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EFFECTS OF IMPLICIT VERSUS EXPLICIT VOCABULARY INSTRUCTION ON EFL LEARNERS' VOCABULARY KNOWLEDGE GAIN

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ABSTRACT

Drawing upon a number of previous studies in the literature on the role of implicit and explicit vocabulary instruction on EFL learners' vocabulary learning and retention, the present study investigated explicit versus implicit vocabulary instruction through reading on a group of sophomore students' vocabulary knowledge in order to examine which type of instruction lead to better learning of vocabulary. To do so, the participants were given the chance to complete three types of reading activities. First, they were given two reading passages, containing 15 target words, to read and check comprehension questions and then answer some questions on the target vocabulary. In the second phase of the treatment, the students completed the same task, but the meanings of the target words were given in the margins of the reading texts. In the third phase of the treatment, the participants completed the same task, but they were allowed to check the meanings of words using dictionaries. Paired comparisons of the participants' performances on these tasks revealed that there was no significant difference between the participants' performance on task one and task two. The difference of performance between task one and task three was statistically significant, the fact which point to the effectiveness of exposure to vocabulary definitions through looking up words in the dictionary. So was the performance on task two and task three. Further comparisons revealed that the subjects' scores on task three was significantly higher than the scores on task two, suggesting that when the learners looked up the meaning of unknown words in the dictionary, the task led to better learning of vocabulary in comparison with task two.

Key words: Implicit vocabulary instruction; explicit vocabulary instruction; cognitive load hypothesis

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INTRODUCTION

Vocabulary is an important aspect of the second language learning process. There have been a great number of different approaches to language learning, each with a different outlook on

vocabulary (Richards & Rodgers, 2001; Jesa, 2008). At times, language teaching methodologies have attached great importance to vocabulary learning, and sometimes it has been neglected (Schmitt, 2000). In practice, grammar and pronunciation are

at the core of language learning, while vocabulary is neglected in most foreign language classes (Farghal & Obiedat, 1995). Nowadays it is widely accepted that vocabulary learning is one of the essential elements of learning a foreign language (Morra & Camba, 2009). Learning vocabulary is seen as a key element to achieve a high level of proficiency in the target language by a large number of theoreticians (Boers & Lindstromberg, 2008). Also just recently researchers, teachers and other language scholars involved in foreign language learning are paying special attention to foreign language vocabulary acquisition (Zu, 2009).

It is believed that having a large and varied vocabulary is the indicator of communicative competence and it is one of the important aspects of language learning (McCrostie, 2007). However, many learners experience difficulties in developing a good knowledge of L2 vocabulary. They are usually overwhelmed by the task of committing to memory large numbers of L2 words. Even if they learn the basic meaning of numerous L2 words, they are still far from having a good working knowledge of L2 vocabulary. This is because learning vocabulary is a multi-faceted process involving different types of knowledge .

As Nation (2001) described, knowing a word entails learning the formal (spelling, orthography, pronunciation etc.) and semantic (concepts, referents etc.) aspects of words as well as the constraints on their correct use. This type of knowledge is essential for acquiring efficient vocabulary knowledge. Learners who lack this type of knowledge are likely to face difficulties in decoding or encoding the intended meaning of words during communication. What is more, without sufficient knowledge of the detailed properties of words, most learners risk violating native speaker norms and sounding foreign to a native speaker's ear.

Lewis (1993) states that holistic language processing in the form of storage and retrieval of collocating words in the long-term memory underlies fluency and accuracy. In the same way, Wray (2002) notes that a good knowledge of the detailed aspects of words has a direct effect on learners oral performance as well as on their reading

speed. Based on the significance and benefits of processing words, language teaching practitioners and researchers now argue that the different aspects of word meaning need to be taught to learners rather than leaving them to their own devices to acquire that knowledge on their own (Lewis, 1997; Nattinger and DeCarrico, 1992).

Purpose of the study

In this study, the researcher tends to focus his attention on the effect of explicit versus implicit vocabulary instruction on students vocabulary knowledge and will decide which type of instruction will lead to better learning of vocabulary.

The problem this study deals with is that in most EFL classes new words are not given enough emphasis, and students are left to study them on their own using translation or dictionary definitions. While some researchers believe that implicit instruction leads to good vocabulary knowledge, many believe that there is a vital necessity of implementing explicit vocabulary teaching techniques in foreign language classes. As Siyanova and Schmitt (2008) suggest, teachers should make fundamental changes in their vocabulary teaching pedagogies by focusing on explicit vocabulary instruction through various techniques.

