Chapter 1

**Vocabulary Acquisition in the Second Language**

The importance of vocabulary in general language acquisition and communication (first and second\(^1\)) cannot be denied (Clark, 1993; Dagut, 1977; Harley, 1995; Laufer, 1990b; Singleton, 1999, 2000; Smith & Locke, 1988; Yoshida, 1978). The process of L2 vocabulary acquisition begins as soon as the L2 is encountered and continues long after other aspects of the L2 have been mastered. Despite being such a central and durative phenomenon, there are still many aspects of the L2 vocabulary acquisition process that remain mysterious, as Schmitt (1998: 281) points out: ‘[t]he mechanics of vocabulary acquisition is one of the more intriguing puzzles in second language acquisition’. This chapter explores L2 vocabulary learning with a particular focus on young learners’ vocabulary acquisition. Accounts of differences in L1 and L2 lexical development processes as well as the relationships between the L1 and L2 lexicons are also dealt with in this chapter.

There has been copious research in lexical development in L1 and L2,\(^2\) but the absence of an overarching psycholinguistic framework to interpret these studies results in a fragmentation of the field, with studies addressing, for example, vocabulary size, different dimensions of word knowledge, passive/active distinctions in respect of vocabulary knowledge, reception and comprehension, vocabulary instruction and vocabulary learning strategies. In 1988, Channell already noted this problem:

> There are now theories of L2 vocabulary acquisition, a wide (and growing) range of teaching techniques available, and a greatly increased awareness on the part of most teachers (and learners) of the importance of vocabulary development. At the same time, understanding of the psychological aspects of L2 vocabulary acquisition and vocabulary use is still rather limited. (Channell, 1988: 83)

Hudson (1990) also recognized this general area of deficit.

To my knowledge, a systematic model of how meanings of words are acquired is absent from the field. Most writers on the subject assume L2 lexical development proceeds in the same way as in a first language (L1), without specifying what this is in formal terms. (Hudson, 1990: 222)

The situation has not changed much in the last decade, although research on L2 vocabulary learning has significantly increased. The most frequently brandished explanation of L2 vocabulary learning extends L1 research findings to the learning of vocabulary in an additional language, on the basis of a view that the L2 lexicon is operationally similar to the L1 lexicon and that L1 and L2 lexical acquisition and processing follow in at least comparable ways. Thus, the findings in respect to L1 lexical processing are also seen as relevant to L2 (Singleton, 1999: Chap. 3; Stoller & Grabe, 1995). The fact, however, that L2 learners have already started developing their L1 lexicon by the time L2 acquisition begins may imply some differences between L1 and L2 lexical development (Singleton, 1999: Chap. 2). We further deal with this issue later. Our focus to begin with is on the different theories that attempt to explain vocabulary acquisition.

**Theories of Vocabulary Acquisition in the Second Language**

There are a number of disparate stances regarding the nature of L2 vocabulary acquisition, but two main complementary approaches can be distinguished, each emphasising different aspects of the process. The first focuses on the development of vocabulary as a process in stages (cf. Ellis, 1997a: 133ff; Jiang, 2000; Schmitt, 1998). The second represents vocabulary acquisition as the development of associative networks (Meara, 1984, 1996).

**Vocabulary acquisition as a process in stages**

One possibility is that vocabulary develops in consecutive stages. Researchers have made attempts at discovering some systematicity in how vocabulary items are acquired, trying to isolate predictable stages of acquisition. Thus, Gleitman and Landau (1996: 1) claim that vocabulary learning is not just the result of a mapping procedure, but that there is a systematic process at work comparable to the highly structured innate principles that guide syntactic acquisition.
The study of vocabulary acquisition in this perspective can have a number of dimensions: (1) order of acquisition of different types of knowledge (morphological, syntactic, collocational, semantic, etc.) for each lexical item, (2) order of acquisition of word classes (noun, verb, adverb, adjective, etc.), (3) order of acquisition of particular lexical items and (4) developmental stages of lexical processing.

