



The Effects of Dictionary Vocabulary Learning Versus Contextual Vocabulary Acquisition on the Vocabulary Development of Pakistani EFL Learners

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Abstract

The vocabulary of a language refers to the range of words used in it. A number of strategies are used in EFL classrooms to teach vocabulary, where the most common are Dictionary Vocabulary Learning (DVL) and Contextual Vocabulary Acquisition (CVA). The present study investigates the difference between the vocabulary development of EFL learners undergone the mentioned strategies. The study is experimental and the population is the BS students of Punjab (Pakistan). The sample was forty EFL students, divided as group 1 and group 2, where group 1 was taught by using DVL while group 2 was taught by CVA. Pre and Post tests were used to see the effects of DVL on group 1 and of CVA on group 2. Results indicated that the vocabulary development of the students taught by using CVA was higher than the students taught by DVL.

Key Words: English as a foreign language (EFL), Dictionary Vocabulary Learning (DVL), Contextual Vocabulary Acquisition (CVA), Vocabulary Development

Introduction

The knowledge about the words of a language including their meanings is referred to as the vocabulary of a language (Diamond & Gutlohn, 2006). Language learners take vocabulary enhancement as the most difficult part of the language learning procedure (Celik & Topt, 2010). The need to understand a reading comprehension for the academic purpose in a foreign language requires the knowledge of 10,000 words at least whereas the learners need familiarity with a minimum of 2,000 words for spoken communication (Schmitt, 2008). Thus foreign language learners find it very difficult to get familiarized with such size of the vocabulary.

Learning Vocabulary in EFL

According to Thornbury (2002), a foreign language learner mostly focuses on learning the grammar of the language and ignores the importance of learning the words of that language and does not go for vocabulary enrichment. He further explains that grammar helps them to say just a few sentences while if they keep on adding new words to their language, that may enhance their expression of thoughts too.

The central part of any foreign language learning is the learning of vocabulary as concepts, ideologies and thoughts cannot be transferred to the people either in written or spoken form, without having sound knowledge of the words of the language (Fauziati, 2005). Harmer (2001), elaborated the fact by saying that vocabulary must be considered as the most essential element of a language. The idea of learning the vocabulary of a language is supported by various linguists in different forms. Karashen (1989), supported the idea of learning vocabulary by means of accidental and contextual practices rather than intentional vocabulary learning practices. This concept was further supported by Thornbury in 2002, where he mentioned that incidental learning was found to be more effective among EFL learners. Nation (2004), introduced a theory and practice relationship of vocabulary development among EFL learners. He categorized a few steps of vocabulary learning such as generating, notifying and retrieving.

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Vocabulary development and Pakistani EFL context

Most of the countries in Asia put less stress on the enhancement of vocabulary among the learners of foreign languages and more focus is given to the language skills (Fan, 2003). In Pakistan, vocabulary learning is also ignored and more focus is given to the grammar of the language rather than on the practical approaches of the use of language in various contexts (Fatima & Pathan, 2016). Vocabulary learning is given importance very rarely in the EFL context of Pakistan. If a difficult or a new word appears in an academic text, that is the only time when the teacher tells the learners, to look for the meaning of the word and write it on the book or notes without any further discussion on its usage (Jamil & Khan, 2014). The strategies and techniques of learning new words of the English language in the Pakistani context are very much dependent on the teachers as students do not try to put effort to learn new words (Mansoor, 2010). Hence the insufficient amount of vocabulary creates hindrances in their written and spoken discourse.

Statement of the Problem

The effects of Dictionary vocabulary learning and Contextual vocabulary acquisition on the vocabulary development of the EFL learners were investigated in the present study.

Research Questions

What is the level of English language vocabulary of the EFL learners of Pakistan at the bachelor's level?

What is the difference between the English language vocabulary development of Pakistani EFL learners taught by using DVL and CVA at the bachelor's level?

Significance of the Study

The study is significant in the following ways:

The methods of teaching vocabulary through DVL and CVA in the present study can be useful for EFL teachers.

EFL learners can adopt the strategies of learning vocabulary from the present study.

The study can be employed in some other foreign language contexts as well, at some different levels.

Hypothesis

The hypothesis tested for the study was as follow:

Ho: The difference between the vocabulary development of the EFL learners taught by using DVL and CVA is not significant.

Delimitation of the study

The study was delimited to the BS level students of a single private university of the city Lahore, province Punjab.

