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*Exploring second language vocabulary instruction: An Action Research Project*

1. Pedro Luchini & 2. Myriam Serati

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**Abstract**

For a long time now, the teaching and learning of L2 (second language) vocabulary has been underrated in the field of second language acquisition (SLA). However, in the last two decades, a reemergence of interest has been witnessed in areas such as vocabulary acquisition and the teaching and learning of vocabulary. The purpose of this study was to evaluate the effectiveness of the implementation of a project work on vocabulary teaching. The study consisted in an action research project carried out with a group of five teachers of English and their supervisor working at CADS (Colegio Atlántico del Sur), a private secondary school in Mar del Plata, Argentina. In this work, some issues and concerns related to second language vocabulary teaching and learning were analyzed and interpreted. Data were gathered by means of class observations, field notes, teaching activities, and evaluation meetings. The results obtained in this study revealed that, after the implementation of this project, these teachers were able to reflect upon their own teaching with regard to L2 vocabulary explicit instruction and recognize the importance of the inclusion of L2 vocabulary in their classes. Finally, some suggestions for further research in this area were given.



## **Introduction**

The teaching and learning of vocabulary have been neglected and underestimated in the field of second language acquisition (SLA) up to the present day, particularly, in many Argentinean contexts. Instead, a great number of second language researchers and teachers alike have centered their attention on syntax and phonology thus disregarding the critical aspects related to vocabulary learning and teaching and their pedagogical implications.

However, around the 1980s some syllabus theorists began to direct their attention to lexis and its role within the SLA field leading to a reemergence of interest in the area of vocabulary acquisition and learning strategies. Appreciation of the significance and implications of these areas for SLA has led to a considerable amount of research in each and their place of intersection: vocabulary learning strategies. However, the issue of whether vocabulary learning strategies should be implicitly or explicitly taught is still debatable. While some researchers argue that the best predictor of vocabulary learning strategy use is previous vocabulary learning strategy instruction, others believe that we should not be carried away in our enthusiasm for strategy training since its improvement is relatively weak and not all strategies appear to be used spontaneously.

This teaching article describes an action research (henceforth, AR) project carried out in 2008 with five teachers along with their supervisor at Colegio Atlántico del Sur (henceforth, CADS), a middle-school in Argentina. Its main purpose is to explore vocabulary learning and teaching. In the first section, some findings related to already existing theories and other research studies on vocabulary acquisition will be presented. In the next part, the research area, the participants and the context will be described. Next, adopting a qualitative method, the data gathered will be analyzed and interpreted. Finally, suggestions for further research will be given.

## **Literature Review**

In 1985, Krashen, through his Input Hypothesis, postulated that language acquisition is acquired by receiving comprehensible input (Lightbown and Spada, 1993). Although his theory



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has been highly criticized for being too vague and imprecise to provide an account of the process of SLA (McLaughlin, 1987), in 1985, Long extended on it by saying that modified teacher input facilitates comprehension, and this in turn promotes acquisition (in Lightbown and Spada, 1993). The main point in this argument focuses on the adaptation of the teacher input to facilitate comprehension instead of on the way in which learners process the input. In this way, by revolving around the teacher, the learners' conscious processes are disregarded as well as their use of learning strategies for comprehending, processing, learning and retaining concepts in academic settings. If the goal of learning strategies is to develop the learners' motivational or affective state, or the way in which students select, organize, acquire, or integrate new knowledge (Chamot and O'Malley, 1990), then, by providing them with the tools to self-regulate their own learning (Skehan and Dörnyei, 2002), students will be able to develop autonomy. By exerting control over their own learning operations, learners will be able to manage their own productions, and this, as a result, will enhance their learning capabilities.

Research on training L2 (second language) learners to use learning strategies has been restricted almost exclusively to applications with vocabulary tasks reporting interesting improvements in vocabulary learning. Paradoxically, Zimmerman (1997:6), quite polemically, has pointed out that "the teaching and learning of vocabulary have been undervalued in the field of second language acquisition throughout its varying stages and up to the present day". Other linguists and theorists in the area have supported this belief. They claim that for the last 25 years or so vocabulary acquisition has been neglected from second language instruction in favor of syntactic development ignoring its crucial role in SLA. Coady (1997) argues that language teaching methods have paid limited attention to vocabulary since it is very difficult to teach an organized syllabus of both grammar and lexis simultaneously.

