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Three approaches to glossing and their effects on vocabulary learning



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ABSTRACT

Glossing facilitates the creation of correct form-meaning connections, but does not encourage inferring or word meaning retrieving. This study investigates the effects of combining glossing with inferring or meaning retrieval on vocabulary learning. One hundred and eighteen university students read a text with target words occurring three times, either glossed or unglossed, under one of three conditions. In the inference-gloss-gloss condition, participants inferred the word meaning in the first word encounter and were provided with glosses for the subsequent two word encounters. In the gloss-retrieval-gloss condition, participants were provided with glosses for the first and last word encounters but had to retrieve the word meaning in the second word encounter. In the full glossing condition, participants were provided with glosses for all the word encounters. Immediately after the intervention, all participants completed a comprehension test and three vocabulary posttests. They completed delayed vocabulary posttests 2 weeks later. The main results showed that the gloss-retrieval-gloss condition was the most effective at improving vocabulary learning. The study concludes that gloss-retrieval-gloss is facilitative to learning new words from context.

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1. Introduction

Textual input is indispensable to vocabulary growth (e.g. Krashen, 1989) but not all natural contexts ensure successful inferences of word meaning (Hulstijn, 1992; Laufer, 1997), not to mention word learning. To maximize the benefit of learning from context, Hulstijn, Hollander, and Greidanus (1996) emphasized the importance of establishing form-meaning connections through external meaning references such as glosses. Rott, Williams, and Cameron (2002) indicated that glossing is frequently found “to improve both the extent and speed of lexical acquisition” (p. 185). According to Nation (2001), glossing has four advantages. First, learners can read difficult texts without simplification or adaptation. Second, providing accurate meanings prevents learners from guessing incorrectly, which should facilitate vocabulary learning and comprehension. Third, glossing does not seriously interrupt the reading process and it is less time-consuming than dictionary use. Fourth, learners may focus on glossed words, which may encourage learning. Rott (2007) also showed that words that were more frequently glossed produced more vocabulary learning. However, Laufer and Hulstijn (2001) did not think that glossing was an effective method of facilitating vocabulary learning because compared with other tasks such as using words in a composition, glossing did not encourage search or evaluation processes and only induced weak involvement load.

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It seems clear that glossing can increase the possibility of learning correct word meanings in context, but leaving words un glossed for learners to infer or retrieve their word meanings may increase the involvement load and mental effort, thus contributing to better retention. Because both glossing and not glossing have advantages and disadvantages, preceding glossing with inference or following glossing with retrieval may complement vocabulary learning. However, Rott (2007) found that first glossing words and then retrieving their meanings was not significantly more effective than only glossing words. Although Rott (2007) explained that “repeated processing of glosses might compensate for the quality of attentional resources spent during one word retrieval” (p. 189), she allowed learners to refer back to the previously glossed word encountered during retrieval, which may only induce visual search for the previous gloss, but not search from memory. In other words, Rott’s distinction between retrieval and simply a second glance at glosses might be blurred. To eliminate this concern, the effectiveness of full glossing (glossing a word in all of its occurrences) and glossing plus retrieval should be reexamined without allowing previous glosses to be viewed during retrieval. Research on inference followed by meaning assistance has often presented this assistance in the form of a checklist (Mondria, 2003), but seldom occurs as a gloss along with the word in the text. Additionally, the effectiveness of inference followed by glossing in word learning has never been compared with that of glossing plus retrieval or full glossing. Therefore, it is worth investigating these three interventions together.

2. Literature review

Using glosses provides support in unhelpful contexts, but “it might deprive the reader of an opportunity to infer, thus reducing the amount of processing” (Watanabe, 1997, p. 289) and contradict Laufer and Hulstijn’s (2001) Involvement Load Hypothesis. The Involvement Load Hypothesis predicts that glosses, although they induce a moderate need imposed by the task, might not be an effective method of facilitating word learning because they do not trigger readers’ search or evaluation processes. Consistent with the Involvement Load Hypothesis, Rott (2005) found that readers provided with translation glosses only used meta-cognitive strategies, involving “noticing of the occurrence of the lexical form and monitoring of word comprehension... (without) any meaning making or word inferring processes” (p. 103).

In contrast, inferring, which involves using learners’ world and linguistic knowledge to guess word meanings in context, may involve more mental effort and result in higher lexical retention (Hulstijn, 1992). However, Mondria (2003) found that the meaning-inferred method (i.e., learners inferred word meanings from context before memorizing them), though yielding a similar amount of retention to the meaning-given method (i.e., learners were provided with word meaning), was less efficient because of its time-consuming nature. The meaning-inferred method also has the following limitations. Learners may infer from insufficient contextual clue, need to unlearn incorrect inferences that they have made, and not be skilled enough at inferring (Hulstijn, 1992).

To retain the cognitive benefits of inferring word meanings from context, Hulstijn (1992) introduced multiple-choice glosses, which required some mental effort to select from target word meaning options based on text information. In a qualitative investigation, Rott and Williams (2003) found that multiple-choice glosses “triggered a search for lexical meaning and an interaction between the various gloss options and the context provided by the passage... led readers from a tentative to a stable form-meaning mapping” (p. 53) and were more likely to prevent readers from skipping target words than the no-gloss condition. Similarly, multiple-choice glosses, compared with single translation glosses, helped readers to retain more vocabulary and stimulated them to use more semantic-elaborative processing strategies, including active evaluation of the initial meaning assignment, further search for meaning clues, and reevaluation of form-meaning connections in subsequent encounters (Rott, 2005). Such elaborative processing with rehearsal is conducive to retention (Hulstijn, 2001). However, Rott (2005) did not exclude the concern that more time was spent on multiple-choice glosses. Additionally, irrespective of how much the multiple-choice procedure reduced erroneous guesses, it was inevitably and “inherently error prone” (Hulstijn, 1992, p. 123). Even when the multiple-choice procedure only included two alternatives, some students still guessed incorrectly, making the multiple-choice condition generally, although not statistically, inferior to the single gloss condition (Watanabe, 1997). These incorrect guesses can be transferred and strengthened in subsequent encounters when they make sense in reader discourse models (Rott, 2005). Rott et al. (2002) also found that the superior immediate vocabulary learning produced by the multiple-choice gloss condition was not retained better than that produced by the no-gloss condition 5 weeks later. This might “suggest that the mental effort exerted through processing multiple-choice glosses did not lead to the sufficiently deep level of processing that is claimed to promote long-term retention of form-meaning connections...(and that) the search and evaluation demands of using multiple-choice gloss conditions were too low to be effective” (p. 207). These disadvantages mean that multiple-choice glosses can be improved.

Another major process involved in committing a word to memory is retrieval. Retrieval involves first forming a perception and then retrieving meaning from memory (Nation, 2001). Each retrieval may strengthen the link between form and meaning or create an additional retrieval route, making it easier to retrieve the same item again if the interval between two retrievals is not so long that the previous memory fades (Carrier & Pashler, 1992; Nation, 2001; Roediger & Butler, 2011). When learners retrieve an encoded meaning in their mental lexicon, this may foster meaning retention (Rott, 2007) or attenuate the rate at which meaning is forgotten (Wheeler, Ewers, & Buonanno, 2003). Rott (2007) showed that word meaning retrieval resulted in more vocabulary learning than visual enhancement by using bold text. In her study, participants read three texts. Target words appeared four times in three different conditions: the four-time gloss (4G) condition, the gloss-retrieval-bolded (GR) condition, and the gloss-bolded-bolded (GB) condition. The results showed that the GR condition yielded significantly more vocabulary learning and retention than the GB condition, suggesting that retrieval consolidated

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