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The influence of extensive reading on incidental vocabulary acquisition of adult English learners

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Abstract

This study aims to investigate the impact of extensive reading on the development of incidentally acquired vocabulary knowledge of adult English learners. Second language vocabulary can be learned incidentally while the learner is engaged in extensive reading or reading for meaning, inferring the meaning of unknown words.40 Iranian adult learners of English participated in this research. They were classified into the experimental and control groups. Each group consisted of twenty University student participants. Participants in experimental group read two authentic short stories in addition to their main English programs outside the classroom during their ten-week English learning semester.

Both groups were tested on their knowledge of vocabulary before extensive reading program (Pre-test), immediately after extensive reading program (Post-test 1), and 1 month after Post-test 1 (Post-test 2). The scores of Pre-test and two Post-tests of both groups were compared by using a t-test to find out if there were any significant differences in vocabulary recognition between the two groups. A one-way ANOVA was used to find out if there were any significant differences among the participants in the experimental and control groups. The results showed a significant word gain of experimental group participants between the Pre-test and Post-test 1 and that most gained words were retained at Post-test2.

***Key words*:** Extensive reading, Incidental learning, Incidental vocabulary acquisition.

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Lastly, I hope God will give me the guidance and wisdom to use my knowledge and training to help others.

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CHAPTER I

Introduction

1.1. Background

Vocabulary is regarded as one of the most important elements of verbal and nonverbal communication and an essential part of the teaching of reading. Because a greater vocabulary can lead to better understanding of a reading passage, vocabulary development is one of the most important factors in increasing students' reading ability. There is a strong relationship between vocabulary knowledge and reading activities. Vocabulary learning can be developed by using an interactive approach with learners learning new words according to their own background knowledge through techniques such as semantic mapping, cognitive mapping and semantic feature analysis.

Several researchers have expressed the view that extensive reading can play a significant role in vocabulary development. It is suggested that the incidental learning of words during reading could be the easiest and most powerful way to promote the long-term vocabulary growth. It is clear that the incidental learning of vocabulary through extensive reading is beneficial for language learning and learners at all levels. Coady (1997) suggests that simplified readers could be used to increase students' vocabulary and allow students to progress from simplified readers to authentic texts.

Extensive reading gives the learner an opportunity to learn vocabulary again and again in various contexts. As a result of multiple encounters over a long period of time, that individual word becomes part of the reader sight vocabulary.

As a matter of fact extensive reading is not a new idea for teaching reading as a second or foreign language. In fact, it has been used as a language learning activity for over fifty years. It has been proven to be an effective approach for promoting second language acquisition. A considerable

amount of research has been undertaken to examine whether extensive reading has beneficial results. Over the past decade or so, there have been numerous studies reporting that extensive reading benefits different types of learners, in many different ways. Extensive reading is believed to develop reading fluency, build vocabulary and strengthen grammatical awareness. In addition, it develops the reader's background knowledge, improve reading comprehension, and build reading confidence and motivation in second language learning. Results of some similar studies show that extensive reading expanded the readers' vocabulary knowledge, increased reading comprehension and built reading confidence.

1.2. Statement of the problem

With the advent of computers and the Internet, the World Wide Web has become one of the most efficient channels of communication. The World Wide Web has become a powerful reading resource where all sorts of information can be kept and retrieved. While the information is transcribed in many world languages, one of the most popular of those languages is English. In a world of information and technology, reading has become one of the most crucial language skills for both the academic and business worlds.

At the tertiary level of education in Iran, students are required to take English as a foundation course. Because reading is regarded as one of the most important academic skills for university students, students are required to read a considerable number of texts in English.

The lack of ability to read efficiently was also revealed in a survey study by some other researchers. It was reported that Science University Students had difficulty in understanding expository texts in English due to the lack of both English vocabulary knowledge and proper reading skills and strategies. University students are required to take English as foundation courses for their general education; they are obliged to take their special courses in English (ESP).

In an attempt to solve this problem, the Extensive Reading Program is implemented. The program is designed to reflect the results of a variety of studies that have shown the significance of extensive reading, vocabulary development and a positive attitude towards reading for adult learners of English.

