



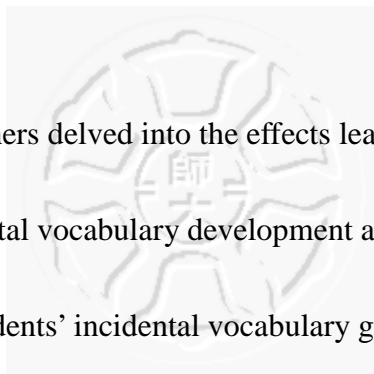
Chapter Two

Literature Review

Many previous studies have generally revealed that reading is an important tool for L2 learners' lexical development. While learners are processing a certain text mainly for its global comprehension, they are reported to incidentally gain a statistically significant number of unfamiliar words. During the reading process, many relevant factors involved are likely to affect the result of students' incidental vocabulary learning. In order to explore the effects these factors may possibly have on students' vocabulary gain and retention through reading, especially those of cultural familiarity in planned reading on college freshmen's incidental vocabulary learning, the researcher first reviews previous studies and discuss the relationship between topic familiarity and vocabulary acquisition in section 2.1. Other variables affecting incidental lexical development such as participants' background knowledge of the text, their general reading proficiency, passage comprehension will be detailed respectively in section 2.2, 2.3, 2.4.

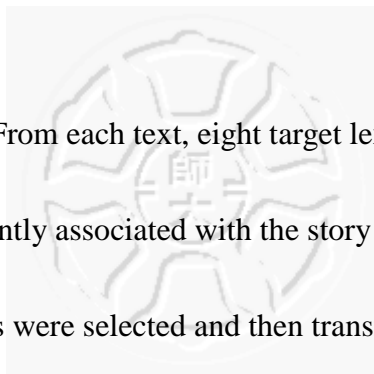
2.1 Topic Familiarity and Vocabulary Acquisition

Most of the past studies (Asher, 1980; Robinson, 1995; Barry & Lazarte, 1998; Nassaji, 2002) revolved around the relationship between students' familiarity with topics of certain passages and their global comprehension of these chosen texts, but

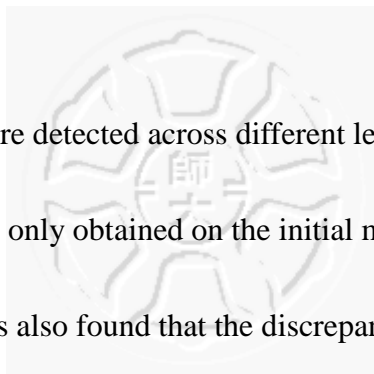


few of the previous researchers delved into the effects learners' topic familiarity would have on their incidental vocabulary development and retention. Is a familiar topic more beneficial to students' incidental vocabulary gain and retention than a less familiar one, or the opposite? To what extent would the effects of topic familiarity be? Do these two kinds of topics exercise similar influence on this vocabulary learning, or topic familiarity is simply not counted as a factor? Different researchers and scholars adopted distinct stances on this issue. It has remained contentious and no obvious and absolute conclusions have been drawn yet. In this section, the researcher plans to review their diverse viewpoints and discuss Pulido's (2004) and Hong's (2005) studies.

Pulido (2004) conducted a study to investigate the effects of topic familiarity on incidental vocabulary acquisition through reading. Participants were ninety-nine native speakers of English who learned Spanish as an L2. They were recruited from three distinct university course levels – 43 students in the beginning level, 39 in the intermediate level and 17 in the advanced level. During session 1, they completed an L2 passage sight vocabulary test, a topic familiarity questionnaire, and an Adult Basic Learning Examination reading proficiency test (Karlsen & Gardner, 1990). In session 2, they read four contrived narratives, two familiar and the other two unfamiliar ones. After that, they were instructed to recall the content of those stories in L1 without

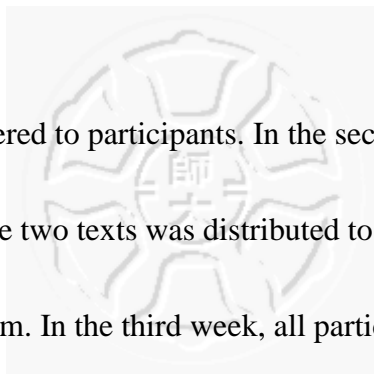


referring back to passages. From each text, eight target lexical items which represented concepts frequently associated with the story scenarios were chosen. In total, thirty two target words were selected and then transformed into nonsense words to ensure that no participants would have any prior word knowledge. Two days after session 2, two test formats, translation production and translation recognition, were administered to assess participants' vocabulary gain of 32 target nonsense words. In the translation production task, participants were required to provide a translation, definition, or explanation of the nonsense words in their native language. The translation recognition task was presented in the form of multiple choice in which they needed to recognize L1 translation equivalents of target lexical items. In addition, they were also required to complete a measure of intake, which verified whether participants could discriminate words presented in the four texts read two days ago from others which were not. In session 4, which was held 28 days after reading the passages, the same instruments (translation production and translation recognition) were employed to measure subjects' retention of target words. Based on the findings of this study, the impact of topic familiarity on vocabulary gain and retention was not consistently supported. Participants did remember slightly more words from the more familiar texts than from the less familiar ones in translation recognition task. However, in terms of translation production task, hardly any notable differences in gain or