Literature Review

Strategies of Vocabulary Learning

The concept of the strategies of learning the vocabulary emerged from the theories of the strategies of language learning, which are determined as the independent learning patterns or techniques to learn a foreign language (Chamot and O' Malley, 1990). These strategies are helpful for learners to be less dependent on their language teachers and be more focused on self-learning. Brown and Payne (1994), highlighted various important steps that may be useful in the development of vocabulary. The steps were as follow:

- a) Express the new words.
- b) Relate words with their visual or verbal images.
- c) Putting the effort in learning the new words.
- d) Entering the new words in the memory.
- e) Using words in various contexts.

Nation (2004), stated that the strategies which are used for language learning, including the strategies of vocabulary enhancement make students more autonomous, where they can take charge of their own learning and it further turns them into responsible language learners. If students get a knowledge of the strategies of vocabulary development then they can apply them in their foreign language classrooms, they can select the words of their own choice to learn and can apply them in their desired context because when they are given that much space then there is always a rapid learning (Ranalli, 2003). Nation (2004), stated that familiarity with the strategies proves to be very helpful towards the enhancement of the vocabulary of EFL students and they feel more motivated and enthusiastic towards learning. Cameron (2001), stated that language learners cannot apply the strategies of learning by themselves in language classrooms and they are supposed to be trained by their teachers at first on how to use them aptly. As stated by Schmitt (2008), learners are always in need of particular and continuous guidance to learn the usage of the strategies of vocabulary development.

Types of Vocabulary Learning Strategies

Dictionary Vocabulary Learning Strategies

The words of a language come up with several meanings according to the context they are being used. Language learners can probably be familiar with what the word means in a sentence but it is not necessary that the meaning they know fits in according to the context of the sentence (Huang & Eslami, 2013). Furthermore, learners can also not be very accurate when they try to make a guess about the meaning of a word in a sentence, they may be right or wrong (Alavi, 2012). Hayati and Fattahzadh (2006), suggested that its always good to guess the meanings of words at first but to be certain about the meanings the learners must go back to the dictionaries, to avoid mistakes. The use of dictionaries makes learners more autonomous and independent in language classrooms as they can find for the meanings of difficult words without help from the language teachers (Gu, 2003). The strategies for the development of vocabulary among foreign language learners by using dictionaries were divided into a few steps by (Nadiya et al, 2019).

1. The vocabulary of a language can best be enhanced by reading a lot, which may include the readings of newspapers, magazines, novels or other literary texts. Language learners may find the meanings of the words in dictionaries, which they encounter while reading
2. Learners must have a dictionary and a thesaurus with them and they must be familiar with their proper and required usage. They can use whatever suits them as per their interest or context. They must look up the pronunciation and various meanings of the words, while they should look for the synonyms and antonyms as well.
3. They must keep a journal along to make the lists of the new words they encounter so that they can always refer back to them or may think of possible sentences out of them or learn them over the period of time.
4. Learning one word each day is quite a common practice. It is a great strategy to enhance the vocabulary gradually and it goes a long way.

Contextual Vocabulary Acquisition (CVA)

“Contextual vocabulary acquisition (CVA) is the acquisition of the meaning of a word in a text by reasoning from textual clues and prior knowledge, including language knowledge and hypotheses developed from prior encounters with the word, but without external sources of help such as dictionaries or people” (Connell, 2008. p.89). It is a very helpful technique for language learners, especially in times when no outside source is available to get the accurate meaning of the words (Rapaport, 2005). Gaskins (2010), stated that learners take most of the words as sight text and to grasp and comprehend the meanings of the unfamiliar words, contextual help is needed. Vocabulary learning incidentally and intentionally named as explicit and implicit learning by Laufer (2001). In explicit learning, the learner learns incidentally and intentionally both, whereas implicitly learning is thoroughly incidental. In addition to this incidental learning is determined to achieve the chief goals of communication (Schmidt, 2001).

Types of CVA

Incidental CVA

Language learners are most of the time have familiarity with the words they were taught at some point in their lives which can be called a “learning by-product” of listening or reading. Contextual vocabulary acquisition can not be referred to as a thing that can be done once in for all as it is an ongoing process (Nagy & Scott, 2000). CVA is often incidental and is a result of the unconscious mind of a person or is the result of the assumption made by a person about the meanings of the words (Christ et al, 2011).

Deliberate CVA

In some contexts, CVA comes with the very conscious efforts of the learners and it involves more engaging and active contexts of language learning. Nation (1993), suggested some strategical steps for CVA, which were further modified and used by Coxhead in 2013. They are as follow:

Step 1: At first it is important to have a deep look at the word itself and at the associated words carefully to get to know about the part of speech it belongs to, whereas it depends on the knowledge of the reader about the grammar of the language. This is where the knowledge of the grammar is extracted from the readers’ minds not from any external source.