Review of the related literature

As Hulstijn (2001) points out, learning a second language can either mean months and years of "intentional" study, by deliberately committing to memory thousands of words along with grammatical words, or it can mean "incidental" learning by "picking up" structures and lexicon of a language, through getting engaged in a variety of communicative activities, namely reading and listening, while the learner's attention is focused not on the form but on the meaning.

Incidental and intentional learning mainly appear in the area of vocabulary. This is because incidental learning can be applied to both abstract and factual declarative knowledge, while intentional is only applicable to factual knowledge (Hulstijn, 2001). Hunt and Beglar (1998) point out that many vocabulary items are learned incidentally through extensive reading and listening. Accordingly, motivating learners to read and listen extensively can provide them with great opportunities to learn

new vocabulary items. In the terms used by Huckin and Coady (1999), too, except for the first few thousand most common words, vocabulary learning predominantly occurs through extensive reading with the learner guessing the meaning of unknown words.

This process is incidental learning of vocabulary for the acquisition of new words and is the by-product of the reading. However, this process of incidental learning of vocabulary occurs gradually as claimed by Anderson (1985). The incidental vocabulary learning, as Hunt and Beglar (1998) point out, can be a useful approach for all language learners at all levels.

Shmidth (1990), also points out that incidental learning is definitely passive in that it can happen when the focus of attention is on some relevant features of input. He further notes that there is an argument that maintains what is learned – whether incidentally or intentionally – is what is noticed.

So far, many studies have been carried out in the field concerning vocabulary learning/teaching approaches. For instance, Huckin and Coady (1999) investigated the role of incidental and intentional vocabulary acquisition. They concluded that incidental vocabulary learning is not entirely incidental in that learners pay at least some attention to individual words.

It is worthy of notice that in a review of 114 studies, Krashen (1989) argued that incidental vocabulary acquisition occurs through operation of his input hypothesis: that reading provides comprehensible and necessary input that eventually leads to acquisition. In addition, Krashen (1989), points out that acquisition of vocabulary and spelling is achieved through exposure to comprehensible input, in this case through reading. Wode (1999), in a study of incidental vocabulary acquisition in a foreign language classroom, found that it is important to investigate in detail which properties of IM teaching are best suited to trigger the incidental learning with respect to vocabulary. Ellis and He (1999) investigated the roles of modified input and output in the incidental acquisition of word meaning. Their study proved that interactional output which provides opportunities for learners to

use new vocabulary items contributes to better incidental vocabulary acquisition.

Paribakht and Wesche (1999) also conducted research investigating the relationship between reading and incidental L2 vocabulary acquisition. Their study demonstrated incidental acquisition of new lexical knowledge through reading of thematically related texts; hence, vocabulary knowledge may be acquired as a by-product of reading comprehension.

Among the other factors, frequency of exposure to new vocabulary items is another determining factor in learning vocabulary. Rott (1999) studied the effect of frequency with which words occur in a reading text and the role of reading as an input resource in vocabulary acquisition. Her study examined whether intermediate learners incidentally acquire and retain unknown vocabulary by reading a text. The result of the study indicated that, regarding retention measures on productive vocabulary knowledge, only half of the subjects displayed a significant rate of retention, and on receptive knowledge, all but one experimental group retained vocabularies over four weeks.

Hulstijn (2006) makes a distinction between intentional and incidental learning as “Intentional learning refers to the learning mode in which participants are informed, prior to their engagement in a learning task, that they will be tested afterward on their retention of a particular type of information. Incidental learning refers to the mode in which participants are not forewarned of an upcoming retention test for a particular type of information.”

In spite of the fact that incidental and intentional learning might seem similar to implicit and explicit learning, respectively, these two dichotomies are not identical. As Paradis (1994) points out, since implicit competence is incidentally acquired, is stored implicitly and is used automatically, it means more than incidental learning. Therefore, while incidental vocabulary learning of vocabulary may be a useful way of acquiring vocabulary for most advanced learners, intentional/explicit instruction is essential for beginning learners whose reading ability is limited.

Research Questions

Drawing on the findings of the previous studies in the related literature, the following research questions have been put forward:

1. Does simple exposure to new words while reading lead to vocabulary learning?
2. Does simple exposure to definitions of new words in margin lead to vocabulary learning?
3. Which method of vocabulary instruction _ implicit or explicit_ has a better influence on students' vocabulary knowledge?

Methodology

Participants

A total of 60 sophomore students of English translation took part in this study. All of the participants had the same background in their language studies. They had studied English for six years at school and for two years at the university. The participants took part in a paper-based TOEFL proficiency test from Broukal (1997), Pearson Education Center, which was used to check the homogeneity of the group in terms of their proficiency level. 45 learners whose scores on the language proficiency test fell within ± 1 standard deviation of the mean score were selected as participants for this study.

