Strategies and Success in Technical Vocabulary Learning: Students' Approaches in One Academic Context

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ABSTRACT

Recognizing the importance of lexis and vocabulary learning strategies (VLS) in academic studies, this article presents a descriptive case study of technical vocabulary learning in English over one academic term in an intact, required first year course in a graduate school of theology in Canada. After outlining background information and describing the research methods, the article discusses the vocabulary learning strategies and success of five non-native (NNES) and six native English speaker (NES) participants. Data were collected using pre- and post-Tests of Theological Language (TTL), through mid- and end-of-term interviews, and at the end of the course using an Approach to Vocabulary Learning Questionnaire. Analyses addressed the VLS that NNES and NES students use in learning the technical vocabulary of their discipline, how these VLS may be classified in relation to previous research, what types of words participants report learning, and whether a particular approach to or strategy in technical vocabulary learning predicts success in acquisition, as reflected in scores on the TTL. Results indicate that participants used a variety of VLS, though no one strategy appeared to dominate. Detailed portraits of participants' approaches to technical vocabulary learning are included. While there were no consistent trends in approaches to or strategies in success on the TTL, overall participants who approached their technical vocabulary learning in an unstructured manner tended to obtain higher scores on the TTL. In terms of growth in depth of vocabulary knowledge, however, TTL results suggest that a structured approach may be helpful for NNESs.

INTRODUCTION

For some time now, it has been established that language-learning strategies play an important role in second and/or foreign language