

The Effects of Linguistic Context's Emotional Valence on the Acquisition of Novel Vocabulary in EFL Learners

Authors: Tram Thai, Lancaster University

Abstract ID: 303

Event: Linguistics 2026 Athens

Subject: 18. Language acquisition

Presenter Name: Tram Thai

Objectives

Valence-laden inputs, regardless of their emotional polarity, tend to receive prioritised processing and thus automatically attract and sustain attention more effectively than neutral ones. When it comes to language acquisition, the Affective Embodiment Account (AEA) suggests that emotional valence facilitates the grounding of word meanings by providing an embodied learning experience. Although research across diverse methodologies and stimulus types points to emotional valence as a significant facilitator of vocabulary acquisition, available evidence yields varied or conflicting conclusions. Additionally, little research has investigated the impact of linguistic context's emotional valence on the acquisition of new L2 words, with even fewer studies examining the retention of vocabulary knowledge. The present study extends this line of enquiry and addresses inconsistencies in existing literature by jointly exploring three dimensions of vocabulary knowledge (form, denotative meaning, emotional meaning), offering insights into how emotional valence of input exerts its facilitative effects. The primary research question is whether reading valence-laden L2 narratives can lead to better learning and retention of L2 novel words in EFL learners.

Methodology

Adopting a within-subjects experimental design in an incidental learning paradigm, this study built on Dong et al. (2024) and involved 74 Vietnamese EFL adult learners who were exposed to 30 novel adjectives through reading 60 short English narratives of different valence conditions (20 positive, 20 negative, 20 neutral). The reading materials were adapted from Dong et al. (2024) and were constructed to elicit distinct emotional valences, validated through both computational analysis (BERT model) and human ratings. Learning was assessed immediately and after a one-week delay through four tasks: speeded recognition (form), meaning matching (denotative meaning), sentence completion (emotional meaning, immediate), and valence judgement (emotional meaning, delayed). Generalised Linear Mixed Models (GLMMs) was adopted as the primary analytic approach for both accuracy and reaction time (RT) data.

Results

Results showed evidence of successful learning of all three aspects, with words encountered in the emotional contexts, especially negative ones, outperforming those in the neutral contexts in both form recognition and denotative meaning. However, these advantages had attenuated by the delayed test, suggesting contextual valence's limited effects on long-term retention of vocabulary knowledge. Results from the two measures of emotional meaning acquisition revealed minimal sensitivity to the valence of context, with no differences in performance across all conditions observed.

Discussion

The study suggests that emotional valence of linguistic context may facilitate early encoding but offer limited benefits for sustained retention of vocabulary knowledge. Evidence for a valence asymmetry was observed, but only in the immediate form recognition and meaning matching speed where negative contexts showed significantly better facilitative effect than positive ones. This indicates that the presence of emotionality, rather than the polarity of valence, may be the key driver of facilitation. Together, these findings indicate that the

strategic integration of emotional content, especially clear, vivid, and carefully-framed negative scenarios, might be a powerful tool for enhancing the initial encoding of new vocabulary in EFL contexts.