Concerning the first, Schmitt (1998) advocates the study of the acquisition of individual words diachronically. In his 1998 article, for example, he measured the developmental acquisition of four types of word knowledge: written form, associations, grammatical behaviour and meaning. The study was intended to find out whether there is any hierarchical relationship between these four aspects of word knowledge. None of the measures used yielded positive evidence of a developmental hierarchy of lexical competence components. Other studies that follow the same line have been equally unsuccessful in identifying the stages through which lexical acquisition might develop. However, the existence of some regular patterns of vocabulary development is generally acknowledged (cf. Curtis, 1987: 45; Palmberg, 1987; Schmitt & Meara, 1997; Viberg, 1996; Yoshida, 1978). Naturalistic observations of L1 lexical development support the idea that knowledge of a word is not a yes/no issue. New words and word aspects are acquired in an incremental way. Different aspects of word knowledge, for example morphological knowledge, collocations, appropriate use of lexical items in context or knowledge of polysemous words, seem to be incorporated to the lexical entry at different moments during the L2 acquisition process. Similarly, lexical items belonging to a different word class appear to undergo different rates of acquisition, with nouns being acquired first and verbs second (Ellis & Beaton, 1993; Laufer, 1997b; Marsden & David, 2008; Myles, 2005; Singleton, 1999: 141–142).

Research on word class acquisition is not very copious, but some recent studies by Marsden and David (2008) and Myles (2005) have claimed that verb production increases as learners’ L2 proficiency develops. Parallel to this increase in verb production, there is, in this view, a decrease in noun production. Low-proficiency learners’ productions abound in nouns, but verbs are practically non-existent in such productions. The higher cognitive and linguistic demands made by verbs seem to result in their being acquired after nouns. The same argument applies to adjectives and adverbs, which also appear after nouns in learners’ production. In particular reference to verbs, the argument runs as follows: verb acquisition implies not only the development of form–meaning connections but also the acquisition of syntactic constraints, morphological inflections and knowledge of the correspondences between verb and subject and verb complements. According to this view, the cognitive load involved in the acquisition of verbs is higher than that involved in the acquisition of nouns, which explains the former’s later appearance.

As learners’ L2 competence progresses, they start developing morphosyntactic features of verbs and other word classes. To illustrate this point, I would like to refer to some example essays taken from our data. It can be observed in the sample essays that as the learner’s proficiency increases, his or her production of nouns proportionally decreases, but the proportion of verbs (including the modal can), adjectives and adverbs rises.

< learner 30, grade 4 >
Monday 29th March
Dear Mr. and Mrs. Edwards:
Hello! My name is XXX. I live in Logroño and I from Spain. I’m nine.
I am tall I’ve got brown eyes and big ears. My school’s name is XXX.
I live in a little city. I like football, tennis, basketball, and I like rice,
potatoes, cucumbers, spaghettis, salad, ice-cream, chocolate cake, rice
and bananas, My English teacher’s name is Luis. My favourite subje
tis gym. My favourite colour is yellow. I live in a big house with 2
bathrooms, four bedrooms and don’t have hall and stairs. My class
is small with 27 chairs and desks, a computer, a blackboard and 34
photos. My birthday is 18 of August Isaac

Nouns: hello, name, eyes, ears, city, school, football, tennis, basketball, rice,
potatoes, cucumbers, spaghettis, salad, ice-cream, chocolate, cake, bananas,
English teacher, subject, gym, colour, house, bathrooms, bedrooms, hall, stairs,
class, chairs, desks, computer, photos, birthday. August: 33

