

*In the Name of God the  
Companionate the Merciful*

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**DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE & LITERATURE**

MA Thesis Entitled

**The Effect of Task-induced Involvement on Incidental  
Vocabulary Acquisition of Iranian EFL Learners**

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the Requirements for  
the Degree of Master of Arts in English Language Teaching

By

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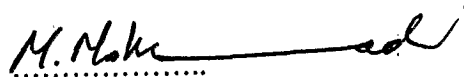
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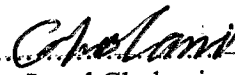


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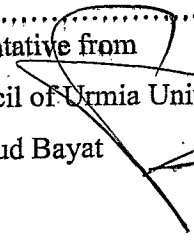


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*Dedicated to*

*My family for their persistent support and unceasing  
encouragement*

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## The Effect of Task-induced Involvement on Incidental Vocabulary Acquisition of Iranian EFL Learners

### Abstract

The aim of the present study was to investigate the efficiency in the use of tasks with different involvement loads (i.e. the amount of need, search, and evaluation a task imposes) in L2 word learning and retention of Azari learners of English with respect to Laufer and Hulstijn's (2001a) Involvement Load Hypothesis. To this end, two tasks, a retelling task (strong effort) and a reading comprehension plus interactive glossary task (moderate effort) were completed by two groups of female learners in a language institute, including 21 high and 20 low proficiency learners. In order to determine the unfamiliar words, two vocabulary checklists, each of which consisting of some words selected from the texts (Two short stories: 'Scary night' and 'Little brother') and some distracters were given to learners a week before treatment. Receptive and productive knowledge of target words were assessed immediately after the treatment and again 10 days later by the use of the same Paribakht and Wesche's VKS (1996) to estimate the short-term and long-term word retention of learners, respectively. In line with the prediction of the Involvement Load Hypothesis, the retention of words was higher in the retelling task and lower in reading comprehension plus interactive glossary task. An interesting finding of this research was that the proficiency level of learners doesn't significantly affect their amount of vocabulary learning and retention. Language educators, teacher trainers, language learners can benefit from the findings of this study.

**Keywords:** incidental word learning, involvement load, task, receptive and productive vocabulary knowledge.

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## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

CLT	Communicative Language Teaching
INCID	Incidental
INTENT	Intentional
NNS	Non-Native Speaker
NS	Native Speaker
TBI	Task-based Instruction
TBLT	Task-based Language Teaching
TWs	Target Words
VKS	Vocabulary Knowledge Scale

## Chapter one

### Introduction

#### 1.1 .Background:

In the last 25 years, the field of second language acquisition has seen renewed interest in vocabulary learning and acquisition (Meara, 1980; Nation, 1990). The reason is due to the important role that vocabulary plays in communication. There are controversial views about how best to incorporate vocabulary learning into language teaching. The most common view is that relatively great amount of vocabulary learning occurs naturally during life time, without learners' awareness of such learning process. However, the role of intentional learning of vocabulary cannot be underestimated. One of the recent approaches which were introduced in language learning, especially in vocabulary learning is task-based language teaching.

Task-based language teaching (TBLT) is one of the recent approaches to language teaching which was used for the first time by Prabhu (1987). He used this approach in his secondary school classes in Bangalore, India, on his Communicational Teaching project. Many scholars such as Oxford (2006) agree that TBI (Task-based instruction) is another version of communicative language teaching (CLT). Others such as Richards and Rodgers (2001) and Willis (1996) say that it is an approach which is evolved from CLT. The reason is that like CLT, TBLT stresses the use of target language in learning foreign language. In this approach the use of the tasks is the core unit of language teaching.

