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The Effect of Visual Aids on Concrete Vocabulary Learning by Intermediate Iranian Learners of English

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In The Name of God

To my father who instilled in me the confidence that I am capable of doing anything I put my mind to. Thank you for everything. I love you!

To my mother who supported me in all stages of my life and who was my source of inspiration and motivation. Thank you for everything. I love you!

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Abstract

This study was attempted to investigate the effect of using visual aids on concrete vocabulary learning by intermediate Iranian learners of English. The research was designed so that it would provide answer to the following question: Does using visual aids affect learning concrete vocabulary items by intermediate Iranian learners significantly? In order to answer the above question, two intact classes, each consisting of 15 female learners, were used. One of them was considered as the experimental and the other as the control group. To check the homogeneity of the subjects, a general proficiency test, consisting of 45 items was given to the subjects before the research treatment. In order to test the hypothesis of the study, a vocabulary pre-test and a vocabulary post-test which were prepared by the researcher were given to the participants at the beginning and end of the treatment period respectively. During 10 sessions of instruction, the experimental group was taught the new vocabulary items through using visual aids but the control group learned the words through definitions and synonyms. The results of a t-test analysis of the obtained data indicated that the experimental group outperformed the control group, thus the null hypothesis of the study was rejected: Using visual aids has a significant effect on concrete vocabulary learning by intermediate learners.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

1.1. Overview

What is the role of vocabulary in language learning and teaching? Does it have a central, or a peripheral role? Vocabulary learning has been considered as both central and peripheral in language learning at different periods of time. During the 1950s and 1960s, vocabulary learning was neglected greatly. In the 1970s, it gained its deserved attention with the help of new methodologies like Community Language Learning, Silent Way, Natural Approach, etc. (Brown, 2000).

Today vocabulary is believed to be the central part of language learning and it has great importance for language learners. Words are used for naming objects and actions and conveying ideas to others; without vocabulary items the intended meaning cannot be understood completely. The significance of second and foreign language vocabulary learning has been emphasized by different researchers in language learning field (Nation, 2001).

In recent years, a great number of studies have recognized the necessity of vocabulary learning. For example, Penno et al. (2002) comments that in fact learning vocabulary items is a necessary part of learning a language and it is mentioned by Saville-Troike (1984) that vocabulary is perceived to be the most prominent aspect to all language learners. It is also indicated by Leki & Carson (1994) that second and foreign language learners, without vocabulary knowledge, cannot exchange thoughts, feelings and ideas properly. According to Thu (2009), in different aspects of language

learning like: vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation, listening, speaking, writing and reading, it is best to pay attention to vocabulary learning. And finally it is noted by Zimmerman (1997) that learning vocabulary items is the first and most important step in learning a new language.

According to the previous mentions it can be inferred that mastery of vocabulary is an essential component of second language acquisition, so it is important for teachers and researchers to understand the necessity of vocabulary in gaining the knowledge of language and vocabulary must receive more attention (Hunt & Beglar, 2005). Now the question which is important to consider is: what is the suitable technique for teaching vocabulary items to second and foreign language learners?

For many years, teaching training courses did not pay enough attention to techniques which help students to learn vocabulary items. Some of the teachers' books also told them that it was not necessary to help students learn the required vocabulary items; it was believed that learners could learn vocabulary items naturally (Allen, 1983). Today various techniques for teaching vocabulary items are recognized. According to Weatherford (1990), these techniques include:

- Using physical activities

- Using visual aids

- Using translation

- Using synonym

- Using mnemonic techniques

- Rote learning

- Computer assisted learning

- Learning through music

- Learning through art activities

The techniques which are usually used to teach vocabulary items are also mentioned by Lewis and Hill (1990):

- Using translation

- Using exemplification

- Using definition

- Using synonym

- Using picture

- Using real object

- Using mime and gesture

- Using demonstration

The last four items as noted by Garibaldi and Strashemi (1967) can be considered as visual aids. In order to elaborate using visual aids as a technique for teaching vocabulary items, first it seems necessary to define them.

Visual aids are varied form of devices such as pictures, drawings, real objects, flash cards, photographs, charts, tables, etc. which are considered as comprehensive tools used to make the meaning of vocabulary items clear to learners (Grain & Redman, 1986). Visual aids are illustrative aids which provide more information for the given materials. They present the information that is not easy or even not possible to be conveyed by words alone. They are especially helpful for teaching concrete vocabulary items (Kakavand, 1995).

Many comments have been asserted by different researchers about the effectiveness of using visual aids in different studies. For example, it is stated by Bazeli (1997) that visual aids make learning easier for learners and help them to have more desire and motivation toward learning. By using visual aids students will be able

to use vocabulary items properly in real life situations. It is also argued by Akbulut (2007) that providing visual aids in a text is more useful for vocabulary learning than just making the definitions of words available. Furthermore, it is mentioned in a study by Hall and Strangman (2002) that visual aids can make the relationships between facts, terms, and ideas clear in a learning situation.

