ON SOME PRACTICAL ISSUES IN L2 VOCABULARY ACQUISITION
KSENIA ZANON

1.0 Intro
Main objective: to present a sample array of activities, exercises and strategies that facilitate vocabulary learning (part of my textbook plan)

The bulk of my proposals is informed by the findings in Applied Ling/SLA. I will hence first present the highlights of the issues that people are interested in when they explore the intricacies involved in vocabulary acquisition, and then show how to apply these insights in a foreign language classroom.

2.0 Research trends in L2 vocabulary acquisition

(1) Incremental vocab use
(2) Measuring vocab size

INCREMENTAL VOCABULARY USE

Lexical acquisition stages [the Vocabulary Knowledge Scale - VKS] (Paribakht and Wesche 1996) (see also Joe 1995)

Score Interpretation
1 The word is not familiar at all.
2 The word is familiar, but the meaning is unknown. An affix is familiar, but the base and general meaning is unknown.
3 The word is familiar. An association or general meaning is known.
4 The word’s specific meaning is known. The word is used accurately and appropriately in the sentence, but only the general meaning is supplied.
5 The word is used with semantic appropriateness in a sentence.
6 The word is used with semantic appropriateness in a sentence (also uses acceptable collocations).

Nation (1990)
1. The spoken form of the word.
2. The written form of the word.
3. The grammatical behavior of the word.
4. The collocation behavior of the word.
5. How frequent the word is.
6. The stylistic register constraints of the word.
7. The conceptual meaning of the word.
8. The association the word has with other related words.

In effect, several components of vocab knowledge can be distinguished (see esp. Nation, P. 2001):

FORM (orthography, pronunciation, morphology) \(\rightarrow\) MEANING (form-meaning link, functions, associations) \(\rightarrow\) USE (grammatical accuracy, collocations, frequency)
Take off

(1) **Form**: ['teikof], spelling (e.g., off is rendered with two fs), related to 'take'

(2) **Morphology**: irregular past 'took', POS: noun or verb

(3) **Meanings**:

**VERB**
- Remove (clothes)
  
  *John took off his jeans.*

- Launch upward, become airborne
  
  *The plane takes off at 3. The bird took off.*

- Succeed
  
  *Her career took off immediately.*

- Depart in a haste
  
  *John took off in a car.*

- Deduct
  
  *She took off five points for spelling.*

**NOUN**
- Being airborne
  
  *Night take-offs are prohibited in this airport.*

- Satirical piece
  
  *This was the best take-off of Donald Trump I've ever seen.*

(4) **Register**:

Neutral for the most part, but cf. Canadian usage “Take off, hoser!”

(5) **Grammatical features**:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>take it off</th>
<th>vs.</th>
<th>*take off it</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>take off immediately</td>
<td>vs.</td>
<td>*his career took immediately off</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>take 5 points off</td>
<td>and</td>
<td>take off 5 points</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(6) **Collocations**:

Here’s the scope of the task for Russian:

СНИМАТЬ / СНЯТЬ
snimat’ / snjat’
‘to remove, to shoot/feature in a video, to rent’

(1) Form: peculiar conjugation (few verbs in Russian follow this conjugation pattern)

(2) Phonology: stress shift in conjugation (end stress for 1sg, stem stress for all the other forms)

Ja snim-ú Ty sním-eš
I take.offPRF.1sg you take.offPRF.2sg

(3) Meanings:

~ одежду = (remove) clothes_ACC
~ C должности = (remove) from position_GEN
~ кого-то В кино/НА ВИДЕО = to feature in a film / make a video of someone
~ квартиру = rent an apartment (but not a car)

Neutral register, except for this:
~ телку (hire an escort, vulg.)

So, now the question is: what does it even mean to “know” a lexical item? Is it the ability to recognize its form, recall what it means in a particular environment, generate one of the meanings appropriately, produce a relevant lexical item appropriately in all contexts with grammatical accuracy?

➤ Ideally the latter, of course.

Some incidental learning experiments results

Waring and Takaki (2003) [Japanese NS learning English]

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Immediate results</th>
<th>After three months</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Recognition (MC test)</td>
<td>42%</td>
<td>24%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recall (translation test)</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In fact, these results are replicated in a number of studies (Brown, Waring, Donkaewbua 2008; Horst, Cobb and Meara 1998; Rott 1999): immediate testing results in better recognition than recall; percentages drop significantly for both after a period of time. Recall entails some generation of a particular LI.