Today, there is a growing interest in the use of tasks in teaching of language especially in teaching of words. Laufer and Hulstijn (2001a) proposed a new construct named task-induced involvement claim that better retention of new words depends on the amount of task's involvement load and that learning tasks can be graded according to the level of vocabulary

processing that they generate. They mentioned three factors in "task-induced involvement": the learners' need to achieve, a requirement that they search for information on the meaning or form of the word, and evaluation of how the information obtained applied to the particular use of the word in question. According to their view, active involvement in the process of teaching and learning will foster learning. In the present study, two tasks with different involvement loads were given to the learners in order to determine their effect on the incidental learning of both active and passive vocabularies. In contrast to earlier research which mostly confirmed that the more frequently learners encountered unknown words in different context, the more effectively the words will be retained.

The selection of tasks in this study was based on the Involvement Load Hypothesis of Laufer and Hulstijn (2001a) in which the emphasis is on the quality of exposure to unknown words rather than on the quantity of exposure. Traditional techniques of presenting new words several times in class or requiring students to memorize lists of vocabulary items seem old-fashioned in the context of current task-based language programs. So, the attempt here is to give the learners such activities which motivate learners to take part willingly in the process of learning. The goal is not just to prompt learners to memorize mechanically the words that they encountered frequently in the context. But the goal is to motivate learners to use the words that they may have just met. The type of input which is provided in this study for the learners is in the form of written materials (short stories). The reason for selecting reading as a source of input is that reading is the best way of getting exposure to unknown words, but it does not mean that other activities should be abandoned. The kinds of tasks that are used in this study are: reading comprehension plus interactive glossary and a retelling task. What is important in this study is to prove whether the quality of task is a crucial factor in effective learning of vocabulary or not.

## **1.2. Statement of the Problem:**

Widely accepted notion is that learning of foreign or second language to a great extent involves the incidental acquisition of many words (Wode, 1999). Previous studies mostly aimed at enhancing the vocabulary knowledge of learners through the repeated exposures to the unknown words. But word learning solely from the exposures to those words is not a reliable way and the results also showed only modest success in word learning (Herman et al.

1987; Host, 2005, and Nation & Waring, 2004). In addition, there is a discouragingly low pick-up rate in incidental learning, with about one word identified out of every 12 words tested (Horst, Cobb, & Meara, 1998). The other problem which was found in earlier studies such as Nagy, Herman, and Anderson (1985) and Paribakht and Wesche (1996a) is that incidental learning generally led to receptive gain in word knowledge rather than productive one. However, vocabulary knowledge involves much more than just recognizing words correctly. Furthermore, another aspect of vocabulary knowledge includes the ability to use those words appropriately in different situations. The final shortcoming of previous research was that they mostly neglected the effects that the tests may have on learners' long-term memory which the absence of delayed post-test is a clear proof of it. It was confirmed that the studies with multiple post-tests lead to better results on the final delayed post-test than those studies with no delayed post-test (Krashen and Mason, 2004).

Taken together, we can summarize the weakness of early studies in incidental vocabulary learning as follows:

- 1- There is inadequate control of text difficulty
- 2- There is small number of target words
- 3- There is no delayed post-tests
- 4- It seems to be difficult to gain a productive level of mastery from just exposure
- 5- There is a relatively low pick-up rate

In an attempt to remove these shortcomings a lot of research has been conducted to make word learning more effectively. The most salient of those studies was the one which was carried out by Laufer and Hulstijn (2001a, and 2001b). They proposed the Task- induced Involvement Load Hypothesis incorporating the tasks into vocabulary teaching. In this construction three motivational and cognitive dimensions are introduced: need, search, and evaluation (the involvement load). The key point in this hypothesis is that the more learners engage with new words, the more likely those words are to be learned. Laufer and Hulstijn's Involvement Load Hypothesis is a useful way to facilitate incidental vocabulary learning, despite having some limitations, for instance, the hypothesis doesn't take students into account. Students interpret materials differently and also engage in different activities in a variety of ways. Furthermore, the students' motivation and attitudes are of crucial importance while designing a task. Thus, the careful design of the tasks which are based on interesting material and have a good amount of loads is of great importance to language teachers. The

focus of previous studies to the great extent was to explore the effectiveness of the tasks in the acquisition of passive words rather than active words especially for advanced learners.

Hence, this study is intended to explore the extent to which tasks with different involvement loads lead to better retention of both active and passive word knowledge in pre-intermediate and intermediate learners of English.