Although some researchers and language practitioners have emphasised other aspects of language learning such as syntax far more than vocabulary learning, Lewis (1997), Willis (1990), Sinclair and Renouf (1988), and Nattinger and DeCarrico (1992) have started to focus their attention on the importance and implications of the inclusion of lexis in language teaching (in Coady and Huckin, 1997). Research on vocabulary teaching reports that explicit teaching of vocabulary results in better retention than incidental learning from natural text-based input



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(Folse, 2006). Channell (1988) makes a distinction between acquiring and learning vocabulary. She says that learning is a process, while acquisition is the end result (in Jordan, 1997). She also presents a difference between productive and receptive use of vocabulary, explaining that “learners gain receptive control of new words before active control” (in Jordan, 1997:154). In one of her studies, she reported that the learners’ L1 (first language) and L2 vocabulary knowledge is linked together in their mental lexicon phonologically, semantically and associationally. She also claimed that learners can make conscious the connections between them. She provides a set of implications for classroom practice:

- (i) Since the lexicon appears to be an independent entity in processing, there is justification for teaching approaches with make vocabulary work a separate learning activity. It is not essential always to integrate vocabulary with general communication.
  - (ii) Presentation of vocabulary should pay specific attention to pronunciation, in particular word stress. So visual presentation and reading may not be the best ways to introduce new vocabulary.
  - (iii) Learners should be encouraged to make their own lexical associations when they are actively learning new vocabulary, although, at present, we do not know which kind of associations are the most useful in aiding retention.
- Semantic links play an important role in production. This suggests the use of semantic fields based presentation methods on the lines of that exemplified.

(in Jordan, 1997:154)

Channell claims that the vocabulary of a language is made up of “many interrelating networks of relations between words” (in Jordan, 1997:154), that is semantic fields. Worded differently, words belonging to the same groupings share the same semantic aspects and constitute a systematic structure. The mind employs semantic similarity in categorizing words, and this, she explains, is beneficial for vocabulary acquisition. Although some researchers advocate the use of semantic groupings, some others such as Tinkham (1993) believe that “new words... are learned most easily if they are not grouped for presentation in prefabricated semantic clusters” (in Jordan, 1997:157). This researcher claims that learners may find a number of similar or



semantically related words confusing, especially when they are introduced together and at once.

Up to date, in the area of SLA, a widely varying number of approaches, methods, and techniques dealing with vocabulary instruction and/or acquisition have been presented. Coady (1997) proposes four main positions on a continuum of methods for teaching vocabulary that should be born to mind:

- a) Context alone: It proposes that there is no need for direct vocabulary instruction since learners will learn all the vocabulary they need from the context by reading extensively, provided it is presented in the form of comprehensible input.
- b) Strategy instruction: This position sustains that context is the major source of vocabulary learning, however, there is considerable emphasis on teaching specific learning strategies to students so that they can successfully learn from context; for instance, summarizing a text, finding the main idea, identifying rhetorical structures, all require some sort of instruction.
- c) Development plus explicit instruction: It argues for explicit teaching of certain types of vocabulary using a variety of techniques and methods including direct memorization of some high-frequency words. This position upholds the idea that contextualized learning through reading is effective but contextualized reading plus instruction is superior; that is, reading plus interactive vocabulary instruction.
- d) Classroom activities: It advocates the teaching of vocabulary words without following a particular methodological approach. Allen (1983) suggests that “vocabulary is best learned when it is encountered in the classroom situation when the learner perceives a need for it.” (in Coady, 1997: 281).

To cater for learners’ linguistic needs, Skehan (1996) suggests that students should be engaged in interactional tasks in which meaning is crucial, there is some kind of relationship with real-life like situations, task completion is the primary goal, and the assessment of task performance



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is related to task outcome. Students' linguistic needs, then, could be created by hiding the linguistic focus of the task from the learners. Within a task-based pedagogical framework, tasks of the type meaning-form-meaning progression provide an idyllic semantic space in which learners may be pushed by operations carried out on the task input data to notice holes or linguistic gaps in their current interlanguage inventory (Samuda, 2001). Thus, by *noticing* or *noticing-the-gap*, learners are able to identify how the input to which they are exposed differs from the output they are able to produce, which are essential processes for second language vocabulary acquisition to occur (Ellis, 2001; Schmidt, 1997; Thornbury, 1997)

An effective way to teach vocabulary then would be to encourage learners to become centrally involved in their own learning process. Initially, this will involve some kind of systematic learner training under the direction of a teacher and the learners working in groups with other students, or on a self-access basis. Through a direct approach to vocabulary teaching, students will be able to pay explicit attention to vocabulary, and this, in turn, will eventually help them develop their own strategies, thus, becoming more independent learners.