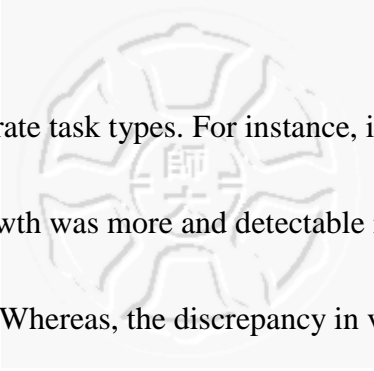
retention of target words were detected across different levels of topic familiarity. Furthermore, this effect was only obtained on the initial measure of gain, and faded away as time went by. It was also found that the discrepancy between the scores received 2 and 28 days after reading reached significance when participants read with more familiar stories. In terms of intake, it was less closely related to the level of passage comprehension in more familiar texts than in less familiar texts.

Hong (2005) conducted a study with the intention of examining the effects of different topic familiarity in planned reading on vocabulary gain and retention. He wondered whether articles of different topics in textbooks and EFL readers would facilitate students' incidental lexical development differently and attempted to detect which type of topics, familiar or unfamiliar ones, would be more conducive to their vocabulary gain and retention. Subjects were 170 vocational high school students in northern Taiwan who were of mixed proficiency levels, mainly from elementary to intermediate levels. Based on their scores on a GEPT reading proficiency test (elementary level), they were further divided into high and low groups, with 34 students for each group. All of them participated in the five-week experiment. In the first week, two tests, a vocabulary size test and a reading section of a published General English Proficiency Test in Taiwan (GEPT), and one topic familiarity questionnaire, which was utilized to determine the most familiar text and the least



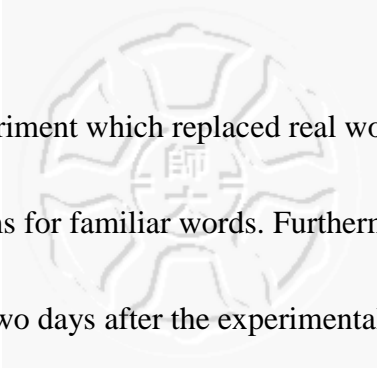
familiar one, were administered to participants. In the second week, a pretest on 20 target words chosen from the two texts was distributed to all participants to measure their prior knowledge of them. In the third week, all participants read both selected articles mainly for the gist and finished a reading comprehension test and an immediate test on those target words. After two weeks, they sat a posttest to assess their retention of the same target words. Paired-Samples t-tests were applied to compare their scores on pretest, immediate test and posttest to get their vocabulary gain and retention. Pearson's correlations coefficient was employed to analyze the relationship between topic familiarity and their vocabulary learning. The results revealed that topic familiarity in planned reading did significantly affect participants' vocabulary learning. On the whole, participants' scores in vocabulary gain and retention from the more familiar text were significantly higher than those in the less familiar text, but the scores of retention were weaker due to the attrition in vocabulary gain over time.

Concluded from the above discussion, topic familiarity was proven to create some degree of positive effects on students' incidental vocabulary learning through reading. However, the effects disappeared over time due to the anticipated attrition. Apart from those common findings, the intensity of the influence varied from one study to another, which might be attributed to different participants at diverse



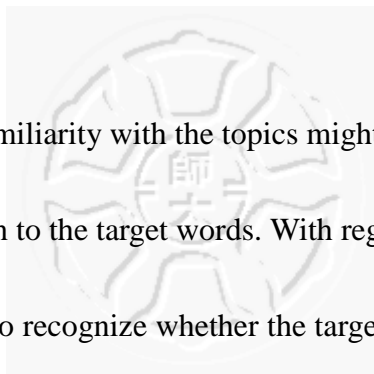
proficiency levels and disparate task types. For instance, in Pulido's study (2004), participants' vocabulary growth was more and detectable in more familiar texts in the translation recognition task. Whereas, the discrepancy in vocabulary gain between familiar and unfamiliar texts was barely detectable in translation production task.

Besides, some limitations were embedded in Pulido's (2004) and in Hong's (2005) study; and they consequently influenced the results and their generalization to other groups of subjects. For example, using multiple-choice task to measure participants' vocabulary gain of the target words might lead to the guessing effect in Pulido's research (2004). In addition, the number of subjects for each proficiency level varied from beginning to the advanced levels. She only utilized one type of genre – narratives, which was not comprehensive in terms of collecting data. Those articles were fabricated, which could not fully represent the impact authentic texts would bring to subjects. Next, target words were transformed into and replaced by nonsense words. This was inappropriate to some extent because the objective of teaching should lie in providing the right input to our students, not the wrong one. When students accidentally picked up the wrong exposure, it would be detrimental to their subsequent vocabulary learning. Nagy, Anderson and Herman (1987) indicated that the real process of learning words from context was concerned with obtaining new concepts and new labels. The difficulty of learning from context would be

