Applying Broaden & Build Theory to L2 Spanish Lexical Acquisition

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The current study investigates how the *broaden-and-build theory* of positive emotions (Fredrickson, 1998, 2001; Fredrickson & Branigan, 2005) applies to vocabulary learning among L2 Spanish speakers. Lexical acquisition is a central component of Second Language Acquisition (Barcroft, 2004). Learners associate form and meaning as well as corresponding linguistic features, developing the syntactic structure of their L2. The *broaden-and-build theory* asserts that positive emotions broaden the scope of attention, cognition, and action; thereby widening learners' momentary thought-action repertoires and putting them in a heightened state of receptiveness. Conversely, negative emotions narrow the scope in these same domains. Therefore, we expect that when it comes to lexical acquisition, presenting new vocabulary items in a context of positive emotions will allow learners to be maximally receptive to input; whereas, presenting novel expressions in a context of negative emotions are expected to have the opposite effect.

For the current study, twenty-seven intermediate L2 speakers of Spanish (L1 English) listened to a brief story manipulated to convey a positive, neutral, or negative emotional drive through intonation and imagery. The story contained eleven nonce words and it was presented in a PowerPoint presentation where images were presented in association with each novel lexical item. Participants watched the presentation twice before the first task and once again before the second task. The first task was a Picture Matching Task, in which participants were asked to match each of the nonce words from the story with the correct image. The second task consisted of a Picture Naming Task, in which participants viewed presentation images and were asked to recall the word that was associated with that particular image.

Results indicate a clear advantage of using positive intonation and imagery across both tasks. In the Matching Task, participants performed equally on the Positive and Neutral conditions (see Figure 1), but they show significantly lower accuracy in the Negative condition (71%; one-way ANOVA $p<0.0001$). The Naming Task shows a decline in accuracy in the Neutral condition and a stable accuracy score for the Negative condition, whereas results for the Positive condition increase in accuracy in this task (Figure 2). Accuracy in the Positive condition is significantly higher than Neutral and Negative in the Naming Task (one-way ANOVA $p<0.001$).

These results point to a consistent benefit to presenting teaching materials with positive intonation and imagery associated with them, supporting the *broaden-and-build theory* extended to L2 lexical acquisition. The results of this study have obvious implications for language learning and teaching. We will discuss practical methods for the classroom, particularly as it pertains to teaching vocabulary related to content that might provoke negative emotions.

References

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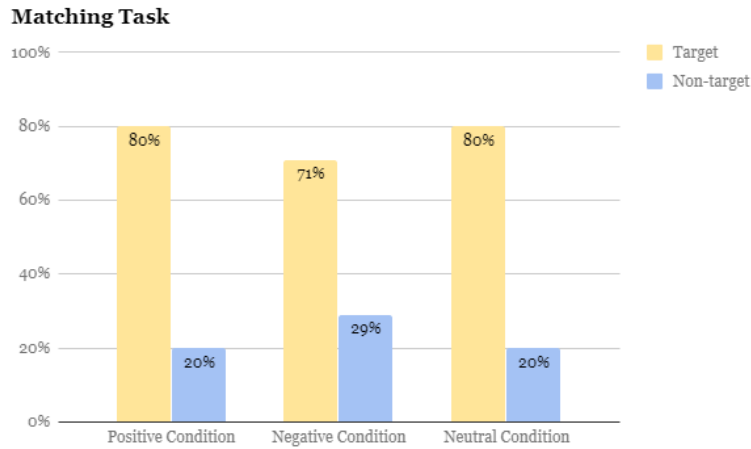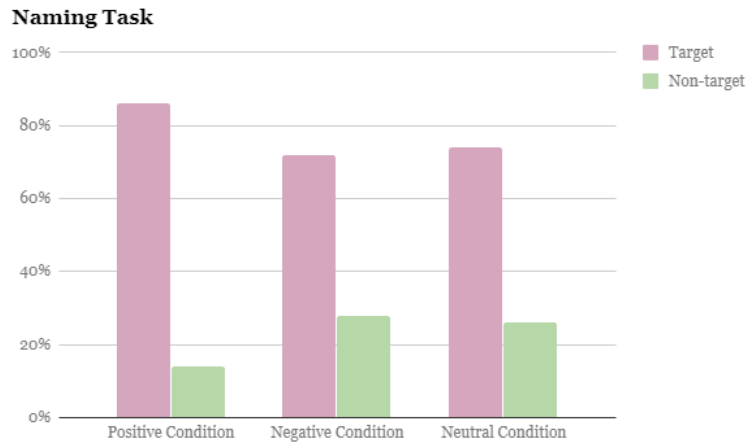
Matching Task

Figure 1. Results of Matching Task

Naming Task

Figure 2. Results of Naming Task