Step 2: The grammatical context of the word should be focused when it is the element of a particular phrase or a clause.

Step 3: Here a deep understanding of the bigger impact of the word is important which should be beyond the level of the clause or the sentence as a whole.

Step 4: Make some guess about the meaning of the word and then check it either it is correct or incorrect.

Methodology

Population

EFL students of BS level in the context of (Punjab (Pakistan) were considered as the population of the present study.

Sample

The study sample was composed of 40 students of a private sector university who had English in their syllabus as the mandatory subject at BS.

Table 1. Sample

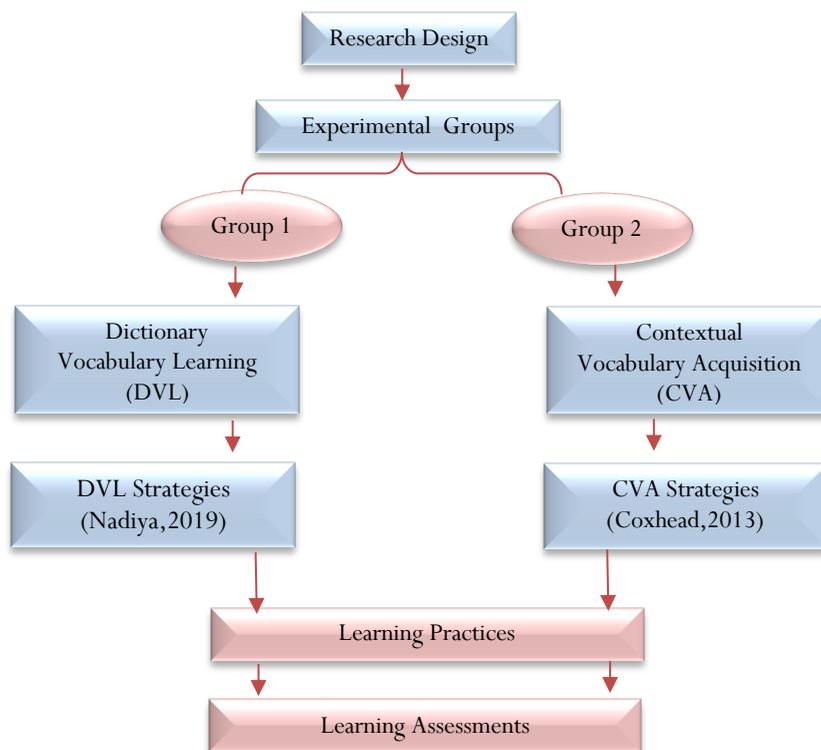
| S.No | Private University Lahore | | | | |
|------|---------------------------|-------------|----------------------------|-----------------------------------|----------------|
| | Level | Age | Duration of the Experiment | Vocabulary Learning Strategies | Total Students |
| 1 | BS | 19-22 years | 1 month | Dictionary Vocabulary Learning | 20 |
| 2 | BS | 19-22 years | 1 month | Contextual Vocabulary Acquisition | 20 |

Research Methodology

It was an experimental study where there were two groups under the experiment as group 1 and group 2. Group 1 was taught by using DVL whereas group 2 was taught by using CVA. The experiment was carried out for 2 months.

Research Design

The study was conducted with a purpose, at first to see the present level of the English vocabulary of participants and further, it aimed at analyzing the differences between the groups using DVL and CVA. The strategies of DVL by Nadiya (2019) and the strategies of CVA by Coxhead (2013) were used as the framework of the study.



Instruments of the study

Both the groups i.e. group 1 and group 2 went through pre-tests before the experiment and post-tests at the end of the experiment. The pattern of both the tests was the same though it was varying in the level of difficulty, whereas Post-test was more complex and difficult than the Pre-test.

The procedure of data collection

The study was conducted with the purpose of identifying the level of vocabulary as well as to find out the effectiveness in any of the domain whether DVL or CVA. A quantitative method of research was used to identify the differences between vocabulary development by DVL and CVA. Lesson Plans for each day were designed with the objectives of enhancing vocabulary among the participants and each activity and exercise was designed under the pattern of the questions and exercises used in the tests taken before and after the experiment. The study duration was one month, where three classes in a week were taken for forty minutes. The activities used for the vocabulary development through DVL and CVA were Vocabulary/Pictures, Matching tests, Synonym Antonym exercises, Written Composition and Reading comprehension. All the worksheets used in both groups were assessed and marked each day to see the development of vocabulary among the participants.

