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Is explicit vocabulary instruction superior to "just listening"?

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Abstract

Zhang and Graham (2019) compared three forms of listening plus vocabulary instruction to a listening-only, "no explanations" condition in order to determine which approach was most effective for vocabulary acquisition. They claim that their results show overall advantages for the three listening plus instruction conditions over the incidental, listening-only condition, with the "Contrastive Focus-on-Form" (CFoF) treatment doing the best. Their data provide only weak support for this conclusion. Their analysis also leaves out a crucial variable in comparing language teaching methods, efficiency.

Key Words: Peter Ackroyd, English Music, Ahmet Hamdi Tanpınar, Huzur ("A Mind at Peace") cultural heritage, national identity

Is explicit vocabulary instruction superior to "just listening"?

Introduction

Previous research has found that we acquire most of our vocabulary through compelling, comprehensible input via reading and listening (Krashen, Lee, & Lau, 2018). Zhang and Graham (2019) argued, however, than students can gain more vocabulary from explicit instruction conditions than from "input-only" conditions.

Zhang & Graham (2019)

Zhang and Graham (2019) examined whether students in a listening-only environment would acquire more vocabulary "just listening" to the input or via listening plus explicit instruction. They assigned high school English as a Foreign Language students (N = 137) to one of three listening plus instruction groups, or to a listening-only group. All four groups listened to a short passage read aloud, one per session, for six sessions. Each passage contained 10 target words, for a total of 60. Passages were short, averaging around 250 words. It appears from their sample passage that target words occurred only once.

After listening to the passage, the subjects in all four groups were asked three short comprehension questions. After this, the listening-only comparison group received "cultural and background information (in the L2) related to the listening passage" (p. 10), and heard the story played again two more times.

For the three treatment groups, a period of instruction followed the first listening. The "L2 Group" got definitions of the target words, along with additional examples of their use. The "CS Group" received code-switching explanations in the L1, plus additional sentences containing the target words. The "Contrastive Focus-on-Form Group (CFoF)" was given the L1 definitions of each word, then "an additional explanation in the L2 focusing on comparing

and contrasting the L2 word and L1 translation" (p. 10). The treatment groups were also shown the individual words on projected slides at the end of each session, and were again given an explanation of the target words. The listening-only group was given a written copy of the passage after the final listening.

Zhang and Graham reported that the CFoF group significantly outperformed the other two instruction groups and the listening-only group on both an immediate post-test and a two-week delayed post-test of target word vocabulary knowledge. The listening-only group, however, outperformed all other groups on a general test of listening comprehension not focused on the target words.

Conditions for Acquisition

Zhang and Graham's "focus on form" treatment group (CFoF) made word gains of 73% on the immediate post-test, and 38% on a delayed post-test. The listening-only group had gains of 7% on the immediate posttest, and no gains at all on the delayed post-test (Table 1, p. 12).

The poor showing of the listening-only group in Zhang and Graham on the delayed post-test appears to be an outlier. Listening-only conditions in similar studies with delayed post-tests have consistently shown vocabulary gains. Hennebry, Rogers, Macaro, and Murphy (2013), Jin and Webb (2020), Vidal (2003; 2011), Tian and Macaro (2012), and van Zeeland and Schmitt (2013) all had nearly identical pickup rates of around 8% on post-tests, with delays ranging from one to seven weeks.[1]

The subjects in Zhang and Graham heard target words in a single context only (one sentence in the passage) repeated three times. With the exception of Tian and Macaro (2013), repeated words in all the other incidental acquisition studies cited above were heard in different contexts, sometimes across more than one listening passage.

It is plausible that the poor showing of the listening-only condition in Zhang and Graham was a result of only hearing target words in a single context. There is evidence from both first and second language acquisition research that "contextual diversity" – reading or hearing words in different contexts – may be as important in acquiring words than the number of occurrences (Aldeman, Brown, & Quesada, 2006; Berger, Crossley, & Shalicky, 2019).

