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Word learning and text organisation: an intervention case

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WORD LEARNING AND TEXT ORGANISATION: AN INTERVENTION CASE:

Abstract

In the present study we focus on the interaction between the acquisition of new words and text organisation. In the acquisition of new words we emphasise the acquisition of paradigmatic relations such as hyponymy, meronymy and semantic sets. We work with a group of girls attending a private school for adolescents in serious difficulties.

The subjects are from disadvantaged families. Their writing skills were very poor. When asked to describe a garden, they write a short text of a single paragraph, the lexical items were generic, there were no adjectives, and all of them use mainly existential verbs.

The intervention plan assumed that subjects must to be exposed to new words, working out its meaning. In presence of referents subjects were taught new words making explicit the intended relation of the new term to a term already known. In the classroom subjects were asked to write all the words they knew drawing the relationships among them. They talk about the words specifying the relation making explicit pragmatic directions like *is a kind of, is a part of or are all x*. After that subjects were exposed to the task of choosing perspective.

The work presented in this paper accounts for significant differences in the text of the subjects before and after the intervention. While working new words subjects were organising their lexicon and learning to present a whole entity in perspective.

Introduction

The starting point of the investigation we were going to briefly outline was the pedagogical practice. The implementation investigation's results is pedagogical practice too. The link between the start and the finish is linguistics.

To learn new words is to interpret, organise, store and retrieve, amounts of information about words, that represent objects of the world and their properties, that are physical, mental, spiritual, imaginary – anything that words denote.

The development of the lexicon consists of the acquisition of information about thousands of individual words and the semantic relations that provide structure for this universe of words. The semantic relations focused was syntagmatic and paradigmatic ones, with special attention payed to hiperonymy/hyponymy and holonymy/meronymy (Campos & Xavier 1991).

The acquisition of lexicon influences cognitive development (Kuczaj 1999). Language provides cues about the ways in which our culture characterise the world and so it plays a crucial role in socialisation as well as conceptual development. The child's learning of syntagmatic and paradigmatic relations encouraged their constrution and structuration of the lexicon. Building networks of meaning facilitate the organisation of semantic knowledge and the accommodation of new words learned in succeeding sessions.

It is accepted that the ability of communication is surface aspect rooted in profound layers of the individual's personality. The personal experience is the stuff and marrow of expression of the speaker/hearer may it be verbal, iconic or other expression. The whats, the hows, and the wherefores of life are reflected in content and form of subjects communication.

The subjects of this study are from uneducated lower-class families and often they are abandoned, neglected or injured children. They are not fluent in basic interpersonal communication skills, they are deficient in those skills required for cognitive-academic language proficiency.

According to Hart & Risley (1995), lower class parents speak little to their children and give even less verbal feedback to children's speech. This comparative lack of verbal interaction implies also an absence of rehearsal and reinstatement two exercises of extreme importance for the longterm storage of any information. The subjects of the study have academic problems, they have problems with comprehension of text, they have a very poor lexicon and a little repertoire of communicative skills. In spite of the majority of these girls have portuguese as their mother tongue, they need specific skills, which they haven't learn at home.

Subjects

This corpus is composed by 34 texts, which were produced by a class of seventeen teenager girls and raged in age from 10;5 to 14;10 (mean age 12;5). They are attending the 5th school year.

Seven of them are attending this year for the second time, and three of them, for the third time. Twelve are Portuguese and the others are children of immigrants from African countries, such as, Republic of Cape Vert, Guiné Bissau and Angola.

This is a school from a religious NGO (Non Governmental Organisation) that shelters girls with a very difficult childhood. They come from a very low social class and they are victims of many social and family problems, like divorces, alcoholism, drugs, AIDS, child abuses, negligence, bad treatments, etc.

None of them live with a "Typical Family" (mother and father). The majority only have their mother and in some cases they live with their grandparents. This is due to the fact that some of the parents are toxic dependents.

The most serious cases live in the boarding-school system. They live in the school "Lar Maria Droste" during the week, at the weekends and whenever they are on holidays, they can spend them with someone of their origins, such as a cousin or an uncle, or with a friendly family that can be responsible for them.

All the others spend the night at home and only come to school to spend the rest of the day. These girls have economic problems, school abstention and danger of serious problems with drugs and neglected because they live in problematic and poor wards. They spend most of the time there alone, because their families are working or are unable to treat them right.

