

What is normal and abnormal in second language vocabulary acquisition? The role of classroom and informal vocabulary input.

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Charles Alderson (2005) recently began a book with the comment that we really understand very little about what is normal and what is abnormal in foreign language learning. Language, it appears is an elusive quality which is difficult to describe in precise or quantifiable terms, and it is hard therefore to describe precisely the knowledge and skill that learners possess at the various stages of progress through learning a foreign language. The Vocabulary Research group in Swansea has, for the last 20 years or so, been working on exactly this kind of question and I think we now have good information as to the kind of vocabulary resources which a learner will have as they pass from elementary to intermediate and from intermediate to advanced levels of knowledge and performance. In this talk I want to illustrate the vocabulary sizes learners have as they progress through learning, and the methods we have for determining the vocabulary that is necessary for communication and comprehension. One thing that emerges from this is that there appears to be considerable variation in the volumes of vocabulary that learners acquire and the rate at which they acquire it. In the second half of this talk, therefore, I want to look at vocabulary input - the directed language instruction which is the subject of this conference. There is a school of thought, particularly in vocabulary learning, that directed instruction really is not very important. For example, Snow suggests that time spent in vocabulary learning and teaching is "time ... wasted" (Harris and Snow, 2004, 58) since "few words are retained from those which are 'learned' or 'taught' by direct instruction" (Harris and Snow, 2004, 55), and "most L2 vocabulary is learned incidentally, much of it from oral input" (Ellis, 1994, 24). I think that these ideas are very misleading and I will illustrate this with a series of studies on course book material, used in the classroom, which has a direct and demonstrable bearing on the vocabulary which is learned. This form of input is particularly important in establishing good knowledge and use of the most frequent words in a language. But it is not clear that this form of input can explain how the most able of learners acquire the very large vocabularies that enable them to be so good. To explain how these very large, often native-like vocabularies are gained, I will examine a series of case studies of learners engaged in informal vocabulary learning activities: reading comic books, listening to songs and watching DVDs with sub-titles in a foreign language. It appears from these that learners can and do acquire surprisingly large volumes of the, particularly infrequent, vocabulary they need to achieve fluency from informal language learning activities, albeit with a clear learning focus.