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INTENTIONAL AND INCIDENTAL LEARNING IN VOCABULARY TEACHING

The role of vocabulary in learning languages is critical as it serves as the foundation for communicating, understanding and expressing oneself. Learning a language without a sufficient vocabulary base will cause problems for the learner and lead to difficulties in comprehending written materials, participating in conversation, and being able to communicate thoughts clearly. Despite having knowledge of grammar rules, limited vocabulary can still make communicating difficult. There are a variety of effective vocabulary teaching strategies that are useful for ESL learners.

Furthermore, vocabulary supports all four areas of language acquisition: reading, listening, speaking, and writing. Learners must have vocabulary to comprehend both the spoken and written language as well as to construct sentences that are meaningful. If learners have limited vocabulary, this will hamper their confidence levels and also hinder their ability to communicate in many of the same situations as they would if they had a more complete vocabulary.

Vocabulary acquisition discussions in the field of language education revolve around two primary methods: intentional and incidental. Intentional vocabulary learning is when a learner consciously tries to learn a new word through both formal and informal practice methods (e.g., memorization, reiterating, and practicing); whereas, incidental vocabulary acquisition happens through encountering language (both through reading and listening) in everyday activities or social interactions [Nation, 2001: 232].

Various advantages and disadvantages exist for both the intentional and incidental learning approaches. Some researchers argue that learners will acquire vocabulary at a higher rate through intentional learning than incidental learning, particularly in academic settings. However, other researchers assert that vocabulary acquired through incidental means will be retained longer than via intentional means and is more likely to represent natural language use [Schmitt 2008: 339]. For these reasons, multiple practitioners believe that an integrated approach combining both strategies is likely to yield superior outcomes compared to using either strategy alone.

The purpose of this article is to provide an in-depth exploration of both intentional and incidental learning, and to illustrate the value of combining these two strategies when teaching vocabulary.

Deliberate or Explicit Learning is the conscious attempt to learn vocabulary items with focused attention. The learner makes a deliberate attempt

to memorize and comprehend new words through structured / planned activities (e.g., word lists, flashcards, dictionary, repetition, and various vocabulary activities). Intentional learning typically occurs within a formal institutional setting where the teacher is responsible for providing direction or instruction to the learner. One benefit of Intentional Learning is that it can allow learners to quickly and efficiently acquire vocabulary. This is particularly beneficial in the academic context where learners need to acquire a relatively large number of new vocabulary items in a short period of time (e.g., students preparing for exams such as IELTS will often utilize word lists, vocabulary notebooks, and practice tests to learn academic vocabulary) [Nation 2001: 245]. Through this process, the learner is provided with the opportunity to develop a detailed understanding of the meaning of each vocabulary item as well as its pronunciation, spelling, and grammatical use.

In addition to clear learning objectives and measurable progress, another benefit of intentional learning is its structured learning process, which allows both teachers and learners to easily assess improvement. Using structured activities such as matching, gap fill, synonyms, antonyms and translations will help reinforce vocabulary development. For example, a teacher might introduce vocabulary related to 'environment' by having students use the words 'pollution', 'recycling', and 'climate change' in sentences or paragraphs. This type of activity is beneficial because it helps the learner to not only remember the word(s) but also provides them with the ability to use these words in their respective contexts correctly.

Intentional learning can also support higher-level cognitive processing by allowing learners to actively engage in vocabulary learning through repetition, recording, and practice; thus, they will have a greater likelihood of retaining the vocabulary word(s) in long-term memory. In addition, the use of spaced repetition and regular reviews will enhance their retention and ability to recall vocabulary items.

There are limitations to intentional learning as well. Some students may find that intentional learning is boring, especially those students who depend on simple rote learning methods without really understanding what these words mean. For example, students who only learn isolated lists of vocabulary will often not have the skills to use them in real-life situations because they have no idea what the vocabulary means in context. There are many students who will recognize vocabulary on a test, but are unable to use it correctly when they must speak or write. This is a very common problem for many students in terms of explicit vocabulary learning [Schmitt 2008: 342].

So, even though intentional learning is a good way to develop a strong foundation of vocabulary, it is most beneficial when combined with other forms of learning that give a student context and opportunities to learn and use the vocabulary in a more 'natural' way.

Incidental learning is done without any explicit intention, where you encounter language naturally. Incidental vocabulary learning is accomplished when learners interact with language through meaningful and communicative means (i.e., reading, watching movies, listening to podcasts, talking with others). Therefore, vocabulary is acquired randomly –it is not the main reason for interacting with the language.

Another benefit of incidental vocabulary acquisition is that it allows the learner to have a contextually rich and meaningful source for discovering the meaning of vocabulary. For instance, if you read a story and come across a word you do not know but understand what that word means due to a great deal of context, then you have learned that vocabulary through an incidental learning process. Because incidental vocabulary acquisition occurs along with your use of the language but is not the primary reason for your use of the language, this type of acquisition is effective for the long-term retention of the vocabulary because they are associated with a real situation and experience, rather than having been learned in isolation. [Krashen 1989: 440]

Another advantage of incidental learning is that it develops fluency and natural language use. When learners are exposed to real language, they see how vocabulary works in real-life communication, including collocations, idioms and multiple meanings of words; for instance, by watching English movies or TV, a learner might be exposed to phrases such as ‘take it easy’, ‘figure out’ or ‘make up your mind’, and will then use those phrases without directly studying them. This exposure makes learners sound more natural and confident when speaking and writing.

