

RESEARCH ARTICLE



EFFECT OF NARRATION TASK AND ELECTRONIC COMMENTING FEEDBACK ON VOCABULARY ACQUISITION AND RETENTION IN EFL CLASSROOMS

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ABSTRACT

Vocabulary has always been regarded as the core of language acquisition. Since the start of our language acquisition we are obsessed with the question of vocabulary acquisition up to the end. Metaphorically speaking, language can be regarded as a body in which grammatical rules are its skeleton, a forming structure and vocabulary plays the role of flesh, the vital and fresh part of the body containing vessels and blood circulating in them. Since the first simple word of 'Hello' up to the possibly last and very complicated and long words such as 'antidisestablishmentarianism' that we may come across, we are in the process of building up our vocabulary and growing up this body.

This prominent role of vocabulary in foreign language learning has widely been recognized by theorists and language learners (Kasper, 1993; Krashen and Terrell, 1993; Pavio, 1982; Richards, 1980). As Krashen (1989, P.440) argued:

Excellent reasons exist for devoting attention to vocabulary and spelling. First, there are practical reasons. A large vocabulary is of course, essential for mastery of a language. Second language acquirers know this; they carry dictionaries with them, not grammar books, and regularly report that lack of vocabulary is a major problem ... on the theoretical level, the study of the acquisition of vocabulary and spelling ability can help us understand language acquisition in general.

So all the theoreticians, language teachers and learners acknowledge the essential role of vocabulary, however, there has been considerable debate about the most effective way to develop students' foreign language vocabulary ceiling. Several foreign language vocabulary teaching methods have been developed and empirically tested so far (for reviews, see Cohen, 1987; Ellis, 1995).

Key Words: Language Acquisition, Role of Vocabulary, Teaching Methods, Experimental Group (Computer based), Control Group (Paper-based)

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“Tell me and I forget,
Teach me and I remember,
Involve me and I learn”
-Benjamin Franklin (Richards, J. C., &
Rodgers, T. S. (2001))

INTRODUCTION

The problem with many vocabulary teaching methods has been the lack of involvement of the learners in the acquisition and retention of the vocabulary. So nowadays many of the theoreticians and practitioners in the area of vocabulary acquisition especially in EFL are concerned with the techniques which more insist on involving students to reflect on the vocabulary they are to learn and the psychological processes for learning have also brought into the foreground. The present study moves in the trend line of these recent issues in the area of vocabulary acquisition, namely, contextualization, deeper retention, and connecting the input into the background in the mind and making a real intake.

Vocabulary learning for many learners of English has always been a tiresome and tedious activity with the permanent danger of forgetting which, again, means hours and days or maybe weeks of repetition and haunting their vocabulary storage notebooks.

This issue is much aggravated in the Iranian EFL context with an unpleasant experience in the years of high school education where students were supposed to memorize long lists of vocabulary presented in the beginning or end of their high school English books. The unfortunate students were so much involved in the repeating and memorizing practice of these vocabularies that the text following or preceding these lists of vocabularies came out totally unpleasant and loathsome for them.

Furthermore, acquisition of vocabulary is not considered by many as the mere storing of a heap of words in mind. There are different opinions regarding how the knowledge of vocabulary is defined, that according to Laufer, B. and Nation, P. (2001):

lexical knowledge is construed either as a continuum consisting of several levels, starting with superficial familiarity with the word, and ending with the ability to use

the word correctly in free production (Faerch, Haastrup and Phillipson 1984, Palmberg 1987), or continua (Henriksen 1999) consisting for example of partial-precise knowledge, depth of knowledge, and the receptive-productive continuum.

Though some learners are successful in memorizing and storing vocabularies in their mind through the torturous ways mentioned above, they are unable to use them on one hand, and on the other hand, they show a lot of problems regarding recognizing these previously learned words once encountering them in the text. So, the problem can be seen in three aspects; one in motivating students to learn the presented vocabulary, then in the retention of the learned vocabulary and finally in activating the acquired vocabulary in both production and comprehension.

Research Questions & Hypotheses

RQ1. Does using vocabulary in narration increase the vocabulary retention of the learners in comparison to the customary techniques (i.e. Rote, context, keyword, and context/keyword)?

RQ2. Does presenting and commenting on the electronic version of narrations lead to more motivated and deeper vocabulary acquisition and retention in learners in comparison to the paper version of narrations?

