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Electronic Translators in the ESL Writing Class

When interacting with ESL students, I have often observed them using hand-held electronic dictionaries, or translators, in order to communicate. These translators allow learners to enter a word or phrase in their first language and receive a translation in the target language, or vice versa, and often a short sentence using the word or phrase. For example, while two Japanese speakers were telling me (in English) a Japanese fairy tale, one of them pulled out her translator to find the "correct" word for a certain kind of bird and the translator provided the word "pheasant." I have also observed students use these translators while drafting and/or revising essays. And in the English 86A class in which I interned, when students were requested by the instructor to bring a few things to share with the class that were important to them, several included their translators.

Since many second language learners seem to rely on these translators for communicating, a closer look at how they help students—particularly in the area of vocabulary development and writing—is an important topic of study. While there has been research on the influence of language dictionaries and/or electronic translators on vocabulary development and reading comprehension (Gonzalez, 1999; Hulstijn, et al., 1996; Liou, 2000), little has been said about their effect on the writing process. My thesis aims to explore the impact of translators in ESL writing through a study of translator use by international students in ESL writing classes at CSUSB.

According to Knight (1994), "vocabulary acquisition is considered by many to be the single most important aspect of foreign language learning" (p. 285). This belief is held not only by students, "but [vocabulary] is often considered a priority by teachers as well" (p. 285). Gass

and Selinker (2001) take this a step further and propose that vocabulary knowledge is crucial for both production and comprehension of the target language. Some believe that dictionaries may be one tool for helping students develop this lexical knowledge (Fan, 2003; Gonzalez, 1999; Hulstijn, et al., 1996; Liou, 2000). On the other hand, "many educators and researchers discourage the practice, advising students to . . . use the dictionary only as a tool of last resort" (Knight, 1994, p. 285).

In contrast to this negative evaluation of dictionary use, previous studies, such as Hulstijn (1993), have shown that when computer dictionaries are available while a student views a text—either electronically or in hard copy format—learners are likely to look up unfamiliar words perceived as relevant to understanding the text, and that the student's level of vocabulary knowledge is not a significant factor in the degree to which they use a dictionary. Knight's (1994) research also concludes that "subjects who used the dictionary not only learned more words but also achieved higher reading comprehension scores than those who guessed from context" (p. 295). Other studies have also demonstrated positive results of electronic dictionary use on lexical acquisition (Cobb, 1999; Liou, 2000).

The apparent mixed feelings by second language teachers and researchers about dictionary use leads to several questions about the use of electronic translators by students, particularly in the little-studied area of writing: 1) How and when do students use electronic translators in composing their papers? For example, what kinds of words do they look up, and in what ways do they rely on them throughout the writing process? 2) To what extent do they then use these words appropriately in their texts? 3) How does electronic translator use influence their long-term acquisition of the vocabulary they look up, in terms of either receptive or

productive knowledge?   4) Should writing instructors encourage, perhaps even integrate into their class, the use of electronic translators?

In an effort to address these questions, I propose the following study. I will review literature on second language vocabulary acquisition as well as current practices in teaching ESL vocabulary, focusing on the use, or non-use, of language dictionaries and translators. I will also conduct a case study of four to six ESL students' use of electronic translators in their writing processes and the impact it has on their receptive and productive acquisition of vocabulary. Data will be collected from students in writing classes in the American Language and Culture Program at CSUSB during Spring quarter 2004 through the following: 1) a language use survey of the students' experiences with English and other languages and their comfort level in using these languages in various settings. The survey will also include questions about their use of an electronic translator; 2) interviews with students focusing on their strategies for using a translator and how they see their use helps them in their writing processes; 3) an analysis of students' papers for how they used the vocabulary accessed through a translator, which they will be asked to highlight; and 4) an assessment of the students' acquisition of selected vocabulary through a short test on the highlighted words from their individual texts. Based on the findings of this study, I will provide possible strategies for the effective use of translators in a composition course designed for second language learners. An application will be submitted to the CSUSB Institutional Review Board prior to starting the case study.

