

INVOLUNTARY REHEARSAL IN SECOND LANGUAGE ACQUISITION

Teresa Siek-Piskozub

School of English, Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań

Abstract: The presentation is devoted to the mechanism of involuntary rehearsal in second language acquisition. Two phenomena of involuntary rehearsal type are discussed: Din and song-stuck-in-my head. Results of some earlier studies on the phenomena in question are discussed. Since the Din and SSIMH phenomena are hypothesised to belong to the mechanism of Language Acquisition Device, two studies were undertaken to see a potential value of songs for vocabulary learning. Results of the two studies confirm the potentials of songs for language acquisition.

Keywords: involuntary rehearsal, subvocal rehearsal, din, song-stuck-in-my-head

1. INVOLUNTARY REHEARSAL

The phenomenon of involuntary rehearsal (a repeated rehearsal of thoughts) is documented in the related literature. It has been observed by psychiatrists studying people with mental disorders and mentally healthy people who have a problem to solve. Until they find a satisfying solution, they may experience a persistent and involuntary thinking about the problem. Existence of visual and kinaesthetic rehearsals are widely experienced in many domains, for example in arts and in sports (Murphey, 1990: 55-56). Two phenomena involving involuntary rehearsal in second language acquisition have been identified: the din in the head and the song-stuck-in-my head.

1.1. *Din phenomenon*

Involuntary rehearsal of a foreign language in the mind was first mentioned anecdotally by Barber in 1980 who it called the „Din in the head” phenomenon. During her business trip to Russia she experienced hearing in her mind: word sounds, intonations, phrases, all swimming about in the voices of the people she talked to. The sounds in her head became so intense after 5 days that she found herself metaphorically chewing on them. She also observed that whenever she noticed this Din, the linguist in her demanded to know what she was ‘saying’. She had to reconstruct what it meant from the context in which she had heard it hours or days earlier. Barber observed that the constant rehearsal of those phrases made it easier for her from day to day to speak more quickly as ”things popped out as prefabricated chunks”, but she had no control over what her subconsciousness fed into her ‘chewer’ each day (Barber 1980).

Krashen (1983) hypothesises that this involuntary rehearsal is the result of the Language Acquisition Device at work. He further hypothesises that it is caused by comprehensible input, i.e. messages in the second language above the learner’s present competence but which the acquirer is able to comprehend.

Several studies have reported the Din (Bedford, 1985; Chapman Parr and Krashen, 1986; de Guerrero, 1987; Siek-Piskozub, 1997; Siek-Piskozub, in press) confirming that it is widespread (see table 1.).

Bedford’s and de Guerrero’s studies showed that involuntary rehearsal was provoked by classes devoted to verbal interaction, and not by formal instruction with controlled practice. No significant sex differences were found but the difference between less and more proficient learners was significant in the Krashen’s study. The more advanced learners of a language were experiencing the phenomenon less often. It provoked the researchers to a further study which confirmed this observation (Chapman Parr and Krashen, 1986:275-276).

However, the results of my study do not support this claim as no important difference was found between advanced language learners and post-beginners in an intensive language course of L2 English in Poland (Siek-Piskozub, 1997).

Table 1 Results of five studies of Din experience

Study	Number of respondents	Affirmative responses %
Bedford (1985)	160	(109) 68,1
Parr and Krashen (1986)	504	(366) 72,6
Guerrero (1987)	55	(44) 78,9
Siek-Piskozub (1997)	27	(25) 92,5
Siek-Piskozub (in press)	58	(53) 91,0
TOTAL	804	(597) 74,2

In another study (Siek-Piskozub, in press), when interrogated on when the Din was experienced more often: at the beginning, intermediate or advanced levels, only 15% of Polish advanced university students pointed to the early stage of language learning (table 2.).

