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The effectiveness of frequency lists for vocabulary acquisition in formal and informal learning settings

1. Introduction

The importance of vocabulary acquisition when learning a foreign language or a second language is indisputable. There is, however, discussion about the number of words that should be mastered, what exactly this mastery means, the method of presenting new words and the extent to which students can self-regulate their vocabulary acquisition and language learning process. This article will focus on the latter two issues: a method of presenting vocabulary, and facilitating and supporting autonomous language learning.

Teachers of Dutch as a second language (Nt2) at the University of Groningen Language Centre make use of vocabulary frequency lists which contain the most frequently used words in written sources and can be applied in both formal and informal educational settings. The lists are highly efficient and applicable to use both by teachers and students if they are presented in an appropriate and effective way.

We will first give a short introduction to frequency lists for language learning, followed by the teaching approach at our institution. We will then present various examples of possible activities with frequency lists. Although this article concentrates on Dutch as a second language, the pedagogical and training opportunities can be useful for many more languages.

2. Frequency lists

How many words does a language learner need in order to understand a reading or listening text? The answer to that question depends on the kind of text. A learner has to understand a minimum of 90% of all entries in order to

roughly understand a text (Bossers 2010: 171). If an average newspaper article contains approximately 5000 words, it means a learner has to know those 5000 words so as to understand an article from a newspaper.

The relationship between the receptive word knowledge of a learner and the CEFR levels for Dutch is A2 – 2000 words, B1 – 5000 and B2 – 12000 (Bossers 2010: 172). This corresponds approximately to what is said about the lexical requirements for English, according to Tseng and Schmitt (2008: 366):

- 2000-3000 word families for basic everyday conversation (chat),
- 3000 word families to begin reading authentic texts,
- 5000-9000 word families to independently read authentic texts,
- 10000 word families, a wide vocabulary, to allow most language use.

The question remains which words can be selected to become part of the list of 0-2000 or 2000-5000. This can be a matter of choice in itself because most course books have been written for a certain target group: every course book that applies the reference levels of the CEFR is basically a Reference Level Description (RLD), which means that a vocabulary list provided in the book relates to a certain level. However, there are major differences between size and content of vocabulary in the same CEFR levels in different languages (Decoo 2012).

The construct of vocabulary knowledge is said to be quite complex, but it can be conceptualized in terms of vocabulary size (knowing enough words and knowing the right words), vocabulary depth (having the knowledge about the words) and accessibility (recognizing and applying the words) (Bossers 2010). Vocabulary learning relates to these three aspects. “It is clear from a wide range of research that certain vocabulary sizes are necessary to do certain things in language” (e.g., Adolphs/Schmitt 2003; Hazenberg/Hulstijn 1996; Laufer 1988; Nation/Waring 1997, in Tseng/Schmitt 2008: 366), but the question remains which words are selected. There are several criteria, such as target words (which words ought to be important to the learner), words for specific contexts/purposes (such as academic word list or ‘schooltaalwoorden’, terminology) and frequency (which words are the most common words in a given language). The most frequently used words then belong to the lowest language level whereas the degree of more or less frequently used words defines the level of difficulty. The range of frequency also depends on the sources on which the lists have been drawn up and other linguistically standards (Decoo 2012).

The Dutch Section of the University of Groningen Language Centre uses vocabulary lists grouped by frequency: the Hazenberg-Hulstijn lists (H&H).

5. Discussion

The use of frequency lists for language learning is very effective. By providing the lists in a variety of ways, such as in print or digitally, through the university's LMS or through Quizlet, teachers of the University of Groningen Language Centre facilitate and encourage autonomous language learning. The learners appreciate the fact that the teachers play an active role in this process.

Possible hands-on approaches for fostering vocabulary learning in formal and informal settings have been presented and naturally, the practices of the examples shown above are not inexhaustible. The frequency lists, however, form the backbone of these approaches and support both the teacher and the student to teach and learn more efficiently and effectively.

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