

The Effects of Teaching Vocabulary Learning Strategies on Iranian EFL Learners ‘Vocabulary Development

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Abstract: *Vocabulary has always been one language area about which students usually complain and claim that it impedes language learning. The main purpose of this study is to investigate whether using the context for guessing the meaning of new vocabulary can solve this problem. To do so the researchers assigned two experimental groups at Goal Language Institute, and gave them a pre-test to make sure that they were homogeneous. In the first group we used guessing the meaning of new vocabulary from context and in the other group we used the traditional method of using a dictionary for vocabulary learning. At the end of the instruction period each group was given the same post-test to determine the amount of their progress in learning and remembering the new vocabulary. The instruction was done through a short story (Animal Farm by George Orwell). This study aims at investigating the impact of the use of short stories on vocabulary instruction through making a comparison between the two basic vocabulary learning strategies, dictionary use and contextual guessing, Nation (2000). For this purpose, a quasi-experimental design was used and the words used in the experiment were selected out of the short story "Animal Farm" by George Orwell. The participants took a test called "Vocabulary Level Test", first devised by Paul Nation (2000) to measure their vocabulary knowledge, so we could discover if learners with more vocabulary items in their memory do better in contextual guessing and/or dictionary use. Further, the study also attempted to reveal what kind of factors actually hinder or facilitate learning a word in context.*

Keywords: *Contextual guessing, dictionary use, short story, vocabulary*

1. INTRODUCTION

It is irrefutable fact that vocabulary plays an important role in the academic lives of EFL learners. This is because if foreign language learners lack a mature vocabulary, their other language skills suffer significantly. That is why David Wilkins (1972, P. 111) very rightly says that “Without grammar, very little can be conveyed. Without vocabulary, nothing can be conveyed.” Therefore, the teaching and learning of vocabulary in any foreign language classroom form a very significant place. While doing so, various methods and strategies are employed to develop the vocabulary knowledge of EFL learners. However success of any methodology, strategy or material used depends on the nature of the material and perceptions of EFL learners towards that methodology, strategy and material. In that respect, this paper attempts to investigate the role of short-stories in developing vocabulary of EFL learners. According to Hatch and Brown (1995) there are five essential steps of learning vocabulary: The first one is having source for encountering new words, the second one is getting a clear image for the form of new words, the third one is learning the meaning of new words, the fourth one is making a strong memory connection between the form and the meaning of the words, and certainly the last one should be using the words.

2. TYPES OF VOCABULARY

It is helpful to distinguish between expressive and receptive vocabulary. A word is in your receptive vocabulary when you understand it when others use it. A word is in your expressive

vocabulary when you think to use it. Well over half of the average adult's vocabulary is receptive. Will (1990). In addition to using verbal workout. Come to add words to your vocabulary; you can use it to move words from receptive to expressive vocabulary. According to Beck et al (2002). The findings in Macaro's survey (2003) indicate to add a word to your expressive vocabulary, leave it on your short-term review list until you develop the habit of using it. Usually, you'll add words to your verbalworkout.com review list by checking them after the computer has presented them to you. But if you hear a word elsewhere that you want to add to the list, use the Find link at the top of many verbalworkout.com screens, to find the word and flag it for review. Blachowicz & Fisher, P. (2004). The words that EFL learners need to master and use come in two forms: oral and print. Oral vocabulary includes those words that we recognize and use in listening and speaking whereas print vocabulary includes those words that we recognize and use in reading and writing. Another distinction is also made based upon the knowledge of words. Based upon the knowledge of words, vocabulary can be receptive and productive. Receptive vocabulary includes those words that we recognize when we hear or see them. Productive vocabulary, on the other hand, includes those words that we use when we speak or write. It is also argued and believed that our receptive vocabulary is typically larger than our productive vocabulary. The following figure offers an overview of these main types of vocabulary. Bard, Robertson & Sorace, (1996).