Procedure

The subjects were given the chance to complete the three types of activities involved in the experimental part of the study. First, they were given two reading passages, containing 15 target words, to read and check comprehension questions and then answer some questions on the target vocabulary. In the second phase of the treatment, the students completed the same task, but the meanings of the target words were given in the margins of the reading texts. Then, they were asked to answer vocabulary questions related to the target words in this section. In the third phase of the treatment, the participants completed the same task, but they were allowed to check the meanings of words using dictionaries. Following that, the subjects answered the third vocabulary post-test including the target words practiced in this part. After the treatment sessions were completed, data were collected and data analyses procedures were

run to find answers to the research questions stated above.

Results and discussion

In order to investigate the results of the three types of activities in the experimental phases of the study, data was collected to analyze the results. Descriptive statistics of the performances of the participants on the three reading tasks are shown in Table 1. The figures in the table indicate that the participants had the highest scores after reading the texts and looking up the new words in the dictionary, with the mean score of 13.25, followed by reading with texts with marginal definitions of unknown words, with the mean score of 12.75. Then appears the reading task involving no vocabulary exercise (mean score= 11.05).

Table 1. Mean scores and SD on the three reading tasks

	N	Mean	SD	Min	Max
Task one	45	10.32	3.03	6	14
Task two	45	11.25	2.30	9	14
Task three	45	13.25	2.05	10	15

Also, results of one-way ANOVA of the participants' performances on the three types of reading tasks (Table 2) indicate that the p value (0.000) is lower than the critical value. Thus, it is concluded that there was a significant difference in the scores of the participants on the reading tasks.

Table 2. Results of one-way ANOVA for the three reading tasks

	df	Mean Sq.	F	Sig
Task one, Task two, Task three	2	121.07	17.04	0.000

Results of Tukey's Post Hoc analysis of the subjects' performances on the three reading tasks through one-way repeated measures ANOVA are shown in Table 3. Paired comparisons of the participants' performances on these tasks reveal that there was no significant difference between the participants' performance on task one and task two as the p value (0.438) in table 3 suggests. The difference of performance between task one and task three was statistically significant with p value of 0.000, the fact which point to the effectiveness of explicit exposure to vocabulary definitions through looking up words in the dictionary. So was the performance on task two and task three (p= 0.042).

The results in this regard seem to point to the effectiveness of explicit exposure to vocabulary definition through marginal cues.

Table 3: Results of one-way repeated measures ANOVA for the post-tests on vocabulary learning

	Mean D	Std. Error	Sig
Task one-task two	-0.850	0.574	0.438
Task one-task three	-0.57	0.574	0.000
Task two-task three	-1.47	0.574	0.042

It can be interpreted that these two types of explicit vocabulary instruction seem to influence EFL learners' vocabulary knowledge though the results need to be further confirmed by future studies.

Further comparisons reveal that the subjects' scores on task three was significantly higher than the scores on task two (p value= 0.042), suggesting that when the learners looked up the meaning of unknown words in the dictionary, the task led to better learning of vocabulary in comparison with task two, in which they were given the definitions of words in the margin. This probably suggest to the fact that looking up words in the dictionary involve higher cognitive load, in the sense used by Laufer & Hulstijn (2001). The results are in line with the findings of the previous studies in the related literature (Shmidth, 1990, Huckin and Coady, 1999), which suggest explicit instruction of vocabulary results in improving vocabulary learning.

Conclusions

Regarding the first research question postulated above, we have found that the simple exposure to new words while attending to reading comprehension can lead to learning meaning of target words. Concerning the second research question posed above, it has been found that exposure to definitions of unknown words through marginal cues can cause attention to form and consequently lead to vocabulary knowledge gain as the students in the second phase of the treatment performed better on the vocabulary post-test in comparison with their performance after the first task. Also, with reference to the third research question above, the results of the present study indicate that having students look up meanings of words from dictionary as an explicit exposure to

word definition is more effective than simply being exposed to words while reading a text. The participant even performed better on the vocabulary post-test after the task involving dictionary work in comparison with the task in which they were given ready-made definitions of in the margin. This probably suggests that when a task involves more cognitive processing, it is more probable to lead to higher vocabulary knowledge gain. The results in this respect are consistent with some of the previous studies that reported positive effects of explicit instruction of target words. The results, however, stand in contrast to the findings of a second group of studies suggesting that implicit instruction of vocabulary can foster vocabulary knowledge (e.g., Hunt and Beglar, 1998, Coady, 1999, Paribakht and Wesche, 1999).

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