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Title:

**THE EFFECT OF TEACHING CRITICAL
READING STRATEGIES ON EFL
LEARNERS' VOCABULARY RETENTION**

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In The Name of God

The greater writer of our life stories, each uniquely organized

**I would like to dedicate this thesis with all my heart to my
loving parents**

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Abstract

This study was an attempt to investigate whether teaching critical reading strategies had any significant effect on intermediate EFL learners' vocabulary retention. To fulfill the purpose of this study, 72 male and female students within the age range of 17 to 32 years studying at Farzan and Farzanegan language schools in Tehran at intermediate level were selected from among a total number of 114 participants based on their performance on a piloted PET (2009) and a piloted teacher-made vocabulary recognition test respectively, and were randomly assigned to the experimental and control groups of 36 subjects each. The same content (covering eight reading texts) was taught by the teacher/researcher to both groups throughout the 19-session treatment; the only difference between them was the way of presentation, i.e. the experimental group was taught through teaching critical reading strategies while in the control group, the application of such strategies was absent so the common ways of teaching reading was applied. At the end of the instruction, the piloted vocabulary retention post-test parallel to the vocabulary test at the onset of the study was administered to the participants of both groups after an interval of two weeks. Finally, the mean scores of both groups on the posttest were compared through an independent samples *t*-test, which led to the rejection of the null hypothesis. Thus, teaching critical reading strategies had significant effect on intermediate EFL learners' vocabulary retention.

Table of Contents

Acknowledgement	iv
Abstract	v
List of Tables	1
List of Figures	2
List of Appendices	3
CHAPTER ONE	4
BACKGROUND AND PURPOSE.....	4
1.1 Introduction	5
1.2 Statement of the Problem	11
1.3 Statement of the Research Question.....	15
1.4 Statement of the Research Hypothesis	15
1.5 Definition of Key Terms	16
1.5.1 Reading Comprehension.....	16
1.5.2 Critical Reading	16
1.5.3 Critical Reading Strategies	17
1.5.4 Vocabulary Retention	17
1.5.5 Intermediate EFL Learners	18
1.6 Significance of the Study.....	18
1.7 Delimitations, Limitation, and Assumption.....	23
CHAPTER TWO	26
REVIEW OF THE RELATED LITERATURE.....	26
2.1 Introduction	27
2.2 What Is Reading?.....	27
2.2.1 The Bottom-Up Processing Reading Model	29
2.2.2 The Top-Down Processing Reading Model	31
2.2.3 The Interactive Processing Reading Model	32
2.3 What Is Comprehension?	34
2.4 What Is Reading Comprehension?.....	35
2.4.1 Phases of Reading Comprehension	36
2.4.1.1 Pre-Reading Phase.....	37
2.4.1.2 During-Reading Phase	38
2.4.1.3 Post-Reading Phase	39
2.4.2 Types of Reading Comprehension	39
2.5 What Is Critical Reading?.....	43

2.5.1	Components of Critical Reading	46
2.5.2	What Level Is Appropriate for Critical Reading	48
2.5.3	Teaching Critical Reading Strategies	49
2.5.4	The Role of the Teacher in Teaching Critical Reading Strategies	59
2.6	Vocabulary Knowledge through Reading	62
2.6.1	Merits of Vocabulary Learning through Reading	65
2.6.2	Vocabulary Size and Reading Comprehension	68
2.7	Vocabulary Knowledge	69
2.7.1	The Importance of Vocabulary	71
2.7.2	Types of Vocabulary	72
2.7.2.1	Content and Function.....	72
2.7.2.2	Concrete and Abstract.....	72
2.7.2.3	Receptive and Productive.....	73
2.7.2.4	Depth and Breath.....	75
2.8	Vocabulary Learning.....	76
2.8.1	Incidental and Intentional Vocabulary Learning.....	79
2.8.2	Contextualized and De-contextualized Vocabulary Learning.....	82
2.9	Vocabulary Forgetting and Retention	85
2.10	Vocabulary and Memorization	87
2.11	Vocabulary Retention.....	90
2.12	The Related Studies on Vocabulary and Reading.....	93
CHAPTER THREE.....		97
METHODOLOGY.....		97
3.1	Introduction	98
3.2	Participants	99
3.3	Instrumentation	102
3.3.1	Tests.....	103
3.3.1.1	Language Proficiency Test.....	103
3.3.1.2	Vocabulary Recognition Test for Homogenizing the Participants	107
3.3.1.3	Vocabulary Retention Posttest	111
3.3.2	Instructional Materials.....	113
3.3.2.1	Course Book.....	114
3.3.2.2	The Critical Reading Strategies Pamphlets	116
3.4	Procedure.....	119
3.4.1	The Preliminary Study.....	119