The proposals considered in this section will be partly used as theoretical background to analyze and interpret the data collected. In the next section, the puzzled area will be identified and the participants and context described. Next, the data will be analyzed and interpreted. Finally, some recommendations for the teaching of vocabulary will be given.

### **The action research project**

Burn (1999) defines AR as the application of fact finding to practical problem solving in a social situation with the intention of improving the quality of action within it, involving the collaboration and cooperation of researchers, practitioners and laymen. AR relies on exploratory and interpretative methods which are often appealing to the classroom teacher. These methods enable teachers to explore the realities of practical situations without the need of controlling the variables of their classroom contexts. The flexible and eclectic nature of AR implies that teachers are able to modify the questions or issues guiding their research, to take



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on different research methods or to take their interpretations in new directions as the need arises, a variant that would not be suitable in quantitative research.

However flexible and eclectic this research method might be, it *does* require systematic and rigorous data collection and analysis. It fulfils essential research requirements because it comprises a researchable question or the identification of a puzzled area, planning, collecting data, information analysis, reflection and interpretation, hypothesising, intervening, observing, reporting, writing and presenting. These features do not necessarily need to be clearly delineated and separate points in the research. The crucial aspect of AR lies in the participants' collaborative discussions that occur regularly throughout the process (Burns, 2007).

This research method enables researchers to take on interpretations that are motivated by data derived from the actual social situations -in this case the teachers' own classroom settings- rather than by theoretical concepts alone. It is a highly flexible research process which can respond rapidly to emerging political, social and educational questions as they impact on practice (Burns, 2007).

### **The context and participants**

Since 1999, I have been working at CADS as supervisor of the English Language Department. The learners at this school, whose L1 is Spanish, are grouped according to their English proficiency level ranging from elementary (level I), low-intermediate (level II), intermediate (level III), upper intermediate (level IV) and advanced (level V). In each group, there are approximately 25 students and their ages range from 13 to 17. Each group is taught by a different teacher. At the time this study was conducted, one male and five female teachers were in charge of these classes. Their teaching experience ranged from 10 to 15 years. Three of them were university graduate English language teachers, one was a Sworn Translator and the other one was an advanced student at an English teacher training program.

English classes meet twice a week for a 2-hour period each. As one of the institutional requirements, learners have to take and pass three term tests (written and oral) which are administered after each academic term (May, August and November). The written test consists



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of a reading comprehension section, a grammar part and a written production task. For the oral test, the students are interviewed in pairs. At the interview, they are required to answer content questions related to a set of short stories or novels previously dealt with in class. Using the content of these stories as a trigger, they also have to complete a spontaneous speech task.

### **Identifying the puzzled area**

By the end of June 2007, after administering and rating the first term test, I held an evaluation meeting with the five teachers. On analyzing the oral test scores, we realized that the students' present level of oral language competence and the instructional objectives of their courses for that term were not well-matched. A common core course objective for all these classes is to enable students to become trained competent speakers of English. However, at that time, the oral test results revealed that most of the students had failed the oral part of this test. On analyzing these results, the teachers agreed that one possible reason for that could have been the students' lack of vocabulary to express their ideas efficiently. Therefore, to explore more in depth that particular incident, we decided to engage in an AR project with the intention of providing a description, explanation and, above all, some judgment about our existing assumptions.

### **Instruments of data collection**

The instruments used in this study were class observation sheets, field notes and teachers' reports.

### **Implementation of the AR Project**

After identifying the puzzled area, the next step in conducting the AR project consisted in reading and exploring literature related to the teaching and learning of L2 vocabulary. After that, we held another meeting where we discussed the materials which helped us think about a possible plan of action. We agreed that each teacher should design and implement a battery of comprehensible tasks with a strong focus on explicit vocabulary instruction to be taught along with the rest of the contents already set prior to this project. We also worked on an observation



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time-plan, so I would be able to see each teacher individually in action when implementing their tasks.

