**In the Name of God, the Compassionate the Merciful**

**The moving finger writes: and, having writ, moves on:**
**nor all thy piety nor wit, shall it back to cancel half a line.**
**Nor all thy tears wash out a word of it.**

*(Omar Kayyam, Rubaiat)*

48711

**Tarbiat Moallem University**

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# The Effect of Vocabulary Instruction through Semantic Mapping on Learning and recall of EFL Learners

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# The effect of vocabulary instruction through semantic mapping on learning and recall of EFL learners

Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree of Master of Arts in Teaching
English as a Foreign Language (TEFL)

by

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## ABSTRACT

This study examined the effects of teaching vocabulary through semantic mapping strategy on learning vocabulary and recall of the Iranian intermediate EFL students. The schema theory, semantic field and semantic network theory provide the theoretical framework for this study. The subjects of this study were thirty-six students in Urmiah Shokuh-e-Iran language institute. a group of intermediate students were needed. Therefore, the *vocabulary levels test* (Schmitt, N. 2000) was administered to assure the homogeneity of the students regarding their lexical knowledge.

After being randomly streamed into two comparable groups namely group A (vocabulary teaching with semantic mapping) and group B (vocabulary teaching without semantic mapping), each group was given four vocabulary lessons after each of which an immediate vocabulary test was given as a measure of the students' short term recall. Subsequently, an overall vocabulary posttest was administered to examine their learning and after four weeks the same test was given to all the students as a measure of their long term vocabulary recall.

Based on a descriptive analysis of the data and independent t-tests it was revealed that there were significant differences in learning and recall of the students who received instruction in the use of semantic mapping and students who received traditional instruction. It's noteworthy that results of the two out of four immediate recall post tests were found to be insignificant too.

Based on some positive effects in favor of the experimental vocabulary instruction group, it can be concluded that the experimental method employed in this study, may be used as an alternative method useful for vocabulary instruction.



Key words: vocabulary instruction, semantic mapping, immediate recall, delayed recall

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# Chapter one

# Introduction

## 1.1. Introduction

Vocabulary learning is a major component of language learning and language use as, speakers cannot communicate and convey meaning without vocabulary in a particular language (Laufer, 1997). As a result of a renewed focus, especially in the last two decades, a lot of studies have claimed that vocabulary knowledge plays a central role in L2 acquisition and that vocabulary teaching is an essential part of language instruction (Boggards, 2001; Vermeer, 2001; Nunan, 1999; Meara, 1996). This renewed focus is largely due to research investigating its importance on immigrant college students in general (Harklau, 1994) and reading and listening comprehension of L2 learners in particular (Adolphs and Schmitt, 2004; Brisbois, 1995; Lin, 2004).

This enthusiasm over the importance of vocabulary has led to an increase in research on relevant topics related to the pedagogy of vocabulary instruction such as vocabulary learning strategies (Nagy, 1997; Qian, 2004; Schmitt, 1997), incidental vocabulary learning (Rott, 1999; Watanabe, 1997), vocabulary acquisition in different conditions (Chin, 2002; Zimmerman, 1997), and learners' processing of syntactic or phono-orthographical aspects of L2 vocabulary (Akmatsu, 1999; Ryan, 1997; Wang et al. 2003).

Efforts in this area have also resulted in the development of several instructional techniques and strategies concerning the content areas vocabulary (Readence et al.

1995). Coady (1993, p.352) argues that "Many current techniques for teaching vocabulary are artificial and frequently ineffective because they do not induce the learners to associate the new word-forms and concepts in their mind together with schemata they already know". Culyer (1978) in his guidelines for skill development, suggested developing vocabulary related to a particular topic (e.g. seasons, holidays), that is in thematic terms. As suggested by Fry (1987), words related to a topic are generated in a way that a study about "weather" words ,for example, might include brisk, sultry, squall, alert, high pressure, torrid, tornado, cyclone, barometer, travelers advisor, etc. As Greenwood (2002) states, "vocabulary instruction...should help students make the connections between unknown words and the knowledge they already possess" (p. 259). Ojima (2006) concludes that pre-task planning minimizes the L2 learners' "cognitive expenditure" to process the information during task performance, because it permits them to prepare a head of the time for an activity and consequently enhances the quality of their language production.