3.4.2	The Pilot Study.....	120
3.4.3	Selection of the Participants.....	123
3.4.4	The Main Study.....	124
3.4.4.1	Instruction in the Control Group	125
3.4.4.2	Instruction in the Experimental Group (Treatment)	129
3.5	Design	142
3.6	Statistical Analyses	143
CHAPTER FOUR		145
RESULTS AND DISCUSSION		145
4.1	Introduction	146
4.2	Data Analysis.....	147
4.2.1	Constructing and Piloting Vocabulary Parallel-Forms Tests	147
4.2.2	Participant Selection.....	151
4.2.2.1	Results of the PET Pilot Study	151
4.2.2.2	Results of the PET Main Administration.....	154
4.2.2.3	Results of the Teacher-made Vocabulary Recognition Test Main Administration	156
4.2.2.4	Results of Random Assignment of Participants into Control and Experimental Groups	158
4.3	Posttest Phase.....	162
4.3.1	Results of Checking the Normality of the Distributions of Posttest Scores.....	162
4.3.2	Results of Testing the Null Hypothesis	165
4.4	Discussion.....	167
CHAPTER FIVE.....		173
CONCLUSION AND PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS.....		173
5.1	Introduction	174
5.2	Summary of the Procedure and Findings	174
5.3	Conclusion.....	177
5.4	Pedagogical Implications.....	182
5.4.1	Implications for the Teachers.....	182
5.4.2	Implications for the Learners	184
5.4.3	Implications for the Syllabus Designers and Materials Developers	186
5.4.4	Implications for the Language Schools	188
5.5	Suggestions for Further Research	189
REFERENCES.....		191

List of Tables

Table 2.1. What is involved in knowing a word?	70
Table 3.1. Participants of the Study	102
Table 3.2. The Sections of PET	103
Table 3.3. The Variables of the Study	142
Table 4.1. Reliability Estimates of the Teacher-made Vocabulary Test before and after Discarding Malfunctioning Items (Pilot Study)	148
Table 4.2. Reliability Estimates of the Two Parallel Forms of 80-item Teacher-made Vocabulary Recognition and Retention Tests (Pilot Study)	150
Table 4.3. Levene's Test of Equality of Error Variances	150
Table 4.4. Descriptive Statistics of the PET Pilot Administration	152
Table 4.5. Reliability Estimates of the PET before and after Removing Malfunctioning Items (Pilot Study)	152
Table 4.6. Inter-rater Reliability of Raters on Writing Section of the PET Pilot Study	153
Table 4.7. Inter-rater Reliability of Raters on Speaking Section of the PET Pilot Study	154
Table 4.8. Descriptive Statistics of the Main Administration of the PET for Homogenization	155
Table 4.9. Reliability Estimate of PET Main Administration	156
Table 4.10. Descriptive Statistics of the Teacher-made Vocabulary Recognition Test Main Administration	157
Table 4.11. Reliability Estimate of the Teacher-made Vocabulary Test, Main Administration at Homogenization Phase	158
Table 4.12. Descriptive Statistics of Vocabulary Recognition Test of Control and Experimental Groups	158
Table 4.13. <i>t</i> -test Results for Comparing the Vocabulary Recognition Test Scores of Control and Experimental Groups at the Homogenization Phase	161
Table 4.14. Descriptive Statistics of both Experimental and Control Groups on Vocabulary Retention Posttest	163
Table 4.15. <i>t</i> -test Results for Comparing the Vocabulary Retention Posttest Scores of Control and Experimental Groups	165

List of Figures

Figure 4.1. Histogram of the Distribution of Scores on PET Piloting	152
Figure 4.2. Histogram of the Scores Obtained on the PET Main Administration	155
Figure 4.3. Histogram of the Distribution of Scores on Teacher-made Vocabulary Recognition Test (Homogenization Phase)	157
Figure 4.4. Histogram for Distribution of Scores of Vocabulary Recognition Test for Control Group	159
Figure 4.5. Histogram for Distribution of Scores of Vocabulary Recognition Test for Experimental Group	159
Figure 4.6. Histogram of the Control Group's Scores on the Vocabulary Retention Posttest	164
Figure 4.7. Histogram of the Experimental Group's Scores on the Vocabulary Retention Posttest	164