Verbs: to be, live, like, have, do: 5

Adjectives: tall, brown, big, little, favourite, yellow, small: 7

< learner 30, grade 6 >
Hello! My name is XXX. I live in Logroño, (La Rioja). I’m an only
child. My fathers name are XXX and XXX I go to XXX school, in this
place there are camps of basketball and football. Logroño is a small
city. But there are lots of houses I like playing football with my
friends and eating pizza but I don’t like eating fish. I go to my villag.
It’s name is bezares. It very small village. It has a fronton, a church
and a town hall. It has only ten habitants. This habitants live in a very
old houses. I am tall and my hair is blond in summer and more dar in
autum. My eyes are brown. My school has three places. A small house. In this house are the young pupils A big house. In this house I can play football. Oh And I the President of the United States I have got a bird and a dog in north pole and my father win the lottery It's incredible! I have got a clock only of gold. I have got two noses and three arms but one arm is very small. Cristian is a mosquitos.

**Nouns:** name, child, fathers, place, camps, football, city, houses, friends, pizza, fish, village, church, town hall, habitants, hair, summer, eyes, school, pupils, children, president, bird, sports centre, dog, lottery, clock, gold, noses, arms, mosquitos: 31.

**Verbs:** to be, live, go, like, play, eat, can, win, have got, do: 10

**Adjectives:** small, old, tall, blond, dark, brown, young, big, last, incredible, a lot of, only: 12

**Adverbs:** very, more: 2

Among the factors that affect the rate of acquisition of individual words, researchers distinguish, among others, pronounceability, length, morphological complexity, abstractness, polysemy, semantic opacity, synonymy, word frequency and salience (Ellis, 2004; Ellis & Beaton, 1993; González Álvarez, 2004; Laufer, 1990b, 1997b; Singleton, 1999: 136–147). Apart from these phonological, orthographic and semantic characteristics of the L2 word, the degree to which the L2 and L1 words correspond will determine the ‘learnability’, that is the degree of ease of learning of L2 items. The more difficult a word is to learn, the more lexical errors can be expected to affect this word. In this vein, a long and formally complex word gives rise to many lexical errors in our sample. Examples of the different renderings of the word are as follows:

- **My bidray** is in february.
- **My birthey** is the third of April.
- **My birday** is in September.
- **My verdey** is day 22 may.
- **On friday** is my birdhay.

Considering the degree of integration of the components of a lexical entry (semantic, syntactic, morphological and formal), Jiang (2000) proposes a theoretical model of tutored L2 lexical development that proceeds in stages. The model draws on the two basic differences between L1 and L2 vocabulary acquisition in a formal instructional setting. L2 vocabulary acquisition is constrained by (1) ‘poverty of input in terms of both quantity and quality’ and (2) ‘presence of an established conceptual/semantic system with an L1 lexical system closely associated with it’ (p. 49) (cf. Ellis, 1997a: 133ff).

According to Jiang (2000) L2 vocabulary acquisition proceeds in three phases. Firstly, learners focus on the formal specifications of a particular lexical item, and may even try to relate given L2 forms to their L1 translations. This is called the ‘formal stage of lexical development’.

Secondly, as experience with the language and its lexicon increases, learners add to L2 lexical entries the semantic and syntactic features of their L1 translation equivalents. This stage of vocabulary learning implies the matching of a new word form with pre-existing (L1) meanings (Ellis, 1997a: 134). Jiang describes this stage as the ‘L1 lemma mediation stage’. Lexical transfer is common at this stage (cf. Ellis, 1997a: 134). Finally, when the learner has considerable L2 experience, semantic, syntactic and morphological information relating to the L2 word is incorporated into the corresponding lexical entry, and there is a movement away from any type of L1 mediation; this is the ‘L2 integration stage’. The cognitive linguistic interpretation of lexical acquisition follows the same line (Robinson & Ellis, 2008; VanPatten et al., 2004).

The belief that L2 vocabulary acquisition can proceed as a set of hierarchically and systematically ordered stages implies systematicity and regularity in the lexical system. This is a step forward in research in the field of lexical development, since, traditionally, the lexicon has been deemed to be a chaotic mass of words arranged or listed without any predetermined order (cf. among many others, Dušková, 1969; Warren, 1982). Attempts such as the above at explaining the nature of lexical acquisition in L2 illustrate a major change in perspective as well as renewed research interest in the lexical component of language. A similar development can be observed in research in lexical errors, as will be presented below.