Procedure

This investigation work was based on an initial diagnosis done by picking up texts written about a specific subject, previously selected in the classroom.

The subject chosen "THE GARDEN", this theme is a part of the class project. The school building has, in the backyard, a playground, a garden, and a swimming-pool, where the students are able to play, talk and get some sun bathing.

The first stage started with a text elaboration about the garden. All the students wrote freely about what this subject meant to them, without any interference from the teacher. The analyses of the texts showed that the subjects made short text, in general with a single paragraph, used generic words like *tree, plants, people*, and the verbs were stative: *there are, it has...*

The next step was to make a list of words about the subject, starting from the text, and it could be concluded that there wasn't a considerable lexical diversity.

Then we passed to the other stage that was visiting the garden so that it would be possible to make a direct observation about what exists there. Some visits were done, orientated by the teacher. First the subjects were asked to look to the entire garden, then they were asked to pay attention to all the details related with the study entities and its properties. In the final observation the student were trained to take perspective.

The students always carried with them some writing material so that they could registate what they were seeing while they were visiting the garden.

When they arrived at the classroom with their notes about the plants' names, flowers, animals and other objects, it was elaborated a list of words and new sentences were done using these words. Learning is easier if the information is put into use, so students were encouraged to use words they had learn.

All the students were participating. They were indicating the new words they had learned. They were very enthusiastic and their enthusiasm were difficult to control because all of them wanted to participate in order to show that they had learn lots of new things. We agree with Hatch and Brown (1995:370) that «the specificity of any individual's knowledge about a word depends on the person and his or her motivation, desires and needs for the word».

Some posters were done with the registered words. All those new words were also written in the computer, so that it would be possible to establish semantic relations of hiperonymy/hiponymy and holonymy/meronymy between them.

At the final stage with all the vocabulary registred and fixed and the nets of semantic relations established in the scoreboards, the students elaborated the final text.

We must emphasise the role played by naming, and on the other hand the productions of subjects with new words, definition and sentences utilising the new word, the discussions about it and after the collective task of writing and gumming it on the class walls. So the instructional role was reversible: the teacher provides stimuli to the learners, but in turn becomes a receiver when utilising the learner's participation.

Results and discussion

The results show that there are enormous progress in writing, not only in vocabulary, but also in text organisation. That is, the texts were either longer and better organised.

The garden can be seen as a whole. This is the representation that the subjects have on the first text. On the final texts, subjects include prespective and organise the space through the description they make. That is, they order the reporting of all the things that constitute the garden. They describe a complex network of specially organised material while advancing in thematic progression.

The ability to organise the space (and the text) appears with a repertoire of spatial expressions used by students. The majority of these expressions refer to perception, particularly sight (see, look, watch), or motion (come, go on, walk around, pass through).

Significant progress in texture can be seen between the first and the final text. Subjects showed to be able to produce pieces of discourse which are interrelated and relevant to the task at hand. They were able occasionally to provide descriptive sequences by relating blocks of information to one another in a perspective way: *in front, at the left, in the right...*

The first and the second texts were analysed in terms of total number of words, paragraphs, sentences, spatial and deictic expressions, number of concepts, semantic relations, cohesive conjunctions and NP structure (pronoun, coordinated nouns and nouns and relatives, PP and adjectives).

The second texts are more cohesive and more cohesive texture is a part of the lexicon organisation and also of the commitment of the subjects with perspective and use of deictic expressions to organise the space.

Table 1 lists the differences between the first and the second text involving total number of words, paragraphs, sentences and verbs. The first and most obvious finding is that there were a great improvement in the total numbers of words, paragraphs, sentences and verbs between the first text and the second one. We observe that with the intentional vocabulary learning in L₁ does aid in the learning of words. With new words subjects produced more sentences and paragraphs. We must highlight that it is not only the number of verbs that increased in second text, its diversity also increased, in special the number of perception and motion verbs. The higher number of this kind of verbs testifies the subjects' commitment with perspective and a better texture of description. So the verb specialisation, on this case, becomes crucial in sentence production and in text organisation. It is assumed that the production of verbs play an important role in the acquisition of grammar for all children. Verbs are the nuclear element in predication, carrying important information about inflexional morphology and establishing a bridge between semantics and grammar.