### **1.3. Significance of the study:**

Reading has long been considered the main source to increase vocabulary in L1 and L2 (Krashen, 1989; Paribakht and Wesche, 1999, 2000; Rott, 2004). Although incidental learning through guessing from context is considered the most important of all sources of vocabulary learning; it is also evident that solely presenting new words in context is very insufficient. One of the suggestions to solve this problem is to integrate reading with some post reading activities. It has been shown that the integration of reading and word-focused tasks is much more influential method to increase vocabulary than reading only method (Paribakht and Wesche, 1997). What is at issue here is whether integrating reading and word-focused tasks is more useful for learners' word gains or not. It is also crucially needed to point out which types of word-focused activities have an effect on the degree of achievement in retaining new vocabulary (Laufer and Hulstijn 2001b). That is, it is important to explore which tasks are more promising, leading to higher vocabulary gains: a) reading comprehension plus interactive glossary, b) retelling task.

Furthermore, because most of the previous studies only tested the effect of task-induced involvement on learners' passive knowledge of words, it is little known how task-induced involvement affects active recall of newly acquired words. Thus, the present study makes an attempt to explore the effectiveness of applying tasks with different degree of involvement loads in order to promote learner's incidental vocabulary learning, either receptive and productive vocabularies. Another issue which was ignored in most of the previous studies is the effects that tasks may have on vocabulary knowledge of low level learners. They only studied advanced learners, who are more likely to possess the threshold vocabularies necessary to infer meaning from contexts. The significance of this study is that contrary to the most previous research in which learners' general vocabulary knowledge is tested, learners'

passage vocabulary knowledge (vocabularies related to the text) is the focus of the present study. If the findings of this study confirm that the tasks with greater involvement have positive effect in vocabulary retention of learners in higher levels, then the implication will be that it is worthwhile to put more emphasis on using such tasks with greater loads to enhance vocabulary retention of learners. It is believed that the selection of most effective tasks are of great importance for teachers in order to facilitate retention of unfamiliar words which learners encountered in texts. In conclusion, the following goals would be the objective of the present study:

- 1- Explore how tasks with greater involvement loads affect short-term word retention in Iranian EFL learners.
- 2- Explore how tasks with greater involvement loads affect long-term word retention in Iranian EFL learners.
- 3- Investigate whether tasks with greater involvement loads lead to receptive word knowledge gains.
- 4- Try to explore whether tasks with greater involvement loads lead to productive word knowledge gains.
- 5-try to find out whether there is any significant difference between low proficiency vs. high proficiency learners' gains in word learning.

#### **1.4. Research questions and hypotheses**

The specific research questions which were addressed in this research were stipulated below to explore whether or not students could expand their vocabulary through engaging in two different tasks:

Q1 -Do tasks with greater involvement loads have any significant effect on short-term word retention in Iranian EFL learners?

Q2- Do tasks with greater involvement loads have any significant effect on long-term word retention in Iranian EFL learners?



Q3- Do tasks with greater involvement loads lead to receptive word knowledge gains?

Q4- Do tasks with greater involvement loads lead to productive word knowledge gains?

Q5-Do low-proficiency learners' gains in word learning differ significantly from those of high-proficiency learners?

With regard to the above questions, the following null hypotheses can be proposed:

H1- Tasks with greater involvement loads have no significant effect on short-term word retention in Iranian EFL learners at the significance level of .05.

H2- Tasks with greater involvement loads have no significant effect on long-term word retention in Iranian EFL learners at the significance level of .05.

H3- Tasks with greater involvement loads have no significant difference in receptive word knowledge gains at the significance level of .05.

H4- Tasks with greater involvement loads have no significant difference in productive word knowledge gains at the significance level of .05.

H5- There is no significant difference between low proficiency vs. high proficiency learners' gains in word learning at the significance level of .05.

### 1.5 Definition of key terms

**Incidental vocabulary learning:** Incidental vocabulary acquisition is defined as 'the by-product, not the target, of another activity or other language activities' (Huckin and Coady, 1999, p.182).