**Vocabulary as associative networks**

The second main trend within lexical studies suggests that vocabulary development occurs through associative networks (Meara, 1984, 1996). The belief that there is some systematic disposition of words in the lexicon led to the proposal of explanations that would account for lexical learning while taking full account of such systematicity (Dagut, 1977; Meara, 1996; Singleton, 1999). In this perspective, a new lexical item is incorporated into the L2 lexicon by establishing relations of various kinds to already existent words.
Meara (1984, 1996) asserts that learning vocabulary involves developing a set of associations, a semantico-formal network that reorganises itself with every new word learned; Beheydt (1987) and Robinson (1989, 1995) support this view, according to which new lexical information relates to old information by means of semantico-formal connections. Thus, lexical learning implies extending and strengthening those associations as the result of the incorporation of new words, or of further semantic and/or formal features of already known words.

At the core of these networks lies the notion of prototypicality (cf. Weinreich, 1974). A prototype is seen as the central or best example of a semantic category. In this view, vocabulary acquisition consists in broadening the semantic category by adding new shades of meaning or even new meanings to the prototype and by stretching the category with new lexical items that establish polysemy, synonymy, antonymy or metonymy relations among themselves (Cameron, 1994, 2001; Coady, 1995; Gass, 1988; Laufer, 1991a; Meara, 1996; Nagy & Herman, 1987; Nation, 1990; Schmitt, 1995; Schmitt & Meara, 1997; Wesche & Paribakht, 1996). Imagine, for example, that an EFL learner acquires the word dog with its denotative meaning of a ‘domestic four-legged animal known for its loyalty to men’. This will constitute the prototype term, and as experience with the L2 increases, new meanings of the term such as figuratively or connotatively derived ‘contemptible person’, ‘ugly person’, ‘any of various usually simple mechanical devices for holding, gripping or fastening that consist of a spike, bar or hook’ or ‘uncharacteristic or affected stylishness or dignity’ (cf. www.merriam-webster.com) will also be incorporated. Moreover, the learners will also incorporate other words semantically and formally related to the prototype: morphological variations of the word (doggie, to dog, dog-eared), synonyms (canine, hound), expressions with the word (put on the dog, lazy dog, going to the dogs, hot dog), words in opposite or contrastive relationships (cat, wolf) and words in hyponymous or superordinate relationships (mammal, animal, spaniel, German shepherd).

From this model, it follows that not all L2 words have the same opportunities to be acquired within a certain time span by L2 learners. The fact that our minds are organised into categories and that these categories revolve around a prototypical term determines the possibilities of a word to be learned (González Álvarez, 2004). Basic-level terms are the first to be learned and remembered by L2 learners, because they are conceptually the easiest. Going back to the previous example, the word dog will be learned more quickly and more easily than the related words animal or spaniel, since the first is more neutral and less marked than the latter two (Cameron, 1994, 2001; Singleton, 1999; Weinreich, 1974). If the learned L2 prototypical term does not coincide with the native prototype, the learner will have to restructure the categorisation with the aid of further L2 lexical information until it resembles a native prototype (Beheydt, 1987; Cameron, 1994, 2001). A very conspicuous example here is the notion or concept bread. The prototype bread does not correspond in exact ways with its Spanish equivalent pan. The Spanish EFL learner first attaches the form bread to the already existing conceptual image of pan. However, as experience with the L2 increases, learners abandon the L1 concept, replacing it with the L2 concept and incorporating L2 meanings and L2 forms that relate to bread (bread and butter, loaf, brown bread, bread roll, bread slice, bun).