Null Hypothesis 1. Using vocabulary in narration does not increase the vocabulary retention of the learners in comparison to the customary techniques (i.e. Rote, context, keyword, and context/keyword)?

Null Hypothesis 2. Presenting and commenting on the computer-based version of narrations does not lead to more motivated and deeper vocabulary acquisition and retention in learners in comparison to the paper version of narrations?

LITERATURE REVIEW

The design of the study, by itself, defies many of the common limitations of EFL researches in our country. The main part of the experiment happens out of the classroom, so it makes the study really manageable. Because all the cumbersome task of directing, revising and commenting on the students' writing will be done by the researcher, again, no practical limitations are expected to be faced in this regard.

The only minor limitations maybe about writing level of the participants in the study. Owing to this point that the aim of this study is not to improve the grammatical and structural aspect of students' writing, the structural errors in the writing will be corrected by the researcher but they will not be counted or measured as a point of focus in the study.

There are different ideations of the concept "vocabulary" and what is involved in knowing a word (Richards 1976, Ringbom 1987, Nation 1990 and 1999). These studies, especially Richards (1976) and Nation (1990 and 1999) see this knowledge including "knowledge of spoken and written form, morphological knowledge, knowledge of word meanings, collocational and grammatical knowledge, connotative and associational knowledge, and knowledge of constraints to be observed in the use of a word." (Laufer and Nation, 2001)

Therefore, knowing a word involves a cline of "sub-knowledges" which all together create full concept of a method. In this regard, among the studies on vocabulary and vocabulary acquisition Ooi and Kim-Seoh (1996) in their paper entitles "Vocabulary teaching: looking behind the word" believe that vocabulary should be presented in a way that its collocation and appropriate application is emphasized. Quoting form Richards they believe that vocabulary learners must become aware of "how it behaves syntactically and, just as importantly, its limitations of use according to situation and function (Richards 1976)." In their study they urge us to pay more attention to what exists "behind" the words while teaching; so that learners are capable of understanding and using them. This is best asserted in the conclusion of their paper as follows:

It has been argued that the purpose of vocabulary instruction should be to make the learner more discriminating of word meaning and word use. In order to achieve this, it is necessary to integrate lexis, grammar, and discourse. This can be accomplished by teaching vocabulary through reading and thinking in terms of 'activities' with varying focus rather than clearly demarcated 'lessons'. This

approach has advantages, in particular the fact that learners can be involved in the process of deciding what should be taught, and when. This should enhance motivation and engagement.

It has also been argued that teaching content should address specific learner needs. This would mean that, for intermediate and advanced learners, traditional selectional criteria (frequency, coverage, availability, etc.) might be given a lower priority than items that lend themselves to particular kinds of treatment, such as comparison and contrast, derivational processes, and collocability.

Following the emphasis we see in the literature on the importance of an enriched retention of the vocabulary, the present study offers an alternative to the previous and customary techniques which is in accordance with this demand. Furthermore, the presented technique is also in line with up-to-date assessment techniques which are dynamic assessment because teacher's assessment is done in a constant fashion over three or four drafts of the student's production.

METHODOLOGY AND STUDY DESIGN

The present study is in line with some of the researches mentioned above but it is completely different in its approach towards the way students should look at their vocabulary learning. Here, vocabulary learning is considered as a dynamic process of using vocabulary in the corpus of students' narration.

This study gains its significance due to the problems mentioned in the previous section about the approach it adopts towards the acquisition of the vocabulary. The new approach embodied in the narration technique is supposed to bring about positive changes in the vocabulary acquisition of the students, viz. high motivation in learning the vocabularies, better retention and activating the learnt vocabularies.

This study is aimed to make a comparison between the methods already practiced for learning and retention of vocabulary, viz. Rote, context, keyword, and context/key word, which are completely receptive ones and actively using

vocabulary in narration supported by teacher feedback through email.

Participants

The participants of this study were 60 Iranian EFL learners of English at two language institutes in Shiraz, Iran. They were males and females aged between 16 and 45 and were studying at an intermediate level. The participants were all Persian speakers and had a similar language learning history and contact with English outside the classroom but they were differed in terms of the period of time they had been studying English in the past and the purposes for which they were studying English.