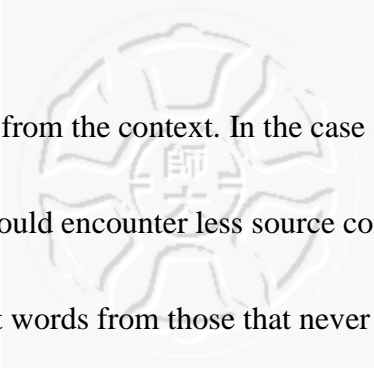


underestimated by any experiment which replaced real words with nonsense words or adopted unfamiliar synonyms for familiar words. Furthermore, the vocabulary gain measure was administered two days after the experimental reading. The temporal distance between the reading and vocabulary test would lead to some degree of attrition to subjects' memory of those target lexical items and these nonsense words made themselves even harder to recall. In Hong's study (2005), he only included participants at intermediate and elementary levels, which left the advanced learners unexplored. The number of each level was also not big enough. The two selected articles were distributed to them simultaneously, which might produce fatigue effect on participants for they needed to do the same task twice with two varied texts. Then it would indirectly affect the results to a certain degree. Besides, the selection of only one article for the more familiar topic and one for the less familiar topic was not sufficient. To yield more reliable results, Hong (2005) could utilize two for both the more familiar and the less familiar topics. Last but not least, the number of the occurrence for each target word was rare, ranging from once to twice at most. Such inadequate exposure and input would greatly diminish the likelihood of participants' lexical growth.

Different from the arguments mentioned above, other researchers maintained that familiar topics might not necessarily facilitate a person's lexical development through



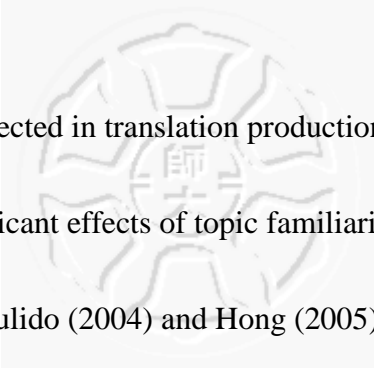
reading. On the contrary, familiarity with the topics might prevent him or her from allocating adequate attention to the target words. With regard to lexical intake, which accounted for one's ability to recognize whether the target words appeared in the texts, more proficient learners might not need to allocate too much attention to those target words because they could easily grasp the message in the case of more familiar passages. As a result, they could possibly fail to recognize the word forms of these target lexical items and the first "noticing" step in incidental vocabulary learning was not fulfilled. Previous researchers brought forth their explanations to expound this phenomenon (Graesser & Nakamura, 1982; Graesser, Woll, Kowalski, & Smith, 1980; Rizzella & O'Brien, 2002; Yekovich & Walker, 1986). They claimed that when strong readers performed the task of distinguishing between words presented in those passages and those that were not in more familiar scenario passages, they might behave similarly to L1 readers, who were inclined to experience source confusion because there was higher level of competition between activation from background knowledge and activation from episodic memory gained from text. In other words, fluent readers might have difficulty differentiating between words actually and explicitly presented and those which were not explicitly stated within the article but were closely associated with the theme and concepts of the text. Consequently, they might fail to clearly notice the outward manifestation of the target lexical item, let



alone acquiring these words from the context. In the case of less familiar contexts, good learners presumably would encounter less source confusion and thus could more easily discriminate the target words from those that never appeared in the passages. In this way, they could perceive the word form more clearly and thus move forward to associate it with its meaning and concept introduced in the context.

In the study of Paribakht & Wesche (2000), some participants received the Reading Only treatment in which they read the texts mainly for the global comprehension. The results showed that learners could successfully achieve this reading goal by using world knowledge and familiarity with the topics to compensate for the gaps in unknown words. In this way, they did not have to deal with these unfamiliar specific lexical items. Therefore, participants' retention of most target words learned in the Reading Only condition remained at the recognition level.

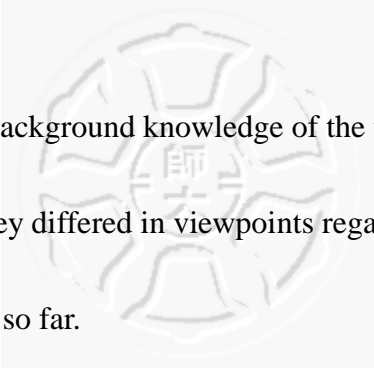
Based on the foregoing discussion pertinent to the relationship between topic familiarity and vocabulary acquisition, unanimous agreements or results were not obtained. Due to the discrepancy in the number of subjects investigated, in the proficiency level groups they were assigned to, and in the various tasks eliciting their responses, disparate degrees of the influence topic familiarity exerted on participants' lexical development were reported. Pulido (2004) found that only slightly more words were learned from the more familiar texts in translation recognition task, but no



notable differences were detected in translation production task. As for Hong (2005), his findings presented significant effects of topic familiarity on participants' vocabulary learning. Both Pulido (2004) and Hong (2005) found that the effects faded away due to attrition over time. However, other researchers claimed that familiar topic may not certainly contribute to vocabulary gains for participants may take advantage of their knowledge about the topic to bridge over the gap caused by unknown words and easily grasp the global messages of the text, which consequently made it unnecessary for them to devote the amount of attention which vocabulary learning required. Moreover, the source confusion generated by more familiar topics led to difficulty in distinguishing words explicitly presented within the text and others closely associated with the theme of the passage. This phenomenon prevented participants from retaining a clear word form and thus they failed to connect the form and the meaning.