Webb (2005, 2007a, b): receptive scores are higher than productive scores (measured for various components of lexicon knowledge); the percentages improve with repeated exposure.

The results are not at all surprising: it is intuitively obvious that receptive (passive) knowledge is easier to attain than productive (active) knowledge. The practical question is this:

- **HOW TO GET OUR STUDENTS FROM BEING ABLE TO VAGUELY RECOGNIZE THE LI TO USING IT ACTIVELY IN A VARIETY OF APPROPRIATE CONTEXTS?**
MEASURING VOCABULARY SIZE AND QUALITY

If vocabulary learning is incremental and proceeds in stages (as most people believe, see Laufer and Goldstein 2004, and references therein), how does one measure it?

Not a trivial issue (but somewhat orthogonal to the main point of my talk) (for an overview of related issues and problems see esp. Milton 2009, Pignot-Shahov 2012).

- Depending on one’s definition for what it means to know the LI, the tests will vary
- People speak of measuring the breadth (roughly, correlates with perceptive knowledge = how many words does a learner know?) and the depth (productive knowledge = quality of knowledge, i.e. collocations, spelling, associations) of vocabulary.

3.0 Insights in L2 vocab acquisition

[1] Extensive reading by itself does not accomplish much

Krashen (1989) for the defense of the position that extensive reading for content translates into incidental vocabulary acquisition: curiously, he cites a lot of studies done on the effect of reading in L1 vocab. It is a big question of whether we should, in fact, conflate the two. Consider this:

Pitts, White and Krashen (1989) Clockwork experiment: 7% average gain vs.

The original Saragi et al. (1978) study with native speakers: 76% average gain.

Krashen and Cho (1994): subjects who did not use the dictionary learned 7 words out of 7000 (those who did use the dictionary performed better).

The point: native speakers’ rate of incidental acquisition (however that is defined) from reading is substantially higher than that of learners; the gain for learners in not negligible, but it is not tremendous either.¹

My hunch: ACQUISITION THROUGH READING WORKS BETTER FOR LEARNERS AT THE HIGHER LEVELS

[2] Reading+… activities are claimed to be much more effective in vocab development

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Less effective</th>
<th>More effective</th>
<th>Studies</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Reading (inferring meaning)</td>
<td>Reading and looking up the words in the dictionary</td>
<td>Knight 1994, Luppescu and Day 1993</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meaning explained by a synonym</td>
<td>Meaning selected from several options</td>
<td>Hulstijn 1992</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meaning provided in a gloss</td>
<td>Meaning looked up in a dictionary</td>
<td>Hultsijn et al. 1996, Laufer 2000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reading only (reading followed by comprehension questions)</td>
<td>Reading plus (reading followed by a number of activities targeting a particular set of words)</td>
<td>Paribakht and Wesche 1997</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meaning not negotiated</td>
<td>Meaning negotiated</td>
<td>Newton 1995</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

¹ See, however, Pellicer-Sanchez who reports on her eye-tracking/offline tests that suggest a relatively high rate of vocabulary acquisition through incidental procedure. I should point out here that her subjects were advanced English speakers – postdocs and graduate students who lived in the UK for a minimum of 12 months.
Some additional results (Laufer 2001):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Immediate result</th>
<th>Long term result</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Reading (read and used a dictionary)</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sentence writing (TL words with explanations, which they had to put in a sentence)</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Results are pretty much the same; both outperform the reading only group</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reading + sentence writing (both tasks)</td>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1 codes for the worst performance; 3 codes for the best performance

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Immediate result</th>
<th>Long term result</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Reading (read and looked up 10 unknown words)</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sentence writing (TL words with explanations were distributed to the subjects)</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fill-in-the blanks (TL words with explanations were distributed to the subjects)</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1 codes for the worst performance; 3 codes for the best performance

Explanation of these results is found in Laufer and Hulstijn (2001), Laufer (2010): Need, Search, Evaluation model.

