

An Experimental Study on the Variability of Nonnative and Native Inference of Word Meanings in Timed and Untimed Conditions

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Abstract : Reading research suggests that online contextual vocabulary comprehension while reading is an interactive and integrative process. One's success in it depends on a variety of factors including the amount and the nature of available linguistic and nonlinguistic cues, his/her analytical and integrative skills, schema memory (content familiarity), and processing speed characterized along the continuum of controlled to automatic processing. The experiment reported here, conducted with 30 native speakers as one group and 30 nonnative speakers as another group (all graduate students), hypothesized that while working on (24) tasks which required them to comprehend an unfamiliar word in real time without backtracking, due to the differences in the nature of their respective reading processes, the nonnative subjects would be less able to construct the meanings of the unknown words by integrating the multiple but sufficient contextual cues provided in the text but the native subjects would be able to. The results indicated that there were significant inter-group as well as intra-group differences in terms of the quality of definitions given. However, when given additional time, while the nonnative speakers could significantly improve the quality of their definitions, the native speakers in general would not, suggesting that all things being equal, time is a significant factor for success in nonnative vocabulary and reading comprehension processes and that accuracy precedes automaticity in the development of nonnative reading processes also.

Keywords : reading, second language processing, vocabulary comprehension

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