List of Appendices

Appendix A: PET (2009), Answer Sheet, Writing and Speaking Rating Scales	219
Appendix B: 80-item Teacher-made Vocabulary Recognition Test, Answer Sheet	240
Appendix C: 80-item Teacher-made Vocabulary Test (Parallel Form), Answer Sheet	252
Appendix D: 52-item Teacher-made Vocabulary Retention Posttest, Answer Sheet, 52-item Vocabulary Posttest Checklist	262
Appendix E: Covered Reading Texts	272
Appendix F: Critical Reading Strategies' Pamphlets and Their References	282
Appendix G: Course Descriptions of Experimental and Control Groups....	386
Appendix H: Sample Reading Texts and Assignments of Experimental Group's Students	391

CHAPTER ONE

BACKGROUND AND PURPOSE

1.1 Introduction

One of the important ingredients of language is its lexicon; an ingredient which is of prime and critical importance to the language learners. The lexicon, or in simple day-to-day term, vocabularies are the building blocks of a language since they label objects, actions, and ideas without which people cannot convey the intended meaning.

It is of importance knowing that vocabulary was not recognized as a priority in language teaching in the past. However, interest in the role of vocabulary in second or foreign language learning has grown rapidly in recent years (Knight, 1994; Wesche & Paribakht, 1996; Zimmerman, 1997) and some specialists (Hatch & Brown, 1995; Hulstijn, 1993) now emphasize the need for a systematic and principled approach to the teaching and learning of vocabulary. Consequently, there is now a widespread agreement that L2 learners need to improve their range of vocabulary substantially.

The role played in language by vocabulary is so important that Clark (1993) refers to it as a unique window to the process of learning as a whole. Language learners need a wide array of target language words to be able to successfully engage in both production and comprehension activities in the second or foreign language.

Not only do the majority of students studying foreign language cite vocabulary as their number one priority (Crow, 1986; Yorio, 1971), but also it seems to be considered a priority by teachers. Accordingly, numerous types of approaches, techniques, exercises and practices have been introduced into the field to teach vocabulary (Hatch & Brown, 1995).

It has been suggested that teaching vocabulary should not only consist of teaching specific words but also aim at equipping learners with strategies necessary to expand their vocabulary knowledge (Hulstijn, 1993), since vocabulary learning is one of the major challenges foreign language learners face during the process of learning a language. That is, having to absorb and digest many unfamiliar words in a limited time without sufficient opportunity to internalize what have been learnt requires vocabulary learning to be performed through elaborate and effective approaches.

It is good to be noted that research on L2 language assessment provides many reports of strong relationship between vocabulary knowledge or development and reading comprehension (Grabe, 2004; Hilton & Hyder, 1995). In this regard, Anderson and Freebody (1983) and Koda (1989) state that, target language vocabulary knowledge contributes significantly to reading comprehension. In other words, the more words the learners are familiar with, the better and more effectively they can comprehend texts.

Likewise, reading increases our vocabulary knowledge; vocabulary learning is actually a by-product of reading and is considered to be among the best approached for promoting vocabulary retention (Swanborn, 1999). In fact, learners with high-level reading comprehension skills are able to acquire broader and deeper vocabularies and consequently retain them better (Coady, 1997; Paribakht & Wesche, 1999; Stoller & Grabe, 1993). This shows the very interesting pattern of the relation between reading comprehension and vocabulary learning in which not only reading is a source of learning vocabulary but also a large vocabulary is specifically predictive and reflective of high levels of reading achievement.

To substantiate this claim one can refer to the result of the study done by Davis (2008) which indicated more vocabulary acquisition and retention was possible from reading than what the previous studies had suggested. Similarly, Huckin and Coady (1999) indicated that “except for the first few thousand most common words, vocabulary learning dominantly occurs through reading, with the learner guessing at the meaning of unknown words” (p. 182).

With respect to the abovementioned issues, one can come to this conclusion that research has confirmed that reading has a positive impact on language development (Krashen, 1989b) and the indisputable linguistic gain for the readers is new vocabulary (Nagy, Anderson, & Hermann, 1987).

With respect to the importance of the vocabulary learning and retention explained above and the relation that is proven to exist between vocabulary learning and reading comprehension it seems that both reading comprehension and vocabulary teaching should be approached with effective strategies, which can bring about fruitful results for both.

This point is well supported by Beck, McKeown, and Kucan (2003) who state that methods of vocabulary instruction used in the past in which students viewed definitions before reading a text and then had a quiz, or figured out new vocabulary meaning from the context proved to be less effective than once thought. Beck et al. (2003) argue that the problem is that such approaches are effective for neither teaching word meaning nor enhancing reading comprehension, and may, in fact, lead to misunderstanding of word meaning.