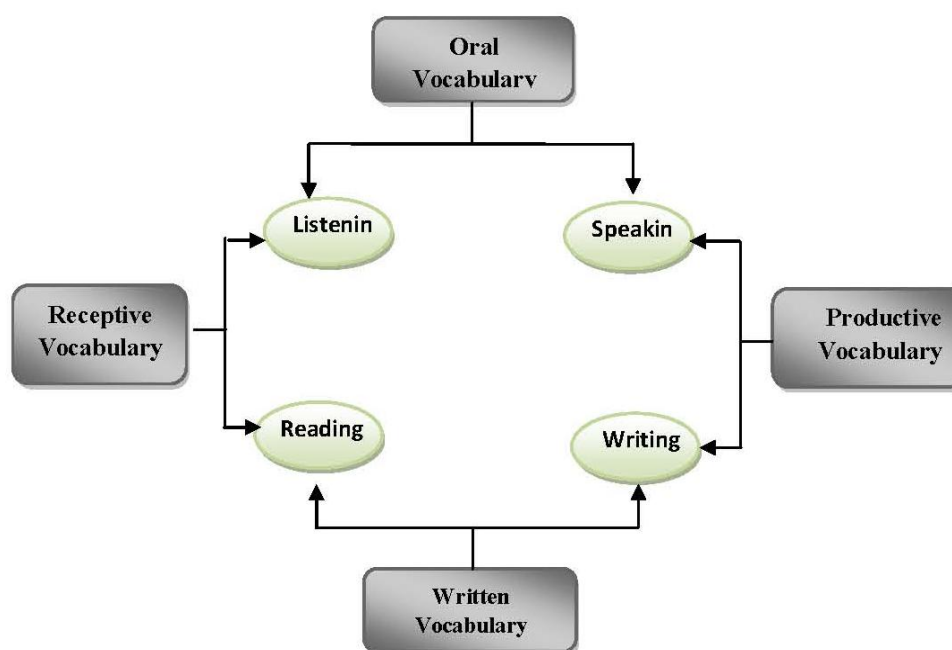


Fig1. *Types of Vocabulary*

3. THE CLASSIFICATION OF LEARNING VOCABULARY

A complete inventory of VLS will be conducive to pertinent studies in this area. However, just as Skehan (1989) argues, the field of learner strategies is still in an early stage of development. His remark is particularly applicable to VLS in that a comprehensive list or taxonomy of strategies in this specific area is not present (Schmitt 1997). In order to address this gap, Schmitt (1997) attempted to propose as exhaustive a list of VLS as possible and classify them based on one of the current descriptive systems. He primarily referred to Oxford's(1990) classification scheme and adopted four strategy groups (Social, Memory, Cognitive, and Metacognitive) which seemed best able to illustrate the wide variety of VLS. Social strategies involve learners using interaction with other people to facilitate their learning. Memory strategies consist of those approaches helping relate new materials to existing knowledge system. Skills which require "manipulation or transformation of the target language by the learner" (Oxford 1990, p.43) fall into the Cognitive strategies. Lastly, Metacognitive strategies "involve a conscious overview of the learning process and making decisions about planning, monitoring, or evaluating the best way to study" (Schmitt 1997, p.205).

Since Oxford's system deals with LLS in general and thus seems not to be able to cover certain specific strategies used in vocabulary learning, Schmitt created a new category for those strategies

learners employ when discovering a new word’s meaning without consulting other people, namely Determination Strategies. In addition, a helpful distinction suggested by Cook and Mayer (1983) and Nation (1990) was incorporated into Schmitt’s classification scheme.

4. DISCOVERY STRATEGIES

Discovery strategies include several determination strategies and social strategies. A learner may discover a new word’s meaning through guessing from context, guessing from an L1 cognate, using reference materials (mainly a dictionary), or asking someone else (e.g. their teacher or classmates). There is a natural sense that almost all of the strategies applied to discovery activities could be used as consolidation strategies in the later stage of vocabulary learning (Schmitt 1997).

