Lexical Attrition of Some Arabic Speakers of English as a Foreign language: A Study of Word Loss

Hassan Al-Hazemi
hghazemi [at] hotmail.com
King AbdulAziz Military Academy (Riyadh, Saudi Arabia)

ABSTRACT

This study investigates the loss of English vocabulary knowledge (both general and specialized military) of some Saudi military officers in the Saudi Armed forces. The study investigates the lexical loss during 12 years of English disuse after leaving King AbdulAziz military academy in which those lexical items are previously learned. The study will examine the loss of the receptive vocabulary, which was claimed to suffer greater loss than productive vocabulary (Nation, 1988).

A descriptive statistic is conducted to determine any statistical differences in the subjects' mean scores which can be attributed to attrition (word loss).

INTRODUCTION

In the past few years, different studies were carried out on Arab learners of English as a foreign language, aimed at looking into vocabulary knowledge (Al-Hazemi,1998) and word recognition (Al-Hazemi, 2000a). Al-Hazemi argued in those studies that the inability of some Arab EFL learners to recognize some words was due to the fact that certain words might have been forgotten. Many words were also hard to recognize even when clues were given. The phenomenon of word loss, however, was not investigated with adult Arab learners of English to support the above arguments.

This study intends to investigate words' loss of some Saudi officers at the Saudi armed forces who must have studied both general and military English at the military academy before joining the army. The study will shed light on how their vocabulary knowledge is affected after 2-12 years of disuse. Some studies (Ginkel et al, 1996) show that the process of forgetting probably occurs later than three or four years after the university degree.

It has been argued that lexical knowledge is probably the most vulnerable aspect of the language system (Weltens et al, 1993) to word loss. According to Weltens et al, forgetting is different than attrition in that during forgetting an information can be retrieved as a whole when clues are given, whereas during attrition learners might be able to retrieve part of the information. According to psychologists, forgetting occurs as a result of either the influence between target and other learned materials or as a result of memory decay (cohen, 1989: 136). The views outlined above about the nature of attrition and word loss have lead some linguists and psychologists to study this issue. Cohen (1989) studied the lexicon of his two trilingual children. He found out that L2 or L3 vocabulary became week as L1 words utterances interfered with L2 words. In another study, Cohen also found attrition of productive knowledge, especially nouns. Cohen (1986) believes that when there is a lot to learn in learning words, there is much that can be forgotten in the forgetting process (p. 146). This claim was supported by Ebbinghaus (1885), who believed that the more you know, the more you forget (quoted in Welten et al, 1993). Olshtain (1989), conducted a similar study to that of Cohen (1989) on Hebrew -speaking children. The results show that disuse of English results in attrition of lexical knowledge.

In another study, Bahrick (1984) tested the retention of school-learned Spanish, and concluded that students lose fixed amount of knowledge over a given period of time, regardless of their total knowledge. Berman and Olshtain (1983) found greater quantitative and qualitative loss of English as a second language among 5- to 8- year-old Hebrew speakers than among older children experiencing similar disuse of the language. This suggests that children suffer greater language attrition in the same period of time than older ones (Cohen, 1989).

Other studies on lexical attrition demonstrated that lexical knowledge attrited easily than phonology and morpho-syntax (Seliger,

1985), since the vocabulary of a language is relatively unstructured (Welten et al, 1993).

It can be noticed from the above review of studies on attrition that most studies dealt mainly with children, and few of them tackled this problem with adult learners. This study will examine the problem of word loss of adult EFL speakers of English.

The study

The present study investigates word attrition (word loss) ; it addresses the following questions: What is the state of vocabulary (both general and military) of Saudi military officers after 2- 12 years of disuse ? Is it heavily lost, or does it remain partially intact?

Methods

Subjects

The subjects of this study were 60 officers in the Saudi armed forces ranking from Lieutenants to Majors. They were all male native speakers of Arabic. Prior to their work in the armed forces, they were cadets at King AbdulAziz Military Academy in Riyadh. In this Academy, they were taught both general and military English as part of the general curriculum. The officers participating in the study are now members of staff in King AbdulAziz Military Academy.