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Polish learners reported experiencing Din either after an intensive study (also of grammar) or after an intensive oral or written exposure to linguistic input (e.g. after reading a book or watching a film). It follows that it is rather the intensity of exposure and a will to acquire more language that matters and not the level of proficiency. Most of the students felt the need to decode the incomprehensible words or phrases being involuntarily rehearsed in their mind, and many of them conformed to this need. Most of the respondents report that they experienced the Din more often when they were already intermediate or advanced (Siek-Piskozub, in press).

Table 2. Results of three studies of Din experienced by advanced language learners

Study	Number	Affirmative responses
Krashen and Parr (1986)	28	(3) 10%
Siek-Piskozub (1997)	18	(17) 94%
Siek-Piskozub (in press)	58	(46) 79%

The occurrence of the phenomenon in question seems to be influenced rather by learners willingness to further develop their competence in the language than by their level of proficiency, as Krashen hypothesises.

1.2. Song-stuck-in-my-head phenomenon

Murphey (1990) associates the Din phenomenon with another one, the so called 'Song-stuck-in-my-head' (SSIMH) which can also be a developmental strategy of the LAD. It is a persistent dinning in the head of a song. It also seems to be a very widespread phenomenon (see table 3). Some learners also think that words, expressions and sentences, heard earlier in songs, help them in learning new material in the classroom (Siekierzyńska, 1996, Siek-Piskozub, in press).

Table 3. Results of three studies of SSIMH experience

Study	Number	Affirmative responses
Murphey (1990)	49	(47) 96%
Siekierzyńska (1996)	813	(779) 96%
Siek-Piskozub (in press)	58	(58) 100%
TOTAL	920	(884) 96%

Exposure of language learners to target language songs may thus have an important influence on target language acquisition.

Results of several studies confirm the wide exposure of English language learners to English popular songs. Learners at the age of 16-23 may listen to English songs for 2 hours a day on average (Murphey, 1985; Siekierzyńska, 1996; Siek-Piskozub, in press). It is because English pop-songs are very popular. This may mean that English language learners may be receiving

much more input than learners of other languages which makes the process of English language learning easier to them. Listening to songs may provoke an involuntary subvocal rehearsal which Lyczak (1979) observed in his study devoted to the role of passive listening. In his experiment three groups of Chinese-English bilinguals, who knew no Thai nor Japanese, listened to tapes of either Japanese, Thai, or classical music for 45 minutes a day during a week preceding the instruction in L2 Thai. Then after a short Thai learning period, he tested the three groups for comprehension and production. Whereas no difference in comprehension was found between the groups, there were significant differences in production. The Thai-listening-groups scored the highest, the Japanese-listening-group the lowest and the classical-music-listening group was in the middle. None of the subjects were observed speaking during the experiment, so Lyczak speculates that perhaps students were rehearsing subvocally. The fact that the Japanese Group performed worse than any other of the two groups suggests that subjects in this group may actually have 'learnt' something about the language which interfered with the learning of Thai. Lyczak concludes that subvocal rehearsal may be a more potent factor in second language learning than language teachers had heretofore imagined (1979:87).

If SSIMH phenomenon is a kind of subvocal rehearsal a question rises if exposure to foreign language songs can provoke the LAD into a Din mode? It was the goal of an experiment which will be discussed here.

2. SONGS AND LANGUAGE ACQUISITION

Positive effects of songs on the process of language learning have been known to many language teachers since the early days of language teaching, for example, already St. Augustin advocated songs for teaching Latin. Motivational function of songs was emphasised by many language teachers (e.g. Rivers, 1968). At times songs were also recognised as a valuable source of cultural material. The Din and SSIMH studies, however, suggest that songs may also have an important influence on the mechanism of language learning.

2.1. Exposure to foreign language songs and vocabulary learning

A study was undertaken by an MA student at Adam Mickiewicz University to see what effect, if any, a passive exposure to songs in the target language may have on the acquisition of vocabulary (Mamys, 1997). In an experiment two groups of learners students at the age of 14-17 were taught according to the same syllabus and by the same teacher. The only difference in treatment was that one of the groups was exposed to a background music while learning. It was a 45-minutes-long cassette with some English pop-songs. Students were informed that they should not pay any attention to the recording. It was only for a good atmosphere in the classroom. The experiment lasted for two month.

