Semantic Gap Filling Ability in Chinese as a Foreign Language

Semantic gap filling ability (or referred to as lexical inferencing ability in previous literature) refers to the ability to fill semantic gaps created by unknown words in a text. This ability has been found to be very important in second language (L2) vocabulary learning (e.g. Pitts, White & Krashen, 1989) and L2 reading (e.g. de Bot, Paribakht, & Wesche, 1997; Paribakht & Wesche, 1999). However, it is still unclear what factors would contribute to this ability. Understanding this question is significant because it will help instructors identify learners’ specific difficulties in semantic gap filling and address these difficulties in their future instruction.

Previous studies on L2 semantic gap filling have shown that both L1 resources (such as L1 reading ability) and L2 linguistic knowledge (such as vocabulary and grammar) affect L2 semantic gap filling (e.g., de Bot et al., 1997; Nassaj, 2004; Paribakht, 2005; Wesche & Paribakht, 2010; Zhang, in press). In addition, there are two sources of information that readers can use when filling semantic gaps that are created by unknown words: word-internal information (i.e., morphological information) and word-external information (i.e., contextual information) (Koda, 2005). To make use of morphological information, readers need to first analyze a morphologically complex word, then decompose it into its morphemic constituents, and then combine the meanings of these constituents to infer the meaning of the word. This ability to analyze, identify, and manipulate morphemes in words is defined as morphological awareness (Koda, 2005). To use contextual information, readers need to identify, abstract, and integrate useful semantic information from the context (i.e., words, phrases, and sentences surrounding the unknown word). The ability to manipulate contextual information to construct meaning from the context is defined as contextual meaning construction ability in this study. Therefore, L1 reading ability, L2 linguistic knowledge (vocabulary and grammar), L2 morphological awareness, and L2 contextual meaning construction ability were proposed as potential predictors of L2 semantic gap filling ability.

To test the hypothesis, this study examined Chinese semantic gap filling ability among 82 learners of Chinese as a foreign language, including 64 native English-speaking learners (36 high proficiency learners and 28 low proficiency learners) and 18 Chinese heritage language learners. Participants were asked to complete a number of tasks testing those potential predictors. Different factors were found to predict different groups of learners’ semantic gap filling ability in Chinese. For Chinese heritage learners, Chinese vocabulary knowledge was found to be the only factor that significantly predicted their semantic gap filling ability in Chinese. However, for high proficiency English-speaking learners, all factors tested were found to be significant predictors of their semantic gap filling ability in Chinese. For low proficiency English-speaking learners, morphological awareness was the only significant predictor of their semantic gap filling ability in Chinese. Based on the findings, suggestions are proposed about what to focus on in future instruction to improve diverse groups of learners’ semantic gap filling abilities in Chinese.
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References