4.1. Guessing Through Context

Nation (2001, p.232) maintains that “incidental learning via guessing from context is the most important of all sources of vocabulary learning”. Over the past two decades, this strategy has been greatly promoted since it seems to “fit in more comfortably with the communicative approach than other, more discrete, Discovery Strategies” (Schmitt 1997, p.209). Context tends to be more interpreted as simply textual context. Nevertheless, some other important sources of information should also be taken into account when guessing, such as knowledge of the subject being read, or knowledge of the conceptual structure of the topic. In Liu and Nation’s (1985, cited Nation 2001) study, it is found that a minimum requirement for the guessing to happen is that 95% of the running words are already familiar to the learner.

4.1.1. Dictionary Use

Reference materials, primarily a dictionary, can be used in a receptive or a productive skill in language learning. However, since we likely have insufficient time to consult a dictionary during the process of speaking and listening, more look-up work happens during reading and writing. A common situation is that, for example, when a learner meets an unknown word in the text and fails to infer the meaning through context, they might be advised to consult a dictionary. Looking up a word in a dictionary is “far from performing a purely mechanical operation” (Scholfield 1982, p.185); instead, a proficient dictionary user “is often required to formulate and pursue several hypotheses and make use of prior knowledge of various sorts, especially information derived from context” (Scholfield 1982, p.185). Except for locating the unknown word in the alphabetic list, which seems to be the skill most dealt with in respect of training dictionary use, other important facets involving effective dictionary use receive little attention (Scholfield 1982). Since many lexical items in a language have more than one meaning, learners should be instructed how to reduce multiple options by elimination. Scanning all of the definitions in the entry before deciding which is the one that fits is a good idea proposed by Underhill (1980). After choosing a seemingly reasonable sense from the definitions in the entry, a user then needs to “understand the definition and integrate it into the context where the unknown was met” (Scholfield 1982, p.190). The most sophisticated parts involving dictionary use arise when none of the senses in the entry seems to fit the context or more than one fits. In these situations, a user may need to infer a meaning that comes from the senses in the entry or “seek further contextual clues in the source text to disambiguate” (Scholfield 1982, p.193).

5. THE IMPORTANCE OF VOCABULARY DEVELOPMENT

Vocabulary is the basis for learning language. Educational research shows that vocabulary strongly relates to reading comprehension, intelligence, and general ability. As children learn to read, they must learn to decode (sound-out) print, but they also must have a vocabulary base (word knowledge) in order to make sense of what they decode. By third grade, however, children are reading to learn. For example, a child who is reading to learn about the Revolutionary War needs to know words like *war*, *army*, and *horses* (a basic vocabulary) to understand the history lesson. At the same time, however, the child will likely learn new words like *artillery* and *revolution*—continuing to build his/her vocabulary. Though there exist many methods and strategies of teaching and developing vocabulary of EFL learners, the importance of wide reading in the growth of EFL learners’ vocabulary is critical (Nagy and Anderson, 1984). It is argued that students who read widely have expansive vocabularies (Blachowicz & Fisher, 2004). Brabham