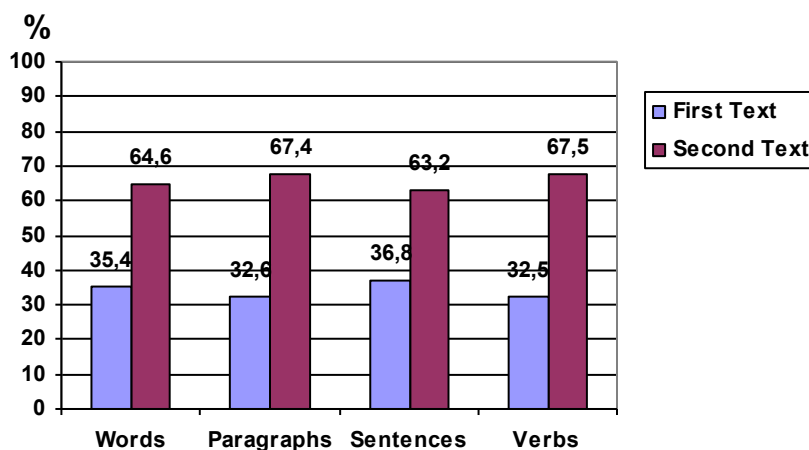


table - 1

Table 2 presents the way subjects constructed space in their texts. Comparing the number of spatial expressions (lexical and deictic ones) in both texts we observe that there is, also, a great difference in the employment of this kind of expressions. The results reveal that subjects in the second texts produced deictic and other adverbial expressions, whose function is to organize the garden's space, such as: *in, under, above, into*, that don't appear on the first one.

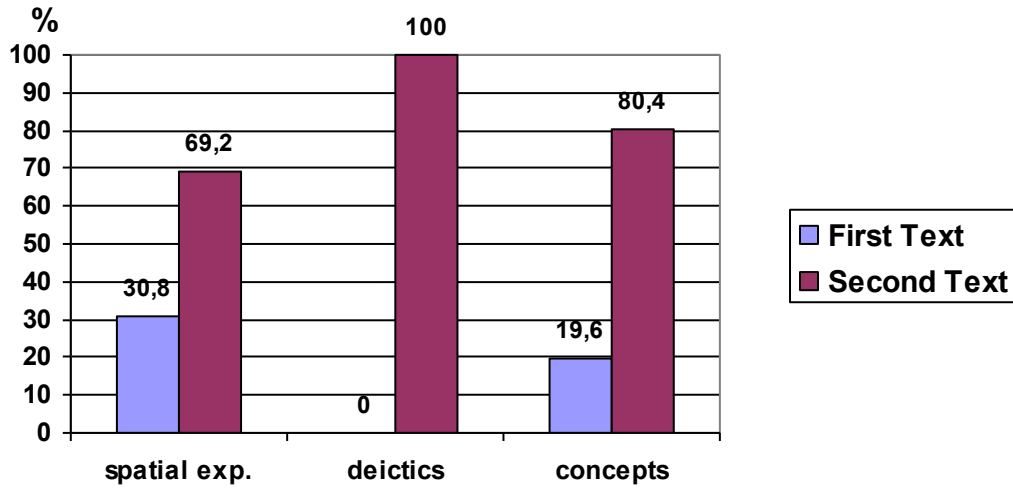


Table – 2 spatial, deictic expressions and concepts

Another important difference between texts was observed in the number of concepts and relations of *garden* semantic structure

Regarding cohesive conjunctions it can be observed that there is a significant difference between the first and the second text. Other quantity it may be stressed out the diversity of cohesive conjunctions whereas in the first text and is dominant, in the second subjects used conjunctions such as *and, also, next, then*.

