

## **Course readings in a foreign language – a noble cause or a losing battle?**

In the context of the fast-paced globalisation, English has emerged as a working language of many international academic and professional communities. University students are therefore often required to read academic texts in English, even in countries where English is not one of the official or commonly spoken languages. Notwithstanding advantages of being able to access international academic and professional literature, students' abilities to develop higher-level subject matter understanding may suffer as a consequence of insufficient proficiency in English. Vocabulary knowledge, in particular, is one of the stumbling blocks in L2 reading comprehension (Nation, 2006). How quickly and efficiently students may be able to overcome initial difficulties associated with using English as a medium of learning depends critically on the speed and quality of contextual L2 word learning (i.e., ability to 'pick up' new vocabulary from reading).

In the present study, eye-movements of forty Dutch-speaking university students were recorded while they read a long expository text in English, in order to observe the learning trajectories of low-frequency words that occurred multiple times in the text. A sentence reading post-test was used to further probe the participants' ability to process these contextually-learned L2 words in new contexts. A range of eye movement measures reflecting lexical processing and word-to-text integration were used in the data analysis. The results show that L2 readers' orthographic processing of novel words develops quickly and reliably. However, online retrieval of meaning remains insufficient for fluent word-to-text integration even after multiple contextual encounters with a word. Implications of the findings for the introduction of L2 reading materials in the university undergraduate curricula are considered.

Nation, P. (2006). How large a vocabulary is needed for reading and listening? *The Canadian Modern Language Review*, 63, 59-82.

Words: 284 words.

### **Summary**

When university students are required to read in a foreign language, their abilities to develop higher-level subject matter understanding may suffer, because unfamiliar words could lead to a comprehension bottleneck. The present study looks at how orthographic and semantic processing of novel words develops in the course of reading.