

Do adult second language learners teach themselves? Insights from eye movements and verbal reports

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Attention and awareness have long been identified as strong facilitators of adult second language (L2) learning (e.g., Baars, 1988; Robinson, 1995; Schmidt, 1990). Whereas early claims about the role of these mechanisms were based on pre-test – post-test comparisons, recent methodological innovations obviate the need for such indirect evidence, allowing instead to observe the effects of attention and awareness during or immediately after processing. In this talk, I report on my work with two such methodologies—eye tracking and verbal reports—as means to study adult L2 learners’ processing of unfamiliar language forms.

In a first eye-tracking project, we investigated advanced English learners’ incidental vocabulary learning during reading (Godfroid, Boers & Housen, in press; Godfroid, Housen & Boers, 2010; Godfroid & Schmidtke, in press). Participants read twenty short English texts embedded with twelve novel (pseudo-)words for comprehension purposes. A second eye-tracking study looked at beginning L2 German learners’ processing of irregular, vowel-changing verb forms that they did not know yet (Godfroid & Uggen, in press). In both studies a participant’s eye fixation duration on the target form, relative to a control condition, served as a measure of amount of attention. This measure predicted gains in lexical and morphological knowledge, respectively, and thereby supported the facilitative role of attention in these domains. Furthermore, data on participants’ awareness levels, collected during interviews following the vocabulary post-tests in the first study, also revealed a positive association between novel-word recognition and reported awareness level.

I will argue that these two studies illustrate how eye tracking and verbal reports can be used to measure, respectively, attention to and awareness of lexical or morphological target forms. As each measure provides a different type of information about learners’ cognitive processing, I believe that triangulating the two data types may afford a more complete account of what adult L2 learners do—and do not—do when they encounter an unfamiliar language form during meaning-based processing.