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The Faculty of Language, Literature, and History

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of Master of Arts in Teaching English as a Foreign Language

Thesis Title:

**The Effect of Teaching Etymology versus Synonym
on Vocabulary Learning of EFL Iranian Undergraduate Students**

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In the Name of God, the Beneficent the Merciful

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In the Name of Allah, the Beneficent the Merciful

I hereby confirm that the whole of this thesis and any articles derived from it for publication are completely original, and that if clear evidence existed to the contrary, I submit to any grade that my supervisor decides on, as well as any kind of punishment that the department approves, such as revoking my degree, pecuniary retribution, and/or suing in a legal court.

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To My Family

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Abstract

Failing to remember previously learned words is one of the common complaints of both EFL and ESL learners. Since Vocabulary is a key component of language proficiency and without it no deep communication would occur, we should facilitate the process of vocabulary learning. There is a variety of commonly used vocabulary reinforcing techniques. Some researchers believe that if learners know the etymology of the words, that is the word formation rules, and include “the meaning of Latin and Greek roots and affixes” (Tahaine, 2010, p. 25), they can guess the meaning of vocabularies derived from that root more easily. On the other hand, some others believe that knowing the synonyms of the words that is a phenomenon in which two or more words have the same or similar meaning (Papathanasiou, 2008), helps them in improving lexical knowledge. Therefore, the major issue that this research has dealt with was to evaluate the role of teaching etymologies in comparison with giving just known synonyms of the words in learning the vocabulary of English textbooks and to see which method had a more important role at different levels (high and low) of English language proficiency. The participants were 120 learners in Alzahra University. Etymologies of words were given to one group, and the known synonyms were provided to the other one. The results of posttest and delayed posttest demonstrated the mnemonic efficacy of etymology presentation at high level.

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List of Abbreviations

FL	Foreign
EFL	English as a Foreign Language
ESL	English as a Second Language
L2	Second Language
L1	First Language
SLA	Second Language Acquisition
ST	Short-Term
LT	Long-Term
STM	Short-Term Memory
LTM	Long-Term Memory
R	Receptive
P	Productive
BICS	Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills
CALP	Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency
GTM	Grammar Translation Method
CUP	Cambridge University Press
OUP	Oxford University Press
SPSS	Statistical Package for Social Sciences

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Chapter One

Introduction

1.1. Introduction

According to the *Longman Dictionary of Language Teaching and Applied Linguistics* (Richards and Schmidt, 2002, p. 580), vocabulary is defined as “a set of lexemes, including single words, compounds and idioms.” Before considering the role of vocabulary in foreign language learning and teaching, we should mention that the central concepts of *vocabulary* and *word* are used interchangeably in this study. As Ur (1996) believes, “vocabulary is defined as the words we teach in the foreign language” (p. 60).

To many learners, and even some teachers, language learning is synonymous with memorization of so many words. Although this is not completely true, we should not forget that words constitute a major part of any language (Bogaards, 2001; Nation, 2001). “Vocabulary is one of the three essential elements (sound, vocabulary and grammar) of a language” (Zhi-liang, 2010, p. 154). It is very important for people’s communication and language learning and plays an important role in the whole process of second language learning. If second language learners cannot enhance their vocabulary, the lack of vocabulary will prevent them from developing language skills like listening, speaking, reading and writing, and also as a result, they will not be able to express themselves or to be understood.

Wilkins (1972) stated that “without grammar little can be conveyed, without vocabulary nothing can be conveyed” (p. 9-10). Therefore, we cannot deny that vocabulary learning plays a very important role in second language learning and a great number of vocabulary items will help learners improve their language proficiency. Therefore, in order to become proficient in a second language, a learner must master a large amount of vocabulary. Besides, no one can master all

the vocabulary in a language. What can be done is to obtain certain strategies to speed up the learning of new words.

1.2. Statement of the Problem and Purpose of the Study

Vocabulary is a key component of language proficiency and provides much of the basis of how well learners speak, listen, read and write. “Without an extensive vocabulary and strategies for acquiring new

vocabulary, learners often achieve less than their potential and may be discouraged from making use of language learning opportunities around them” (Richards and Renandya, 2002, p. 255). As different people involve in second language learning, i.e., material writers, syllabus developers, teachers and learners, the importance of this issue increases.

Some students claim that their primary problem in learning English is lack of vocabulary and lexical knowledge. They say poor vocabulary prevents them from having good listening, speaking, reading and writing skills and plays as an obstacle in the way of effective communication. Some researchers believe that if learners know the etymology of the words, that is the word formation rules, and include “the meaning of Latin and Greek roots and affixes” (Tahaine, 2010, p. 25), they can guess the meaning of vocabularies derived from that root more easily. (Bellomo, T.S, 1999; Chatzisavvas, K, 2005; Davoudi, 1995; Emadin and Yazdani Moghadam, 2008; Hosseini et al, 2012; Nation, 2001; Pierson, 1987; Shahbazi, 2004).

