little effect of the independent variable in the research (type of instruction) on the research target (ways of conveying lexical reiteration), although differences in favour of CLIL students were found in the areas of lexical variation, language level, and use of antonyms and general nouns, a finding that comes to show once again the relationship between the amount and frequency of input and language development.

John Read provides a wide-ranging and updated survey of some current developments in second language vocabulary assessment. The discussion is organised around three crucial issues: measuring breath of vocabulary; testing depth of vocabulary; and the use of vocabulary in context. Concerning the former, Read discusses the merits of various word lists and test formats. Regarding depth of vocabulary, he discusses the methodological and theoretical issues surrorunding testing in this area.As for the use of vocabulary in context, Read centres the discussion in the academic context and elaborates on the notion of an "interactionalist" vocabulary test, which would assess the ability of the learner to make effective use of their lexical resources in specific contexts of use. As Read notes, this entails taking theoretical and methodological decisions regarding the study of discipline-specific vocabulary, and he discusses the benefits that may derive from turning to research in corpus linguistics.

María Moreno Jaén explores assessment issues, thus linking back to Read´s opening contribution, and also to Almela and Sánchez´s paper with its goal of developing a test of collocational competence by making use of corpus evidence. Jaén's study is exploratory in nature. After a careful selection of the target lexical items in the assessment, the researcher designed an 80-item test to assess productive and receptive competence in collocational aspects, which was then administered to Spanish university students of EFL. Results revealed that the students' collocational competence was poor, and that their score on production was

higher than that on reception. The author goes on to discuss the implications of her findings for assessment and teaching.

Finally, **Rosa Manchón, Julio Roca de Larios and Liz Murphy** contribute a comprehensive literature review paper that focuses on lexical retrieval processes and strategies in second language written production. The authors first explain the cognitive dimension of lexical retrieval processes in the three macro-writing processes (planning, text-generation, and revision), with a special focus on the kind of problem-solving activity that characterises L2 written communication. This is followed by a review of the available empirical evidence on three crucial L2 writing lexical retrieval strategies: use of the native language, backtracking and dictionary use. The results from this review are then discussed from various strands of research in SLA and vocabulary studies: the role of transfer in second language production, the nature of the bilingual lexicon, and the language (vocabulary) learning potential of written output in instructed SLA.

To conclude, we trust that the collection of papers in this volume constitutes a body of important empirical evidence together with theoretical insights into the areas of vocabulary learning, teaching, and assessment. We would like to end with a word of gratitude to those colleagues who kindly agreed to assist us in the review process, and to the authors for having joined us in this project and for helping to make it a reality.

AQUILINO SÁNCHEZ
ROSA M. MANCHÓN

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