Korean EFL Learners’ Knowledge of Polysemous Words in Relation to Word Frequency and Reading Proficiency

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Kim, Youngsu, and Mun-Hong Choe. “Korean EFL Learners’ Knowledge of Polysemous Words in Relation to Word Frequency and Reading Proficiency.” Modern Studies in English Language & Literature 59.3 (2015): 125-46. The acquisition of polysemous words in a foreign language epitomizes the retention and representation of linguistic knowledge as well as its developmental dynamics. In this study, Korean high school students were asked to carry out two types of English vocabulary tasks: a word-in-isolation task and a word-in-context task. Each task was made up of three sets of polysemous words selected from 1000-, 2000-, and 3000-level frequency words, respectively. In addition, the students’ strategies for learning and determining the meanings of polysemous words were assessed through written questionnaires and class discussion. Overall, the students showed a higher rate of acquisition when measured by the word-in-context task than the word-in-isolation task, and they had greater difficulty identifying the meaning of less frequent polysemous words. Students relied more on memorized meanings when dealing with high-frequency polysemes. When words were presented in isolation, the meanings of more frequent polysemes were better recalled than less frequent ones. When words were presented in context, however, frequency was not proportionate to knowledge. All these observations suggest that differences in L2 learners’ knowledge of polysemous words lie not only in how many individual meanings they have memorized but in how well they make use of contextual cues and that as the learners’ reading proficiency develops, their vocabulary knowledge becomes contextualized to a greater extent. (Chonnam National University)

Key Words: polysemy, polysemous words, EFL, frequency, reading comprehension
I. Introduction

Words with multiple meanings are one of the main causes of miscomprehension and communication failure. Previous research has shown that second language (L2) learners are likely to experience difficulties with polysemous words in the target language. For example, Bensoussan and Laufer (1984) found that L2 learners performed far worse on guessing the meaning of polysemous words than on guessing the meaning of other words. Moreover, according to Schmitt (1998), learning to discern the meanings of a polysemous word is a slow and patchy process.

Polysemy refers to the relation of multiple meanings within a single lexical item. The structuralist approach to polysemy assumes that multiple meanings of a polysemous word are not part of inherent semantic knowledge of an abstract core monoseme, but are rather attributed to contextual and pragmatic factors (Caramazza and Brones, 1979). Alternatively, multiple meanings of a word may be learned and represented as discrete entries which are unrelated to one another, or they may be linked together in a coherent way with prototypical meanings connected meaningfully with their extended meanings (Klein & Murphy, 2001, 2002; Langacker, 1987; Lehrer, 1990; Nakahara, 2005; Rijpma, 1999; Verspoor & Lowie, 2003). Although there have been a large number of studies on polysemy from the perspective of lexical semantics (Brugman, 1988; Kim, 2004; Kwon, 2008; Lakoff, 1987; Tyler & Evans, 2003), studies on L2 learners’ knowledge and learning of polysemous words are very few. The present study focuses on the relationship between L2 learners’ reading proficiency and knowledge of polysemous words and the effect of word frequency on representing the meanings of polysemous words.