

HELPING SECONDARY READERS: THE TEACHER AS A *LIVING DICTIONARY*

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the effect of the teaching strategy called 'living dictionary' on reading comprehension and incidental vocabulary learning with Spanish Secondary students of English as a foreign language. The 40 participants belong to two groups of 41 of ESO (Enseñanza Secundaria Obligatoria) of Heliche High School (Olivares, Seville). A first test (pre-test) compares both groups in reading comprehension and incidental vocabulary learning. Results show that Group A are better readers. Afterwards, both groups receive help with the technique of 'living dictionary': students can ask the teacher any words they want while they are reading a text. They cannot ask about sentences or general meaning; just isolated words. The teacher instantly answers giving a synonym, definition or translation. When Group B, the poorer readers, are helped with vocabulary, they do not improve at all their level of comprehension. On the contrary, they get even worse results. But when Group A, the better readers, get the 'living dictionary' help, they improve significantly their reading comprehension with respect to Group B. According to this study, vocabulary is not the main problem with poor readers, and a 'bottom-up' approach does not solve their reading problems. The good readers are the ones who benefit when they receive help with vocabulary. This kind of help does not have any impact on incidental vocabulary learning with any kind of learners, at least from a productive point of view.

KEY WORDS

Top-down approach, bottom-up approach, reading comprehension, incidental vocabulary learning, teaching strategy.

RESUMEN

Este estudio investiga el efecto de la estrategia docente denominada 'diccionario viviente' en la comprensión lectora y la adquisición incidental de voca-

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bulario con estudiantes españoles de Inglés como lengua extranjera en Enseñanza Secundaria. Los 40 participantes pertenecen a dos grupos de 41 de ESO (Enseñanza Secundaria Obligatoria) del Instituto Heliche (Olivares, Sevilla). Una primera prueba compara los resultados de ambos grupos en comprensión lectora y aprendizaje incidental de vocabulario. Los resultados muestran que el Grupo A está compuesto por mejores lectores. A continuación, ambos grupos reciben ayuda con la técnica del 'diccionario viviente': los estudiantes pueden preguntar las palabras que quieran mientras leen un texto. No pueden preguntar sobre oraciones o el significado general; tan sólo palabras aisladas. El profesor responde al momento ofreciendo un sinónimo, definición o traducción. Cuando el grupo B, los lectores menos eficaces, reciben la ayuda con el vocabulario, no mejoran su nivel de comprensión. Al contrario, obtienen peores resultados. Pero cuando el grupo A, los lectores más eficaces, obtienen la ayuda del 'diccionario viviente', mejoran significativamente su comprensión lectora con respecto al grupo B. Según este estudio, el vocabulario no es el principal problema de los lectores poco eficaces, y una aproximación a la lectura 'de abajo a arriba' no resuelve sus problemas de lectura. Los buenos lectores son los que salen beneficiados cuando reciben ayuda con el vocabulario. Este tipo de ayuda no tiene ninguna repercusión en el aprendizaje incidental de vocabulario con ningún tipo de aprendices, al menos desde un punto de vista productivo.

PALABRAS CLAVE

Lectura de arriba a abajo, lectura de abajo a arriba, comprensión lectora, aprendizaje incidental de vocabulario, estrategia docente.

RÉSUMÉ

Ce travail étudie l'effet de la stratégie d'enseignement dite 'le dictionnaire vivant' sur la compréhension de lecture et l'apprentissage incident de vocabulaire avec les élèves espagnols de l'anglais comme langue étrangère du cycle de l'Enseignement Secondaire. Les 40 participants appartiennent à deux groupes de 41 élèves d'ESO (Enseñanza Secundaria Obligatoria) du lycée Heliche (Olivares, Sevilla). Un premier test (prétest) compare des groupes sur la compréhension de lecture et l'apprentissage incident de vocabulaire. Les résultats prouvent que les élèves du groupe A sont de meilleurs lecteurs. Après, les deux groupes reçoivent de l'aide avec la technique du 'dictionnaire vivant': les élèves peuvent demander au professeur tous les mots qu'ils veulent pendant la lecture d'un texte. Ils ne peuvent pas s'enquérir des phrases ou de la signification générale; seulement des mots isolées. Le professeur répond immédiatement en donnant un synonyme, une définition ou une traduction. Quand le groupe B, les lecteurs les moins efficaces, sont aidés avec du vocabulaire, ils n'améliorent pas du tout leur niveau de compréhension. Au contraire, ils obtiennent encore de plus mauvais résultats. Mais quand le groupe A, les meilleurs lecteurs, obtiennent de l'aide du 'dictionnaire vivant', ils améliorent de manière significative leur compréhension de lecture par rapport au groupe