Before the experiment and after the experiment both groups were tested on selected vocabulary from the songs. The same test served first as a pre-test and later as a post-test.

Comparison of the results (see table 5) shows that whereas 23% of the tested vocabulary was not acquired before the experiment, after it only 10 % was still not recognised by the learners from the experimental group (13 % increase in the tested vocabulary).

Table 5. Learners' vocabulary development after 2 months exposure to songs (Mamys, 1997:47)

% of vocabulary items	control group		experimental group	
	pre-test	post test	pre-test	post-test
recognised, spelt and translated	41%	40%	39%	47%
translated but misspelt	32%	32%	38%	43%
not recognised	27%	28%	23%	10%

An interesting observation is that the learners acquired some of the vocabulary with the correct spelling despite the fact that they were only hearing the words of songs while concentrating on other tasks. This may mean that they preserved the words in their mind and either checked their meaning later, or, while encountering the word in a text they focused their attention on it. As we can see there was no improvement in the control group. The fact that the difference in progress between the two groups was not big can be accounted for by a short period of exposure to the English language songs in the classroom. The classes were conducted twice a week for a period of two months. In a natural situation, outside the classroom, learners listen to English songs more frequently.

The study shows that the influence of wide exposure to English songs may have an important impact on the acquisition of English vocabulary. However experience of many teachers is that words do not easily separate from music. It is the combination of music and words that makes a text easy to remember. It implies that there is a need for some conscious active procedures for the input to become an intake. It suggests that teachers should make use of pop-songs in the foreign language classroom to better utilise the potential input that is so easily available. Thus a follow-up study was designed to see the effects of using songs as a teaching device.

2.2. Song as vocabulary teaching device

The subjects of the second study were the same students as in the previous study. This time, however, both groups worked on lyrics of one of the songs from the 45-minutes-long-cassette recording from the previous study. The song that was used to practice oral communication skills was Sinead O'Connor's "Famine" from the longplay "Universal Mother". The song was chosen for its historical and cultural content which poses the opportunity for discussion and exchange of the students' knowledge about the facts concerning Ireland. It was also anticipated that the non-trivial but at the same time unambiguous message of the lyrics would play a role of interesting and challenging input. As a pre-listening activity the teacher asked the students about any facts they knew on Ireland. After a short discussion the learners received the lyrics of the song in the form of the gapped-text. They skimmed the text and were offered any explanation of unfamiliar words. Later they listened to the song twice and filled in the gaps. After that the teacher provided feedback on the vocabulary. As a follow-up activity the learners got a gapped-text on the history and the present situation in Ireland.

A pre-test and a post-test were administered to the students on the vocabulary from the song. The results are presented in the table 6. They seem to confirm the expectation that songs may be a valuable teaching vehicle. The vocabulary gain was significant in both groups of language learners. The number of unknown words decreased noticeably in both groups. The considerably better results in the control group can be put on the novelty of the situation thus confirming the motivational function of songs. The experimental group was used to songs in the classroom and was familiar at least with the melody of this song due to exposure in the previous study.

Table 6. Learners' vocabulary development after using a song as a teaching device (see Mamys 1997:48)

% of vocabulary items			control group		experimental group	
			pre-test	post test	pre-test	post-test
recognised,	spelt	and	17%	68%	31%	71%
translated						
translated but misspelt			19%	22%	18%	16%
not recognised			64%	10%	51%	13%

3. CONCLUSION

The results of the two studies discussed here seem to confirm the expectations of the researchers that songs have potentials for activating language acquisition mechanism. Both passive exposure to songs and planned activities in connection with lyrics of a song resulted in better acquisition of the target language vocabulary. However, as a result of well structured activities in connection with the lyrics of song the vocabulary gain was higher. This proves that whereas exposure to songs may have some facilitated effect on language acquisition planned activities will have even stronger influence.

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