Data analysis

The data was analyzed by using Mean, Standard Deviation, while the difference between the vocabulary

development of group 1 and group 2 was analyzed through independent sample t-test.

Results and Findings

The results of the study showed a noticeable difference between the vocabulary development of the learners taught by using DVL and CVA. The group taught with CVA strategies showed better performance in the post-test in comparison to the group taught by using DVL strategies.

Table 1. Mean and Standard Deviation of Gain scores (Group 1) and Gain scores (Group 2)

| | Groups | N | Mean | Std. Deviation |
|-------------|---------|----|-------|----------------|
| Gain scores | Group 1 | 20 | 2.633 | 1.033 |
| Gain Scores | Group 2 | 20 | 8.766 | 1.94 |

The table shows that the gain scores of the experimental group 2, N=20 with, M= 8.766 and SD=1.94 are higher than the gain scores of group 1, N=20 with, M= 2.633 and SD=1.033.

Table 2. Independent Sample T-Test

| | | Levine's Test for Equality of variances | | t-test for Equality of Means | | |
|-------------|-----------------------------|---|------|------------------------------|--------|-----------------|
| | | F | Sig. | t | df | Sig. (2-tailed) |
| Gain scores | Equal variances assumed | 5.619 | .021 | 15.271 | 58 | .000 |
| | Equal variances not assumed | | | 15.271 | 44.204 | .000 |

The t value was significant with $t(58) = 15.271$ and $p = 0.021 \leq 0.05$. It shows the significance of the value achieved from the independent sample t-test and further displays that the difference in the gain scores of group 1 and group 2 was significant.

The findings of the study rejected the hypothesis stating no significant difference between the groups taught with DVL and CVA. The findings showed that the group taught with CVA gained higher scores than the group taught with DVL at the end of the experiment.

Discussion

The studies on the development of vocabulary mostly highlight the use of dictionaries as a preferred technique but a few studies have also shown some interest in the relationship between dictionaries and accidental vocabulary learning techniques. Welker (2015), identified that the students who used dictionaries for the vocabulary retention showed slightly better performance as compared to the students who used only the contextual clues so he suggested in his study that the use of clues in various contexts and a handy use of the language dictionaries must go together for the better vocabulary development.

Chang (2005), found that if students consult dictionaries then they get a better and comprehensive understanding of the vocabulary instead of just inferring meanings from the context, whereas the present study goes into the opposite view than this. Laufer & Waldman (2011), conducted an experimental study with the methods of DVL and CVA and the results showed that the participants of the group using no dictionaries showed relatively higher results than the participants of the group using dictionaries. The present study goes in line with the findings of Laufer & Waldman (2011), as it also showed better performance among the non-dictionary group.

Shi & Zhang (2008), expressed that a mix method approach towards vocabulary development can be more beneficial for language learners instead of using DVL and CVA as separate techniques. The present study with an experiment by using both the strategies of DVL and CVA also proved that the contextual acquisition helped more towards the vocabulary enhancement among EFL learners, whereas the use of dictionaries as an external source at the end of the contextual clues was also considered to be important.

Conclusion

The study concluded that the treatment of 'CVA' has strong effects on the vocabulary development of EFL learners rather than the treatment of 'DVL'. The problem of being inefficient on the part of dictionary vocabulary learning or intentional learning was the lack of practice by the learners. Due to this fact, learners were unable to retain much vocabulary taught in class. The students of the DVL group were slow in the process of retention and remembering, moreover, they were not paying much attention to the related text. They showed greater dependence on the external sources either in the form of the teacher or in the form of the dictionaries. So these external sources were the hindrance in their process of vocabulary development.

The students who went through the strategies of contextual guessing displayed satisfying results with greater enhancement of the vocabulary. The test results of the students of CVA showed that they were well aware of the basic techniques of learning vocabulary by guessing the meanings at first and then relating it to the context. The contextual clues helped them in understanding the basic essence of the text and then they were able to comprehend the meanings aptly.

The activities of contextual guessing added skill in their learning i.e how to guess the meaning themselves instead of getting much external support. It was like creating a habit to learn words and their usage with this strategy. A noticeable change in the participants of CVA was observed at the end of the research. The strategy of CVA does have an effect on enhancing vocabulary more than DVL, especially when learners get contextual help, they remember more words. Ultimately the results finalized that by learning 'Contextually', the retention power is strong and a student's vocabulary is also enhanced. The treatment of CVA also revealed the aptitude and interest of the learners in acquiring language as they participated, negotiated and discussed the meaning with peers and instructors each time they encounter an unknown word.

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