Participants were randomly put into two groups; 20 students in the control and 40 students in the experimental group. Of the 40 students in the experimental group, 20 of those who had more access to computer and internet and had enough time for typing their writing and working with computer were put in the experimental 2 (computer-based group) and the rest, 20 students were selected as the experimental 1 (paper-based group).

Instrumentation

The list of the useful vocabulary for the upper-intermediate students was adopted from 504 Absolutely Essential Words, one of the books which is widely approved and used in Iranian academic setting and English language institutes for teaching 'absolutely essential' words to students. Each chapter of this book consists of 12 essential interrelated words. The first 20 lessons out of 42 lessons of the book were selected for the experiment of this study.

PROCEDURE

Pretest: At the beginning of the term students in the groups, Control, Experimental 1(paper-based group), Experimental 2(computer-based group) were given a pretest to check whether they knew the vocabularies aimed for this study or not.

Treatment: Session by session, teacher provided students with 12 words, starting from words of lesson 1 for session one up to the words of lesson 20 for session 20. Teacher explained exact meaning of the vocabulary to the students and talked about the best places to apply them and expounded on the nuances of their collocation.

Using the vocabulary provided, students in the two experimental groups were supposed to write a semi-novel or short story as the final product of the narration-task they followed throughout the term. The task requires every student to choose a topic for his/her short story. This short story consisted of 22 chapters. The comparison group merely received the vocabulary and was supposed to learn them through rote learning or reading them in the context. They were asked to learn the vocabulary for the next session enquiry and final exam.

In the Experimental 1 (paper-based group), students wrote the specified chapter of their story which was supposed to be around 250 words, more or less, at home. They were supposed to pay attention to use the words in their perfect semantic ground. The students bolded the vocabulary they used in the text.

The following session they delivered their writing to the teacher. The teacher read their writing and gave them comment on two areas, appropriateness in application of the vocabulary and narration. Then the students revised their writing and gave it back to the teacher. Teacher received, checked and corrected the possible errors in the writing and accompanied the writing with some suggestions for the next chapter of the story.

The chapter following the one corrected was the second episode of the same story. So, students continued this process until they produce a 20-chapter episodic short story.

In the Experimental 2 (computer-based group), students did the same procedures explained for the experimental 1(paper-based group) but the whole activity was done in the electronic world of computer (the whole process is indicated in

Appendix A

The most important aspect that made difference here was the feedback they received from their teacher on their writing. Here, the teacher gave his comment by means of electronic commenting in Microsoft Word which meant a lot to both teacher and students; in the electronic commenting the teacher had unlimited space to give comment and many writing tools such as bolding, italicizing,

underlying, coloring, charting, inserting a picture and many other tools not mentioned here.

The exchange process mentioned for the paper group was repeated here but through sending WORD files by emails. It was remarkable that preservation of the written text and keeping track of them was facilitated and more guaranteed in the electronic activity of experimental 2.

After the 20th session, each student had produced and collected 20 chapters of his/her episodic story which was fully edited and was ready to turn into a book. Three prints of the book were be published, one for the teacher, one for the writer and one for the other students. The book was preserved in the library of the institute for the prospective students to read.

Posttest: Finally, two types of posttest were given to the students in the three groups at the end of the term. One version of the posttest checked the recognition of the intended vocabulary by students; it was highly similar to the pretest administered at the beginning of the term. The other test taped into the production ability of the students. The questions of the second posttest were really concerned with the question of using learned vocabulary in the production and the active vocabulary of the students.

The words for the posttest were selected through stratified sampling where we were quite sure that all the 20 lessons had been included in the posttest. So, every lesson should have contributed to the posttest with three words but selection of the three words was quite random.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The effect of the new method of teaching vocabulary was measured by analyzing learners' vocabulary retention in the posttest. To check our hypothesis as well as addressing all the research questions we applied the one-way ANOVA statistical test. Doing the one-way ANOVA we witnessed that the variability of between groups (SS between = 468.868) is greater than the variability of within group (SS within=155.345). This shows that in the results collected from the posttest there is a difference in the groups.