**Need**: drive to comply with the task (can be self-imposed or externally imposed)

**Search**: attempt to find the meaning of L2 word or find the relevant L2 item to express a concept

**Evaluate**: comparison of a given word with other words, selection of the one that best fits the context

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Task</th>
<th>Status of target words</th>
<th>Need</th>
<th>Search</th>
<th>Evaluation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Reading and comprehension questions</td>
<td>Glossed in text, but not relevant to the task</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reading and comprehension question</td>
<td>Not glossed, but relevant to the task</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+/- (depending on word in context)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Adapted from Laufer and Hulstijn (2001)

**The point**: DOING SOMETHING WITH THE WORD (PREFERABLY GETTING STUDENTS TO USE IT IN NEW CONTEXT) IS MORE PRODUCTIVE THAN SIMPLY ENCOUNTERING IT.

But there a few more issues here:

- What do we actually accomplish by getting our students to read?
- How to activate higher involvement in learners (i.e., get them to be intrinsically motivated, to actively search and evaluate LIs)?


An interesting study is reported in Schmitt and Meara (1997): they conduct a longitudinal study of vocabulary acquisition in L1 Japanese speakers learning English. They report that the learners learned an average of 330 words in a year, and exhibited a rather poor command of derivational morphology. Here is what I thought is interesting:

Consider a word like “DISCLOSE” and its associations → information, tell, secrecy
Here are some of the associations elicited from their subjects:

**Disclose → door, open, distance, station** (mistaken associations)

**Commit → connection, community, cooperate** (clang association)

**Commit → crime, purchase**      **Complete → whole, moon** (not nativelike association)

**Their conclusion (following Meara 1983):** associations are related to given words on a basis of the form (clang association from above). Later in the acquisition process associations tend to become more meaning-based.

I suspect that the story is more complicated than that (and, in fact, Paribakht and Wesche 1999 consider several sources of inferencing a word: morphology, world knowledge, homonymy, cognates etc.) So, in the case of “disclose”, for example, the learners appear to derive the meaning compositionally (dis-[- = not, as, e.g., in distrust] + close = open; hence the door too).

[4] Frequency of exposure

Not shockingly higher frequency of exposure correlates with higher gains (Waring and Takaki 2003, Zahar et al. 2001, Rott 1999, Horst et al. 1998, Pigada and Schmitt 2006 a.o.; the aforementioned Saragi et al. (1978) estimate the minimum number of encounters around 10). On average, people endorse 8-12 minimal instances of exposure.

Some issues:

- Anecdata (from personal experience and classroom observations): sometimes a particular word (often very low frequency) can be learned (=retained) upon single exposure. I can think of the following for me – hirsute and lucubrate in English, istakoz ‘lobster’ in Turkish, enotnost ‘unity’ in Slovene, harač ‘personal tax imposed on the subjects of the Ottoman Empire’ in Bosnian/Serbian/Croatian. In the meantime, some of the high frequency vocab often eludes the learner: I struggled with phrasal verbs in English (the take off-type).

  My students: remembered сарафанное радио lit. ‘a saraphan radio’, ‘grapevine (used in: learn through the grapevine)’ from a single exposure in the text they have read at home, западать на кого ‘to have a crush on somebody’ from a word list I went over, but had an impossible time with приходить к выводу, сойти с ума ‘to come to a conclusion, to go insane’.

The common theme here is the following: phrasal verbs in English, much like Russian verbs of movement, boast numerous meanings (as per discussion above). Another common feature is that they all look relatively alike. These two factors coupled with a very high frequency of these lexical items ensure that they appear in vastly diverse contexts. So, the question then is: what counts as an exposure? One particular context? Do learners need 10 instances of “take off 5 points” to map it to the concept “deduct”? Is there something else going on that hinders acquisition in the case of homonymy?

In fact, there is some evidence that suggests that I am not that far off: semantic elaboration (e.g., confronting the learner with synonymy whether in her L1 or L2, making pleasantness ratings about each word etc.) produces strong negative effects on vocabulary learning (Barcroft 2002, 2006). Barcroft (2006): the learners we instructed to produce synonyms for the new L2 vocab in their L1. The idea tested: semantically oriented tasks increase memory performance. In turns out though that “target word recall was higher… when synonym generation was not required.” (ibid. 79)

- What to do with morphologically robust languages? Again, what counts as exposure? In Russian most verbs are paired: perfective and imperfective, and they conjugate.

