Vocabulary learning under three different language conditions in foreign/second language (L2) English classrooms in Sweden

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Abstract

Although research indicates cognitive (Wu et al., 2013) and social (Cummins, 2017) benefits of drawing on students’ whole language repertoires, and vocabulary experts pointing to the merit of using L1s to establish initial form-meaning mapping (Schmitt, 2008), classroom-based research on what teaching/learning practices may be effective in multilingual classrooms is scarce.

We present initial results from an intervention study aimed at comparing the effects on vocabulary learning of three week-long teaching/learning conditions: English Only (EO); English and Swedish (E&S); and English, Swedish and any Other language(s) (E&S&O) that learners know.

Participants are learners (age 15-16) in six intact classes. So far, results have been computed for three of them (N = 62). Teaching materials for each of the three treatment conditions comprised (1) a text, including 12 controlled and piloted English target words in context, (2) vocabulary exercises and (3) vocabulary lists covering the target words, the latter being either EO, E&S, or E&S&O. We used a counter-balanced, repeated-measures design, featuring proficiency test–pretest–3 x treatment–immediate posttest–delayed posttest. Learners were instructed to follow the imposed condition each week.

Analyses of gain scores (pretest-immediate posttest; pretest-delayed posttest) showed that all groups performed the best in the E&S condition, irrespective what week this treatment condition was. Thus, presenting English vocabulary with Swedish translation equivalents (E&S) resulted in higher gain scores for all three classes. Only one class was used to the E&S approach prior to intervention. Correlations between an English proficiency test and gain scores were observed at .67 and .81, indicating that gain scores increased as a function of proficiency. In our presentation, results also for the remaining 3 classes will be reported (Total N = c. 120), and factors such as language dominance, preferred teaching/learning approach and perceived learning will be incorporated as covariates in the analysis.