Knowing that the study has yielded new and hopeful results, now, we went to the two hypotheses and checked them:

The first hypothesis of this study addressed the backbone question of the research, whether the treatment had any effect on the vocabulary acquisition of the students or not. As was mentioned in the procedures, control group followed the conventional methods of vocabulary acquisition but the experiment groups adopted the new initiative which was learning vocabulary through narration of the extended stories. Posttest and Pretest were scored from 0 to 20 based on the Iranian marking system. To check Hypothesis 1 pretest and posttests of the three groups were compared by means of a matched t-test. Table 1 indicates the matched t-tests. The results for the control group posttest and pretest did not show a difference.

Table 1. One-way ANOVA

		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Vocabulary retention	Between Groups	468.868	2	265.342	2.754	.000
	Within Groups	155.345	163	0.987		
	Total	624.213	165			

Table 2. Matched t-test of pretest and posttest for the groups

Groups	Test	Mean	Std. Deviation	t	Significance
Experimental 1	Pretest	3.68	0.756	-25.887	0.000
	Posttest	8.5	2.045		
Experimental 2	Pretest	3.5	0.654	-28.876	0.000
	Posttest	9.00	0.632		
Control	Pretest	3.8	0.682	-2.345	0.000
	Posttest	4.2	0.627		

Table 3. Independent -sample t-test of computer-based and paper-based groups.

Test	Group	N	M	t	Significance
Posttest of retention	Experimental 1	20	8.5	1.687	0.000
	Experimental 2	20	9.0		

As the result of the analysis shows, there is not much difference between the marks of students in control group before and after period of learning. Though the marks of students has increased a little which is normal, because they have passed a course but with a traditional method of vocabulary learning. So we should have expected that learning would happen but retention of these vocabularies after the span of three months was the focus of this study in which control group did not show so success.

Experimental group 1 (paper-based group) showed a dramatic change in the marks of the students. The *t* value ($t = -25.887$) indicated that the differences of vocabulary retention after the instructional period which are gauged in the pretest and posttest were statistically significant.

Experimental group 2 (Computer-based group) yielded results somehow similar to the group one. The *t* value ($t = -28.876$) suggests statistically significant difference in the pretest and posttest after the instructional period.

CONCLUSION

Though both experimental groups showed remarkable changes in the posttest mark of the students which means they have learnt the intended vocabulary with high retention ability, the second Hypothesis addresses the question of superiority of one of them over the other.

According to the independent-sample *t*-test in Table 3 Experimental group 2 (computer-based group) outperforms the paper-based one. This was also supported in the post-interview done with the students of experimental 2. They found it more interesting and motivating, on one hand, to type their stories in a clean, arranged environment of Microsoft Word and include their favorite pictures and changes on the text. On the other hand, reading electronic comments from their teacher with smiley symbols, highlights, underlining proved really appealing to the students in comparison to the illegible scant comments of their teacher on the paper appearing with the old red pen whose revision needed rewriting the whole text.

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

As reviewed at the outset, there has already been a long history of studies on techniques such as, context, keyword, and context/key word. In these techniques the main concern of the activities has been to measure the passive and receptive aspect of vocabulary but the present study is aimed to focus on the more and more productive and active aspect of vocabulary. But unfortunately, measuring active vocabulary is not among the research hypotheses of this study and the other researchers are suggested to check whether

learning vocabulary through narration can contribute to how active vocabulary is for the language learner.

