

‘In Praise of Incidental Learning: Lessons from Some Empirical Findings on Language Acquisition’
A Critical Response

This assignment aims to provide a critical response to the article ‘In Praise of Incidental Learning: Lessons from Some Empirical Findings on Language Acquisition’ (Elley, 1997), this article is a presentation of the authors findings in comparison with other research in relation to the acquisition of vocabulary and grammar, and how language learning is best achieved, with a focus on incidental learning. The author, Dr. Warwick B. Elley is Emeritus Professor of Education at the University of Canterbury, New Zealand, where he researches the literacy acquisition of first and second language learners (Langer, 1997 cited in Elley, 1997), therefore the author has great authority in this field. The title of the text suggests that the author is bias regarding incidental learning, the article is predominantly based on the author’s own findings and research, with links to other research to add validity to findings. However, as the research is mainly the authors, there could be an element of bias in the findings as if the author holds a particular view point, this could influence the results obtained. Nonetheless, Elley (1997) acknowledges that the results of research are not definitive due to a degree of artificiality and uncertainty in the tasks carried out, stating that it provides more of an insight and an alternative perspective rather than absolute fact.

The article is aimed at academics who have an interest in language acquisition, and is reasonably well laid out with a logical flow and headings to guide the reader. It begins with an introduction to language learning in general, how it is acquired including in the case of second language acquisition. Elley (1997) highlights in this article the work of Noam Chomsky in that language acquisition is an innate ability, due to the ‘Language Acquisition Device’ (LAD) (Chomsky, 1957 cited in Pound, 2014), acknowledging that this view is widely accepted. However he fails to discuss opposing theories and views such as Skinner’s theory of behaviourism (Baker, 2011), this highlights the authors view and potential bias. Elley (1997) also discusses parental involvement in the development of language, this is supported by Bruner (Pound, 2014) who conceived the ‘Language Acquisition Support System’ (LASS), this is also supported by Vygotsky who believed that language is both modelled by parents or caregivers and this provides scaffolding (Vygotsky, 1962 cited in Baker, 2007; Pound, 2006).

Another point that is discussed is the ‘traditional’ view of language learning, Elley (1997) appears to have a clear distaste for these methods, stating that they are difficult and less favoured by practitioners, he states that these methods entail grammar being intentionally learned through memorisation and repetitive drills. This is similar to the audio-lingual method of language learning, parts of which are incorporated successfully into language teaching today, including the ‘Presentation, Practice and Production’ cycle (Richards, 2006: 8) particularly the repetition aspect with ‘Slot Drilio’ recommended by ‘Y Siarter Iaith’ (Jones, 2017), a ten minute per day repetitive oral drilling of the target language.

Elley (1997) appears to favour methods of learning in authentic situations and where the learner is focused on the message rather than learning, Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) is a more recent development in language learning (Grenfell and Harris, 2002), the focus is placed upon communication, with the use of activities in order to apply the learned language in meaningful contexts (Cook, 2008; Jabeen, 2014), this method is considered highly interactive due to the involvement and engagement of the learners (Aldred and Miller, 2000) and aims to develop ‘communicative competence’ (Richards, 2006: 2). Task-based learning is a similar approach, with a focus on collaborative discussion to achieve a goal or complete a task (Dettori, 2011). Although different from reading, it shares some characteristics. However these methods may fail to develop grammatical accuracy (Hummel, 2014) which becomes essential in the later stages of language

learning. It is suggested by Elley (1997) that reading may help with this, but reading the target language and studying grammar alone will not achieve fluency in the language, learners need to communicate and use the language according to the CLT approach.

Incidental learning is defined as the acquisition of skills without explicit teaching or instruction (Ezell and Justice, 2005), this can be witnessed in schools throughout Wales in the form of incidental Welsh, which the Welsh Government (2016) has found to increase the amount of Welsh spoken in the classroom, increasing confidence and enthusiasm. It is described by Estyn (2013) as natural, unstructured interactions whereby practitioners give information in Welsh and provide children with the opportunity to develop communication skills. Second language teaching has shifted in recent years to involve greater communication and a focus on speech (Grenfell and Harries, 2002) including use of the second language frequently in the classroom (Howatt, 2004 cited in Cook, 2008). However, the incidental language learning in this article is referred to in terms of reading, this differs from the incidental Welsh learning currently seen in schools as the focus is placed on reading as opposed to oral communication. This being said, the principles of acquisition are the same in that when learning within a familiar or engaging context, the children are not usually given the definitions, instead prompts are used if the children do not understand (Estyn, 2013) and so they are learning new vocabulary without being explicitly taught.