On the other hand, some others believe in “associative priming” (Hashemi & Gowdasiaei, 2005, p. 344), according to which if associated items are presented simultaneously, the process of gaining access to information is facilitated. In other words, they say knowing the synonym of the words, which is a

phenomenon in that two or more words have the same or similar meaning (Munro, 2006; Papathanasiou, 2008; Taylor, 2001; Webb, 2007), helps them in improving lexical knowledge. Therefore, the major issue that this research is going to cope with is to evaluate the role of teaching etymologies in comparison with giving just known synonyms of the words in learning the vocabulary of English textbooks and to see which method has a more important role in short term (ST) and long term (LT) retention of the words at different levels (high and low) of English language proficiency.

1.3. Significance of the study

These days synonyms are used in most books, especially in those which are taught in institutes like *Top Notch* (Saslow and Ascher, 2006) and also some teachers add synonyms to new words while teaching and presenting new vocabulary. The main reason seems to be assisting students to build stronger relationships between the words and to learn them better; on the other hand, vocabulary is taught through etymology in some other books such as *English Vocabulary for the High School Students* (Levine, 2005). If it is proved that providing etymologies is more useful than giving known synonyms, it can primarily be helpful for the material developers and second language (L2) syllabus designers who prepare and order the words that should be presented in different courses. Also it can be useful for the teachers by providing them with the appropriate way of presenting vocabulary to improve learners' learning, and as a consequence for the students in learning and organizing the vocabulary. Moreover the outcome of this study can be beneficial for the students with different levels of language proficiency for ST or LT retention.

The main difference between this study and what has been done before is that the previous studies surveyed the effect of either providing etymologies (Baleghizadeh and Yousefpoori Naeim, 2011; Bellomo, T.S, 1999; Chatzisavvas, K, 2005; Emadin and Yazdani Moghadam, 2008; Tahaineh, 2010) or synonyms (Munro, 2006; Nation, 2000; Papathanasiou, 2009; Webb, 2007) on learning vocabulary separately.

Therefore, first of all, this study will investigate the results of these methods compared to each other. Secondly, the above-mentioned studies have not investigated the role of different language proficiency levels and also retention of the words after a period of time of two weeks (Mackey & Gass, 2005), so this study will address this, as well.

1.4. Research Questions

This study aims to concentrate on the effect of teaching words through two different methods (i.e., providing etymologies and providing known synonyms) on both the ST and LT retention of Iranian high and low proficient learners of English as a foreign language. Therefore, the research questions are:

1. Is there a statistically significant difference between vocabulary learning through etymologies and known synonyms in participants with different levels of English language proficiency (high and low)?
2. Is there a statistically significant difference between short term and long term retention of the learned vocabulary items among the learners who learned new items through etymology or synonym?

3. Is there a statistically significant difference between short term and long term retention of the learned vocabulary items among high and low proficient learners?

1.5. Null Hypotheses

Based on the above mentioned questions, we can propose three hypotheses:

H₀1. There is no significant difference between vocabulary learning through etymologies and known synonyms in participants with different levels of English language proficiency.

H₀2. There is no significant difference between short term and long term retention of the learned vocabulary items among the learners who learned new items through etymology or synonym.

H₀3. There is no significant difference between short term and long term retention of the learned vocabulary items among high and low proficient learners.

1.6. Definition of Key Terms

1.6.1. Etymology

Etymology is “the scientific study of the origin or history and derivation of words” (Hashemi and Aziznezhad, 2011, p. 103). Word formation is generally divided into two main groups; the first group includes “affixation (derivation), compounding and conversion” which are considered “predictable formations”, whereas the second group includes the “unpredictable formations such as clipping, blending, acronyms, etc” (Tahaine, 2010, p. 8). He says "etymology is related to the first group of word formation that includes the meaning of Latin and Greek roots and affixes (prefixes, suffixes and infixes)" (p. 6).

In this study the definition of etymology suggested by Tahaine (2010), that is Latin and Greek roots and affixes, will be considered as the definition of etymology.

1.6.2. Language proficiency

Language proficiency or linguistic proficiency is “the knowledge, competence, or ability in the use of a language, irrespective of how, where, or under what conditions it has been acquired” (Bachman, 1990, p. 16). Therefore, it is the ability of an individual to speak or perform in an acquired language.

From among different proficiency tests, the Preliminary English Test (PET) is used as an instrument to measure participants’ English language proficiency (high and low). There are different language proficiency levels like elementary, intermediate, and advanced ones. As the participants are from different levels and majors, the intermediate level is selected to be the criterion for dividing them into high and low language proficiency levels. Therefore, the Preliminary English Test (PET) that is an international test and measures the English language skills (reading, writing, listening and speaking) at an intermediate level is selected. Based on that, the participants with scores higher than one standard deviation above the mean score are considered as high and those who are lower than one standard deviation below the mean score are considered as low English language proficient learners.

1.6.3. Retention

It is “the ability to recall or remember things after an interval of time which, in language teaching depends on quality of teaching, the interest of the learners, or the meaningfulness of the materials” (Richards and Schmidt, 2002, p. 457).