&Villaume(2002) assert that “A serious commitment to decreasing gaps in vocabulary and comprehension includes instruction that allows all students to learn and use strategies that will enable them to discover and deepen understandings of words during in dependent treading” (p. 266). By using short-stories to develop vocabulary of EFL learners, EFL teachers have the benefit of teaching vocabulary through context. Teaching vocabulary through context simply means to look for clues in the sentence that might tell the reader something about the meaning of the word in question. Researchers have studied the impact of visual and verbal clues on learning words in context. In this regard, Walters (2006) reported that improved reading comprehension resulted when 11 ESL students, ranging in age from 17 to 47, enrolled in an English language program were shown strategies of how to derive meanings of unfamiliar words from context clues. Researchers have also found that word meanings are retained longer when they are included in numerous classroom assignments. In order to really know a word, students must be able to use it in more than one context; it must be used in writing, speaking, and listening (Rupley & Nichols, 2005). And the use of short-stories in EFL classroom offers these opportunities for integrating vocabulary with other language skills. Many studies have also showed that context-clue vocabulary instruction using short-stories can cause an increase in word usage compared with word-list instruction (Dixon-Krauss (2002) and Dillard (2005)). Another benefit of using short-stories is the culture load in storytelling. Culture load refers to the way language and cultures are related and the amount of cultural knowledge required comprehending meaning to participate in activity (Meyer, 2000).English students need to learn the words in English as well as the cultural background and need to learn words in context to understand the meaning. This can be made possible with the use of selected short-stories by the EFL teachers. The use of short-stories for developing vocabulary also makes EFL learners more autonomous. As students read and try to comprehend the meaning from the context, this strategy also develops the autonomous learning among EFL learners. Therefore, this use of short-stories needs to be explored as it has many pedagogical benefits. It is a shared belief among the researchers that vocabulary is the principle aspect to convey the meaning in a reading text and because of that, vocabulary and its instruction are vital parts of not only second language, but also first language teaching. Vocabulary has been neglected for many years but it has retrieved the place that it is supposed to be in. The purpose of vocabulary learning should include both remembering words and the ability to use them automatically in a wide range of language contexts when the need arises (McCarthy, 1984). In fact, evidence suggests that the knowledge aspect (both breadth and depth) requires more conscious and explicit learning mechanisms whereas the skill aspect involves mostly implicit learning and memory (Ellis, 1994). Vocabulary learning strategies, therefore, should include strategies for "using" as well as "knowing" a word.

6. STATEMENT OF PROBLEM

Iranian language learners, like all foreign language learners throughout the world suffer greatly from not efficiently communicating because of their limited knowledge of vocabulary. It seems that this is because of not utilizing working vocabulary teaching strategies by language teachers. Lack of research in the area of vocabulary learning strategies is because of having no comprehensive list of such strategies. This taxonomy of vocabulary learning strategies includes two main groups: strategies for the discovery of a new word's meaning and strategies for consolidating a word once it has been encountered. That is to say, differentiation between discovery and consolidating strategies along with the base of Oxford's (1990) works on language learning strategies were taken into account. Two ways to discover a new meaning were first determining the word meaning and second employing the social strategy of asking someone who knows (Schmitt, 1997).

7. SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

Learning vocabulary and the process of vocabulary retention have an important role in foreign language learning. People, all over the world, learn languages and use it to express themselves and communicate their ideas to others. It is obvious that good communication entails appropriate word choices along with accurate structures. One of the major components of language is the knowledge of the words which are believed to be the building blocks of language, so teaching a language is not apart from teaching its vocabulary. Before 1990, vocabulary was taught with grammar (Nyikos & Fan, 2007). In order to learn a word, two aspects of form and meaning should

be taught. Meaning includes grammatical uses, collocation, connotation and form involves spelling and pronunciation. Vocabulary is a central part of any language and there is no language without words. It is the component of language which not only is inherently the most important linkage in the ring of skills and components that keeps the chain of language connected but also is the very first medium and facilitator for them to be taught and learned. Vocabulary instruction forms a very important aspect of any foreign language teaching and learning. This is because the knowledge of vocabulary determines and decides the level of a foreign language learner. The knowledge of vocabulary also plays a very crucial role in the major language skills: listening, speaking, reading and writing. Mastery over required knowledge of vocabulary can make a foreign language learner an effective speaker, good listener, reader and writer. On the other hand, lack of vocabulary significantly affects these four language skills. Therefore, the teaching and learning of vocabulary needs special attention both from teachers and learners. Therefore, a deliberate and structured approach needs to be taken for enriching vocabulary of EFL learners.

8. METHODS

Research Questions

To achieve the purpose of the study, the following research question and hypotheses were proposed:

Research Question (RQ): Is there any significant difference between using dictionary and guessing vocabulary on English learners?

Null Hypothesis (H₀): There is no significant difference between using dictionary and guessing vocabulary on English language learners.

Alternative Hypothesis (H): There is significant difference between using dictionary and guessing vocabulary on English language learners.

9. PARTICIPANTS

A total number of sixty male and female English language learners serve as the participants of this study. 20 students are in one experimental group (guessing group) and another 20 students are in another experimental group (dictionary use). The participants are all Turkish native speakers in their eighteens. They will select from an English language institute.