Test and testing procedure

The materials used in the study were 40 vocabulary items, 20 of which were general English words (words encountered in the daily situations or in books) and 20 related to military terminology. All words were randomly selected from the materials that the subjects had studied when they were cadets at the military academy. To make sure that these vocabulary items were learned by the officers 2- 12 years ago, they were shown to a number of senior civil instructors at the academy, as well as to some senior officers to check their accuracy. Words that were not taught to the officers earlier when they were cadets were discarded.

A multiple-choice test was designed using the 40 words. The distracters were carefully selected to make sure that they were also understood by the subjects. The test was then shown in its earlier format to the same group of senior teachers at the academy to check for any possible difficulties.

The test was handed out to the subjects, and they were told that this was merely a study for experimental purposes and had nothing to do with their carrier. Instructions were written on the front page of the test sheet. The subjects were instructed as follows:

1. Not to write their names on the test sheet, in order to reduce their fear of exposing their weak knowledge of English and to insure better results. Instead of the subjects' names, numbers would be used to label each case of the data.
2. Not to resort to any help of any kind (friends, books, dictionaries, etc.) while taking the test.
3. To circle only one answer on the test sheet for each item of the test. The test was then collected and graded by giving one mark to each correct answer. Any double or blank answers would be marked as wrong ones.

Analysis

Descriptive statistics was used to determine any differences in the means of the row scores of the subjects . The SPSS Statistical Package Program (V.7) for windows was used to run the analysis.

Results

The data that concern us most was the differences in the means between the three groups' scores (lieutenants, captains , and majors) . The data would show us whether the length of time of English disuse had caused a greater loss to English words learned by the testees during their learning stage at King AbdulAziz Military Academy (KAMA). The data is summarized in table (1).

Table (1) : The row and mean scores, percentage of the means, and standard deviation of the subjects' scores.

Subjects	Cases	TRS	Mean	% of mean	SD
Lits.	20	362	18.1	45.25	7.033
Capt.	20	370	18.5	46.25	7.45
Maj.	20	362	18.1	45.33	8.75

Lits.: Lieutenants

Capts.: Captains

Maj.: Majors

TRS: Total Raw scores

The table clearly shows that there was no difference in the subjects raw scores. The slight rise in the scores of the second groups (Captains) was due to the fact that some of the testees in this group had an English training course in some English institutes. This in turn, enhanced their vocabulary knowledge that helped them to score around 80% on the test. However, the mean scores of the three groups represent less than half of the words being tested. This means that each group knows only half of the words presented to them on the test. Besides, each group tends to forget more than 50% of the given words, regardless of the period of English disuse.

DISCUSSION

The results of this investigation demonstrated that the ability of the subjects to recall words (both general and military) that have been learned few years ago is certainly low. Less than half (about 45 %) of the words given on the test were known to the subjects. Even newly graduated subjects (Lieutenants) seemed unable to recognize the words on the test which they had learned two to three years before, which is not a long time compared to Captains and Majors. The results also indicated that all three groups, who participated in the test, (Lieutenants, Captains, And Majors) had about the same lexical knowledge, regardless of the period of disuse of English. This loss of word knowledge by these subjects is a serious problem indeed, which seems to suggest that there may be other hidden problems in learning English that lead to attrition. The environment in Saudi Arabia, for instance, in which foreign languages is acquired by the subjects has an important effect on the retention of words. The attrition or word loss of our Saudi subjects, which is clear from the results, may have been attributed to lack of language environment (i.e. the regular use of language in daily situations, and lack of language input). The continuation of language feedback in some countries in Europe is one factor of enhancing word knowledge of the learners of English and of reducing the degree of word loss. Saudi learners suffer from what is called " the retrieval-failure" (Loftus& Loftus, 1976). This simply means the inability to remember certain words and recall their meanings. Some Saudi learners of English forget most of what they learn gradually as no practice or enough exposure to the English language is available to them. However, when given clues in their native language about forgotten words, the information about those lost words would come back again and the retrieval - process is reactivated. Clues in English (i.e. context) about certain words could add to the problem as more words in the clues need to be understood before the target word's meaning is achieved (see Al-Hazemi, 2000b).

