Comparing Foreign Language Learners’ Use of Online Glossing Programs

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ABSTRACT

This study furthers research in three crucial related areas: 1) comparing various online glossing and vocabulary learning tools; 2) language teaching and learning using a more natural bilingualized approach to developing online reading skills in a second or foreign language; and 3) comparing the relative level of enjoyment and effectiveness students experience when using various CALL programs. This paper applies recent insights into vocabulary learning behaviors and functions online and investigates whether teachers can help learners increase their use of online glosses to improve their vocabulary learning by giving them automatic mouse-over instant glosses versus optional, clickable, mechanical access. The authors compare Japanese college students’ actual use of three types of glossing when reading similar texts online. The findings suggest that an expanded glossing system that helps encourage deeper lexical processing by providing automatic, archivable glosses would be superior for digital vocabulary learning because it can simultaneously offer better monitoring and more motivation vis-à-vis online word learning.

Keywords: Digital Vocabulary Learning, Educational Technologies, Glossing, Immediate-Access Automatic Glossing, Online Reading, Second Language Vocabulary Acquisition (SLVA)

INTRODUCTION

Print texts have had marginal, index glosses or definitions added to them for many years, either in L1 or L2, or both, to enable readers to better understand the localized meaning of individual words and thereby also the global meaning of composite textual passages. When reading online, however, sufficient research has not yet been done to clearly answer our central research question in this paper with any degree of confidence: “How can any online text be made more immediately comprehensible and its vocabulary more accessible to language learners from any L2 background?” This study aimed to initiate and provide further direction and impetus to a more thorough investigation of this yet insufficiently understood area of research, since it is crucial for helping to improve online content or language learning, as well as cross-cultural communication in general.

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Improving text readability is not a trivial issue, since uncomprehended texts cannot result in meaningful language-learning. Thus, if language learners cannot understand reading passages, in print or online documents, such difficult or unglossed texts will be of little help to them, either in their second language acquisition (SLA) or in meeting other communication needs in their target language (TL). Reading authentic text is too difficult for many language learners due to their lack of sufficient vocabulary and/ or background knowledge (Harmer, 1991), especially those whose background language has few cognates with the target language (Loucky, 1996). Teachers may instead turn to edited or translated texts to help learners appreciate the richness of authentic works. A better approach would be to enable students to read such texts in their original form, by providing them with vocabulary assistance and supplementary material needed to enhance and empower their reading comprehension.

Abundant studies in reading and second language vocabulary acquisition (SLVA) confirm the critical role of lexical development not only in L2 reading, but in all areas of language development. Research on readability in up to eleven languages (Rabin, 1988), and by DuBay (2004, pp. 57-58), for example, has shown that many readers have limited reading abilities due to low vocabulary and literacy levels. This is even more the case when they are trying to read a second language, as longitudinal measurements taken at seven Japanese colleges have shown (Loucky, 1996). The crucial role of lexical development has become increasingly recognized and researched in the mainstream of ESL/EFL, SLA and CALL fields. While welcome news, this leaves wide open the challenging gap of integrating these varied pieces of SLVA research, to better optimize online reading labs and approaches as a large field still in need of much confirmation and refinement through better application of SLA findings in CALL-enhanced classes.

More important than merely speculating about how students can use CALL software or E-learning websites, therefore, is to carefully examine how these tools actually promote language learning by showing specific affordances they have and contributions they can make especially to vocabulary and reading comprehension development, as well as to other literacy skills (in L1 and L2, as well as computer literacy). Thus, in evaluating any online learning program Fischer (2007) correctly stresses how essential it is that “we empirically support those claims by providing some degree of assurance that students’ use of the program (or its components) advances the cause of their language-learning efforts” (p. 410). Without question educators should monitor and evaluate any CALL program to clearly show students how to use its component tools, in order to determine how they are actually using particular functions of any program to promote their second language acquisition (SLA). Thus Chapelle’s (2001) six standards including a program’s “language-learning potential” (p. 55) must be kept in mind when designing or evaluating any CALL program, including any vocabulary learning glossing engine or translation dictionary it may include.

Among the challenges remaining in this broad field is the need for some innovative attempts at synergy as to maximize the use of CALL tools and collaborative language learning methodologies to help language teachers and students achieve better online vocabulary and language learning from their reading of any site in any target language anywhere on the World Wide Web. This article is a collaborative synthesis of some of the most recent CALL tools and SLVA findings to achieve such an end. It aims to help close the gap between theoretical glossing studies and the need to show in practice what kinds of programs lower level English students find most helpful in learning new words while reading, as well as for reviewing and incorporating them into their L2 mental lexicons for future productive use.
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