

A Comparative Study of Writing and Reading Tasks: The Retention Effect on Incidental Second Language Vocabulary Acquisition

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Abstract: The role of writing and reading in second language (L2) acquisition has long intrigued researchers, particularly in the context of incidental vocabulary acquisition. This paper investigates how different language tasks—writing versus reading—affect the retention of newly encountered vocabulary in a second language. Through a review of empirical research and theoretical insights, the study explores which of the two tasks is more effective in promoting long-term retention of incidentally acquired vocabulary. It is found that while both tasks contribute significantly, writing tasks may offer deeper processing benefits, leading to more durable vocabulary retention. The paper concludes with pedagogical implications and recommendations for second language instruction.

Keywords: Writing and Reading Tasks; Second Language Acquisition; Vocabulary Learning; English Education; Comparative Study.

1. Introduction

Vocabulary acquisition is central to second language learning, influencing learners' proficiency in listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Incidental vocabulary acquisition, where learners acquire new words as a by-product of engaging in language tasks, has gained prominence due to its efficiency and authenticity. Among the variety of language tasks, reading and writing are often used as instructional tools, yet they differ in cognitive demand and learner engagement. This study compares the impact of writing and reading tasks on the retention of vocabulary incidentally acquired by L2 learners, seeking to determine which task fosters more enduring lexical knowledge.

2. Theoretical Background

2.1. Incidental Vocabulary Acquisition

Incidental vocabulary acquisition occurs when learners encounter new words unintentionally while focusing on meaning rather than form. It contrasts with intentional learning, where vocabulary study is the explicit goal. According to Krashen's Input Hypothesis (1985), comprehensible input is essential for language acquisition, positioning reading as a prime environment for incidental learning. However, the involvement load hypothesis (Laufer & Hulstijn, 2001) suggests that tasks with higher cognitive involvement led to better retention, which brings writing tasks into the spotlight.

2.2. Retention in Vocabulary Learning

Retention refers to the ability to recall and use newly learned vocabulary over time. Factors influencing retention include frequency of exposure, context richness, cognitive engagement, and task type. Retention is not only a function of memory but also of meaningful processing. Tasks that require deeper semantic or syntactic manipulation tend to enhance memory traces, thus supporting better retention.

3. Reading Tasks and Vocabulary Retention

Reading is a widely used method for incidental vocabulary learning. Through extensive reading, learners are exposed to a variety of lexical items in context, allowing for inference-based acquisition. Studies (e.g., Nation, 2001; Pigada & Schmitt, 2006) have demonstrated that reading can result in significant vocabulary gains, especially when the input is rich and repetitive.

However, retention from reading tasks may be limited by several factors. Firstly, word encounters in texts are often insufficient in number for durable retention. Secondly, learners may not pay enough attention to unfamiliar words unless tasks are designed to promote noticing. Lastly, passive exposure in reading does not guarantee active processing, which is crucial for memory consolidation.

4. Writing Tasks and Vocabulary Retention

In contrast to reading, writing requires active retrieval, manipulation, and integration of vocabulary. Writing tasks such as summarizing, story completion, or guided composition force learners to produce language output, often involving newly encountered words. This aligns with Swain's Output Hypothesis (1995), which posits that language production encourages syntactic and lexical processing.

Writing demands higher involvement load—specifically in terms of need, search, and evaluation—than reading. Learners often need to recall words, assess their appropriateness, and modify usage based on context. These processes not only foster deeper lexical processing but also reinforce long-term retention.

Empirical studies support this claim. For example, Keating (2008) found that learners who wrote essays using target vocabulary retained more words after two weeks than those who only read texts containing those words. Similarly, Waring and Takaki (2003) reported stronger long-term

retention in learners engaged in productive tasks compared to receptive ones.

5. Comparative Studies

Numerous comparative studies have explored the differential impact of reading and writing tasks on vocabulary retention. Webb (2005) conducted an experiment where participants were divided into groups engaging in reading-only tasks and writing tasks using target vocabulary. The writing group outperformed the reading group in both immediate and delayed post-tests.

In another study by Barcroft (2007), learners were exposed to novel vocabulary through either reading sentences or writing compositions. The writing group demonstrated superior retention, attributed to higher cognitive engagement and contextual personalization of the vocabulary.

Nonetheless, some research presents mixed results. Kim (2008) found that while writing tasks led to better productive knowledge, reading tasks were equally effective for receptive vocabulary retention. This suggests that the nature of the task may align with different dimensions of lexical knowledge—writing for productive use, and reading for recognition.

6. Cognitive Processes Underlying Task Performance

The difference in retention effects can be attributed to cognitive depth. Writing engages deeper processing by demanding learners to search for and retrieve words, apply them in meaningful contexts, and evaluate their accuracy. These cognitive operations strengthen neural connections, increasing the likelihood of long-term retention.

On the other hand, reading often involves shallow processing, especially when the primary focus is comprehension rather than vocabulary learning. Unless attention is explicitly directed toward new vocabulary (e.g., through glosses or post-reading activities), the depth of processing remains low, leading to weaker memory traces.

7. Pedagogical Implications

Understanding the differential impacts of reading and writing tasks on vocabulary retention has practical implications for language instruction.

Firstly, writing tasks should be integrated into vocabulary teaching strategies to enhance retention. Tasks such as sentence construction, paragraph writing, or peer-reviewed compositions provide opportunities for learners to engage deeply with new vocabulary.

Secondly, reading should not be dismissed; rather, it should be supported with interventions that promote vocabulary noticing. Techniques like marginal glossing, vocabulary pre-teaching, and post-reading discussions can raise lexical awareness.

Thirdly, a combination of both reading and writing may yield the best results. Reading can introduce vocabulary in

context, while writing can consolidate it. A task-based approach that integrates reading input followed by writing output may maximize retention.

8. Limitations and Future Research

While writing tasks appear to be more effective for vocabulary retention, several factors can moderate this effect, including learners' proficiency levels, motivation, and prior knowledge. Additionally, not all writing tasks are equally effective; guided tasks may lead to better outcomes than free writing.

Future research should explore task design more deeply, examining which specific features (e.g., task complexity, feedback, topic familiarity) enhance retention. Longitudinal studies are also needed to assess the durability of retention over months or years.

9. Conclusion

This comparative study highlights that writing tasks are generally more effective than reading tasks in promoting long-term retention of incidentally acquired vocabulary in a second language. The active, productive, and cognitively demanding nature of writing contributes to deeper lexical processing and stronger memory traces. While reading remains an important avenue for vocabulary exposure, it may not suffice on its own for durable retention. A balanced instructional approach that integrates both reading and writing can better support comprehensive and lasting vocabulary acquisition in second language learners.

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