According to this line of thinking, how well a particular lexical item is known may condition the strengthening and consolidation of the relationships between words in the mental lexicon. As the knowledge of a word increases, the connections it maintains with other words in the lexicon vary in nature and intensity (cf. Singleton, 1999: Chap. 4). Thus, the closer a word is to the core vocabulary, the stronger its semantic associations with other core vocabulary items will be (Wotler, 2001).

Formal aspects of lexical items (phonology and orthography) are also seen as playing an important role in structuring and connecting words in the mind. Relationships among lexical items in the mental lexicon of native children and, especially, in that of low-proficiency L2 learners are claimed to be significantly characterised by phonological connections, that is words relate to each other via formal similarities rather than by meaning relations. For instance, a word such as dog would relate semantically with cat or bark (paradigmatic and syntagmatic association, respectively) and phonologically with bog (examples taken from Wolter, 2001: 43). Such evidence of both phonological and semantic lexical relationships emphasises the importance of the formal aspects (phonological and graphemic) of a word in L2 vocabulary learning. Lexical errors can, accordingly, not only involve the semantic component of a word, but its form is also liable to be affected, for example spelling errors, coinages, misselections.3

Lexicon organisation in L2 and L1

Knowing how lexical items are organised and accessed can provide relevant insights into how vocabulary is acquired, and especially into how it can be best taught. There are three basic perspectives that try to
provide an account of the organisation of the lexicon, in the L1 and L2, in terms of the types of links established among the stored lexical items.

The first line of research (Meara, 1983, 1984, 1992, 1996) contends that the L1 and L2 lexicons are qualitatively different in their structure. It claims that while the L1 lexicon is predominantly semantically organised, the words stored in the L2 lexicon are mainly phonologically related. The comparison of data obtained from word association tests performed by L1 and L2 learners has led to this conclusion. To illustrate this point, we can think of the associations of the word book. In the native speaker’s lexicon, these would probably include the words read, write, novel, library, edit, publish, hardback, bookshop, one for the book, in one’s book, and so on. In the L2 learner’s lexicon, on Meara’s view, formal associations such as bookshop, cook, hook, textbook, foot may manifest themselves.

The second account of lexicon organisation postulates that even beginner L2 learners store some words in the lexicon via the establishment of semantic associations. In this view, the L1 and L2 lexicons function in essentially the same manner. It is the number of words integrated into the lexicon (i.e. how many words the learner knows) and also the extent of the integration of each particular item (i.e. how well the item in question is known), as well as the nature of the particular word in question, which influence the type of associations established (Ellis & Beaton, 1993; Meara, 1996; Nation, 1990; Ringbom, 1983; Singleton, 1996, 1999: 139; Wolter, 2001).

Still a third model of lexical organisation and access exists that is based on the production/comprehension distinction. Some authors (Channell, 1988; López Morales, 1993; Nattinger, 1988) claim that in production, words are accessed via semantic associations, while in comprehension, it is the formal (phonological/orthographic) relationships between words that account for lexicon organisation and access, both in L1 and in L2. According to this model, for production, words are organised into semantic networks, and for comprehension, lexical items are arranged into formal (phonological/orthographic) networks. For advocates of this model, the L1 and L2 lexicons also function in the same way and share organisational structure.

In comparing L1 and L2 speech errors, Channell (1988) reached the conclusion that the nature of lexical errors produced by both groups was similar, implying that, at some level, the L1 and L2 lexicons resemble each other and are organised in a similar way, with words arranged phonologically and related by semantic links (Coady, 1995; De Groot, 1993; Kroll, 1993; Kroll et al., 2002; Singleton, 1999: Chaps. 4 and 7).
Nonetheless, there are clear differences between adults and young learners deriving from differences in cognitive development, linguistic and lexical development, instructional experience and input. Such differences are likely to impact both the route and the rate of vocabulary acquisition. Hence, we need to review in detail the process of L2 vocabulary acquisition in children. The following section is devoted to the analysis of language acquisition by young learners.