Extensive reading has a long history in the teaching of English as a foreign language. Its use as a strategy to increase the students' reading ability was first recorded by Harold Palmer (1964) and the term "supplementary reading" was first used as far back as 1955 by Michael West, a well-known teacher and materials writers working in India used the language proficiency (West, 1955). In recent years, extensive reading has received renewed attention as a result of an increased focus on student-centered learning: because students are able to choose what they want to read and how they want to read it, extensive reading has come to be regarded as an essentially student-centered activity. Day and Bamford (1997) define extensive reading as an approach to the teaching and learning of second language, in which students have to read widely within their level of language proficiency. Extensive reading helps EFL students not only to learn to read but also to motivate them to enjoy reading, resulting in a continuation of reading outside class in addition to normal classroom study. Extensive reading can be used to promote good reading habits in ESL/EFL teaching as it provides comprehensible input for the students, providing the reading materials are easy enough to allow them to read without difficulty.

Many more researchers agree that extensive reading has beneficial results for foreign students learning to read in English. Even though extensive reading has been very popular among ESL and EFL language teachers, it is not very widely applied for teaching reading in Iran, therefore, it is of interest to find out if an Extensive Reading Program developed for Adult undergraduate Iranian university students could yield similar results to those found in the recent studies both in Iran and abroad.

However, in view of the number of hours of instruction that students receive, one cannot dismiss the possibility that most of the words they know are taught rather than 'picked up', since it is not impossible to teach an average of 2–3 words per hour of instruction. If, the vocabulary is acquired mainly through input, the figures speak against the efficacy of this way of learning.

In this research, a different source of L2 vocabulary acquisition via extensive reading will be investigated: ER activities; especially in the form of word-focused tasks by reading authentic short stories.

1.3. Significance of the study

In recent years, an increasing number of language instructors have turned to extensive reading as a means of facilitating acquisition among their students. Learners in such programs typically select books from a wide variety of genres and language levels and read them for interest and enjoyment, with minimal post-reading tasks (e.g., book reports, essays), the emphasis is being on maximizing input rather than output.

During the 2007 academic year, extensive reading program was considered as a component of English conversation and English communication courses at foreign universities. It was hoped that this would be an enjoyable, motivating source of plentiful, out-of-class input that would feed into learners' overall language abilities and provide stimulating fodder for communication in the classroom.

This overview of the initial year of the program includes discussion of (a) theoretical and practical bases for Extensive Reading and its use in communication oriented courses, (b) program

implementation, (c) activities utilizing reading as a resource for communication in the classroom, and (d) student response based on reading quantity, and book reports.

As a matter of fact more realistic estimates of vocabulary learning through reading can be obtained from studies that used stories. Yet most studies of extensive reading do not investigate vocabulary as such, but general improvement in reading and writing, and attitudes to reading and the language course.

The studies compare the extensive reading method with more traditional teaching techniques, though it is seldom clear what is meant by these 'Traditional' ways of teaching. When they examine the progress in vocabulary, they do not normally test the knowledge of particular words but measure vocabulary progress in general. Furthermore, it is not always clear how the learners deal with unknown words during the reading activity. If the words are underlined, written down and/or checked for meaning, then we cannot attribute the reported learning to reading only.

Studies that focus specifically on the acquisition of words show huge gains, as a matter of fact in an on-going process of extensive reading, students can choose articles that are within their own range or capability. Therefore, students are less likely to get frustrated and their learning attitude will be positive and beneficial. In addition, extensive reading can build students' vocabulary recognition, especially where students have more reading input. Consequently, extensive reading can help in the development of personal reading strategies, thus increasing reading speed, and involvement with the text. However, extensive reading cannot guarantee to enhance students' reading comprehension, where the aim of extensive reading leans upon its multicultural agenda of increasing 'global' understanding.

To summarize the 'established' perspective; extensive reading can promote students motivation in learning English, it can enhance their vocabulary, and increase reading speed. However, extensive reading will not enhance students' reading comprehension.

The foregoing research implies that extensive reading is one of the main sources of L2 learners' vocabularies. It aims to examine whether extensive reading can enhance incidental vocabulary acquisition of adult English learners.

1.4. Research questions

The fallowing questions were asked to guide the present research:

1. Does extensive reading have any influence on incidental vocabulary acquisition of adult English learners?

2. If the answer to the first question is yes, whether the influence of extensive reading on incidental vocabulary acquisition is short or long term retention?