The length of the listening passages may have also impeded word acquisition. The average passage length was only 250 words. Such short passages required that most sentences contain at least one unknown word. In the sample passage provided in Supplementary Materials 2, for example, nine of the 15 sentences contained a potentially unknown target word (one sentence contained two target words).

Also, while vocabulary coverage for the passages was estimated to be 95%, the researchers did not measure this directly with their subjects. They instead relied on what students at this level *should* know according to curriculum guides (p. 11). Even if students were able to answer general comprehension questions, the passages may have been too difficult for them to acquire many new words incidentally.

Instructional Efficiency

For any given method of instruction, we need to consider not just effectiveness as measured by raw score gains, but *time efficiency* (Mason, 2007). For vocabulary acquisition, several analyses have found that on average, teaching vocabulary is a less efficient use of time than acquiring new words via reading and listening (Mason, 2007; McQuillan 2016; 2019a; 2019b; 2019c).

On the surface, it would appear that all four conditions in Zhang and Graham had the same exposure to the target words (six 45-minute sessions). The instructional groups, however, spent nearly all of their time focused on the words and their meanings. The

listening-only group heard the story three times, but otherwise did not appear to have exposure to the target words, only to "background information."

So while all four groups spend time doing "something" for 45 minutes, the listening-only group spent only a very limited time *actually being exposed to the target words*. This issue is also seen in many reading-only versus reading plus instruction studies (see McQuillan (2016) for a review).

A more accurate estimate for the listening-only group is the time it took to listen to the passages. Zhang and Graham report that the passages were read at a rate of 150 to 190 wpm. Taking the midpoint value of 170 wpm, we can estimate that listening to a passage would require only about 90 seconds. All groups heard the passage at the beginning of the lesson, followed by a three-question comprehension quiz. The listening-only group heard the passage two additional times, for a total of three minutes, or 18 minutes across all six lessons.

Assuming the initial reading and comprehension check for each passage took five minutes, the instructional conditions spent 40 minutes listening to and discussing the target words, or a total of 240 minutes. This is 13.3 times as much target word exposure as the listening-only condition.

We can compare the efficiency of instruction versus incidental acquisition by dividing the number of words gained by the total time of the input, yielding a words-per-minute (wpm) rate (Mason, 2007).

Table 1 shows an efficiency comparison on the immediate and delayed post-tests in Zhang and Graham from the highest-scoring instructional condition (CFoF) and the listening-only (LO) condition (rows 2 and 3). For comparison, I've also included results from a similar study of listening plus instruction versus listening-only, Tian and Macaro (2012), who used a study design similar to Zhang and Graham's.

On the immediate post-test in Zhang and Graham, the listening-only group was less efficient than the CFoF group on the immediate post-test (.18 wpm vs. .12 wpm) and on the delayed post-test (.09 wpm vs. 0 wpm). But in Tian and Macaro (2012), the listening-only condition was far superior to the instruction group on the delayed post-test (.21 wpm vs. .02 wpm) (no immediate post-test was given to the listening-only group).[2] The evidence for the efficiency of instruction in these two very similarly designed studies is thus mixed.

Table 1: Efficiency in Vocabulary Acquisition in Listening Only versus Instruction

	Condition	**Time**	**Immediate Efficiency**	**Delayed Efficiency (Delay)**
Zhang & Graham (2019)	Instruction (CFoF Group)	240m	.18 wpm	.09 wpm (2 weeks)
	Incidental (LO Group)	18m	.00 wpm	0 wpm
Tian & Macaro (2012)	Instruction (NCS + CS)	680m	.18 wpm	.02 wpm (2-7 weeks)
	Incidental (Control)	51m	--	.21 wpm

CFoF = Contrastive focus-on-form. LO = Listening-only. Recall test scores used for all studies.