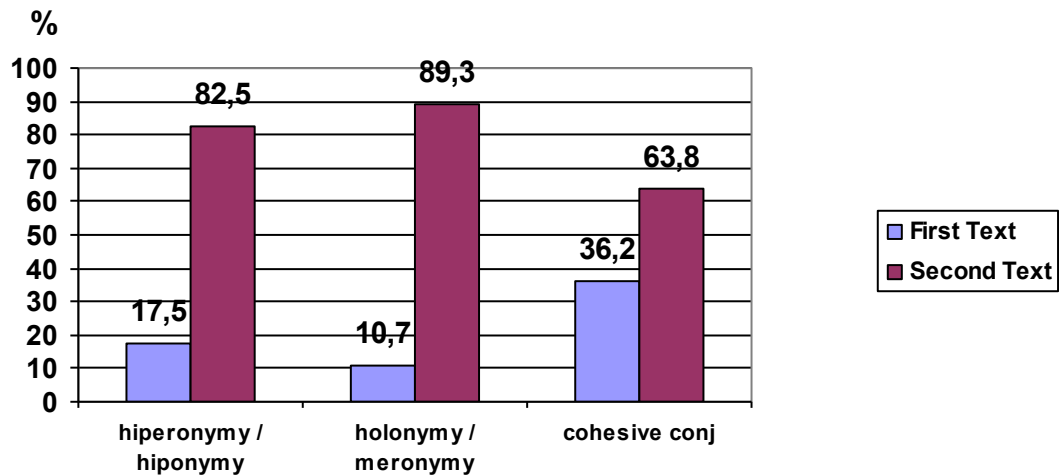


table –3 semantic relations and cohesive conjunctions

As language teachers we know we must relate concepts, and words for concepts within the language we use. In fact, we have paid special attention to the lexicon organisation, mainly in drawing semantic relations, such as hiperonymy/hiponymy, holonymy/meronymy, as we can see, once more, in the second texts. This is one of the linguistic devices that increase the texts cohesion.

The aim of the study was “words”, so the study of noun phrase structure was obligatory. We can verify the progress mainly in NP with modifier. We find that lexical and grammatical development is strongly intertwined. As we saw in table 6

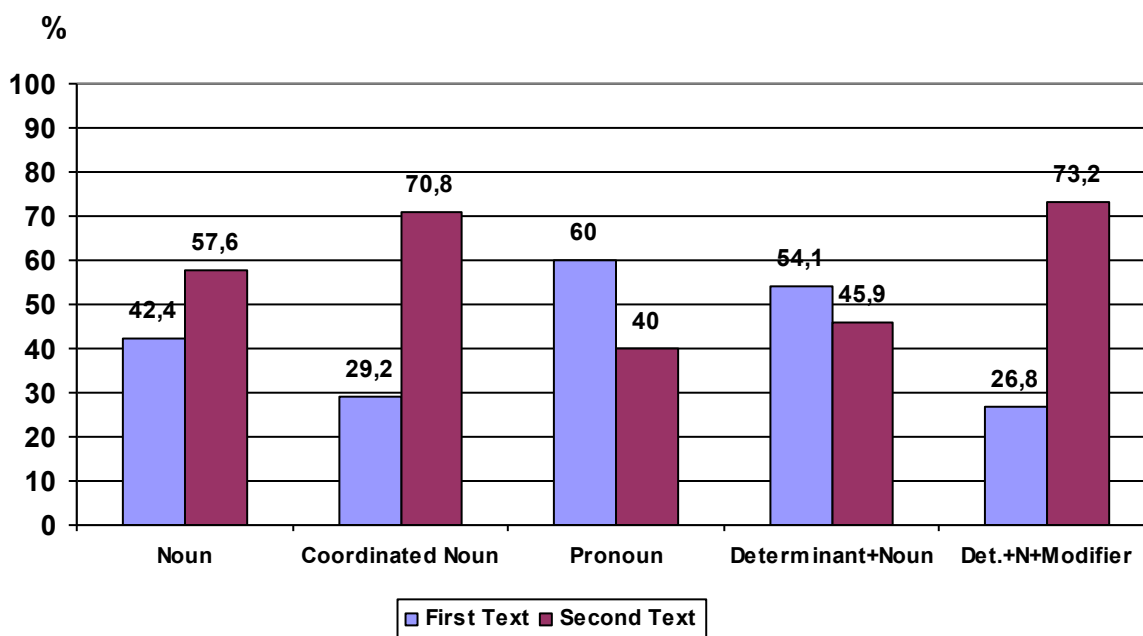


Table – 4 NP structure

Conclusion

We designed and planned to teach words in a broad perspective, we can conclude that learning lexicon improves not only the grammar skills but the textual ones too.

According to the hypothesis tested in the study, the acquisition of new lexical items and the awareness of its semantic relations are an important part to improve the writing skills. We can suggest that density of semantic relations in text is directly related with the work done on lexical development.

The second texts are more cohesive. Cohesion is a part of lexicon organisation and also of the commitment of the subjects with perspective in order to organise the space.

The results showed us that both the learning process of lexicon and the learning semantic relations have an effect on text construction: in the length of text and on its organisation, mainly in semantic relations, cohesive conjunctions, spatial locations and relative sentences.

To sum up, learning is a process working through a continuous of differentiation and integration, and not an accumulation of disjointed blocks.

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