B. Selon cette étude, le vocabulaire n'est pas le problème principal avec des lecteurs moins efficaces, et une approche ascendante ne résout pas leurs problèmes de lecture. Les bons lecteurs sont ceux qui tirent profit de l'aide qu'ils reçoivent avec le vocabulaire. Ce genre d'aide n'a aucun impact sur l'apprentissage incident de vocabulaire avec aucun genre d'élèves, au moins d'un point de vue productif.

MOTS-CLÉ

Approche descendante, approche ascendante, compréhension de lecture, apprentissage incident de vocabulaire, stratégie d'enseignement.

1. INTRODUCTION

Kenneth Goodman's (1967) famous definition of reading as "a psycholinguistic guessing game" is a perspective which emphasises the importance of the so called "top-down" approach: when we read we face the task with our baggage of previous knowledge, schemata, predictions and prejudices. We also take advantage of all the possible clues at our disposition to catch the meaning: title suggestions, pictures. We frequently skip words or even whole sentences or paragraphs. When we do not skip the words, we guess their meanings making the most of context, common sense and personal experience on the topic. Bartlett (1932) showed that we applied our schemata when we read; the attempts to make the reading fit these schemata sometimes may lead even to distortion. We read to corroborate what we already know or to confirm our predictions. Good readers do not read stopping to look at every word; they read in chunks without adding the meaning of each word to the meaning of the following word. But there are second language readers who do not transfer these reading strategies to second language reading; they focus on graphophonic features of the text, stopping and starting once and again, losing concentration and drifting away. This is why methodologists like Wallace (1992) emphasise the need of a 'strategy based approach' to reading in a foreign language, where the teacher shows the students how to skip, skim, scan, guess, predict and so on.

This kind of reading strategies are natural in both first and second languages when the reader has a certain level of proficiency. But the importance of the "bottom-up" approach has been underlined by some researchers, especially when the second language reader is a low proficient learner, a beginner or simply a reader whose level is much low-

er than the text he tries to understand. Alderson (1984) tentatively concluded in his classical article that for low levels of foreign language competence, reading is more a language problem than a reading problem. Eskey (1988) claims that these readers have fewer possibilities to rely on clues or take advantage of the context, and will need to decipher the meaning of every single word before getting the general picture. Coady (1997) calls this situation “the beginner’s paradox”: the learner is supposed to use the context to guess the meaning of unknown words, but he has not enough words to be able to use the context. There is some research that shows that successful guessing in context takes place when 98% of the lexical items in the text are already known (Nation and Coady, 1988). Haynes (1993, p. 59) claims that “the importance of word-unit processing needs to be recognised in ESL teaching”. Laufer (1997, p. 31) states:

By far the greatest obstacle to good reading is insufficient number of words in the learner’s lexicon. Lexis was found to be the best predictor of success in reading, better than syntax or general reading ability. Whatever the effect of reading strategies is, it is short-circuited if the vocabulary is below the threshold, i.e., below the minimum of 3,000 word families, or 5,000 lexical items.

At Secondary School, students have a vocabulary of English as a foreign language under this level. So, according to Laufer, they need more help with vocabulary than with reading strategies to read successfully. Therefore, if the teacher helps the students with their vocabulary problems when reading, their general reading comprehension will be improved. On the contrary, if the students are helped with all their vocabulary doubts but this help does not make any difference in the understanding of the text, then the problem is a reading problem, a lack of ability to employ adequate reading strategies.

There is some research that highlights the importance of consulting directly and explicitly as a vocabulary learning strategy, especially if this consultation is made to verify an inference (Fraser, 1999). There are also studies that emphasise the strategy of consulting a dictionary to enhance reading comprehension and vocabulary learning (Knight, 1994; Luppescu & Day, 1993).

We are going to work with Secondary students who have to complete a reading task with the help of their teacher, who is going to become a kind of ‘living dictionary’.