According to Jones et al. (1989), learners can gain a kind of understanding by using visual tools that words alone cannot give them. Miller (2006) states that visual aids help learners picture what teachers try to say and they help teachers to convey information that might be hard to state with words alone. Moreover, Wilson (2000) maintains that visual aids can support the comprehension and usage of new items.

Ellis (2004) maintains that by using visual aids teachers can provide more difficult items and materials because visual tools decrease the semantic processing required for learning. Ur (1996) also believes that visual aids are significant for learning because they are motivating, encouraging and attractive for students so they increase learners' focus and concentration on what they learn. In addition, Roboch (1994) comments that visual aids can provide suitable connection between the words and their meanings. And according to Wilkins (1972), psychologists believe that the quality of learning and retention will increase if a wide range of visual aids be provided for learners.

According to all the above comments, it can be hypothesized that using visual aids can be an effective way for presenting vocabulary items. So this technique is utilized by the researcher in order to provide better understanding of new items. The language which is used for explaining new items through visual aids is the target language. It is important to mention that the visual aids used in this study are real objects, pictures and blackboard drawings. The main purpose of this study is the

following: building a framework for the development of vocabulary learning by using visual aids for intermediate learners.

1.2. Statement of the Problem

Some studies have proved the success and advantages of using visual aids in other environments and regions (e.g. Davidson et al. 2009; Miller, 2006; Kang, 2004; Lazar, 1996; Snyder & Colon, 1988; Tong, 1971) but few studies have been carried out in Iran about the effects of visual aids on vocabulary learning.

As mentioned earlier, vocabulary learning is very important for every language learner. Vocabulary items can be learned through different techniques, one of those is using visual aids. Using these devices is neglected in our country, maybe because of their high prices, lack of teachers' training courses for using these devices or the difficulty in their accessibility.

One of the important aims for English learners is to become skillful in vocabulary learning. It is very difficult to learn the full meaning of vocabulary items and it needs a long time to achieve this goal, so definition of vocabulary items alone is not enough to learn the full meaning of them (Kim, 2006). Limitation in the amount of vocabulary items is the most important problem for students who learn a foreign language (Alshwiah, 2009). It would be effective if using visual aids could help them to learn the vocabulary items they need.

1.3. Purpose of the Study

There is a need for evidence that using visual aids has a powerful effect on improving vocabulary learning. Thus, this study is aimed at investigating the effect of using visual aids on vocabulary acquisition enhancement for intermediate learners.

1.4. Research Question

This study sets out to show that by using visual aids, students can acquire the new terms easily and effectively.

The research question is:

-Does using visual aids affect learning concrete vocabulary items by intermediate Iranian learners significantly?

1.5. Research Hypothesis

This study aims to validate the following hypothesis:

- Using visual aids has no significant effect on concrete vocabulary learning by intermediate Iranian learners.

1.6. Significance of the Study

Best achievements in communication depend on vocabulary learning, which is the chief component of language learning, and both researchers and teachers similarly believe that vocabulary learning is the main aspect of language acquisition (Yuksel, 2009). Vocabulary is the central part of any language, it is essential for understanding all the information in listening and reading and fundamental for developing speaking and writing skills.

According to Wilkins, (1972) without knowledge of grammar one can make little feelings or ideas known to someone else but without knowledge of vocabulary, connection with others is completely impossible, so vocabulary plays an important role in second language acquisition. For successful communication, all the things around us must have names; without them no exchange of information can takes place

and it seems difficult to perceive the existence of all entities. Accordingly, vocabulary items play the role of the building blocks of any communication in which the structure acts as cement to hold these building blocks together (Zhang-Xiang, 2004).

Vocabulary is not a new term but defining a vocabulary item seems difficult. Language learners in all levels of their learning encounter problems in vocabulary acquisition, and stress that learning vocabulary items is not an easy task. It appears that vocabulary acquisition is the chief problem for most language learners and in learning the knowledge of vocabulary thoroughly, second and foreign language learners face difficulties (August et al. 2005).

According to Barani et al. (2010), the problem of Iranian students is that most of the time, they learn new vocabulary items by Persian translation. This is the reason they always stress that they cannot remember the words easily. From different techniques for teaching vocabulary items such as translation, exemplification, description and using visual aids, the last one receives the least amount of attention.

According to Kang (2004), the main goal of using visual aids for teaching vocabulary items is better comprehension and retention of new words. Visual aids are effective because they help learners to get and exchange information simply and they can make unintelligible concepts easier to understand. It is also noted by Lazar (1996) that using visual aids make the difficult task of vocabulary learning easier for learners, they help learners to acquire a large amount and varied vocabulary items in a short period of time. By using visual aids students can have more participation in learning task, they increase students' motivation and interest and they are effective for learners at all levels of learning.

