

The Reality, Robustness, and Possible Superiority of Incidental Vocabulary Acquisition: Another Look at File and Adams (2010)

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File and Adams (2010) conclude that their data confirms the superiority of form-focused vocabulary instruction over incidental acquisition. In our view, their data actually confirms the reality, robustness, and possible superiority of incidental acquisition.

Their subjects heard two passages read to them that contained target words that were set in bold and were explained either before or during the course of the reading. There were also target words in each passage that were not explained or set in bold, as a test of incidental acquisition. The gains in word knowledge were indeed greater for the taught words, but the gains for the incidental words were impressive, despite the fact that the conditions for acquisition were far from ideal. In addition, incidental learning might have been more efficient: There was more time devoted to the taught words.

Subjects improved 3.4 points on incidental words, from pre- to delayed post-test (from 19.6 to 23; table 2; perfect score = 60). Each fully acquired or learned word was worth five points, with fewer points awarded for partial knowledge. Thus, the gain for incidental word learning was equivalent to about 2/3 of the full meaning of one word, or an overall gain of about 6%, a result remarkably similar to that found for children reading in English as a first language (Nagy, Herman and Anderson, 1985).

This is quite impressive considering that the reading was not self-selected, and subjects had to follow along while the text was read to them. Also, the passages were demanding: Our analysis of Article 1 using the Text Word Frequency Analyzer at <http://www.edict.com.hk> revealed that only 78% of the words were from the most frequent 2000. Students were given a reading comprehension test, but File and Adams did not share the results.

In contrast, under the "isolated" focus-on-form condition (words taught before the passage was read), the gain was 7.1 points (18 on the pre-test to 25.1 on the delayed post-test), equivalent to about one and half words, a 12% gain. In the "integrated" focus-on-form condition, with words explained during the course of reading the passage, the gain was 6.3 (18.3 to 24.6), or one and a third words, a 10.5% gain.

The gain for instructed words was greater, but students had more exposure to these words: Considerable time was taken to explain their meanings (although the exact amount of additional time used to explain meanings was not specified; File and Adams, pp. 231-232). Thus, it may be the case that the incidental condition was as efficient or even more efficient than the focus-on-form conditions, in terms of vocabulary acquisition per unit of time.¹

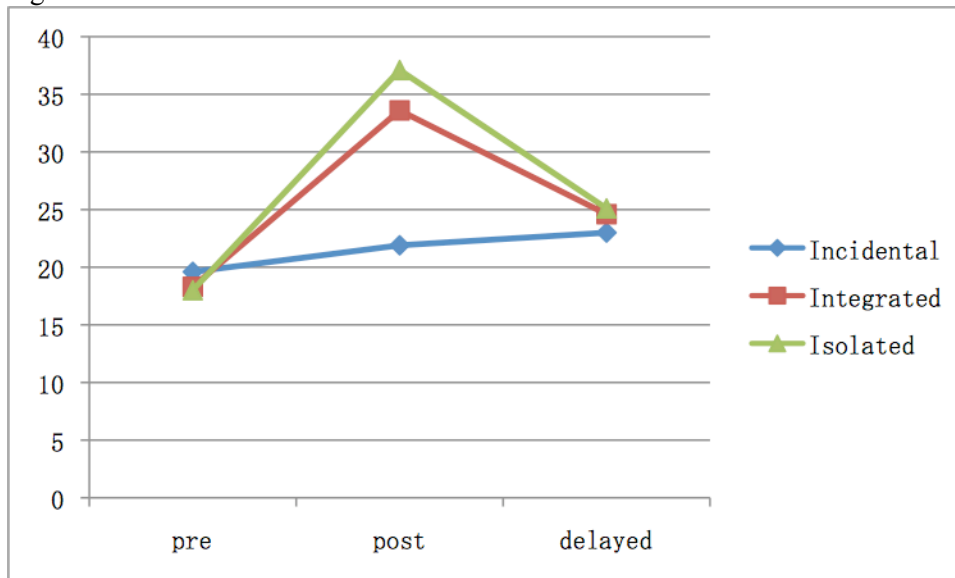
It should also be pointed out that the focus-on-form words were rapidly forgotten, with scores plummeting between the immediate post-test and the delayed post-test, given only 16 days after the treatment. This was not the case for incidentally acquired words (see table 1 and figure 1 below, from data in File and Adams, table 2).

Table 1: Pretest, Posttest and Delayed Test results.

	pre	post	delayed
Incidental	19.6	21.9	23
Integrated	18.3	33.6	24.6
Isolated	18	37.1	25.1

Focus on form conditions: integrated, isolated (see text for explanation)

Figure 1: Test Results



DISCUSSION

Even if it were established that focus-on-form vocabulary development is as efficient or even more efficient than incidental learning, incidental acquisition has major advantages. Reading results in much more than vocabulary development: it contributes to grammatical competence, writing ability, spelling, and more knowledge of the world (Krashen, 2004). In addition, it is, for most people, interesting and pleasant, making it likely that acquirers will continue doing it. The same cannot be said for form-based activities.

It has been hypothesized that language acquisition proceeds optimally when acquirers encounter a great deal of input that is comprehensible and extremely interesting, even compelling (Krashen, 2004). It is unlikely that the passages used in this study were compelling, they were difficult, and the segments were short. If we want to see the full potential of reading for vocabulary development, we should examine vocabulary acquisition in situations in which these conditions are met.

NOTE

(1) Mason's studies consistently show that developing vocabulary knowledge through hearing stories is more efficient than focus-on-form vocabulary exercises (Mason 2007; Mason and Krashen, 2004; Mason, Vanata, Jander, Borsch, and Krashen, 2009).

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