Incidental learning also increases learners’ motivation and engagement. Watching films or reading interesting texts is usually fun, leading learners to want to spend more time with the language. By receiving more input this way (which is critical for vocabulary acquisition), students can acquire more vocabulary through incidental learning than through intentional learning.

There are, however, some disadvantages to incidental learning. Whereas intentional learning is usually faster and more controlled than incidental learning, incidental learning is typically slower and less controlled. Students may not register all of the rare words that they see, and even if they do see a rare word, they may not retain it for long enough to be able to use it correctly without seeing it again. Additionally, when a student has received no support or guidance from a teacher or other source, they may misunderstand or fail to learn many of the less common but still important vocabulary items [Nation 2001: 310].

Thus, although incidental learning is crucial for developing naturally sounding language through extended retention, maximum benefit from incidental learning is achieved when accompanied by purposeful forms of learning that promote reinforcement and focus.

Many researchers recommend the use of both intentional and incidental learning, as combining the two learning styles produces learners who are more balanced in their vocabulary development. By connecting the words with how they are used, learners learn not only how to understand the language but also how to use the language with greater confidence and appropriateness.

One of the benefits of integrating these two styles of learning is that it bridges the gap between the two forms (form and meaning) with practical applications. For example, by first providing students with instruction on a new word through a definition, translation or practice (intentional learning), they will then have opportunities to use that word in context when reading, during discussion or while completing a communicative task (incidental learning). This process gives learners the opportunity to learn the correct way to use the word as well as give them the ability to use the word accurately and appropriately in any situation.

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Another example would be when learners are given reading assignments. Before reading the passage, they would be introduced to the vocabulary used in the passage and its meaning. When reading the passage, they would see those same words in context and build their vocabulary through their exposure to those words. After reading the passage, they would then have the opportunity to complete a number of follow-up activities using the vocabulary words they were exposed to in order to help consolidate their learning and improve their long-term memory [Schmitt 2008: 348].

Mixing these two methods will allow teachers to reach the variety of different types of learners by separating the needs of learners into two categories: those who need highly structured and direct instruction, and those who learn in a more natural way through exposure and practice. By bringing together both types of instruction, teachers can create a classroom environment that is both flexible and welcoming for a diversity of learners.

Additionally, advances in technology present many ways for educators to incorporate an integrated approach. Language-specific applications, online video training, digital flashcard tools, and active interactive websites allow learners to use skill-building tools for the purpose of intentionally learning vocabulary, while also experiencing an authentic use of the vocabulary in the real world. For example, a student might use a language-specific application to study vocabulary and then see the same vocabulary that they learned on the application in a video or in an article on the Internet. Seeing the repeated use of the vocabulary in different contexts helps to strengthen memory and promote sound use of the vocabulary.

Combining both intentional and incidental learning will ultimately create a more well-balanced and effective model for teaching vocabulary to students. Furthermore, students who are learning English as a second language will develop both accuracy and fluency in the use of English, which are critical components for developing proficiency in any second language.

Both types of learning (intentional learning and incidental learning), while achieving the same end goal of helping learners acquire vocabulary, play a vital but complementary role in the vocabulary acquisition process. Intentional learning gives learners the ability to focus their attention on the new word(s) to quickly acquire vocabulary, and through structured practice, learners develop accurate knowledge of the meaning, form and usage of those words. Incidental learning provides learners with meaningful context, and multiple exposures to the word (s) will lead to a deeper understanding, long-term retention, and a more natural way of using language.

Each type of learning has its strengths and weaknesses, and it is unlikely that using only one type of learning will result in optimal results. Using both of these types of learning provides learners with the benefits of both types of learning by providing a connection between the learner's conscious (intentional) and unconscious (incidental) learning of languages and linking that connection to their everyday (real life) experience with using language. Combining incidental learning with intentional learning can improve vocabulary retention and increase the learner's ability to use words with confidence and correctly in a variety of situations.

Beyond effectiveness, blending these two approaches can also do something just as important – keep learners genuinely interested. When students encounter new words both through structured practice and real communication, they're far more likely to stay engaged rather than go through the motions. This kind of balance also nudges learners toward independence, helping them build their vocabulary beyond the classroom walls, on their own terms.

Oxford reminds us that successful vocabulary learning isn't just about what teachers do – it equally depends on how actively learners themselves get involved and how deliberately they practice [Oxford 1990: 8]. Ellis adds to this by pointing out that encountering language repeatedly in meaningful situations

is what truly builds communicative competence and helps words stick over time [Ellis 1994: 211].

Taken together, these insights suggest that weaving intentional and incidental learning into a single, coherent approach can make a real difference – not just in vocabulary growth, but in learners’ broader academic journey.

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