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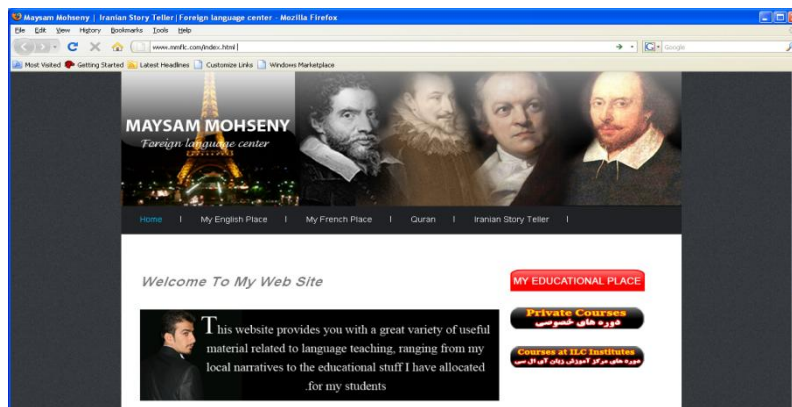
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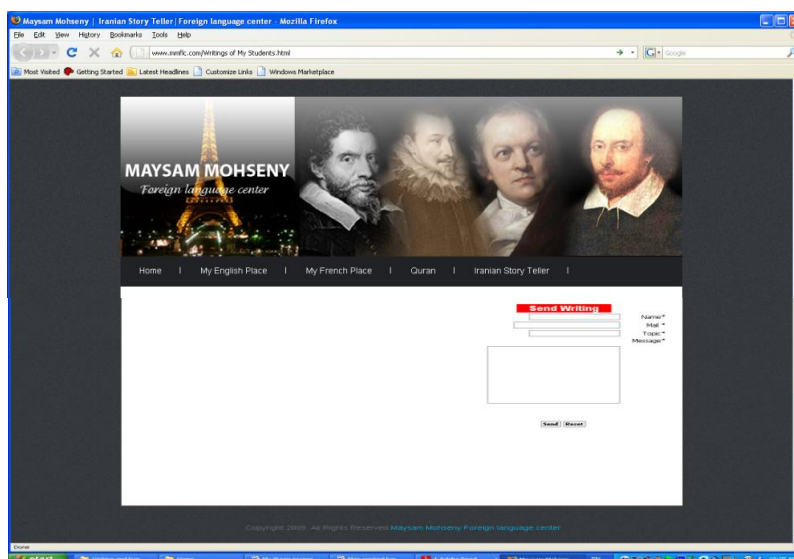
Appendix A. Procedure of sending the narration and its revision in Experimental 2 (Computer-based group)
For sending each story students go to the website:



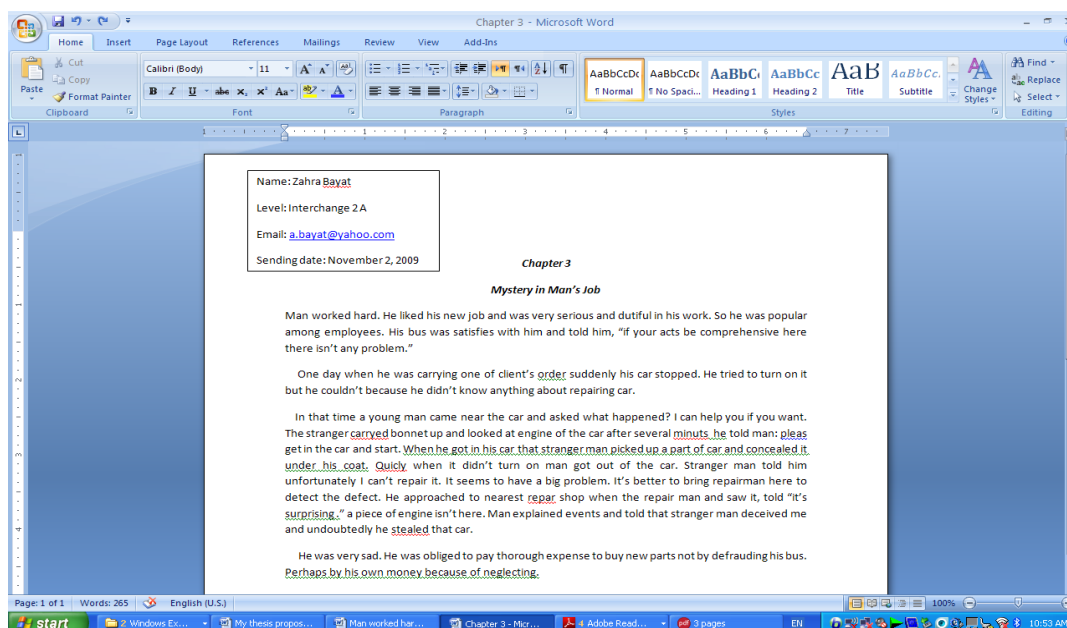
Picture 1. The main page of the website

Then they go to the section entitled, "Writings of My students":

In this section they write their name, email, topic, and they upload the text. The text and the information about student come directly to a categorized section in the website management section controlled by the researcher. After that, the researcher copies the text into Microsoft Word for doing the revision:



Picture 2. Section for uploading the writing



Picture 3. The writing transferred into Microsoft Word file for revision.

After the text is revised and commented on the application of the vocabularies, it is sent back to the learner in the DOC of Microsoft Word format. The teacher also bolds and checks whether all the 12 words are used in the text