Vocabulary Acquisition by Young Learners

This section will explore the processes of lexical development in young learners. Finding out how children acquire vocabulary will be of help in identifying, classifying, analysing and finally explaining their lexical errors. Not only is it relevant for research on lexical errors to investigate L2 vocabulary learning, but, in addition, how the L1 lexical store is acquired offers interesting insights into the strategies underlying the appearance of lexical errors. So far, we have dealt with different explanations that try to account for the process of L2 vocabulary acquisition in general. However, when investigating and discussing the lexical error production of young English learners, it is essential to point out differential particularities of adult and children L2 vocabulary learning, as well as the specifications related to L1 and L2 vocabulary acquisition in young learners. Research on SLA by young learners is, alas, relatively scarce (but see Philp et al., 2008), and especially rare are research studies on L2 vocabulary acquisition by children.

Bearing these considerations in mind, we provide a summary of the research that deals with how infants and children learn their mother tongue vocabulary. After briefly expounding the hypothesis that lexical development proceeds in the L1, an account will be given of the process of L2 vocabulary acquisition by young learners.

Vocabulary acquisition in the mother tongue

Generally, L1 vocabulary acquisition begins during infancy. It is a usually acknowledged fact that words are the first strictly linguistic production of an infant. Despite being the earliest linguistic system to appear, it is never attained completely. We spend our whole lives expanding our lexical store by adding new words to the list of already known words (lexicon), or by 'building up knowledge about words we already know partially' (Cameron, 2001: 74; Goldsmith, 1995; Harley & King, 1989; Laufer, 1991b). Ard and Gass (1987) support the pre-eminence of vocabulary in language acquisition with their proposal that lexical development is a cause, and not an effect, of syntactic development. This implies not only that lexis comes first before syntax but also that syntax is learned through lexis (Cameron, 2001: xiii; Robinson, 1995: 240; Singleton, 2000).

It is widely assumed that it is the need and the intention to communicate that triggers L1 lexical development and with it L1 vocabulary acquisition (Ninio, 1995; Sánchez Rodríguez, 2002; Singleton, 2000: 166). In this view, infants feel the necessity to interact with their parents, caretakers or peers, and as a consequence, they start incorporating new words in their lexicon quite rapidly. This phenomenon of rapid growth of the infant’s lexicon has been termed ‘vocabulary spurt’ (see, e.g., Goldfield & Reznick, 1990). Research findings have revealed that this rapid lexical growth is characterised by the increase in nouns or object names in the lexicon (Goldfield & Reznick, 1990). This is called the ‘naming explosion’ and seems to originate in the urge of young learners to name the objects around them (see, e.g. Goldfield & Reznick, 1990; Poulin-Dubois, 1995; Singleton, 1999: Chap. 2; Vihman & Miller, 1988: 180).

Children learn words primarily for communicative purposes. They need the names to encode their daily life experiences and the objects and persons surrounding them. In order to do this, children have to learn the conventional linguistic signs that refer to those realities. These words naming the world around them constitute the semantic content and the linguistic form of their communicative utterances.
Clark (1993) terms the essential processes involved in learning words as ‘isolating word forms in the input, creating potential meanings and mapping meanings onto forms’ (Ellis & Heimbach, 1997: 249). Single words are used to perform a variety of communicative functions, so that with the same word the child orders, questions or expresses surprise. For example, the utterance daddy?! pronounced by a small child can mean the following:

1. Where is daddy?, so that it poses a question;
2. Tell daddy to come, so that it orders; or
3. Daddy is here! indicating surprise in this case.

This early stage of lexical acquisition is characterised by two basic general phenomena: over- and underextension of meaning. The former refers to the process by which the child applies the same term to all surrounding realities that have something in common with the actual referent of the word – for example all men might be called daddy. The latter is the opposite phenomenon, so that children use a term to refer to the particular reality they know. For instance, dog will be used for the family dog exclusively; for other dogs, the child will use other terms (Anglin, 1985; Goldfield & Reznick, 1990; Sánchez Rodríguez, 2002). Gradually, the infant incorporates more and more words and is able to combine them into chains of lexical items: two-word strings, three-word strings and so on, until syntactic and morphological rules are acquired and complete sentences are formed (Crystal, 1980; Singleton, 1999: Chap. 2).