Using visual aids is not introduced and practiced well in our country. The applicability and usefulness of visual aids has been a controversial issue in our educational system and the authorities, mainly because of its heavy financial burden, might evade this important support for learners.

Over the last decades, books for both teachers and students have focused on ways of organizing, presenting and practicing new vocabulary items to make the crucial job of vocabulary learning easier for students; however, visual aids and the way in which we can increase students' learning through them, have been given less attention than they deserve, so it is necessary to research in this area.

Having in mind that using visual aids can help learners to learn vocabulary items in a more proper way, and considering that to date there hasn't been enough instructional time devoted to using visual aids in English classes, conducting a study with the purpose of finding the effectiveness of these devices for vocabulary learning by English learners appears to be necessary. In addition, by considering the amount of research conducted which support the positive effect of using visual aids (e.g. Davidson et al. 2009; Barani et al. 2009; Miller, 2006; Kang, 2004; Lazar, 1996; Snyder & Colon, 1988; Tong, 1971) and the fact that not enough previous research is conducted in Iran in this area, investigating this topic seems important.

1.7. The Limitations of the Study

This research is limited in its sample size. The participants of this study are 30 English learners. Therefore, generalizations have to be made with caution. It is also important to indicate that the researcher studies female students. So the findings of this study may not be generalized to male learners, or the differences between male and female learners. It must be noted that the participants are all Iranian learners of

English, so the results may not be generalized to other learners with different nationalities. The participants are in their intermediate level of proficiency, so the findings of this study may not be extended to the learners with lower or higher levels of proficiency.

In addition, the information for this study is collected in an English institute. The results of the study should be treated with caution for other places. Environmental variables such as temperature, noise, light, etc. of different places are varied from each other. According to the differences in environmental issues the results of the study may change (Brown, 1988).

Furthermore, this study is carried out in the winter semester, in 10 consecutive sessions. In terms of any change in time of the study or the number of sessions, the results of the study may change because of the relationship between time conditions and learners' psychological factors (Williams & Burden, 1997). Here again the generalizations should be considered carefully.

Another limitation of this study which is important to mention is that in this research only concrete words are studied. In this condition, like other conditions generalizations should be taken into account cautiously.

It is concluded that the results of the study can only be generalized within the following limitations:

- The human limitations: 30 female Iranian students in intermediate level
- The place limitations: A private English institute
- The time limitations: The winter semester

1.8. Definition of Terms

In trying to describe the insights into the use of the visual aids for concrete vocabulary learning by intermediate learners, the key terms are defined as below:

Concrete vocabulary:

Concrete vocabulary refers to physical entities, rather than a quality, a state or an action that can be observed by at least one of the senses (Ooi & Kim-Seoh, 1996).

Visual aids:

Visual aids are devices such as:

- Visual items like photos, drawings and paintings.

- Video materials.

- Tables, charts, graphs that provide interpretation of data.

- Real tools and objects that allow one to create visual data (Davidson et al. 2009).

1.9. Abbreviations Used in the Study

The following are the abbreviations used in the study:

- EFL: English as a foreign language

- ESL: English as a second language

- L2: Second language

- L1: First language

- LL: Language learning

- NS: Native speaker

- CALL: Computer assisted language learning

1.10. Outline of the Study

This study is organized as follows:

- **Chapter one** consists of an introduction to the whole research.

- **Chapter two** includes a review of the related literature and provides theoretical framework for the study.

- **Chapter three** reports the design and methodology of the research which contains the information about the participants, materials and data collection procedures.

- **Chapter four** presents the analysis of the data and reports the results of the study.

- **Chapter five** provides some discussions, implications and conclusions. It also contains the recommendations and suggestions for future research.

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Introduction

After presenting an introduction concerning the importance of teaching vocabulary to second and foreign language learners and the effectiveness of using visual aids as a powerful technique for teaching vocabulary items efficiently, this chapter will review literature relevant to the present study. The presentation covers: English language, a brief history of teaching English language, vocabulary learning, how vocabulary is learned, techniques for teaching vocabulary, the importance of visual aids, and finally research studies. The final section covers 35 studies from 1988 to 2010. The first 21 studies concentrate on visually aided vocabulary learning. The second 14 studies focus on other techniques in vocabulary learning.

2.2. English Language

The importance of English language is growing everyday because English is used as an international language to facilitate communication around the world (Tsai, 2002). It is used to exchange information in different fields such as science, politics, history, education and technology and it is also believed to be the language of trading (Al-Nafisah, 2001).

Iranian students have many difficulties for learning English (Barani et.al, 2010). Their learning is limited to what they learn in the class, they don't have enough chance