2.2 Background Knowledge and Vocabulary Acquisition

Previous empirical studies were more concerned with the positive effects of background knowledge on L2 text comprehension (Barry & Lazarte, 1998; Carrell, 1987; Chen & Donin, 1997; Hudson, 1982). The results indicated that as long as readers had some prior knowledge of the topic, they could perform better in grasping text comprehension. Nonetheless, only few researchers discussed and probed into the



relationship between one's background knowledge of the texts and lexical development from them. They differed in viewpoints regarding this issue and no consensus had been reached so far.

Some scholars claimed that conceptual and background knowledge of the text was beneficial to students' vocabulary development through reading. Adams (1982) contended that when learners were instructed to infer the meaning of certain words, they could perform more successfully if they were aware of the topic. In the realm of vocabulary acquisition through native language reading, the results of some studies (Diakidoy ,1998; Nagy, Anderson, & Herman, 1987) indicated that more lexical gains would be obtained when learners had access to more concepts introduced in the texts than when they were unfamiliar with them. According to Nation and Coady (1988), good readers possessed background knowledge of a selected text and were inclined to utilize it to process the given text and anticipate the type of vocabulary which they would encounter in the later discourse. Such expectation could facilitate students' inference of word meanings from the context.

From the perspective of second language reading, Pulido (2002) conducted a study to examine the effects of topic familiarity on lexical inferencing and vocabulary retention (as cited from Pulido, 2004). The results showed that subjects remembered more target words from more familiar texts. Participants' background knowledge was

again proven to be conducive to vocabulary learning in narrative passages.

Then Pulido (2004) investigated the effects of cultural background knowledge on immediate incidental vocabulary gain through reading brief narratives.

Twenty-three high-intermediate adult Spanish learners were recruited as participants.

They first completed a background questionnaire and a L2 passage sight vocabulary

test. Two weeks later, they read online two passages depicting culturally familiar or

culturally unfamiliar versions of everyday scenarios and finished the reading

comprehension questions and the vocabulary test about the knowledge of five target

nonsense words in each passage. After the vocabulary gain measure, each participant

completed a retrospective think-aloud to reveal how they made sense of the passage

and the target nonsense words. The findings indicated that cultural familiarity did

have significant effects on vocabulary gains; in other words, test takers performed

better in recognizing target nonsense words from the culturally familiar versions of

the passage scenarios. This further supported the assumption that background

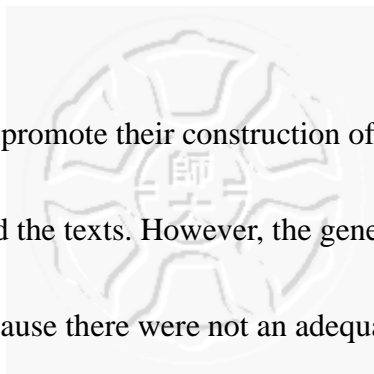
knowledge could exert influence on L2 incidental vocabulary gains through reading,

extending and corroborating previous findings revealed by Pulido (2002), which

demonstrated a strong topic familiarity effect, instead of cultural familiarity, produced

on short-term incidental gains. She finally suggested that language practitioners

familiarize learners with certain cultural information and encourage awareness of

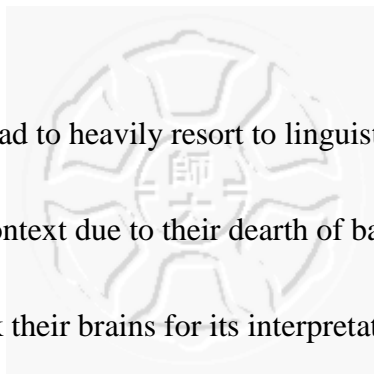


passage sight vocabulary to promote their construction of richer mental representations of words and the texts. However, the generalization of this empirical study was rather limited because there were not an adequate number of subjects.

Besides, only learners of high-intermediate level were involved in the experiment. If more participants from different proficiency levels were there, the findings would be applied more widely.

Hong's study (2005) also demonstrated that learners' background information about a text provided a robust support for vocabulary gain and retention. He suggested that teachers provide students, especially low-proficiency readers, with background knowledge when teaching unfamiliar texts. In this way, students could make use of it to help them learn new lexical items more easily and retain them better.

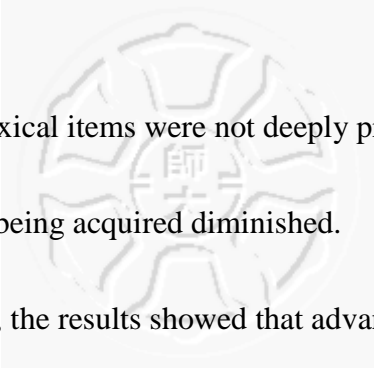
Contrary to the opinions mentioned above, other researchers maintained that background knowledge did not necessarily enhance one's vocabulary learning. Cairns, Cowart and Jablon (1981) suggested that lexical items encountered in highly predictable contexts might be easily comprehended but their saliency in memory might only reach a low level. In other words, if learners cope with articles which they could tap plenty of world knowledge to, they might readily decipher the meanings of those unknown words but only obtain little retention for these items. In brief, the guessing would be easily accomplished, but the quality of word learning might be



poor. However, if learners had to heavily resort to linguistic bottom-up processing for the comprehension of the context due to their dearth of background knowledge and consequently needed to rack their brains for its interpretation, guessing might be more strenuous but vocabulary learning would be greater.