[5] Explicit instruction (vs. incidental learning)

A number of researchers converge on the notion that explicit instruction is actually beneficial for students (Barcroft 2009, Hulstijn 1992, Laufer 2010). This harks back to [1] above.
[6] Negotiated meaning

Ellis and He (1999), Jose de la Fuente (2002), Mackey (1999), van den Branden (1997): negotiations are beneficial for L2 acquisition

➔ Attract learner’s attention to input;
➔ Give them an opportunity to listen, produce, and negotiate the forms with native speakers

[7] Beginning vs. intermediate/advanced levels

I found little discussion about the difference in **vocabulary acquisition** depending on the levels of proficiency. And yet, as a practicing language instructor, I find it vastly easier to teach new vocab to advanced speakers (and this is despite the fact that higher levels entail more abstract, lower frequency vocab). Several factors may be at play here (a speculation at this point):

- The computational burden of advanced speakers is lower (they do not struggle as much with basic morphology and grammar as the lower level students)
- They are inherently more motivated to learn (since they have survived this long in their language acquisition journey)

One point to note: “at the outset of learning and at the very lowest levels […] it seems the words are learned phonologically before they are learned orthographically. […] Beyond the lowest levels, however, and as vocabulary size increases, orthographic vocabulary increases at a faster rate than phonological knowledge.” (The subjects here were Greek and Arabic learners of English – so, it is not implausible that the initial bias toward aural input is conditioned by the new writing system) (Milton 2009).

4.0 Practical application

First some of the guiding principles:

(a) Explicit presentation of lexical material (in fact, I found it very helpful to point out common roots, conjugation types, collocations)
(b) Different sources of input: written/audio/visual support
(c) Varied activities with the lexical material, involving generation of new vocab
(d) Material must be “relatable” to students: induce the strong motivation to engage the lexical item
(e) Repeated exposure

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(f) Avoid presenting all the available LI that belong to the same semantic field and “look alike” all at once. In other words, avoid what every advanced Russian textbook does:

Verbs of study:

учиться (učit’sja + where = be a student somewhere),
учиться/научиться (učit’sja | naučit’sja + DAT. or to do something = to acquire a practical skill),
учить/научить (učit’ | naučit’ +ACC + DAT. or to do something = to teach somebody a practical skill),
учить/выучить (učit’ | vyučit’ +ACC = to memorize a poem, learn a language)
изучать/изучить (izučat’ | izučit’ + ACC = to study something in depth)

(g) LIs should be distinct in some way, stand out, be memorable
Глава 5. Преступления и наказания

Лексика

Совершать (1)/Соверши́ть(2) to commit a crime

Преступление

Какое преступление совершил Родион Раскольников?
Вчера было совершено преступление на проспекте Ленина.
Почему люди совершают преступления?

Грабить (2) /ограби́ть (2) to rob whom or what
+ КОГО/ЧТО
граби́тель
ограбле́ние

Бонни и Клайд были самыми известными американскими грабителями банков. Они ограбили много банков.
Внимание! Всем лежать! Это ограбление!
Власть грабит народ.
Мне приснилось, что я граблю банк.
Вчера было совершено дерзкое ограбление в одном из банков Санкт-Петербурга.

Etc.
Vocab development exercises:

1. Recognition of forms: envisioned as online exercises with auditory accompaniment (ideal for an App)

   [1-matching]

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Совершено</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>[(bank) is robbed]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[(criminal) is confined]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[(crime) is committed]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[(somebody's whereabouts) are confirmed]</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

   [2-fill in the blanks]

   Бандиты ___________________________ банк и ___________________________ 100 миллионов рублей.
   
   A. ограбили  A. посвятили
   B. совершили  B. похитили
   В. убили  В. поделили
   Г. задушили  Г. поставили

2. Recognition and limited production

   [3-write in]

   THE L1S ARE PROVIDED IN PARENTHESES. THE LEARNER TYPES IN THE APPROPRIATE FORM:

   Вчера бандиты (грабить/ограбить) ___________________________ банк и (похищать/похитить) ___________________________ 100 миллионов рублей.
   Вчера было (совершать/совершить) ___________________________ дерзкое преступление.

   [4-write in]

   LEARNER SEES AND HEARS THE SENTENCES:

   В центральном банке было совершено ограбление. ➞ совершать/совершить
   Преступники, ограбившие банк, были в масках. ➞ грабить/ограбить
3. Production activities

[1-reading and recall: simple (dictionary) forms, no context, visual cues]

Ассоциации:

Robber, thief, loot, mask, gun, weapons, armed, to steal money, audacious crime, bank

To threaten with a gun, to be afraid etc.