In sum, L1 vocabulary acquisition is a slow but recurrent process that stretches over the lifespan. It is a dual process that includes lexical and conceptual development, in the sense that new forms are learned in association with new meanings and concepts. This is a basic difference that distinguishes L1 and L2 vocabulary acquisition. L2 vocabulary acquisition implies the incorporation of new L2 forms which are (usually) attached to already existent concepts; that is the L2 learner learns new words to refer to old concepts, although new concepts lacking in the L1 also have to be acquired and existent concepts need to be modified (Singleton, 1999). Imagine, for example, the way in which English and Spanish structure the day. In Spanish, each 24-hour period is conventionally divided into three parts called manana (from dawn until lunch), tarde (from lunch until dusk) and noche (from dusk until dawn, when it is dark). English on its part considers up to four different day-periods: morning, afternoon, evening and night. While the first and fourth roughly coincide, the Spanish L1 learner of English has to learn the new concepts imposed on by the new words: afternoon, and especially evening.
development. An alternative approach which seems to have much to recommend it is the exploitation of L1 associative paths in order for lexical growth in the L2 to be promoted (Cameron, 1994, 2001; Erdmenger, 1985).

In this perspective, introducing a foreign language in the first years of primary education should involve a systematic sequencing of L2 vocabulary items based on the already developed L1 lexicon (Cameron, 2001). Moya Guijarro (2003) found that young EFL learners first acquire concrete and abstract words that belong to their everyday immediate context and to their physical reality. Later on they will incorporate less familiar words accompanied by more complex morphological inflections. They will also easily understand the meaning of new words whose referents are concrete, such as table, tree and dog. In this way, it seems useful to introduce words whose meaning can be easily connected with an action, body language, flashcards, photographs, drawings and other objects. Words whose meaning is abstract and have no concrete referents, such as love, justice or hope, will be acquired later. This very much echoes what is found in L1 lexical development (see, e.g. Anglin, 1985).

Another important discovery in studies about L1 and early L2 vocabulary acquisition is the production of language chunks. In the same vein as children learning their L1, L2 learners produce chunks or whole expressions at a time before they can analyse them into individual words (cf. Robinson & Ellis, 2008). This prefabricated language refers to ready-made expressions that are used by learners as memorised chunks that remain unanalysed and function as one single lexical item. Research has shown (see, e.g. Ellis, 1997a) that prefabricated language constitutes one important stage in the development of L1 and L2. It is related to creative processes of SLA and socialisation skills. As Palmberg (1987) had already noticed (see also Ellis, 1997a; Wray, 2002), young learners show clear patterns of vocabulary development through which their lexical competence evolves; the use of formulaic language is one of these. We have observed this phenomenon in our data. We find the following examples in the written interlanguage of our informants:

- My happy birthday is in February.
- My what’s your name is Ana.

**L1 and L2 Vocabulary Acquisition: Similarities and Differences**

The acquisition of a second language after the internalisation of the L1, even if this happens in the context of child L2 lexical development, lacks, patently, a prespeech phase. It seems, as already noted above, that the utterances produced by L2 learners ‘are from the outset mostly comprised of combinations of meaningful elements’ (Singleton, 2000: 180). Nevertheless, (child) L2 learners have a number of problems in common with L1 developers regarding the ‘struggle to isolate meaningful units and connect them with aspects of reality, to internalise and replicate the formal characteristics of these units, and to puzzle out and store their precise meanings’ (Singleton, 1999: 82).