The semantic development in vocabulary acquisition, that is the cognitive mapping process of word forms and their meaning, has rarely been the focus of empirical research in L2 (Boers, et al, 2004). This mapping process while important and complicated has been widely taken for granted rather than treated as a very vital topic for exploration in L2 research (Jiang, 2002; Yuan and Ellis, 2003).

Taking into consideration that engaging students in effective vocabulary instruction strategies and activities is important in developing vocabulary knowledge and aiding in academic success, this study adopted semantic mapping as an

instructional strategy to examine its potential for improving vocabulary knowledge of EFL learners. One of the main reasons for selecting this strategy, which is widely used in all the language teaching classrooms, is that it is believed to be effective both in terms of conceptual and linguistic development (Heimlich and pittleman, 1986). Moreover, it is extensively believed that teaching vocabulary involves equipping learners with necessary strategies to expand their vocabulary and not just teaching specific words (e.g. Grace, 1987; Hulstijn; 1993; Oxford, 1990).

## 1.2. Statement of the Problem and Purpose of the Study

The major advantage gained from all learning strategies, including strategies for vocabulary learning, is that they enable learners to take more control of their own learning in a way that students can take more responsibility for their studies (Nation, 2001; Scharle & Szabó, 2000). Consequently, strategies foster "learner autonomy, independence, and self direction" (Oxford & Nyikos 1989, p.291). Equipped with a range of different vocabulary learning strategies, students can decide upon how exactly they would like to deal with unknown words. A good knowledge of the strategies and the ability to apply them in suitable situations might remarkably facilitate the learning process of any fresh vocabulary for the learner. For instance, as shown by Atkinson (1972), independence in selecting which words to study results in better recall of the words than when the words are chosen by someone else.

Despite this great deal of interest that vocabulary has embraced in language acquisition research, vocabulary development is still being passed over, as Oxford

and Crookall, (1990, p.9), maintain that "merely giving students lists of words to memorize or providing limited practice opportunities, with no further assistance" for the learner. Bleckley (2006) admitted that today's limited research has just tested three different areas of vocabulary instruction, i.e. definition-based instruction, using context as a clue, semantic mapping methods. In a search for a suitable tool for vocabulary learning, he concludes that, basically, definition-based instruction doesn't work well in the short run, and there's definitely little to none retention. Context works when students are really great readers. But learning vocabularies through semantic mapping methods seem to work really well, since they create a vocabulary network. Lexical competence, as suggested by Meara (1996) should be judged by estimating the overall size and organization of the entire vocabulary network, rather than by examining attributes of individual words.

Some studies conducted recently in vocabulary teaching context have reported the positive effects of semantic mapping for increasing vocabulary (Harley et al., 1996; Johnson and Steele, 1996; Morin and Goebel, 2001). Most of the literature on semantic mapping in EFL/ESL learning is related to the area of reading skills.

The present study aimed at investigating the possible effects of teaching vocabulary through semantic mapping on learning vocabulary and recall, and comparing it with teaching the same vocabularies by means of a more traditional method (i.e. teaching vocabulary through word lists and providing the students with the dictionary meaning of the words and sometimes their L1 equivalents).

## 1.3. Significance of the Study

After a period of relative neglect, language teachers and researchers are realizing vocabulary learning at the heart of language learning that needs more effort and investigation. Both students and teachers agree on the significance of words and phrases in language learning. Learners mostly have difficulty with vocabulary and the acquisition of vocabulary is their greatest single source of problems (Mackay, 1986; Rekrut, 1996). On the other hand, it is felt that teachers and researchers have a paucity of vocabulary knowledge which is seen as one of the main obstacles to progress especially in the receptive skills of listening and reading (Shand, 1999).

