EMI and facilitating vocabulary growth of proficient L2 users

Piet Murre *Driestar University, Gouda, The Netherlands*

Introduction

Using English (as a) medium of instruction (EMI) has gained currency in the Netherlands over the last two decades. While in EFL conditions the initial L2 level of pupils in primary and secondary education generally is low, EMI in higher education reaches students with more advanced levels. At these levels Nation (2001) suggests that further development of a student's vocabulary can hardly be promoted efficiently by explicit teaching of words. Sight vocabularies may vary widely and by definition it concerns infrequent words. Pellicer-Sánchez and Schmitt, however, draw attention to words in the so-called mid frequency range, which 'is necessary for learners to know, but which often receives little attention' (2010: 31). Dutch student teachers of English in the final year of their teacher qualifications bachelor course generally are C2 level speakers. In the case of using EMI for general teacher education modules (i.e. focussing on non-linguistic subject matter) specific vocabulary may be intrinsic to the courses. It is therefore conceivable that even these advanced students benefit from explicit noticing or teaching lexis. As 'there is little research into the impact of EMI on how much English students learn, and how much content they absorb' (Galloway 2017) an exploratory study may shed some light.

Procedure

Students were taught four modules with two lessons each in five consecutive months. The 17 students (10 female, 7 male, aged 20-50) received therefore 24 hours of spoken input and interaction in English while focussing mainly on the course content proper. The module books themselves were in Dutch (their L1) as these were used for other groups as well. Students were asked to put unknown words they came across while listening and interacting into their personal dictionaries. Sometimes I (as their teacher) wrote down words on the whiteboard or used other ways of making them notice words. They handed in their list at the end of each lesson. After the third lesson I gave them the cumulative list at the start of the new lesson, in order to make their learning more effective and efficient. After the final (8th) lesson students received a cumulative list and ticked the box whether they knew the words receptively, productively or not at all. All words were analysed according to their frequency band (1K-10K, www.lextutor.ca) and whether they were content-specific.

Results

The 17 students collectively wrote down 129 words: 24 content words and 105 general words. This does not seem to be much vocabulary for 24 hours spoken input. It probaby reflects my impression that students often did not write down words that seemed to be unknown to them and that I had to draw attention to specific items. The majority of the 129 words were mentioned by only one or two students (81); 19 words by three to seven students, and 24 words were written down by eight to thirteen students.

The self-reported knowledge after the final lesson is 74 words known receptively and 51 productively, on average. Judging from the 24 words written down by at least ten students, learning was limited as most students still do not know most items either productively or receptively after the lesson series.

Remarkably, 83 words out of the 129 words (65%) come from the 3K-9K (i.e. mid) frequency range. 46 words could not be found in the lextutor frequency table (e.g. insipid, leeway, some content words).

Conclusions and implications

The frequency range of words unknown to at least some of the students is wide and contains many words in the mid-frequencies (Pellicer-Sánchez & Schmitt, 2010). Apparently, even for C2-level speakers these frequency bands might be worth paying attention to. Deliberate and incidental noticing of words from spoken input seems to be difficult, which makes sense as we normally listen for understanding and not for every single word. In this exploratory study noticing depended to a considerable extent on external clues provided by the teacher or fellow students. There is therefore an urgent need for effective and efficient means to help students notice unknown words in spoken discourse. Furthermore, in order to be effective in terms of learning and acquisition more should be done besides mere noticing, which supports vocabulary learning principles as repetition and the intensity and quality of the encounters. Finally, the small number of content words found in this study makes it possible to teach these explicitly to subsequent cohorts which will follow the same courses.

<div align="right">p.m.murre@driestar-educatief.nl</div>

References

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