The first chapter of my thesis will offer a review of literature on ESL vocabulary development and teaching practices and the impact of dictionaries/translators on vocabulary acquisition and comprehension. Literature on the relationship between vocabulary acquisition and the writing process will also be discussed.

The second chapter will focus on the case study subjects and the methodology used to collect data. The third chapter will present and discuss the findings of the study, including the student surveys and writing samples. The final chapter will interpret the findings in light of previous research and discuss the implication(s) for ESL composition instruction.

Annotated Bibliography

Bland, S.K., et al. (1990). The naive lexical hypothesis: Evidence from computer-assisted language learning. *The Modern Language Journal*, *74* (4), 440-450.

> This study looks at the impact of the belief that a direct translation is always available (the Naive Lexical Hypothesis or NLH) on the composing process of second language learners.

Cobb, T. (1999). Breadth and depth of lexical acquisition with hands-on concordancing. *Computer Assisted Language Learning*, *12* (4), 345-360.

> This article discusses the use of computer concordances and databases by students to develop their vocabulary. Its primary focus is on a specific computer program that assists students by providing a concordance of words in a course text in order to support their learning of related vocabulary. It also discusses the results of a small, year-long study of students using the program.

Fan, M.Y. (2003). Frequency of use, perceived usefulness, and actual usefulness of second language vocabulary strategies: A study of Hong Kong learners. *The Modern Language Journal*, *87* (2), 222-241.

> This article looks at several strategies used—classified as "deep and surface processing strategies"—to help ESL students acquire English vocabulary, including a discussion of commonly used dictionary strategies. It also includes a study of over 1,000 students in various disciplines who were tested for vocabulary knowledge and surveyed regarding their learning strategies.

Gabel, S. (2001). Over-indulgence and under-representation in interlanguage: Reflections on the utilization of concordancers in self-directed foreign language learning. *Computer Assisted Language Learning*, *14* (3-4), 269-288.

> This article supports the use of concordancers (computerized concordance programs) in language learning. It argues that their use—especially when students use them to compare their own developing language, or interlanguage, to that of a native

speaker—results in efforts to "bridge the gap between the learner's performance and that of native speakers."

Gass, S.M. and Selinker, L. (2001). *Second language acquisition: An introductory course* (Second Edition). Lawrence Erlbaum Associates: New Jersey.

> Chapter 13 of this book, "The Lexicon," provides a basic understanding of the role of the lexicon in second language learning along with a discussion of the requisite lexical skills for acquiring second language vocabulary.

Gonzalez, O. (1999). Building vocabulary: Dictionary consultation and the ESL student. *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, *43* (3), 264-270.

> Gonzalez discusses the effectiveness of dictionary usage by second language learners of English and the impact on vocabulary acquisition. She also conducts an informal study in which she analyzes selected student notebooks documenting vocabulary taken from texts read in their class work for which they either guessed the meaning from context or consulted a dictionary in order to get a formal definition.

Gu, Y. (1996). Vocabulary learning strategies and language learning outcomes. *Language Learning*, *46*, 643-679.

> In this article, Gu shares findings from a study conducted of Chinese university students of English, the various strategies they use in acquiring vocabulary, and the impact those strategies have on their learning English.

Hatch, E. and Brown, C. (1995). *Vocabulary, semantics, and language education*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP.

> This book provides a comprehensive survey of vocabulary learning, learner strategies, pedagogy, and teacher strategies.

Hulstijn, J.H. (1993). When do foreign-language readers look up the meaning of unfamiliar words? The influence of task and learner variables. *The Modern Language Journal*, *77* (2), 139-147.

> Discusses a study of students' behavior in looking up unfamiliar words in a computer-based dictionary. The findings indicate that the perceived relevance of the word to the reading goal increases the likelihood that students will refer to the dictionary for meaning and that the reader's vocabulary knowledge is only a moderate factor.