2. CLASSROOM RESEARCH: AIMS

This study tries to answer the next questions: Is it vocabulary the main problem of poor L2 readers or do they have problems just with reading strategies? Is it a good idea to solve vocabulary problems while students are reading, giving them instant access to the meaning of new and unknown words? Will this help their comprehension? Will this be a help for good readers or for poor readers? Is implicit vocabulary acquisition improved if the meaning of new words is given?

To answer these questions, we will test the teaching strategy called 'living dictionary': the students can ask the teacher any words they want while they are reading a text. They cannot ask about sentences or general meaning; just isolated words. The teacher instantly answers giving a synonym, definition, drawing, gesture or L1 translation.

In the first place, we want to know if this is a good technique for improving reading comprehension. If vocabulary is the main problem for comprehension, and we solve all the vocabulary problems, then comprehension will be improved.

Secondly, we want to test if this is a good technique for learning vocabulary. Getting fast access to the meaning of the new word can be a help to remember the word or, on the contrary, as students do not have to make any effort to guess the meaning, they just grasp it when it is given and forget the form of the word.

3. SUBJECTS

The participants are two groups of 41 of ESO (*Enseñanza Secundaria Obligatoria*) of Heliche High School (Olivares, Seville). Group A has 22 students. Group B has 18 students. (Total: 40 students).

The initial tests (on vocabulary, grammar, reading, listening and writing) show that group A has a better level than group B, although this difference does not reach a significant level.

4. PROCEDURES

The study consists in three reading tasks of similar characteristics, varying the group who receives the immediate help with vocabulary.

1) First reading task: both groups read a text and answer comprehension questions (Comprehension test 1) (See Appendix 1 for all the reading tasks and comprehension tests). Both groups do it by themselves, without any teacher's help.

A week later, students are given the same text with 10 gaps they have to fill in with ten words that have been removed and only the first letter has been left as a clue. This is Vocabulary Test 1 (See Appendix 2 for all the deleted words in the three Vocabulary tests).

The objective of these tests is to compare the level of reading comprehension and vocabulary learning of both groups without any treatment.

2) Second reading task: both groups read a text and answer comprehension questions (Comprehension test 2). In this case, Group A does not have any teacher's help. Group B reads with the teacher's help, who becomes a 'living dictionary'. While students are reading, they can ask the teacher all the doubts they have about the meaning of words. The teacher answers at the moment, giving a synonym, explanation, definition, drawing, gesture or translation. In this occasion, the teacher was asked 70 times to give the meaning of new words.

A week later, students were given the same text with 10 gaps (ten difficult words were removed and only the first letter was left as a clue) (Vocabulary test 2).

3) Third reading task: both groups read a text and answer comprehension questions (Comprehension test 3). In this case, Group B does not have any teacher's help, but Group A reads with the teacher's help, who becomes a 'living dictionary'. He was asked 63 times to give the meaning of new words. A week later, students had to fill in the 10 gaps of Vocabulary test 3.

5. RESULTS

Each Comprehension test was given a maximum of 100 points. Grammar mistakes or spelling mistakes were penalised only if they affected comprehension.

Table 1 shows the results of the Comprehension tests. Means were compared using t-tests (two-tailed comparisons, significance level $\alpha = .05$) to determine whether the treatment (immediate teacher's help with vocabulary while reading a text) caused a group to score higher in reading comprehension.

Table 1. Mean (M), Standard Deviation (S.D.), Degrees of Freedom (D.F.), T values and significance level (p) obtained with groups A and B in the three Comprehension tests.

	<i>Group A</i>		<i>Group B</i>		<i>D.F.</i>	<i>T value</i>	<i>p</i>
	<i>Mean</i>	<i>S.D.</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>S.D.</i>			
Comprehension 1 (Pre-test)	66.565	16.197	58.166	30.992	39	1.04	0.307
Comprehension 2 (group B receives help)	84.428	14.302	61.850	27.689	28.16	3.26	0.003*
Comprehension 3 (group A receives help)	79.000	22.723	44.823	37.295	25.22	3.31	0.003*

[* significant difference (p 0.05)]

Each Vocabulary test was also given a maximum of 100 points. Each correctly written word was given 10 points. Mean scores for the two groups were compared to decide if the treatment made any difference with regard to incidental vocabulary acquisition.

Table 2. Mean (M), Standard Deviation (S.D.), Degrees of Freedom (D.F.), T values and significance level (p) obtained with groups A and B in the three Vocabulary tests.