The observation period lasted five weeks. I sat in on two consecutive classes run by each teacher. I took field notes of each class and kept records of those instances that I thought would be important for discussion later on. After observation, I held personalised debriefing evaluative sessions with each teacher. Once the observation period was over, we held a general meeting to evaluate results. We decided that each should write a semi-structured report in which they should include the aims of their lessons and contents they taught, a brief description of the tasks included and their perceptions regarding the results obtained.

## **Results**

In this section, the information gathered will be critically analyzed against the different pedagogical proposals presented in the literature review section above, including the five methods for teaching vocabulary introduced by Coady (1997). This will be done to determine the effectiveness of the implementation of this vocabulary teaching project.

### *Analía: Level 1*

The first class I observed was Analía's. She is a graduate teacher of English and has vast teaching experience with youngsters and adolescents. She has been working at CADS for more than 25 years. She designed a set of activities aiming at eliciting, introducing and providing several instances of practice of the past tense form of several verbs. Analía started her first class by asking her students about their weekend: *Did you have a good time last weekend? What did you do?* As the students had never been introduced to the simple past tense, they tried to answer using whatever linguistic resources they had at hand. Some of them used L1; some others used L2 or a combination of both to describe their activities in the past.

Analía wrote down on the blackboard the list of verbs produced by the learners in both their infinitive and past forms. Next, she told the class what *she* had done during her weekend. In her account, she included a piece of false information which the students had to guess. Once



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the students figured the odd piece in her account, she wrote the false sentence on the blackboard and used it to introduce formally the past form of both regular and irregular verbs. Next, the students were asked to read a text and complete a diary-table using past forms. The teacher provided feedback with a focus on the past tense forms.

In her second class, the students were asked to complete a diary-table with information about their routines over their last two days. They were asked to include one piece of false information in their data. Then, they were engaged in a dyadic interactional task in which they had to exchange information and guess the false piece. When required, the teacher provided feedback to the students. The class was then divided into two groups to play TIC-TAC-TOE. They took turns to provide the past tense form of a chosen verb and use it in a meaningful sentence.

On my observations, it can be said that these students were exposed to the past tense of various verbs in a range of ways, through different channels, and focusing on form as well as on meaning. Both comprehension and production were required during the sequence of tasks. Initially, by making her student talk about their weekends, she pushed them to use their linguistic resources they had on hand to complete the task. By so doing, she made her students notice gaps in their interlanguage storage and, immediately afterwards, she filled out those linguistic holes through explicit instruction. The design and implementation of tasks of this type may have served to make a particular L2 word -in this case past forms- more salient by drawing attention to the word, potentially resulting in the student noticing the word. The combination of contextualized reading plus formal instruction, as is this case, may have helped the students complete successfully the last two final activities as they were now able to use the new lexical items properly.

In her report, Analía referred to her perception about her students' reactions during the two-day project by saying:

Most of the students were engaged throughout the development of these two classes, especially, when they talked about their weekends and they had to try to guess the odd bit of information in their teacher's or other students' accounts. They looked interested when completing their diary table for the guessing



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activity; even when the instructions given by the teacher had not been fully clear. They also had a lot of fun during the TIC–TAC–TOE game where they both enjoyed and put into practice some of the verb forms they had been exposed to.

It seems her approach to teaching vocabulary not only helped her students use the lexical items presented but also become more confident and comfortable in using their English in class. In my estimation, this may be conducive to generate and enhance students' motivation and concern to continue learning.

*Alejandra: Level 2*

The second class I observed was Alejandra's. She has been teaching English at the school for over 5 years. Her handout paper revolved around the topic of the internet and technology. Apparently, the aim of her tasks was mainly to introduce students to vocabulary connected with technology. She initially showed the students a picture of a teenager playing with his computer. She used that picture as a trigger to get the students to talk about the topic. She then asked them to read two passages. In one of them she highlighted four words and then asked the students to match their meanings to the definitions. In the other, she underlined fifteen words and asked them to find, in a list of fifteen definitions, the ones that matched the words underlined. After that, they were required to find, in the second text, five cognates out of those fifteen words between English and Spanish. Next, she required them to choose six lexical items out of the fifteen set of words and write a paragraph including them.

In her second class, Alejandra provided her students with ten words randomly chosen from the ones used in the second text the class before. Then, she asked them to use those words to fill in blanks in a new reading passage. Finally, they completed an activity in which they had to find eight words connected with technology.