Kammeenui et al. (1982) explored the impact of redundant information in the text and implied that its positive effects would “mask the effects of vocabulary learning.” The findings of Mondria and Wit-De Boer (1991) and Parry (1991) revealed that familiar contexts enhanced one’s reading comprehension more than they did to his or her vocabulary learning. It seemed that learners did not necessarily notice novel lexical items when these words appeared to be redundant with their contexts. That is to say, slightly less supportive contexts, or a mix of context types, may hinder reading but might accelerate the rate of vocabulary acquisition.

Other studies by Haastrup (1989), Hulstijn et al. (1996) also found that when readers were told to deal with articles mainly for the purpose of achieving global comprehension, they easily guessed the gist without paying enough attention to certain unfamiliar words when they appeared to be more familiar with the content of a certain passage. Jiang (2000) also suggested learners’ familiarity with content of a topic would help them get the messages readily, which further reduced the amount of attention needed for new words and surrounding information embedded within the



context. Once these novel lexical items were not deeply processed to a moderate degree, the chances of their being acquired diminished.

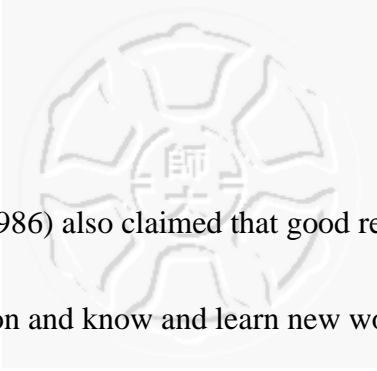
In Parry's study (1997), the results showed that advanced learners who possessed enough background information about a certain topic achieved only low vocabulary gain because they did not need to pay much attention to unfamiliar new words when the text was comprehensible and its gist was easy to get.

With regard to the effects of one's background knowledge about the assigned passages on learners' vocabulary learning through reading, researchers vacillated between its facilitative and debilitating influence. Some of the reviewed studies presented positive effects for these researchers believed that more background knowledge would enhance the inferencing process. On the contrary, other researchers argued that background knowledge could facilitate the attainment of global comprehension, which, in turn, caused learners to pay less attention to the unknown words for they did not have to resort to bottom-up processing to get the main ideas. In this way, those unfamiliar lexical items were processed to a more superficial level and were less likely to be learned.

2.3 Reading Proficiency and Vocabulary Acquisition

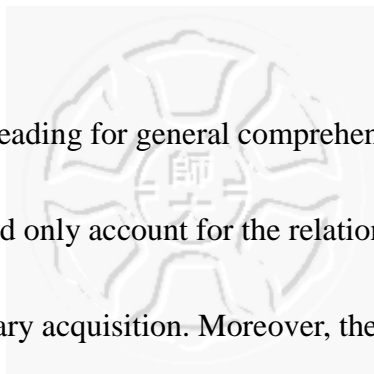
In terms of the relationship between reading proficiency and vocabulary acquisition, it is generally predicted and assumed that more proficient learners can outperform their less proficient counterparts in lexical development. Perfetti and Lesgold (1977, 1979) and Pulido (2004) maintained that efficient readers possessed superior decoding skills and larger sight vocabulary than weak readers. In addition, they could better detect the relationships among words, phrases, and sentences; and were more competent to construct a coherent and meaningful representation of the text. Furthermore, due to their better automaticity in lower processing, such as recognizing letters and the form of a word, and assessing a word's meaning, more attentional resources were released to help learners interpret sentence and discourse thought-pattern, integrate the ideas and get the whole picture of the assigned text. This in turn contributed to a greater chance of successful lexical inferencing in unknown words. Hayes-Roth and Hayes-Roth (1977) and Abramovici (1984) maintained that lexical information was found to “persist in memory representations of meaning,” that is to say, better readers were inclined to remember the words presented within the text together with their meanings. In contrast, poor readers did not hold the edges like those aforementioned and were predisposed to be hindered in local and global comprehension, which further hampered their lexical inferencing and integration process. Therefore, their possibilities of lexical development through reading were

greatly minimized.



Similarly, Stanovich (1986) also claimed that good readers could both achieve better passage comprehension and know and learn new words more easily because they were more competent to make use of context in difficult passages than their less able counterparts and they possessed more free attention to do so. Their ease in recognizing plenty of vocabulary effortlessly further produced more cognitive processing resources available for deciphering the meanings of unfamiliar lexical items. Other researchers (Herman, 1985; Konopak, 1988b) also reported the effect of reading ability in their studies and verified Stanovich's (1986) viewpoints.