	<i>A</i>		<i>B</i>		<i>D.F.</i>	<i>T value</i>	<i>p</i>
	<i>Mean</i>	<i>S.D.</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>S.D.</i>			
Vocabulary 1 (Pre-test)	8.500	12.680	6.470	13.201	35	0.48	0.638
Vocabulary 2 (group B receives help)	13.157	14.163	8.333	14.653	35	1.02	0.315
Vocabulary 3 (group A receives help)	19.000	16.827	20.588	27.265	35	-0.22	0.830

6. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Although no significant difference was found in the Comprehension test 1 (pre-test), results show that Group A learners are better readers.

When Group B, the poorer readers, are helped with the technique of 'living dictionary', they do not improve at all their level of comprehension. On the contrary, they get even worse results (Comprehension

test 2). In this case, the mean for Group A is significantly higher than that for Group B.

On the other hand, when Group A, the better readers, get the 'living dictionary' help, they improve significantly their reading comprehension with respect to Group B: the mean for Group A in Comprehension test 3 is significantly higher than that for Group B.

So, according with this research, vocabulary is not the main problem with poorer readers. Even when they are given the meaning of all the words they need, they do not improve their comprehension. They need another kind of help (help with general understanding, reading anxiety, top-down approaches, and so on). These learners need to understand the meaning of every single word, and this necessity creates a level of anxiety that blocks comprehension. It seems that when this tendency is encouraged (the technique of 'living dictionary' supports a 'bottom-up' approach), they have even more problems with reading comprehension.

Surprisingly, the good readers are the ones who benefit from this technique. They have better general understanding and they can make the most of the help they receive with vocabulary; they improve their comprehension thanks to the help with the unknown words. These learners employ the necessary strategies to get the general meaning; they make predictions and guesses first and then they consult to confirm their expectations. The technique of 'living dictionary' can be of great help if the reader knows how to use appropriate reading strategies and use this help to be more precise in their comprehension.

With respect to implicit vocabulary learning, both groups have a similar level before the treatment, being Group A slightly better in Vocabulary test 1 (pre-test).

When Group B receives help with vocabulary in Reading Task 2, they do not improve their level of vocabulary learning: they even get slightly worse results (Vocabulary test 2) if we compare them to Group A's score.

Exactly the same occurs when Group A is helped with the technique of 'living dictionary'.

In Vocabulary test 3, Group A gets the worst results in implicit vocabulary acquisition in comparison to Group B. It is the first time they have worse results than Group B, although the difference is not significant.

We can conclude that this technique does not have any impact on incidental vocabulary learning, at least from a productive point of view.

Students do not learn more new words when they are given the meanings during the reading process. It seems that they acquire even fewer words: perhaps they do not make any effort in guessing and they just go on reading, forgetting instantly about the new word.

APPENDIX 1: READING TASKS

Reading Task 1

Read the letter below. Who is Melissa writing to?
Which of the three holidays *did* she go on? Why is she writing?

23 Lent Hill
Marlow

24th May
Marie Tours
166 Tottenham Road
London W1 3PP

Dear Sir or Madam, I am writing to complain about your 'Romantic Paris' holiday that I went on between the 10th and 15th of May.

Your advertisement promised a 'holiday of your dreams', travelling on a 'luxury coach'. Our 'luxury coach' was at least twenty-five years old and took twenty hours to get from London to Paris. It was definitely not luxury; it was not even comfortable.

Although you stated that the hotel had four stars, in fact it had only one star and we all had to share the only bathroom. The hotel was noisy because it was next to a disco, so we could not sleep. What is more, the room was like a zoo at night: there were cockroaches, mosquitoes and even rats. You also promised an 'English-speaking guide'. Our guide could not speak any English at all; he could only speak French.

I am, therefore, asking for a complete refund and a written apology. If I do not hear from you in fifteen days, I will write to the Consumers' Association.

Yours faithfully,

Melissa Chase

Read the letter again and answer these questions.

- How did they travel from London to Paris?
- How long did the journey take?
- How many bathrooms did the hotel have?
- Why didn't they sleep well?

How many languages could the guide speak?
Is Melissa going to write to the Consumers' Association?

(From Spencer, D. and Vaughan, D. 1998. *Teamwork 4*. Heinemann ELT, p. 92)

Reading Task 2

Read the text and match the paragraph titles to the correct paragraphs.