It should be emphasised that the length of the period of disuse of English by the subjects of this study accounts only for part of the loss of the words presented in the test .The larger part of attrition, however, can be attributed to the environmental factors as stated above.

The results reported so far may also provide an indication that the testees proficiency in English is low, which in turn reflects on the amount of attrition. This provides a good support to the claim of the classical theory (Ebbinghaus, 1885), namely that proficiency level determines to a large extent the amount of knowledge that will attrite (Weltens & grendel, 1993: 145).

One would argue that the test items used in this study were so small to provide reliable evidence of word lose. It is very important to note, however, that due to the officers (participants of this study) tight daily schedule inside as well as outside the academy, it was difficult to administer large number of words, though we believe that more words would have produced more data about attrition. It should also be born in mind that providing a large number of words (say 150 words) in a multiple choice format would have produced more than a ten- page test, which would have required more time from the officers than they could have given to this study. Therefore, it should be understood that even if the outcome of this research produces some insights regarding word loss, it cannot make claims for statistical generalization.

The collection of data is another obstacle in this study. The data gathering was time consuming. It took quite sometime for some of the subjects to agree to take the test. This was because some of the subjects pretended to be so busy, and most of them were reluctant to do the test. The reason being: firstly, they fear to make mistakes which in their views could ruin their reputation as officers. Secondly, The subjects got the feeling that the test was going to be difficult and most of them chose not to do it, or hand in their test blank. Another group just denied that they had learned those words when they were cadets. Those subjects had, indeed, studied the words in the test, but had forgotten or could not even remember that they had seen them. This situation occurred as a result of long time of disuse or poor proficiency in English."

The question remains to be answered is: which lexical items are more susceptible to loss, general items or military ones? Future research will, hopefully, shed light on this issue.

Implications:

The results of this study have some implications for teachers as well as for officers dealing with English as an essential part in their military life. The loss of vocabulary shown by the subjects in this study is a serious problem. Officers faced great difficulties in communicating in English with their fellow officers from other nationalities during the Gulf War. This problem arises from lack of proficiency in vocabulary which result from the loss of most of the words they have learned when they were cadets or from not having acquired enough words during their academic and military life.

It should be born in mind that attrition occures quickly, about 25% during the first year of disuse (Bahrick, 1984), so constant follow up of what was learned is necessary to maintain a good knowledge of new and old words to express ourselves. This would lead us to outline some recommendations to tackle the issue of vocabulary loss and encourage vocabulary build up.

Recommendations

The recommendations to be mentioned in this research are of two kinds: The first part concerns the officers; the second part concerns the institutions to which these officers belong.

Officers:

The way to build up good vocabulary and develop good command of English should arise from the desire of the officers themselves to seek the proper way to learn. In other words, they must be willing to learn English, and not put the blame on others for not being able to communicate effectively. To this end, officers should be willing to accomplish the following:

1. Seek all avenues possible to learn and keep what they learn alive through constant practice. This can be done through simple reading materials, which can be found in bookstores or public libraries.
2. Enroll in an English language center in the evening; language centers are now available in many towns and cities around the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.
3. Make use of some of the computer English programs available in the markets today (i.e. Learn to speak English, Al-Kamel). Other Learning programs are also available in bookstores (i.e. BBC series, Cambridge learning course, etc.).
4. Find an opportunity to go abroad to see how native speakers speak the language, and practice what had been learned in real situation. While in an English- speaking country, they should visit places like museums, markets, shows, and they should go sightseeing to acquire more words and keep records of all new words. They need to make sure that when they return home, they will have collected good materials for practice and use in their daily life.
5. Learn how to use the internet and exchange ideas with people in the same area. Check web sights and browse some topics related to travel, science, education, medicine, or any topic of their choice.
6. During communication with others, they need to ask them what they mean if they don't understand certain words or phrases. They should not pretend to understand if they don't.
7. Listen carefully to native or native-like speakers of English to correct words which they misheard or mislearned in the past. In this way they would be able to correct any mispronounced words.