It seems that Alejandra made an effort to adopt an approach that included the teaching of vocabulary explicitly. Although most of her activities seemed to provide a context for the words she meant to teach, she did not offer her students specific learning strategies to learn from context. Regarding this, in her report she said:



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[...] with your help, I realized that the guide presented some weaknesses. I have to optimize some strategies of teaching-learning to make the tasks more understandable and with clearer aims and as consequence of this, get better results concerning to vocabulary learning.

On looking at data coming from the different sources, one would claim that she did not set clear objectives for each of the activities she designed. As a result, this may have confused her students as to what they were asked to focus on in each task. With respect to this, she claimed:

When I made students read aloud, for example, I forgot that the main aim of this project was to teach vocabulary and not to focus on pronunciation or reading comprehension skills.

In her handout, she included two reading passages which contained a number of highlighted words. Without checking that her students had understood the general meaning of these texts, she encouraged them to notice the meanings of these words against a set of given definitions. In our debriefing session, we discussed the benefits and drawbacks of using reading passages for vocabulary instruction and setting clear objectives for each task. We also talked about the lack of connection among tasks in her handout and the recurrent similarity in format among them. In the second reading passage, for example, the students were pushed to focus on fifteen low-frequency lexical items at a time, without perceiving a purposeful need to learn them. In regards to this information, Alejandra pointed out:

I included a lot of words and two passages, it would have been more productive to include only one passage and exploit it more. The idea of two paragraphs was to introduce the topic of discussion and, in the other, the case of a student being addicted to the internet.

In our meeting we also discussed the advantages of implementing group work in the language classroom and the usefulness of this technique for vocabulary learning. In reference to this, she said:

Concerning to group work, I have to clarify the advantages and disadvantages of working in groups and clarify the aims of working like this, controlling more their work and being stricter in the final results. Not all of them participated. I should implement some strategies to encourage all of them to participate.



Close examination of these results indicate that Alejandra made a big effort to integrate explicit instruction of vocabulary combined with a focus on contextualized reading. Although she appears to have gained awareness of the importance of basic principles for vocabulary acquisition to take place, she still needs to keep on working on some areas to make this happen.

*Laura: Level III*

The third class I sat in on was Laura's. Although she is a graduate translator, she has been teaching English for more than ten years. Her project focused on the teaching of eight multi-part verbs. She designed a handout that consisted of five different comprehensible tasks. In her first class, the students were asked to read a short paragraph, underline the multi-part verbs, and infer their meaning from the context. Once the students finished with this task, Laura checked their answers. When necessary, she intervened by providing the meaning of some multi-part verbs as well as their collocations. In so doing, she tried to establish purposeful connections between those words and the students' personal experiences. In task two, the students were asked to write these multi-part verbs next to their definitions. In the following activity, based on the context provided, the learners were required to choose the correct option of the multi-part verb to complete a set of six sentences. In task four, using the multi-part verbs from the text, they had to complete eight sentences.

In her second class, as a way of recycling the lexical items previously presented, Laura wrote on the blackboard some key words related to her students' ideas and experiences associated to the eight multi-part verbs. In the process of making associations, the students were encouraged to retrieve these words, their meanings and use. Task five required them to pick three multi-part verbs and write real or imaginary sentences about their lives. Working in pairs, they had to guess whether their sentences were true or false. In the last task, they were asked to invent a dialog for a comic strip and include in it at least two multi-part verbs from the text.

By using the text as a context, the students were able to infer the meanings of the multi-part verbs and relate them to their previous knowledge and personal experiences. Through this activity, Laura was encouraging her students to make their own lexical associations. As was



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said earlier, contextualized reading plus teacher intervention is superior to letting students infer meaning from context alone for vocabulary acquisition to occur. The controlled practice stage that came later may have helped them to see how the multi-part verbs operate in different linguistic environments and how to use them accurately.

To complete the last two communicative tasks, the students, working in pairs, were encouraged to feel the need to use these words in semi-authentic real-like situations. Through this activity, the learners had a chance to perceive and recognize their communicative value. The aims of these tasks may account for Swain's (1995) output theory in which she postulates that when learners are encouraged to produce output that is relevant and succinct, they are driven into making use of the kind of lexical-syntactical processing required for acquisition to occur. In her report, Laura referred to the impact these two classes had on her students' motivation and concern to continue learning the language:

I think students liked the vocabulary project and they got involved. They liked learning new items and tried to use them in different contexts.