The similarities of L1 and L2 lexical acquisition can be observed in all linguistic subsystems. Thus, L1 and L2 learners struggle to acquire new sounds, to distinguish which phonetic differences are phonemic and which are not, to learn the spelling of words and their derivations, and to acquire (partially) new concepts and new distributions of old concepts (Singleton, 2000: 181). Furthermore, L1 and L2 lexical development seem to proceed in similar ways, as attested by the fact that both display common phenomena such as lexical fluidity, change in the type of associations, from syntagmatic to paradigmatic, overextension, underextension and early acquisition of imageable words (Ellis & Beaton, 1993; Moya Guijarro, 2003; Singleton, 2000: 181).

These similarities, notwithstanding the fact that ‘L2 lexical development does not happen in a vacuum’, but ‘against the background of lexical development in at least one other language’ (Singleton, 1999: 41), point to some contrast between the processes. Basically, two main differences have been pointed out (see Singleton, 1999: 79–80): (1) the more advanced stage of cognitive and physical development of L2 lexical acquisition and (2) the existence of already lexicalised concepts.

The presence of a previous linguistic system differentiates L2 vocabulary acquisition from L1 vocabulary acquisition. When L2 words are learnt, they are mapped onto L1 concepts and enter already existing (L1) schemas (Ellis, 1997a: 133; Ellis & Heimbach, 1997; Jiang, 2000).

Frequently, the mapping of L2 words onto L1 schemas results in discrepancies and problems, because different languages organise the world in different ways (Cameron, 2001: 80; Robinson & Ellis, 2008). These asymmetries between the L2 lexical item and the L1 concept or schema onto which it is mapped give rise to lexical errors (see also Jiang, 2000). It is precisely the appearance of these particular kinds of lexical errors that distinguishes L1 from L2 vocabulary acquisition. As happens with adults, the child learner of L2 vocabulary also uses the strategy of L1 lexical transfer to cope with the lexical difficulties imposed by the new vocabulary (see, among others, Celaya & Torras, 2001; Erdmenger, 1985; Harley & King, 1989; Selinker et al., 1975; Szulc-Kurpaska, 2000). Generally, although not necessarily, L1 lexical transfer leads to fossilised
lexical errors in children’s production. Fossilised errors change from learner to learner, but likely candidates for fossilisation are semantic confusions of the type much and many, in “There weren’t much people at the party”, or adjective and adverb confusion such as badly and bad or funny and fun in “It was a very fun [in the sense of ‘comic’] movie.

Furthermore, Nizegorodcew (2006) claims that L2 lexical development by very young children (aged 3-4) in strict FL learning settings is different from L1 vocabulary acquisition, because for the former the L2 is not their usual medium of communication (p. 174). They are aware that L2 and L1 belong to different domains of communication. Moreover, poverty of input in quantitative and qualitative terms also makes a difference between L1 and L2 development in formal contexts.

Conclusion

Vocabulary is seen as a major component in children’s language development. In L1 and L2 acquisition, vocabulary represents the onset of language development and plays a central part in it. Therefore, finding out how vocabulary acquisition proceeds is of extreme relevance to the field of SLA. This chapter has reviewed the main theoretical trends that try to explain lexical development, stressing how children acquire L1 lexical abilities and then focusing on the L2 scenario.

It appears that child vocabulary acquisition proceeds from social interaction in a similar way for the L1 and the L2. Nevertheless, the emergent lexical and cognitive systems already present in L2 vocabulary learning influence the later process. L1 lexical transfer is the most important and visible effect of the L1 presence. Even so, L1 and L2 lexical development appear to proceed in fairly similar ways.

Apart from the aforementioned aspects, L2 vocabulary acquisition and written performance may be affected by other variables such as learner, task and context variables. Depending on the particular learning situation and the individual characteristics of the learner and of the task to be performed, the production of the young learner of the foreign language can vary. Age, sex, L1 background, L2 proficiency, intelligence, motivation, language attitudes, topic task and learning environment may be variables affecting the performance of the children. The following chapter will comment on some of the main learner and situation variables that may influence the production of young learners. Special attention will be given to the analysis and explanation of the variables considered in the design of this study.