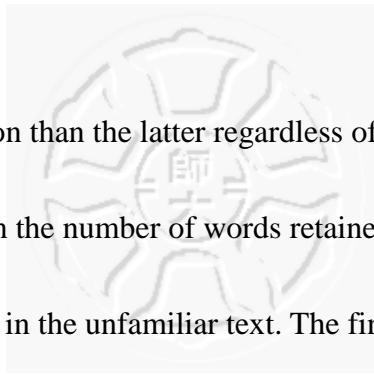
The results in the study of Swanborn and Gloppe (2002) revealed that learners' reading proficiency level played a significant role in incidental vocabulary learning. This study was conducted to investigate whether diverse reading purposes could affect the amount of vocabulary growth. Involved in this experiment were 223 sixth-grade elementary students, 96.4 percent of them were native speakers of Dutch. They were oriented to process authentic Dutch texts for different purposes—for pleasure, for learning about the topic of the text, and for global text comprehension. The findings showed that learners' general reading ability were an influential determining factor in all these three settings. Poor readers hardly learn any words incidentally, while their proficient counterparts were able to define up to 27 of every



100 unknown words when reading for general comprehension of the text. However, the results of this study could only account for the relationship between L1 reading proficiency and L1 vocabulary acquisition. Moreover, the participants were only elementary school students, and not all of them were native Dutch speakers. These drawbacks could limit the generalization of the findings to other age groups who spoke different first languages in other regions of the world.

Chern's research (1993) was relevant to the exploration of the impact general L2 reading ability might have on vocabulary learning in lexical inferencing. Her results revealed that increases in general L2 reading proficiency contributed to increases in lexical inferencing and vocabulary gain. Kilian, Stallman and others (1995) found in their study that children with higher reading proficiency were more competent to obtain information about word meanings from their contrived test contexts than their less proficient counterparts. Pulido (2002) also found similar results in her research. However, Chern's experiment (1993) only utilized expository texts. The adoption of diverse genres of articles was suggested for future studies to elicit more reliable and dependable results.

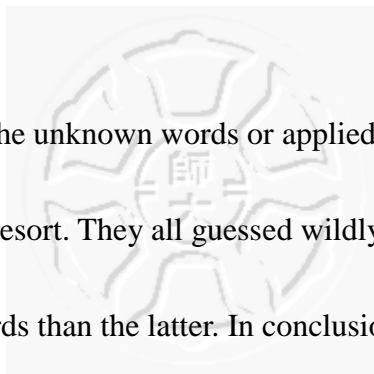
Hong (2005) revealed in his findings that readers' different reading proficiency affected vocabulary gain in both more and less familiar text. When comparing intermediate and elementary readers' performance, the former achieved higher



vocabulary gain and retention than the latter regardless of the topic familiarity.

Furthermore, the disparity in the number of words retained by these two proficiency groups reached significance in the unfamiliar text. The findings of Pulido's study (2004) further showed that L2 reading proficiency was more closely correlated with learners' vocabulary growth in the less familiar texts.

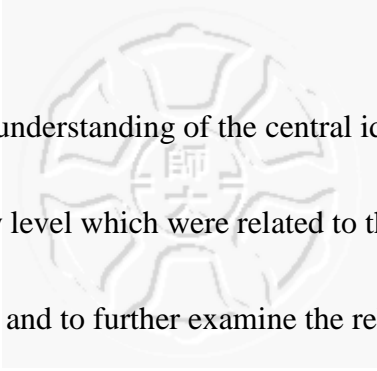
Though the studies mentioned above supported the idea that reading proficiency exerted positive effects on one's lexical development, the findings from quite a few existing studies contradicted this stance. Bensoussan and Laufer (1984) pointed out that one's general reading proficiency did not have an impact on his or her ability to guess unfamiliar words. They attempted to explore whether meanings of certain types of vocabulary were more easily deciphered than others, and whether better readers would take advantage of the context more effectively to infer novel lexical items than their less able counterparts, and to what degree could the context facilitate this process. Sixty first-year students participated in this study and tried to translate a list of 70 words into the mother tongue in the first meeting. Seven days later, the same word list along with the addition of a text containing all the 70 target items was distributed to these subjects who were required to do the same translation task. The results revealed that context could only account for lexical guessing in 13 percent of the responses for only 24 percent of the words. Both the good and average readers utilized similar



strategies such as ignoring the unknown words or applied morphological and contextual clues as the last resort. They all guessed wildly in spite of the fact that the former may know more words than the latter. In conclusion, no difference could be perceived in the guessing behavior of all the learners and in the number of successfully decoded lexical items.

Other researchers implied that lexical inferencing patterns and their success were not necessarily relevant to L2 reading ability. Nagy et al. (1987) reported that no significant relationship was detected between reading ability and incidental word learning (as cited from Swanborn & Gloppe, 1999). Still other researches revealed that learners of all proficiency levels sometimes tended to neglect some unknown lexical items when they were regarded as too difficult (Huckin & Bloch, 1993; De Bot et al., 1997; Paribakht & Wesche, 1999), inessential, or not pertinent because the text messages were readily grasped (Hulstijn et al, 1996; De Bot et al., 1997; Paribakht & Wesche, 1999).