This study will take place in an institutional setting. The subjects will be intermediate learners of English as a foreign language at an English institute in Tabriz. Both groups, two treatment groups will be instructed by the same EFL teacher who is the researcher of this study. She has been teaching English as a foreign language for almost seven years in for male and female learners with various levels of proficiency. The classes meet two times a week for a two –hour class time.

10. CONTEXT OF THE STUDY

The study was conducted at one English institute in Tabriz. In the selected institute, EFL courses consisted of 20 sessions and learners attended for two 90-minute sessions a week. 20 Children (13 boys and 17 girls) were randomly selected out of about 70 students (boys and girls) in that institute; one group was selected as the guessing group and other dictionary, and both groups use of short story “Animal Farm “ by Gorge Orwell; Longman.UK 2010). These two groups were instructed by the same EFL teacher). All the students who participated in the study had before experience with use of dictionary.

11. DESIGN OF THE STUDY

The present research is a Quasi-experimental type of study in which the researcher used pre-tests and post-tests in both contextual guessing group and dictionary group. The independent variable of the study is teaching English language vocabulary through short story which is given to the both experimental group. Then the researcher compared the results obtained from teaching the two different methods for presenting the equal amount of vocabulary during a 20- session of teaching period in both groups.

12. MATERIALS

A Vocabulary Levels Test, An Authentic Achievement Test as Pre-test, An Authentic Achievement Test as Post-test, A Questionnaire, and A Short Story titled "Animal Farm by Gorge Orwell " were used as materials. Vocabulary Levels Test was used to determine the vocabulary levels of the participants and grouped the class into two groups as student with 2000 words. It also helped us form two groups on equal terms; an even distribution was obtained as guess and dictionary group. Authentic Achievement Test consisting of 50 multiple choice vocabulary questions was used to measure how many of the words the participants knew and this test was applied as the posttest with very slight changes. The participants were asked to write in the blank part the words/vocabularies with the appropriate synonym or antonym printed on a piece of paper. Learners have enough experience about these kinds of multiple questions or matching questions.

13. PROCEDURES

The researcher selected one institute (Goal). After receiving the authorities' cooperation at the institute, the researcher started her research which lasted about three months to accomplish. The intermediate students at Goal institute were considered as our experimental groups who received short story as treatments. In this research, we don't have any control group. We have two experimental groups as a treatment. For these experimental groups gave short story. One group guessed difficult vocabulary from context and other group used dictionary for learning difficult words.

In order to examine the effectiveness of teaching vocabulary through short story, for these experimental groups, at first we introduced a short story and fist group must guess new word of context. Short story for two groups is the same. Other group for understanding the new words must use of Oxford Intermediate Vocabulary. The plan included conducting different kinds of ways for learning vocabulary in their lessons so that we could see how the students reacted to this method of teaching vocabulary. Within the 20 sessions of training these students, the researcher tried to apply these two methods for vocabulary learning to observe the students' reaction and to see whether they increased their vocabulary count during the 10-week instruction or not.

During a 10-week teaching period, which consisted of two 90-minute sessions a week, the learners in the two experimental groups were taught English vocabulary through Animal Farm short story. Every session one chapter of this book was taught for students. One group guessed new words and other used of dictionary.

14. DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS OF PRE-TEST

The results obtained in the two experimental groups, the dictionary group which was taught through ordinary/traditional method of language teaching and the other experimental group which was instructed guessing words of context.