Institutions:

Another responsibility lies in the government institutions and military academies, i.e. to encourage the officers to develop their English

language skills by sending them abroad and arranging exchange visits with other institutions in the U.S and Europe. This would allow the officers to see how language is used effectively.

In addition, Military institutes need to adopt what is new in designing English courses and developing programs. They should also use new technology to create new media for teaching and learning the language. Last but not least, they should establish training centers in cooperation with other Universities and language centers within the kingdom and around the world.

CONCLUSION:

In this study, attrition or word loss of some Saudi military officers was investigated. The results indicated that more than 50% of the items tested were forgotten by the subjects . The latter were not able to provide the correct answers to all the vocabulary items given on the test.

The period of English disuse did not seem to have any great impact on the amount of lexical items lost. All the three groups of officers who participated in the test produced equal scores. This was an indication of a similar level of lexical proficiency, regardless of the period of disuse.

The researcher suggests that further research needs to look into the attrition phenomenon of Saudi learners of English, using more subjects and larger vocabulary items in future testing. The research should also look into which vocabulary items are forgotten faster by the officers , general items or military ones. Some implications and recommendations were also outlined.

REFERENCES:

- Al-Hazemi, H. A. (1998). Vocabulary acquisition of Saudi learners of English as a foreign language : A study of lexical development. Journal of faculty of education 22/1: 1-11. Ain Shams university, Cairo.
- AL-Hazemi, H. A. (2000a). Listening to the Yes/No vocabulary test and its impact on the recognition of word as real or non-real. IRAL 38, 89-94.
- Al-Hazemi. H. A. (2000b). The effect of word in isolation and word in context on vocabulary recognition of Arab learners of English as a foreign language. To appear in Damascus University Journal for Arts and Human Education Sciences, Syria.
- Bahrick, H. D. (1984). Fifty years of language attrition : Implications for programmatic research. Modern language journal, 68 : 105-118.
- Berman, R. & Olshtain, E. (1983). Features of first language transfer in second language attrition. Applied linguistics, 4, 222-234.
- Cohen, A. D. (1986). Forgetting foreign language vocabulary. In: B. Weltens, K. De Bot, & T. Van Els (Eds.), Language attrition in progress. (pp. 143-158). Dordrecht, Netherlands: Foris.
- Cohen, A. D. (1989). Attrition in the productive lexicon of two Portuguese third language speakers. Studies in second language acquisition, 11: 135-150.
- Ebbinghaus, H. (1885). Ubr das Gedachtnis. Untersuchungeen Zur experimentellen psychologie. Leipzig: Duncker & Humblot.
- Ginkel C. I. and E.H. Van der Linden. 1996. Word associations in foreign learning and foreign language loss. In K. Sajavaara & C. Fairweather (eds.) Approaches to second language acquisition. Jjvaskyla.
- Loftus, G. and E. Loftus. 1976. Human Memory: The processing of information. Hillsdale, NJ:Erlbaum.
- Nation,I.S.P. (1988). Teaching and learning vocabulary (Occasional publication No. 7) .Wellington, New Zealand : English language Institute , Victoria University of Wellington.
- Olshtain, E. (1989). Is second language attrition the reversal of second language acquisition ?. Studies in second language acquisition, 11 : 151-165.
- Seliger, H. W. (1985). Primary language attrition in the context of other language loss and mixing. Unpublished Ms . queens college, City University of New York.
- Weltens, B., & Marjon G. (1993). Attrition of vocabulary knowledge. In: R. Schreuder & B. Weltens (Eds.) The bilingual lexicon. Amsterdam: Benjamins.