As a consequence, it seems that effective approaches are those that create ways in which the learner interacts with the text and actively uses the word meaning. Therefore, as suggested by Nagy, Hermann, and Anderson (1985) instructional strategies that bring new vocabulary into a student's existing conceptual framework are effective in teaching vocabulary meaning and conceptual understanding.

It is worth noting that, learning vocabulary in rich contexts reinforces the understanding of a word as opposed to tediously learning words in isolation. As

a result, to learn vocabulary in rich contexts and have higher degree of retention and avoid tedious learning of words in isolation (Haastrup; Mondria & Wit-de Boer; Xialong, as cited in Hedge, 2000), it is suggested that learners infer new words in conditions which require more meticulous analysis and decision-making (Hedge, 2000, p. 118).

It is worth adding that, understanding a text is always up to the readers' vocabulary knowledge, ideas, assumptions, and points of view (Coady, 1997). Hence, based on what Mangal (2005) stated, it can be perceived that readers bring their thinking into the text with multiple perspectives and also make use of appropriate elements of reasoning and intellectual ability. Thoughts and thinking processes come to surface throughout the use of language; Moreover, Halpern (1996) holds the idea that language is used as a medium to express one's thoughts. He, furthermore, signifies comprehension as a very reason for language use.

Respectively, reading as one of the four skills of language involves comprehension and therefore, thinking. When one reads words, phrases, or sentences in any language, one is stimulated to think (Mangal, 2005). In order to realize the overlap between reading and thinking, Halpern (1996) puts an emphasis on the importance of thinking in reading and places comprehension in the realm of critical thinking. According to him, this overlap reveals that reading and critical thinking share a common basis.

Thinking critically while reading helps individuals become self-corrective and sensitive to context and form judgments upon certain criteria (Maclure & Davies, 1991). As Varaprasad (1997) argues, having students think and read critically will help them in judging the text, making arguments and giving reasons at later stages. Therefore, language learners should be given the chance to go through the texts and focus on the author's assumptions, viewpoints, purposes, and ideology, that is, to read critically.

In fact, critical reading is a skill for discovering information and ideas within a text and it refers to a careful, active, reflective, and analytic reading (Kurland, 2000). It also gives learners the opportunity to think about and analyze the information critically, which means they should find it possible to look at the context with a wider perspective, linked to their critical understanding (Wallace, 2003) and they should get the chance to evaluate the context they face.

According to Jones (2002), critical reading not only empowers students in EFL learning skills such as vocabulary and reading, but also teaches them how to reach real understanding of texts and how to think about them with a critical view. A critical reader performs a mental action on the word-form and makes associations between the context and his own personal knowledge to infer word meanings (Wallace, 2003).

In another word, a critical reader builds a bridge between the context and its vocabularies by focusing on the process of decoding meaning from printed signs through engaging with text rather than merely rote-reading the words on a page.

1.2 Statement of the Problem

English, the language of worldwide communication is considered as one of the most important subjects in the curriculum of many educational settings. Hence, attempts have been made to devise the most efficient ways of teaching this language and much greater time is now spent on learning it than before.

One of the most important features in defining language knowledge is the knowledge of words. In fact, the need for vocabulary is one point on which teachers and students agree (Allen, 1983) and vocabulary learning as the foundational criterion for language learners is a central issue in learning a new language, which hand in hand with other skills and sub-skills can help a person to use a language. Learning vocabulary seems to be one of the easiest things about learning a language but for some learners it appears as a burdensome task. Hence, vocabulary learning has long been an area of language learning which gives the learners a headache, so they keep complaining that not long after they have memorized a word, it evades.

Likewise, Lawson and Hogben (1996) posit that foreign language learners frequently encounter unknown words in text material and need to learn and retain the meanings of some of these words for later use. In this situation, students are likely to deliberately adopt some strategies to facilitate long-term retention of word meaning such as writing the word's meaning in the text margins, adding the word to a personal word list, or perhaps entering the word and its meanings into a card system, and mainly try to memorize the newly-encountered words.

In this regard, Hulstijn (1997) believes that making a note of unknown vocabularies alone is often not enough and likewise Misulis (1999) holds the idea that memorization alone will not foster vocabulary growth and yet teachers continue to focus on this strategy, in which there is not adequate vocabulary reinforcement.

On the other hand, based on what Allen (1983) says, even where teachers have devoted much time to vocabulary teaching, the results have been disappointing. Sometimes, after a long-term English learning, many of the most needed words are not learned and most of the time learners may learn the vocabulary but forget it easily especially in EFL situation. Therefore, learners continuously search for ways through which they can help retaining words in their minds for longer periods and vocabulary learning and retention, consequently seem to remain an issue for investigation and research.