Что происходит на картинке?____________________________

Перечислите все глаголы, которые связаны с происходящим:

____________________________________________________

____________________________________________________

[2-listening, reading and recall]

- Transcribe what you hear
- Answer the questions (requiring production of the learned vocab in sentences)
- Compare what you have to the text given to you. Which parts were not understood? What do they mean?
- Watch the video again (following the text) and answer the same questions
- Be prepared to report to your classmates on what happened
The activity is devised due to Snezhana Zheltukhova.

- The song features “Rutalian” or “ItaRussian”: the lexical items are Russian, but the morphology is faux Italian.
- The task: students are presented with the text of the song. Their assignment is to “translate” it into Russian, i.e. to produce grammatical forms.

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2 The activity is devised due to Snezhana Zheltukhova.
Вчера с космической станции «Звезда Смерти» сбежала опасная преступница по имени Лея, выдающая себя за принцессу. Свидетели показали, что Лея была спасена двумя подозрительными мужчинами, скрывшись в космическом корабле, называемом «Миллениум Фалкон».

Один мужчина, выглядевший как настоящий мачо, был одет в белую рубашку и чёрный жилет. По непроверенной информации, этого человека зовут Хан Соло. Его любимого друга, напоминающего волосатого монстра, зовут Чубакка.

Компаньон Хана Соло молодой блондин со светлыми глазами, одевающийся по последней моде планеты Татуин. Его имя Люк Скайвокер.

По последней информации агентов скрывшиеся преступники в настоящее время находятся на планете Алдераан в компании с двумя роботами и человеком, называющим себя Бен Кеноби. Один из роботов похож на консервную банку, а другой, раздражающий всех своими разговорами, похож на Оловяного человека (*Tin Man).

Всем, знающим что-нибудь о местонахождении преступников, обещано вознаграждение.

**Sample tasks:**

- Imagine you’re a detective: recreate the crime board; supply all the details

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A dangerous criminal who goes by the name Leia and purports to be a princess has escaped from the "Death Star" space station. The witnesses testified that Leia was saved by two suspicious men, having fled in a starship _The Millennium Falcon_.

One man, who looked like a real macho, was wearing a white shirt and a black vest. According to unconfirmed information, this man’s name is Han Solo. His friend’s name is Chewbacca. The latter resembles a hirsute ( sư) monster.

Han Solo’s companion is a young blond man with light eyes, who wears the latest fashions of the planet Tatooine. His name is Luke Skywalker.

According to the latest information the escaped criminals are currently on the planet Alderaan in the company of two robots and a man who goes by the name of Ben Kenobi. One of the robots resembles a tin can, the other, who irritates everybody with his conversations, resembles the Tin Man.

A reward is promised to those who know anything about the whereabouts of the criminals.
Imagine you’re a detective: recreate the crime board; supply all the details; and record some additional facts that have come to light in the course of your investigation

RETELL the story to your colleague, make sure everybody understands what’s going on, and figure out together what to do next

[written and oral production of original material]

Sample tasks:

Write a story of a crime similar to the one you have read. Provide all the details. Use all the vocab from this lesson. Be prepared to present your story in class (you may use presentation software).

Relate your story to your partner. You may use whatever visual aids you deem necessary. The partner may ask for clarifications and details. Be ready to supply those. The partner needs to be able to retell your story to make sure s/he got the timeline/details right. Listen carefully for inconsistencies/misunderstandings.

5.0 Some concluding remarks

- The activities are constructed in such a way as to facilitate the transition from very narrowly defined, heavily scaffolded, one function at a time tasks to more spontaneous production and the activities that entail a heavier computational burden (recall and grammar). So, in effect, I am proposing to follow the presumed stages in vocab acquisition: recognition → production.

- Several sources of input (that reinforce and recycle the same batch of vocab).

- Reading and listening activities are very short: the main emphasis is on doing something with what they read/hear.

- The activities are designed to trigger students’ motivation (they are meant to be fun).

- The LIs are presented so that they are in some sense distinct – graphics, visual cues, and mnemonics (in addition to being explicitly discussed).

- The students are encouraged to think explicitly about the situations in which the need to use the discussed LIs may arise (Associations task).

Grammar exercises should feature new vocab (for increased exposure);
Ideally, the students will have a relatively firm grasp of the vocab by the end of the chapter, but I found it is very useful to come back to the learned vocab
References:


Paribakht and Wesche 1997