In summary, most of L1 and L2 research supported that proficient readers could achieve better vocabulary gains because they possessed better decoding skills and more cognitive processing resources from the context to derive of the meanings of unknown words. Whereas, other researchers argued that all levels of readers occasionally neglect unfamiliar lexical items on condition that these words were too

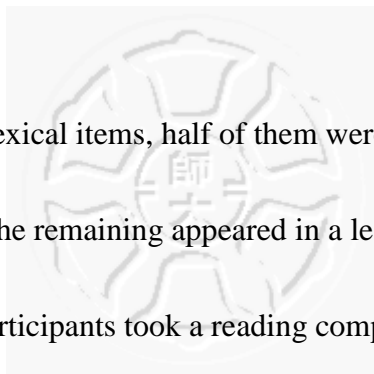


abstruse or irrelevant to the understanding of the central ideas. Accordingly, target words of moderate difficulty level which were related to the text messages were selected to avoid such effect and to further examine the relationship between reading proficiency and vocabulary acquisition in this study.

2.4 Reading Comprehension and Vocabulary Acquisition

As for the relationship between text comprehension and incidental vocabulary learning, previous researchers did not share similar views on this issue. Some past empirical studies on L1 (Diakidoy,1998) and L2 (Jacobs, Dufon, & Fong, 1994; Rott, 1997; Pulido, 2002) incidental vocabulary learning demonstrated that learners' comprehension of specific texts bore moderate to strong relationships with their acquisition of new words presented within these texts.

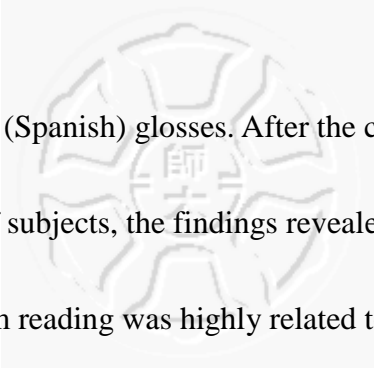
Diakidoy (1998) attempted to investigate the impact of reading comprehension on six-grade students' L1 word meaning acquisition through reading, and to compare it with the influence of local context characteristics, including proximity and directness of context clues. In addition, the effects of prior topic and enabling concept knowledge were also explored. Participants received a pretest which assessed their prior knowledge of target lexical items selected from two expository passages appropriate for their grade and reading level. Then they were first familiarized with main concepts from one passage and, subsequently, dealt with both experimental



passages. As for the target lexical items, half of them were embedded with an informative context, while the remaining appeared in a less-informative context. After processing each passage, participants took a reading comprehension test and a vocabulary posttest. Based on the Hierarchical Regression analyses, the results revealed that reading comprehension level and prior main concept knowledge were proven conducive to vocabulary learning from context. Whereas, the presence or absence of informative context clues did not exert significant effects. The researcher further highlighted the necessity for learners to take into consideration readers' mental interpretation as well the surrounding printed text of an unfamiliar word while they were reconceptualizing the context.

Jacobs et al. (1994), in their research regarding the degree of influence different glosses would bring to incidental lexical development through reading, examined the correlation between text recall scores and incidental vocabulary gain scores.

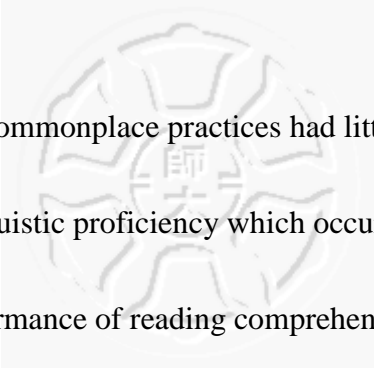
Participants, who were intermediate level students learning Spanish, were selected based on enrollment in the fourth semester course in the Spanish language program. They were required to read an expository passage and then to complete a recall text in their L1 (English) by integrating the crucial messages and reconstructing the general information of the text. Later, their vocabulary gain was measured by means of an L2-L1 translation of target words. They received three treatment conditions: no gloss,



L1 (English) glosses and L2 (Spanish) glosses. After the comparisons were made among those three groups of subjects, the findings revealed that subjects' level of comprehension attained from reading was highly related to vocabulary gains through reading. The better participants performed in the text recall task, the higher vocabulary gain scores they would get. Whereas, this correlation was not maintained after four weeks.

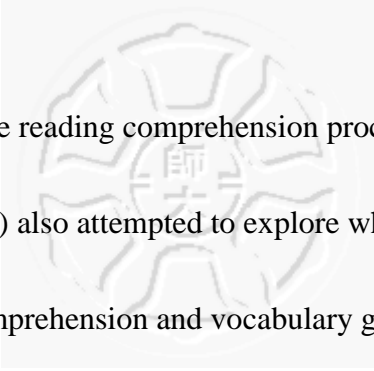
Rott's (1997) participants were intermediate learners of German who also enrolled in a 4th-semester course. Instead of dealing with the expository readings, these subjects read narrative passages in this study. They had to complete an immediate recall task followed by an L2-L1 translation task and a multiple-choice translation recognition task. After data analysis, the results revealed a moderate to strong positive correlations between one's text comprehension and the gain and the retention of the target words. Contrary to the research of Jacob et. al (1994), such a relationship strengthened over time.

