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EXAMINING THE IMPACT OF SEMANTIC RELATEDNESS ON ACQUISITION OF ENGLISH VOCABULARY: EVIDENCE FROM MAINLAND CHINA

Abstract:

Semantic relatedness of English words has for long been a factor influencing how EFL (English as a Foreign Language) learners process new words as well as the extent of their mastery of such new words, especially in face of some closely related words in semantics.

Aim: The aim of this study is to investigate the impact of semantic relatedness on the acquisition of English words and examine whether it will play an inhibitive or facilitative role in their acquisition.

Procedure: The study performs two experiments (61 students participated in Experiment One and 47 students in Experiment Two) in university classroom settings to provide relevant evidence from the Chinese context. Each experiment is counterbalanced with two groups with cross-matched materials and are composed of three sessions, namely reading, productive test and receptive test, whose materials are all derived from COCA (Corpus of Contemporary American English) and carefully selected by learners and confirmed by expert teachers. Reading session serves as an input of counterbalanced words and their collocations that will be tested in the following two tests.

Results: Experiment One exposed participants to crossed-paired sentences involving words that are both semantically related and morphologically similar. Results of productive test shows learners score significantly higher on testing items that are both semantically related and morphologically similar than randomly paired up counterparts, meaning semantic relatedness plays a positive role in the acquisition of such words. However, for receptive test, learners performed significantly better on semantically unrelated items, which means semantic relatedness hinders the acquisition of the words, bringing some interestingly contradictory findings. Experiment Two is almost the same as Experiment One except that the words selected in Experiment Two are only semantically related but do not resemble morphologically. The results of Experiment Two also reveals similar results that productive test scores of semantically related items are significantly greater than semantically unrelated counterparts, while receptive test scores produced opposite situation.

Conclusion: Consistent results have been generated from two experiments which indicate that in college EFL classrooms, for “productive skills”, such as writing, learners may take advantage of semantic relatedness of words and benefit from the facilitative effect, while for “receptive skills”, such as reading, learners may suffer from the inhibitive effect and feel confused when processing similar words as input information.

Keywords:

semantic relatedness; acquisition; English vocabulary; impact