

Lognostics

Single subject studies of lexical acquisition.

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It often seems to me that if second language acquisition was not such a common phenomenon, we would know awful lot more about it. Imagine that the entire world was resolutely monolingual, except for a handful of very unusual individuals who had somehow mysteriously managed to acquire two languages. These few abnormal people would no doubt have made a great deal of money from their very peculiar skills, but they would also have been the object of a great deal of special attention from the scientific establishment. Unfortunately (or fortunately, depending on how you look at it), people who can acquire a second or third language are not rare. If they were, then whole libraries would have been written about people with this amazing cognitive ability, and the psychological and linguistic journals would be full of detailed single case studies of language learners.

Single case studies are not widely used in SLA, though there is a long tradition of research of this kind in first language acquisition, and a smaller tradition of studying individual bilingual children (e.g. Taeschner 1983 and Yoshida 1978). Part of the problem is that the major journals tend to prefer studies which involve large groups of learners, and this policy discourages detailed observations of individual cases. In my view, this is a pity. Work with single subjects is indeed very different from work with large numbers of people, but these differences allow experimenters to be much more speculative and exploratory than they can be under normal circumstances. It is rather difficult, for example, to assemble and group of subjects prepared to learn Albanian, and then to reassemble them 20 years later to assess how much they have remembered. A cautious account of single subject with this experience can provide a useful source of ideas for more ordinary experiments.

This special issue of *Second Language Research* contains seven short accounts of single subject research on vocabulary acquisition. Research on the acquisition on vocabulary has mushroomed enormously over the last 20 years, to the extent that it is now almost impossible to keep up with the output, even if you hardly read anything else. My own feeling, though, is that the types of questions being asked in this research, and the methodologies being used, have rather quickly settled into a run-of-the-mill approach. Hardly any of the material I have read contains results which shock or surprise the reader, nor does it impress the reader with its experimental ingenuity. When *Second Language Research* offered me the chance to edit a special issue on vocabulary acquisition, I thought it would be interesting to give people an opportunity to break out of the framework that working with large subject groups enforces. I wrote, therefore, to a number of colleagues working on vocabulary acquisition, and suggested that they might like to submit articles providing a detailed and in-depth discussion of single subjects acquiring an L2 vocabulary. I made it clear that there was nothing to prevent them from writing about their own experiences as learners, and that I would particularly welcome accounts that involved new methodologies for investigating how people learn words. The sort of model I had in mind was a series of papers by Cattell, published in 1886, and now almost forgotten. Cattell reports a number of self studies in which he measured his own ability to recognise words in English and German. Cattell was able to establish that it takes longer to see and name a word in a foreign language than in one's native language, and he was able to estimate roughly how big this difference is. Nowadays, these findings would not strike us as particularly remarkable, of course. But when you remember that in 1886 Cattell was using apparatus that worked on candlelight and clockwork, you begin to realise just how ingenious these people were.

In the event, the colleagues I approached seemed to be relatively cautious about new methodologies, and uncharacteristically reluctant to talk about themselves. One of papers in the collection (Segalowitz, Watson and Segalowitz) introduces data using a relatively untried method of analysis. This looks like an important new way of assessing automaticity in the lexicon, and is likely to figure often in this journal in future. One paper in the collection is a self study (Jones), similar in style to a recent paper by Kelly (1989), but concerned with a language whose vocabulary is exceedingly opaque to English speakers. The other papers all deal with 'subjects'. What these studies show, of course, is that vocabulary acquisition is a lot more varied and individualistic than we sometimes pretend. Detail like this tends to get lost in large-scale studies. My own hunch is that we need more work of this sort if we are to build really interesting models to guide our research on vocabulary learning in the next 20 years.

References

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This paper first appeared as an editorial piece in *Second Language Research* 11,2(1995), i-iii.