1.5. Research hypotheses

From the above questions, the fallowing hypotheses are formed;

H1: Extensive reading has a great influence on incidental vocabulary acquisition of adult English learners.

H2: The influence of extensive reading on incidental vocabulary acquisition is a long term retention.

1.6. Definition of the key terms

Extensive reading refers to a reading activity that was mainly carried out outside the classroom by the students according to their reading scheduled program (every session two chapters from two assigned short stories.

Incidental learning should not be confused with unattended learning. During the task, the learners may attend to the words by using them in sentences or by looking them up in a dictionary. Consequently, some of these words may be remembered even though the learners do not deliberately try to commit them to memory. Hence, this kind of learning is incidental.

Hulstijn et al (2001) and Laufer (2000) found that looking up new words in a dictionary during a reading task was more effective for incidental learning than reading with the same words glossed in the text margin by the researcher. Both studies Used electronic dictionaries, and all the look-ups of the learners were registered in log files. In this way, it was possible to verify that the acquired words had been looked up by the students.

Incidental vocabulary acquisition is defined as the acquisition of vocabulary as a by-product of another activity.

1.7. Limitations of the Study

Limitations are integral parts of each study and the researcher could not control the following factors:

-As a matter of fact the issue of participants in this study is a matter of concern, performing a similar research with different number of participants in different ranges of age and different English knowledge level may lead to different results. The selection of the present participants limits the generalization of the findings to other populations.

-Findings of the present study are restricted to the two authentic assigned short stories in this investigation. Generalization beyond the present assigned tasks would be speculative.

-The two selected authentic short stories in this study are narrative. Other genres are excluded.

-The present study has been performed in one English institute outside the University, performing similar studies in other academic centers like Universities may leads to different results.

-The other important point is, on the Pre-test, the experimental group participants indicated that they understood 50% or more of the vocabularies throughout the three word classes. This means that the participants did not have many opportunities to meet unfamiliar vocabularies in the ER (extensive reading) materials. Learners who have smaller English vocabularies than these participants are needed to observe whether different word gain and retention rates would be observed among those students also.

-Finally, the experimental methodology used in this study, the self-report checklist technique, is one of various methodologies to measure learner vocabulary knowledge. If a different methodology, such as multiple-choice questions or translation test, had been used in this study, the number of vocabularies remembered on the delayed Post-test might have been different because different experimental techniques can produce different measurement results (Gu & Johnson, 2000).

To determine the retention time of vocabularies incidentally learned through ER, a further study is necessary in which the delayed Post-test is conducted after a longer period than in the present research.

CHAPTER II

Review of the literature

2.1. Introduction

According to Davis (2005), extensive reading bears several implications for implementation in the language (both L1 and L2) classroom. From this classroom implementation perspective, much research have been conducted which have supported the effectiveness of extensive reading for second language development. De'Ath's (2001) introduction of the Shared Book Method to 89 Niuean-speaking Grade 3 students in Nieu (an island in the South Pacific) in the 1970s resulted in great success after one year of implementation. Specifically, the students in the reading group outperformed those involved in the audio lingual classroom in L2 English reading comprehension, word recognition and oral sentence repetition. Elley and Mangubhai's (2003) study of 380 Fijian and Hindi-speaking pupils (Grade 4 and 5) in Fiji also revealed the power of extensive reading, especially after two years of its implementation. While the book flood students were superior to the audio lingual students in only some measures of L2 English ability after one year, by the end of the second year they outperformed the regular students in all measures of language proficiency, including vocabulary, grammar, reading, listening and writing. Together with De'Ath's findings in Nieu, these heartening results lend much credence to extensive reading as a viable means to promote second language acquisition.

A systematic framework for vocabulary development may be viewed as the combination of three approaches to vocabulary instruction and learning. These three approaches are incidental learning, explicit instruction, and independent strategy development. The incidental learning of vocabulary requires that teachers provide opportunities for extensive reading and listening. Explicit

instruction involves diagnosing the words learners need to know, presenting words for the first time, elaborating word knowledge, and developing fluency with familiar words. Finally, independent strategy development involves practice in making inferences from the context and training learners to use dictionaries.