In the article, Elley (1997) suggests that incidental language learning has the potential to greatly improve vocabulary and grammar. However, incidental language learning alone is not enough to achieve fluency in a language, other methods may be required in order to learn the language. Immersion is similar to incidental language learning in that children are not provided with explanations of words, learning the language through assimilation rather than direct instruction. The immersion method of language teaching entails the target language being the primary language of the classroom, with little focus being placed on grammar, this is instead gained from frequent exposure and use, imitating first language learning (De Bot et al., 2005). The curriculum is delivered through the medium of the target language (Welsh Government, 2013) with the goal of this method is that children will become bilingual and bi-literate (Baker, 2011). This has recently become popular in Wales, with many English-speaking families sending their children to Welsh-medium schools, a method that has proved very successful in this context (Welsh Government, 2013). Cummins (2008 cited in Gross, 2013) states that if children are immersed and surrounded by the second language, within two years conversational fluency can be achieved and so incidental learning has roots in a well-established and tested method.

It may have been helpful for Elley (1997) to use younger learners to carry out his research, the children used were over eleven years old in many cases, this could have had an effect on the rate of vocabulary uptake as they are reaching the end of the 'critical period' for language learning as referred to by a large number of sources (Lenneberg, 1967 cited in Bakhurst and Shanker, 2001; Hakuta et al., 2003; Trask, 2007) which is around the beginning of puberty. Although he claims to have used both child and adult learners, perhaps using children who were of a younger age may have shown a larger increase in the number of words gained incidentally if they were firmly within this period, as opposed to nearing the end, resembling adult learners in their innate ability to acquire language. However, learners who are in the foundation phase may have been unsuitable for this research as the tasks required reading, in the case of Welsh second language, Estyn (2013) suggest that foundation phase learners make little progress in reading Welsh, and that this can be attributed to a reluctance to introduce reading in Welsh until learners have a firm grasp of reading English text.

Elley (1997) rules out three possible contenders for the development of vocabulary, and proposes that the two that he has researched are the main contributors, silent reading and listening to stories, then going on to state his own studies and findings, although these are accredited by other similar studies not undertaken by the author. Silent reading was the first focus of study, this involved 'high-interest

illustrated story books' that were read to children and then were interacted with and read silently for half an hour every day for two years, and another study which involved over 500 children reading a large number of books every day for three years, the results of both studies conducted by Elley (1997) showed positive gains in vocabulary. However, silent reading does not follow the constructivist view of learning held by Bruner and Vygotsky (Pound, 2014) as they are working independently and neither does it fit with the recent developments in successful language learning, namely communicative language teaching as the learners are not interacting with each other or using the language to communicate. Estyn (2013) suggest that learning to read is dependent on learner's skills in spoken language, if the text is too difficult for the reader then this method of reading does not offer support as reading in a group context would, therefore the text would need to be one that is closely matched with the readers ability, enabling them to access the text without support, it is recommended that over two unknown words per page could make the text too difficult and discourage learners from independent reading (Estyn, 2013). The author acknowledges that children who have a dislike for reading and typically read less will not acquire the same amount of vocabulary as a keen reader, making this method less effective at increasing learner's vocabulary.

The second way through which learners were exposed to incidental language learning was by being read stories, Elley (1997) conducted research and repeated the study in three separate locations, adding validity to his findings, in all cases learners vocabulary was increased. Shared reading involves reading a text in a whole-class situation, the teacher leads the learning by reading the text to pupils, enabling learners to access higher-level texts and vocabulary that would otherwise prove unreachable at their current ability level, children usually join in reading the text after the first reading (Washtell, 2008). This is scaffolding the learner, providing support and gradually withdrawing it, linking to the social constructivist theory of learning advocated by Vygotsky (Pound, 2014). Estyn (2011) state that shared reading is a highly effective way to model and teach reading, recommending that it should be a feature in all classrooms. Practitioners can draw attention to aspects of the text, such as new vocabulary to aid children, sounding words out and developing word recognition, asking questions about what is happening will also aid in developing comprehension of the text.

Professional teaching experience to date has shown that very few books are read in the Welsh language, this includes learners and practitioners. However, the Welsh Government (2015) state that children should hear books being read in Welsh, and read Welsh books, both individually and collaboratively. Instead, programs in Welsh are shown on the interactive white board, which Elley (1997) regards as less effective in increasing learner's vocabulary. In light of this article, it appears that reading in the second language, and being read to has a positive impact on learners vocabulary and should be a feature in all classrooms, be it through starting shared reading when children are in early foundation phase and unable to access the language independently, moving to include reading books individually when developmentally ready. However, the weighting for second language Welsh in classrooms currently stands at just 15% reading, 15% writing and 70% oracy (Central South Consortium, 2016), therefore if reading has the positive effect that Elley (1997) suggests, perhaps it should feature more heavily in the weighting, becoming a solid feature in classrooms across Wales, and in other countries attempting to develop languages, ERW (2016) and the Welsh Government (2015) agree that reading Welsh books should be a feature in classrooms.

Despite some issues with potential bias, the article 'In praise of Incidental Learning – Lessons From Some Empirical Findings on Language Acquisition' provides evidence that suggests reading texts in a target language that are slightly above the readers capability has benefits on the acquisition of vocabulary, and the most effective way to achieve this is through sharing books that are interesting and engaging to the reader, this article provides an insight into the potential benefits that daily reading can produce, although slow. It would perhaps be useful alongside other methods, Donaldson (2015) suggests that reading enriches lives, and so reading in the target language could enrich language learning too.

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