Hulstijn, J. H., Hollander, M., Greidanus, T. (1996). Incidental vocabulary learning by advanced foreign language students: The influence of marginal glosses, dictionary use, and reoccurrence of unknown words. *The Modern Language Journal*, *80* (3), 327-339.

The authors discuss a study in which students were placed in one of three "text reading conditions" in dealing with unknown vocabulary: 1) marginal glosses; 2) dictionary access, or 3) no information external to the text. The study focuses on Dutch advanced foreign language students of French and explores these strategies and their impact on learning vocabulary which the students are exposed to on multiple occasions.

Johns, T. (1986). Micro-concord: A language learner's research tool, *System*, *14* (2), 151-162.

> This article describes the function of micro-concords and their software While the article focuses primarily on the details of the software and hardware configuration, Johns also includes a section discussing the benefits of using a micro-concord in language learning and, more specifically, in the writing process.

Knight, S. (1994). Dictionary use while reading: The effect on comprehension and vocabulary acquisition for students of different verbal abilities. *The Modern Language Journal*, *78* (3), 285-299.

> This article discusses a study exploring the effects dictionary use has on reading comprehension and vocabulary development. The study group students had access to dictionaries to look up new words as they read. The control group was assigned the same readings but did not have dictionary access. Tests on knowledge of selected words at different intervals were used to measure vocabulary development (retention of the word over time). The results show that students with dictionary access learned more words.

Luppescu, S. and Day, R. (1993). Reading, dictionaries, and vocabulary learning. *Language Learning*, *43* (2), 263-287.

> Luppescu and Day explore the use of bilingual dictionaries by Japanese university students and the effect their use had on vocabulary learning compared to students who did not use a bilingual dictionary.

Liou, H.C. (2000). The electronic bilingual dictionary as a reading aid to EFL learners: Research findings and implications. *Computer Assisted Language Learning*, *13* (4-5), 467-476.

> This articles summarizes the findings of a study of fourteen EFL students and their "strategies of word consultation in order to facilitate reading comprehension." It then draws conclusions and provides suggestions for the most effective way these strategies can be used for improving reading comprehension.

Parry, K. (1991). Building a vocabulary through academic reading. *TESOL Quarterly*, *25* (4), 629-653.

> Parry's study looks at the reading and dictionary use of two second language learners and discusses the impact on their learning vocabulary.

Raptis, H. (1997). Is second language reading vocabulary best learned by reading? *Canadian Modern Language Review*, *53* (3), 566-580.

      Raptis argues that the common belief that vocabulary learning best takes place in the process of reading is not empirically sound. She advocates a focus on the needs of individual students and calls for a closer look at other strategies that aid in the acquisition of vocabulary by second language learners.

Schmmitt, N. (2000). *Vocabulary in language teaching*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP.

      This book contains an excellent summary of the history of vocabulary as it pertains to the language classroom, as well as past and current methodologies and popular movements within vocabulary learning research.

Singleton, D. (1999). *Exploring the second language mental lexicon*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP.

      Singleton provides a focused look at key issues in the area of lexical acquisition, especially the contrasting of L1 and L2 lexical acquisition, as well as "the cross-linguistic factor in lexical processing and acquisition."

Singleton, D. (2000). *Language and the lexicon: An introduction*. New York: Oxford UP.

      This is an introductory text on the field of lexicology. Singleton provides a basic but balanced understanding of this area of linguistics.

Wesche, M.B. and Paribakht, T. S. (2000). Reading-based exercises in second language vocabulary learning: An introspective study. *The Modern Language Journal*, *84* (2), 196-213.

      The authors summarize the findings of a study which examines five text-based exercises designed to increase the vocabulary of ESL students. Their primary focus is on comparing how student reading strategies interact with vocabulary acquisition.

Zahar, R., Cobb, T., and Spada, N. (2001). Acquiring vocabulary through reading: Effects of frequency and contextual richness. *Canadian Modern Language Review*, *57* (4), 541-572.

      Zahar, et al. address some still unresolved issues related to vocabulary acquisition, including: 1) how many times we must be exposed to a word before it is learned, and 2) the best context(s) for learning.