Upon evaluation of the long-term effects of this vocabulary project on her students' language performance, Laura claimed:

When they were assessed, two weeks later after the two-class project was implemented, 16 out of 20 students passed the quiz on vocabulary.

Although more research on this area should be conducted, these partial results seem to indicate that contextualized reading combined with vocabulary instruction where learners are engaged to make associations and manage their own autonomy are beneficial for vocabulary learning.

*Luciana: Level IV*

Level IV was in charge of Luciana. She has been teaching English at the school for more than five years. Through her activities she aimed to evaluate if her students were able to infer the meaning of some words from context and to assess their ability to retrieve these lexical items under this condition in the long-term.



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She started off by arranging her class in two groups and assigning a set of five different words to each. Assuming that her students would have some difficulty in figuring out the meanings of these unknown words, she gave them some time to work on their definitions. She had selected these ten lexical items from a passage published in an English magazine.

After getting some feedback from both groups, Luciana gave them the original five sentences where these words had been drawn. This was done to see whether students were able to infer their meanings from context. After that, each group was presented with the definitions of the five words in random order. Students had to match their five lexical items to their definitions. Finally, both groups were asked to exchange their information.

The following class Luciana recycled the ten words by writing them down on the blackboard and asking the students, working in small groups, to provide their definitions or the sentences in which they had appeared. This is what she found:

The following class students were asked about the vocabulary worked with the previous class. They could only remember from 2 to 4 words with their meanings whereas the rest of the words were just remembered but not defined.

Next, she presented her students with the full text, containing the ten sentences and the words on which they had worked. She asked them to read the passage and identify its main ideas. At this point, she reported that because the students had been exposed to those unknown words in the text several times, they found it easier to read and understand. She pointed out:

Finally, the students were given the text where all the vocabulary appeared in the complete context given the students another chance of seeing the words they had worked with. In this way students were able to understand the meaning of all the words.

On analyzing this information, it can be said that Luciana relied heavily on two main principles for vocabulary acquisition to take place. First, she perceived that context provided her students with a vital source for vocabulary learning. She **conflated** contextualized reading with explicit instruction. She reported:



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First, I gave the students the words in isolation to see what they did with them. Then, I gave them the sentences with the words, and most of the words could be guessed. This means that the context helped them a lot. Finally, when I gave them the reading, they did not have to worry about the words because they had been exposed to them many times and they knew them already.

Her second principle relied on exposing her students with a set of new lexical items repeatedly, over time:

When the project was over, the students had been exposed to the new words more than five times using different activities.

In her report she acknowledged the difficulty that most students often have when learning new vocabulary. To help overcome these difficulties, she suggested repeated frequency of occurrence of new lexical items. To this Luciana stated:

I think students find learning vocabulary very difficult and they have to be exposed to the language many times so as to remember vocabulary. It is also true that teachers should create or plan activities to create in students the need to use learned vocabulary.

When Luciana discussed the results of her project, she referred to the long-term effects of her intervention. Three weeks after having implemented the vocabulary project, her students used some of the words they had learned at that time. In connection to this, she said:

Three weeks after the project was over, the students needed specific vocabulary in order to express their ideas and they used the vocabulary they had learned during this project.

In view of these findings, it can be inferred that Luciana recognized the importance of using context to help students infer the meaning of unknown words. She perceived that teachers ought to design communicative tasks to create in their learners the need to use new vocabulary items purposefully. She acknowledged the usefulness of exposing her students to new words several times for internalization and retrieval to take place.

*Daniela: Level V*



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Daniela was the teacher in charge of level V. She is a graduate teacher of English with vast experience. She has been working at the school for more than eight years. The material that she used for her vocabulary project was part of a short story. In her first class, as a recycling exercise, she elicited vocabulary from the students from the previous class. As the students produced the words, she wrote them on the blackboard. Later, along with the entire class and with the help of these words, Daniela tried to reconstruct part of the story they had dealt with in the class before. She then gave her students a new fragment of the story with new vocabulary items. She had anticipated they would not be familiar with these new terms. The students were encouraged to read that fragment silently on their own to answer some content-based questions.