**Task:** is primarily meaning-focused activity with an outcome in which learners are required to use their own linguistic resources of second language in the process of learning in order to arrive at the outcome (Ellis, 2003; Nunan, 2004).

**Involvement load:** is the combination of two cognitive factors (search & evaluation) and one affective factor (need) which ranges between 0 and 6. The moderate presence of one factor will get a score of 1 and the strong presence of the factor will get a score of 2 and if one factor is absent, it get a score of 0. Involvement load is a determining factor in task effectiveness, that is the more involvement load or mental effort a task demands, the more effectively learning occurs (Laufer & Hulstijn, 2001a; Keating, 2008).

**Retelling task:** It is a kind of task in which learners are required to read a text and then try to retell it (Keating, 2008).

**Reading comprehension plus interactive glossary:** In this task learners read a text in order to comprehend its meaning in which the kind of glossary which is given them is interactive glossary rather than an ordinary glossary that is given in the margin of the text. This kind of glossary lead to more effort and attention because learners are required to go through three steps in order to use it including: guess, consult with each other, and look up glossary (Newton, 2001).

**Productive vocabulary:** is defined as the words which are used to express a meaning through speaking or writing and retrieving and producing the appropriate spoken and written word form (Webb, 2005; De la Fuente, 2002).

**Receptive vocabulary:** is defined as those words that learners perceive while listening or reading and retrieving its meaning (Laufer and Paribakht, 1998).

## **1.6. Organization of the thesis**

This thesis contains five chapters. Chapter One is an introduction. The problem, questions and hypotheses and significance of the study are included in this chapter.

Chapter Two provides readers with review of related literature. This chapter starts with a literature review on the role of incidental learning on vocabulary acquisition and is followed

by the issues that are important in incidental vocabulary learning and ends up to the importance of using tasks with different involvement load and related vocabulary testing method which was described in much research.

Chapter Three deals with Methodology. Information about subjects, their proficiency levels and age range, materials including the tasks and texts that are used, instruments, and procedures that is followed is included in this chapter.

The findings, statistical analysis and discussions, Tables and figures related to the study's findings are presented in the fourth section and finally conclusions, limitations of the study, teaching implications and areas for future research will be discussed.

## Chapter two

### Review of Literature

#### 2.1. Introduction

Until the mid-1980s, vocabulary was a neglected part in second language teaching and learning. After this time, there was a growing interest in this aspect of language. Vocabulary was recognized as central to any language acquisition process, native, or non-native (Meara, 1980; Gass, 1988). This increased interest can be interpreted to mean that there is considerable value in gaining knowledge about specific parts of vocabulary knowledge. It has long been recognized that there are many dimensions to 'knowing a word' (Henriksen, 1999; Nation, 1990), and many degrees of knowledge. The receptive/productive distinction is the best known of these. Teichroew (1982) emphasized the range of terminology used to describe the dichotomy between receptive versus productive vocabulary like active/passive, reception/production all of which refer to the same concept. In this research it is preferred to use the receptive and productive dichotomy because this dichotomy is the most common of all others. Most researchers accept the division between receptive and productive vocabulary and agree that there is a substantial difference in how well different lexical items are mastered in relation to ability to use the words in comprehension and production. However, a clear and adequate definition of what is actually meant by reception and production is still needed. In an attempt to define reception and production and the threshold between them, Melka (1997) stressed the concept of word familiarity and argued for the need to establish 'at what point familiarity is such that one could say that knowledge is no longer receptive, but is productive, or at which point receptive knowledge can be converted into productive knowledge' (p.86). In most practical contexts it is clear that communicative effectiveness is achieved more successfully by learners with a larger vocabulary than by learners with a more detailed command of a smaller one. According to Paribakht and Wesche (1998), active vocabularies are the words which are used to express a meaning through speaking or writing and passive vocabularies are those words that learners perceive while listening or reading. The problem is that it is quite unclear where one would have to draw a dividing line or