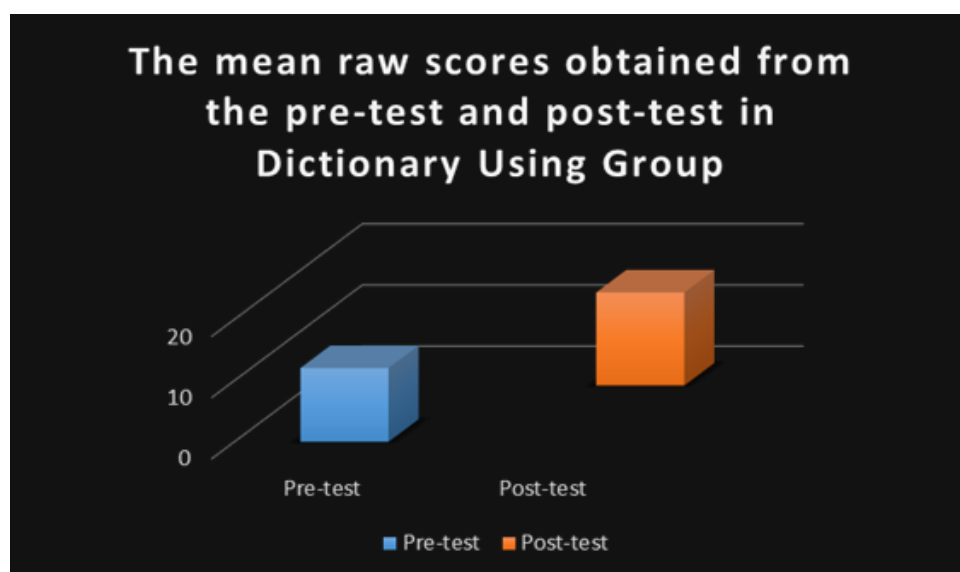


Fig2. Descriptive statistics of pre-test and post-test obtained by students in Dictionary Using Group

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Table1. Descriptive statistics of post-test

Vocabulary				
Group	N	Mean	St. Deviation	St. Error Mean
Guessing from context	20	15.2167	3.74956	0.68457
Using Dictionary	20	13.4833	2.83294	0.51722

Table 1 show the results obtained in the two experimental groups, the first group which was taught through guessing vocabulary from context and the other experimental group which got the meaning of new vocabulary by using a dictionary.

As can be seen through table 1.0 there are some differences between the two groups in vocabulary learning feature; that is, the mean for the guessing group is 15.53 which is significantly higher than that of the dictionary group which is 13.47. The difference in the mean scores of the two groups is 2.06. So, it is obvious that the learners in the guessing group got rather higher scores than the learners in the dictionary group. This means that use of short story in the language teaching affected learners' vocabulary learning at intermediate level more than ordinary method of teaching foreign languages in Iranian institutes.

15. ANALYZING TASKS FOR PEDAGOGICAL PURPOSE

ELT Learners in Iran are required to utilize the lifetime vocabularies that are relevant for their assigned tasks so the result of this study can help teachers and trainers in teaching the foreign language vocabulary and fixing it in their minds. According to Rico, Agudo & Curado (2007) providing language learners with different quantity of vocabulary and word effects can be seen in the performance of language learners. So, according to other findings and investigations, the findings may also add to the present literature in SLA theory, language testing, syllabus design, vocabulary learning, teaching and material development. Vocabulary strongly relates to reading comprehension, intelligence, and general ability. As student learns to read, they must learn to decode (sound-out) print, but they also must have a vocabulary base (word knowledge) in order to make sense of what they decode.

16. SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

Despite of the abovementioned limitations, the results of this study indicated directions for further studies. First, future research should be in such a way that it may appeal to the new generation and speed up the foreign language teaching process, using a teaching method which covers all needs and interests of learners bearing in mind the fast development of technology and science, which also covers aspects of vocabulary learning process starting from the planning stage to the end of the process. Second, this study investigated the effectiveness of guessing the meaning of new vocabulary from the context in a short story at the intermediate level in Iran. Future research should attempt to study the effects of this method with students in various levels of education and with different levels of English proficiency to determine the most appropriate levels of the students for the implementation of novel methods of teaching vocabulary and solving one of the most common problems of EFL learners.

17. CONCLUSION

The findings of this study showed that contextual guessing affected the students' vocabulary learning and helped them keep the second language vocabulary in their minds longer. In the case of fixing good number of vocabulary items in mind short stories help significantly. In general, the purpose of this study is to provide an insight into the effects of using the context technique in a short story for learning vocabulary among high school intermediate level EFL learners in Iran.

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