Story Listening versus Instruction. A series of "story listening" studies by Mason and colleagues provide additional evidence that incidental acquisition is more efficient than instruction. Unlike the studies in Table 1, the incidental conditions in Mason's studies had some focus on the target words during the teacher-told story. Target words were written on the board and then pointed to as they appeared in the story. The teacher gave an L2 explanation or used some visual clues to help students understand the words, occasionally resorting to the L1.

The primary focus of story listening, however, is on understanding the story, with no separate instruction before or after listening to the story. More importantly, "listening plus"

conditions spend much more time on the target words than the story listening-only groups, similar to the experimental conditions in Zhang and Graham.

Table 2 lists three studies of story listening for beginning and low-intermediate L2 students (Mason & Krashen, 2004; Mason, 2005; Mason, Vanata, Jander, Borsch, & Krashen, 2009). When story listening-only was compared to listening plus instruction or list memorization, story listening was found to be more efficient on delayed post-tests in all three studies, and as or more efficient on the immediate post-tests.

Table 2: Vocabulary Acquisition in Story Listening versus Instruction

Study	Condition	Time	Immediate Efficiency*	Delayed Efficiency (Delay)
Mason & Krashen (2004)	Instruction (Story-Plus)	70m	.42 wpm	.16 wpm (5 weeks)
	Incidental (Story-Only)	15m	.62 wpm	.25 wpm
Mason (2005)	Instruction (Story-Plus)	85m	.18 wpm	.13 wpm (5 weeks)
	Incidental (Story-Only)	25m	.37 wpm	.15 wpm
Mason et al. (2009) (Experiment 1)	Instruction (List Method)	35m	.62 wpm	.13 wpm (2 weeks)
	Incidental (Story-Only)	20m	.62 wpm	.23 wpm

Conclusion

Zhang and Graham provide only weak evidence that spending classroom time on instruction versus providing students with comprehensible input is worth the effort. It may even be that explicit instruction comes at the expense of improvements in listening proficiency. The instructional CFoF group made no virtually no gains on a general test of listening comprehension modeled on the IELTS test. Zhang and Graham correctly point out

(p. 20) that we should expect vocabulary teaching to improve scores only on passages that contain the taught words, not on general measures of comprehension (Wright & Cervetti, 2017).

But the listening-only condition *did* make a large, significant gain on such a general listening test (effect size difference from CFoF group: d = .82), making this an all-the-more impressive achievement. The cause of that improvement can be reasonably attributed to the listening-only group receiving more comprehensible input than the instructional groups. While the treatment groups were focused on word study, the listening-only group listened to cultural and background information on the general topic of the passage.

None of the studies on word acquisition from listening have included a condition in which subjects choose their own topics to listen to. It seems likely that in a natural setting, acquirers would choose to listen to things that were interesting and comprehensible to them. This should result in even higher rates of vocabulary acquisition.

Pulido (2003) and Lee and Pulido (2017) reported that increased familiarity and interest in a reading text significantly improved vocabulary acquisition compared to reading less familiar and less interesting texts. Reynolds and Bai (2013) found that students who were given even a very restricted choice of texts to read acquired significantly more words than those who had their texts assigned to them (d = .49). This suggests that vocabulary acquisition may be best promoted by spending more time on self-selected listening and reading rather than on explicit vocabulary instruction or output activities.

Notes

1. Pickup rate was calculated from a formula proposed by Nagy, Anderson, and Herman (1987): (Proportion of Target Words Correct – Proportion of Control Words Correct) / (1 - Proportion of Control Words Correct). For pretest/post-test designs, substitute post-test scores for "target words" and pretest scores for "control words."

I have excluded Feng and Webb (2019), another listening-only study, since they used only vocabulary recognition rather than recall tests as was done in the other studies.

2. Tian and Macaro (2012) had their subjects listen to 17 listening passages, each about the same length as those in Zhang and Graham. Since they heard these passages twice, the total listening time equals 17 X 1.5 minutes X 2 repetitions, or 51 minutes.

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