Although all of these approaches and principles have a role to play in vocabulary instruction, the learners' proficiency level and learning situation should be considered when deciding the relative emphasis to be placed on each approach. In general, emphasizing explicit instruction is probably best for beginning and intermediate students who have limited vocabularies. On the other hand, extensive reading and listening might receive more attention for more proficient intermediate and advanced students. Also, because of its immediate benefits, dictionary training should begin early in the curriculum.

In the long run, most words in both source and target languages are probably learned incidentally, through extensive reading and listening. Incidental vocabulary learning is the acquisition of new words as a by-product of a meaning-focused communicative activity, such as reading, listening, and interaction. It occurs through multiple exposures to a word in different contexts. Learners are able to pick up vocabulary through extensive reading, communicative interactions or exposure to natural input such as movies, TV, etc. Explicit vocabulary teaching is crucial for teaching the core vocabulary, particularly for the learning of basic lexical and semantic knowledge. Incidental vocabulary acquisition should be encouraged for further lexical and semantic development of the words learned through explicit instruction and for learning additional vocabulary. It is contextualized, giving the learner a richer sense of a word's use and meaning than can be provided in traditional pair-associated exercises, pedagogically efficient in that it enables two activities - vocabulary acquisition and reading - to occur at the same time, and more

individualized and learner-based because the vocabulary being acquired is dependent on the learner's own selection of reading materials.

The incidental learning of vocabulary may eventually account for the major part of advanced learners' vocabulary; however, intentional learning through instruction also significantly contributes to vocabulary development. Explicit instruction is particularly essential for beginning students whose lack of vocabulary limits their reading ability. It is evident that beginners cannot learn enough words to learn vocabulary through extensive reading since they do not know enough words to read well. According to Coady J. the solution is to have students supplement their extensive reading with study of the 3,000 most frequent words until the words' form and meaning becomes automatically recognized. The first stage in teaching these 3,000 words commonly begins with word-pairs in which an L2 word is matched with an L1 translation. Translation has a necessary and useful role for L2 learning, but it can hinder learners' progress if it is used to the exclusion of L2-based techniques. The both "advanced" and "weaker" learners could recall more newly learned words using L1 translations than using L2 context. However, "weaker" learners are less able to transfer knowledge learned from translation into an L2 context. Weaker learners require more time when using an L2 context as they have less developed L2 networks and are slower to use syntactic information. To discourage the learners from over-relying on translation teachers should talk with them about their expectations of language learning and the pitfalls of low-effort strategies like translation. Furthermore, translation needs to be followed up with other L2-based exercises and learning strategies.

Vocabulary lists can be an effective way to quickly learn word-pair translations. However, Atkinson R. C. considers that it is more effective to use vocabulary cards, because learners can control the order in which they study the words.

Guessing from context is a complex and often difficult strategy to carry out successfully. To guess successfully from context learners need to know about 19 out of every 20 words (95%) of a text, which requires knowing the 3,000 most common words. However, even if one knows these words, unless the context is very constrained, which is a relatively rare occurrence, or unless there is a relationship with a known word identifiable on the basis of form and supported by context, there is little chance of guessing the correct meaning.

Although this strategy often may not result in gaining a full understanding of word meaning and form, guessing from context may still contribute to vocabulary learning. Just what is and is not learned will partly depend on text difficulty as well as the learners' level. In particular, more proficient learners using texts that are not overly difficult can be expected to use this strategy more effectively than low proficiency learners. It should also be remembered that learning vocabulary also includes learning about collocations, associations, and related grammatical patterns as well as meaning. Therefore, if regularly practiced, this strategy may contribute to deeper word knowledge for advanced learners as long as they pay attention to the word and its context.

Learning vocabulary through incidental, intentional, and independent approaches requires teachers to plan a wide variety of activities and exercises. The amount of emphasis that teachers and programs decide to place on any given activity will depend on the learners' level and the educational goals of the teacher and the program. In general, it makes most sense to emphasize the direct teaching of vocabulary for learners who still need to learn the first 3,000 most common words. As learners' vocabulary expands in size and depth, then extensive reading and independent strategies may be increasingly emphasized. Extensive reading and listening, translation, elaboration, and fluency activities, guessing from context, and using dictionaries all have a role to play in the systematic development of the learners' vocabulary knowledge.