- | | |
|-------------------------------------|-------------------------------|
| a How to be a police officer. | b Early English police force. |
| c What makes a good police officer? | d Scotland Yard today. |

The History of Scotland Yard

1 The origins of the London police go back to before the tenth century. Although at this time there was no official police force, people were divided into groups of ten and one of the ten people was appointed to represent the others. For every hundred people there were ten representatives, and one of these was appointed to maintain law and order. The idea was that the people were the police. Later, in the eighteenth century, groups of citizens known as 'The Watch' received money to patrol the streets at night. However, they were not very effective and in 1829 Sir Robert Peel formed the first official police, the Metropolitan Police Force. Not long after, Scotland Yard, the English police force that investigates organised crime, was created.

2 The name 'Scotland Yard' was taken from the area of London where the police had its first offices in 1892. Today, over a hundred years later, about 3000 detectives and another 20000 administrative staff work at New Scotland Yard.

3 Training for new police officers now is very different to what it was in the early days of Scotland Yard. Every officer has to do two years' initial training. After about four months of this initial training, police officers start to work at a London police station. During these early weeks working on the streets of London, they learn about the local area, the people and the problems that police officers have every day. After the initial two years, police officers still have a lot to learn and their training continues.

4 The qualities Scotland Yard looks for in new detectives are patience, because it often takes months or years to solve a case, flexibility because detectives have to work long hours, and an interest in people. Nowadays, computer skills are also important because it is often necessary to look for information about suspects on the Internet.

Read the text again and correct the statements below.

- A In the tenth century there was an official police force.
B The people who formed 'The Watch' were not paid to patrol the streets.

- C Sir James Peel formed the first official police force in 1829.
- D Scotland Yard was created before the Metropolitan Police Force.
- E Scotland Yard was named after the first detective to work there.
- F In 1892, Scotland Yard had about 3000 detectives.
- G Nowadays, police do four months' initial training.
- H Detectives do not work with computers.

(From Spencer, D. and Vaughan, D. 1998. *Teamwork 4*. Activity Book. Heinemann ELT, p. 54)

Reading Task 3

Read this article about Sandra Bullock

A Superstar's Phobia !

Last week we met new Hollywood superstar Sandra Bullock to talk about her latest film, *Speed 2*, and we discovered that the life of a famous actress isn't always as comfortable as it seems!

After the incredible success of *Speed*, the film producers decided they just had to make a **sequel**. But, in *Speed 2* the action doesn't happen on a bus, it happens at sea, and this is where the problems began for Sandra.

'When I was fourteen I nearly drowned when I was learning to surf. Water became a real phobia for me. To make this new film, I decided that I had to attack my phobia by learning to scuba dive.'

Not only did Sandra learn to scuba dive, she also decided to swim one day with sharks!

'That was definitely the most frightening experience of my life. Suddenly the sharks were swimming with me. They were watching me all the time. The really terrifying thing is when you go back up to sea level because you think they're going to attack you and pull you back under the water.'

Sandra overcame her phobia but one day, when she was making the film, she almost drowned for the second time in her life. She was swimming in the sea when, suddenly, the sea became **rough** and the waves were more than two metres high. Sandra immediately began to panic because she thought the waves would push her against the ship that was filming her. Luckily, her co-star, Jason Patrio, was there and saved her. 'Jason definitely saved my life and became a real-life hero!' Sandra told us.

Apart from that, while making the film, Sandra almost crashed a speed-boat too! Is it *too* dangerous being the star of an action film, we wondered?

'I'd do it all again tomorrow!' replied Sandra, without a moment's hesitation.

Answer these questions.

- A Why was Sandra Bullock afraid of water?
- B Why was the worst moment when she swam with the sharks?
- C Why Sandra nearly drowned the second time?
- D Apart from nearly drowning and swimming with sharks, what other dangerous thing happened to Sandra?
- E After her experiences making *Speed 2*, was Sandra too afraid to go near water again?

(From Spencer, D. and Vaughan, D. 1998. *Teamwork 4*. Activity Book. Heinemann ELT, p. 61)

APPENDIX 2: VOCABULARY TESTS

Vocabulary test 1: complain, advertisement, luxury, although, share, cockroaches, guide, refund, apology, faithfully.

Vocabulary test 2: early, force, appointed, maintain, law, patrol, staff, training, nowadays, skills.

Vocabulary test 3: seems, sequel, drowned, sharks, level, overcame, rough, waves, crashed, hesitation.

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