Nevertheless, some limitations were embedded within the previous two studies. First, only one level of participants, the intermediate level, were examined. For wider generalization of the findings, subjects of diverse proficiency groups ought to be taken into consideration. Secondly, the course level was the sole grouping criteria in Rott (1997), while Jacobs et al. (1994) adopted course level and course grade.



However, these seemingly commonplace practices had little control over the variability in reading or linguistic proficiency which occurred in intermediate level. This could affect their performance of reading comprehension.

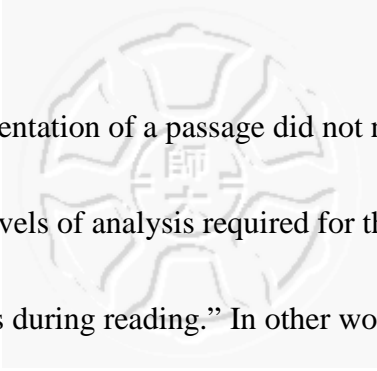
Kilian, Stallman and others (1995) found that higher passage comprehension was accompanied by more vocabulary learning for students at diverse reading proficiency levels. Their study aimed to examine the relationship between vocabulary learning and text comprehension by systematically varying the vocabulary-related instruction which students received before reading. Participants were 299 students from fifth- or fourth/fifth-grade classes. They were assigned to different conditions under which they read passages with underlined words, read and underlined difficult words and tried to learn meanings from contexts. According to the findings from their research, the positive effect of passage comprehension on participants' lexical growth was detected. They explained this phenomenon by referring to the notion that reader's principal goal was to construct a coherent mental representation of the text. On their way to accomplish this objective, readers capitalized on their background knowledge about the topic as well as the information gleaned from the text to bridge the gap caused by missing or unknown information. Hence, the reader would make inferences about the meanings of novel target items which were in accordance with the overall mental model of the text being formed. Then vocabulary learning could be perceived



as a natural by-product of the reading comprehension process.

Similarly, Pulido (2004) also attempted to explore whether positive correlations existed between level of comprehension and vocabulary gain, retention when learners read narrative texts. Her results confirmed the findings from Jacobs et al. (1994) and Rott (1997). Increases in level of passage-specific comprehension would bring along the increases in incidental gain and retention of new L2 vocabulary from the same passages. She explained this phenomenon by assuming that contextually relevant text information was more activated and available in better readers' working memory, which in turn would facilitate learners' lexical inferencing of unfamiliar words perceived crucial during reading. Aside from what was mentioned, passage comprehension played a consistent role in incidental vocabulary gain and retention was regardless of topic familiarity.

Other scholars held different views toward the relationship between these two variables, namely one's passage-specific comprehension and incidental vocabulary acquisition through reading. Achieving global comprehension of a text was not sufficient for vocabulary acquisition. The first step in incidental vocabulary learning lied in understanding a word, which meant forming the connection between meaning and form. As Paribakht and Wesche (1999) indicated, "even though there was shared process between text comprehension and lexical development through reading,

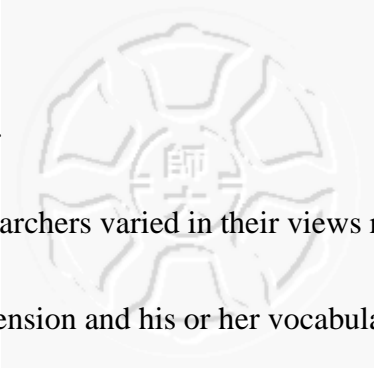


constructing a mental representation of a passage did not necessarily entail engaging in the same processes and levels of analysis required for the acquisition of semantic features of new lexical items during reading.” In other words, vocabulary acquisition was more complicated and was distinct from comprehending a passage.

When learners were instructed to process a text mainly for the gist instead of focusing on learning new lexical items intentionally, Coady (1993) pointed out that they might strive more for the analysis and construction of textual messages and were not motivated to pay sufficient attention to these unfamiliar vocabulary because the text could be readily comprehended. Now that the outward representation of the target words was not processed deeply enough, learners’ retention of it would be rather obscure in their memory. Without adequate “noticing” allotted to the form, the acquisition of a certain word was impeded.

In Hong’s study (2005), only low correlations were detected between reading comprehension and vocabulary gain and retention in both familiar and unfamiliar texts. He further contended that such findings might be attributed to the fact that reaching passage comprehension lied in macroprocessing, while vocabulary gain and retention might involve more than microprocessing. Apparently, the macroprocessing could not suffice for the amount of processing required for the complicated vocabulary learning, which consequently reduced the likelihood of the unfamiliar

lexical items being acquired.



In conclusion, past researchers varied in their views regarding the relationship between one's text comprehension and his or her vocabulary learning. Some pointed out strong to moderate correlations between these two variables, while others contended that the macroprocessing for text comprehension was not adequate for lexical development and that learners had less desire to notice those unfamiliar words since they could readily grasp the main ideas. To have a clearer picture of this issue, the researcher attempted to explore this issue in this study and conduct an interview to verify whether participants with higher comprehension scores would pay less attention to unfamiliar words.