Students know what to learn but they do not know how to learn it. Nunan (1998), having put special attention on incorporating strategies in syllabus design as a way for the independence of learners from teachers and educational system, states that apart from philosophical reasons for weaning learners from dependence on teachers, it is felt that learners should be taught independent learning skills so that they may continue their career after the completion of formal instruction.

Here, the importance of research on different strategies comes out to be indispensable since theses powerful tools will come to help to enhance the learning and teaching. Regarding our restricted class time, the incorporation of semantic mapping strategies will help the learners to retain vocabulary without sacrificing too much time on their manipulation and exploration process.

Prior research suggests that semantic maps can provide effective encodings of the scientific domain of knowledge which is complex and also reliable

representations of understanding in learners and flexible models to explore and assess their cognitive development (Kang, 2004; Avgerinou & Ericson, 1997). In addition, research on learning suggests that semantic maps pave the way for the development of macro-level understandings and more effective learning in cooperative situations, especially for low proficiency learners. These strategies not only allows students to interact with others. defend their choices, and assess themselves but also its incorporation into the classroom procedure, for the most part, would help the learners to learn better and increase students' retention of the vocabulary items.

The study of semantic development is especially important because there seems to be a tendency to overlook the complexity of this process in vocabulary teaching (Henriksen, 1999). The evidence suggests that a "theoretical threshold exists through which L2 learners must pass in order to become native like speakers" (Chiu, 2006). Yet researchers have mostly emphasized on the process of mapping form onto the meaning and the construction and reorganization of the semantic networks have been neglected (ibid, 2006). On the other hand, vocabulary acquisition being a very slow process (Bogaards, 1994), we can imagine that significant changes and growth in how to construct the learner's mental lexicon network seems indispensable.

In addition, understanding semantic mapping and knowing its possible effects has important pedagogical implications as it can potentially inform language teachers in designing curricula to facilitate semantic development and thus to foster vocabulary acquisition.

It is hoped that such a study will invite new discussions as to how vocabulary can be learned more effectively and more importantly how L2 vocabulary development occurs.

## 1.4. Research Questions and Hypotheses

The present study aims at analyzing the subjects' performance on different dependent variables in order to answer one major question: which of the two teaching strategies is more effective? In particular the following research questions were formulated to be examined:

**Q1:** Does teaching vocabulary through semantic mapping strategy have any effect on immediate recall of vocabularies by EFL intermediate learners?

**Q2:** Does teaching vocabulary through semantic mapping have any effect on EFL intermediate learners' overall learning of the vocabulary items?

**Q3:** Does teaching vocabulary through semantic mapping have any effect on Iranian EFL intermediate learners' delayed recall of the vocabulary items?

To probe the above research questions, the following null hypotheses were formulated:

**Ho1:** Teaching vocabulary through semantic mapping strategy has no significant effect on vocabulary learning of EFL intermediate students' immediate recall.

**Ho2:** Teaching vocabulary through semantic mapping strategy has no significant effect on overall vocabulary learning of EFL intermediate students.

**Ho3:** Teaching vocabulary through semantic mapping has no significant effect, on intermediate EFL learners' delayed recall of the vocabulary items?

## 1.5. Limitations of the Study

Like any kind of research, the present study suffers from a number of limitations which will cause undeniable limitations on the generalization of its result. They are as follows:

1. Subjects of this study were chosen from among male and female Iranian intermediate students of Shokouhe-e-Iran Language Institute in Urmia. The results of this study may not be applicable to other populations.

2. The focus of attention is restricted to teaching of one vocabulary strategy i.e. semantic mapping. The results of this study may not be applicable to other strategies or skill areas.

3. Training of any sort takes a long time to satisfy the desired objectives. However, owing to time limitations, the time allocated was not a long one and did not permit conclusions to be drawn on the lasting effects of the treatment.

4. The responsibility of making graphic organizers is uniquely devoted to the teacher while both teacher and the students can do the job.

5. This study caught a glimpse of the vocabulary learning by a small sample of Iranian students. A larger sample with more diverse backgrounds would be desirable in order to yield more generalizable findings.