In her second class, she asked her students to re-read the fragment to identify no more than seven words they did not know but thought might be important to better understand the extract. Relying on her intuition and experience with the group, she anticipated they would not know the meanings of these lexical terms. She provided them with the definitions of these words in random order without their entries. She then asked her students to match the words they had selected to these definitions. In hindsight, in her report, Daniela referred to this as a risky activity:

On the whole the aim of the task was fulfilled, although I felt that working with the list of definitions was risky. I would rather have carried out the activity using other materials like dictionaries.

After that, she elicited the words the students had chosen and wrote them on the blackboard. To help the students get their meanings, she prompted them to use the glossary she had given them and the reading passage as a context. Those words, whose definitions had not been included in the glossary, were introduced at that point. She said:

The task took longer than expected as some students selected words whose definitions were not in the list and I had to go back to the text again or explain those using different resources on the spot.

To explain their meanings, Daniela resorted to a number of assorted strategies such as: context, synonyms, opposites, syntax (morphology and function of words) and associations and



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linkages with new and previous knowledge for successful retrieval. For example, to clarify the meaning of “black-*tipped* bird” she asked her students:

Do you know the expression “in the *tip* of my tongue”? (She pointed to the tip of her tongue). Well, what is the *tip* of something? What about if the *tip* of that something is black? Then, you can say that this something is “black-*tipped*”

Daniela’s major source of vocabulary teaching seems to be contextualized reading in combination with the teaching of specific language learning strategies. Another main concern appears to be her belief that students should be given the tools to self-regulate their learning and develop self-autonomy to manage their own achievements. She claimed:

The choice of key words at the end was easy for them and they gave good feedback about the activity. It seems that they enjoyed working on their own and evaluate how much they know and what they need to learn.

Upon monitoring these activities, Daniela’s perception indicates that most of her students acknowledged the importance of being given the opportunity to make some decisions on their own for their language development.

## **Final Discussion**

A tentative conclusion from studying these data is that, at least, in this preliminary stage of the development of this project, the results obtained so far seem to be beneficial for both the students and teachers alike. However, in this section, some observations will be made regarding the implementation of this project and the results obtained.

Concerning the number of classes observed, it would have been interesting to sit in on more classes during and after the instrumentation of this project. This would have provided the researcher and the teachers in charge with more information about instances in action which could have been used to determine the extent of the impact of this project and its overall effectiveness. However, due to time constraints, this plan had to be called off.



For reasons of practicality, I chose only five teachers to work with in depth. Nevertheless, it would have been ideal to count on the information coming from more than five teachers to carry out this research. This would have enabled the evaluator to have a greater research scope, a fact which would have strengthened the validity of the study. However ideal, this scheme had to be overlooked considering the amount of time it took to design, implement and evaluate this project. As regards these teachers, the question will remain if, under similar conditions in the future, these same teachers will be able to design and put into action similar projects to the one carried out in this study by themselves, that is, without the supervision and guidance of a supervisor.

Notwithstanding these observations, close examination of the findings reveals that the implementation of this action research project, which aimed mainly at teaching/learning vocabulary, turned out to be effective. The underlying assumptions behind this work is that projects of this sort, where teachers are pushed to work collaboratively with another colleague, exchange ideas, negotiate meaning and put their creative potential at play provide a great contribution to the profession.

The framework used in this study could be replicated in other contexts to compare these results with others, coming from different teachers under different circumstances who might also be in vast need of developing their vocabulary teaching skills. See Luchini (2004), where the author conducted a similar action research project with a Chinese teacher of English and her students at Shanghai Normal University in China, and Luchini (2007), where the author carried out an action research project with another colleague in Argentina.

## **Conclusion**

This small-scale study reported the design, implementation and later evaluation of a vocabulary action research project carried out in a private middle school in Argentina. Emerging from the data analyzed, a number of assumptions can be made. First, when students are put to work on projects that integrate the teaching of specific language learning skills with direct vocabulary



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instruction, learners are pushed to take on responsibility for their own learning process and thus develop self-regulation skills, crucial aspects for second language acquisition to occur. Second, projects of this type whereby teachers are encouraged to reflect upon their own teaching practices and, as a result, engage in change by redirecting their instructional objectives to meet their students' needs are also valuable. These aspects, it might be argued, contribute to enhance teacher development.

The steps taken in this project are limited in the narrowest of its scope. Based on these findings, teachers and learners might interact with a proposal similar to the one deployed in this study. This may help explain how these steps might affect and shape acquisition over time before effectiveness can be claimed. The pedagogical implications discussed here need to be rigorously investigated under a broader range of contexts for verification.

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