

In the name of GOD



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REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF ARTS IN
TEACHING ENGLISH AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE (TEFL)

The Comparative Impact of Visual Aids and
Contextualization on Field- Dependent and Field-
Independent EFL Learners' Vocabulary Retention

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Dedicated to:

My Dear family

And

My faithful friends

And

My beloveds

Acknowledgment

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Abstract

Vocabulary learning is a crucial aspect of education .According to (Harmer 1993) “if language structures make up the skeleton of language, then it is vocabulary that provides the vital organs and the flesh”(p.153). This vital role necessitates studies focusing on the most effective programs of teaching vocabulary. This study aimed to compare the impact of two vocabulary teaching techniques, contextualization and visual aids on field dependence/independence learners’ vocabulary retention among third grade students of public secondary school in Iran. 120 EFL learners studying at two secondary schools in Savojbolagh were randomly selected and were assigned to two almost homogeneous groups, based on their scores on a Nelson proficiency test. The learners were checked about their vocabulary knowledge prior to the start of the treatment. Next, the standard Group Embedded Figures Test (GEFT) developed by Witkin et al (1971) was administered to classify each participant’s level of field independency. The two groups were exposed to identical vocabulary text during classes held twice a week in the four-month treatment period. The context group received vocabulary instruction through contextualization method while the other experimental group which was called visual aids group was taught through visual aids techniques of vocabulary teaching. A delayed posttest was administered to show the differences in vocabulary retention in the two groups. The collected data was analyzed through T-Test and ANCOVA using SPSS software. The results led to the rejection of all the four null hypotheses.

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Chapter I

Background and Purpose

Chapter I: Background and Purpose

1.1 Introduction

Vocabulary knowledge seems to be one of the most essential components of language without which no language could exist. Words are in fact the tools not just of better reading, writing, speaking and listening but of thinking as well. The more words one knows, the more effective their communication will be, and the more impression one can have on the people around. Vocabulary knowledge is also a major part of almost every standardized test, college entrance exams, placement tests, etc. The more words the learners know, then, the better they are likely to do on such important tests.

The role that vocabulary knowledge plays in learning a foreign language is so crucial that many theorists and language educators believe that learning a foreign language is basically a matter of learning the vocabulary of that language (Rodriguez & Sadoski, 2002; Kitajim, 2001). In this line Bowen and Marks (2002) state that "Words are the basic of language, and thus the basic of communication. Without words, it is possible to know everything about the grammatical structure of a language, but yet to be unable to make a single utterance" (p.106). Stating that one cannot learn language without vocabulary, Krashen (1989) highlights the importance of vocabulary learning. Harmer (1991) also states the importance of vocabulary by saying, "If language structure makes up the skeleton of the language, then it is vocabulary that provides the vital organs and the flesh"(p.153). McCrostie (2007) also supports this idea by saying "having a large and varied vocabulary

is the indicator of communicative competence and it is one of the important aspects of language learning” (p.252).

There have been a great number of different approaches to language learning, each with a different outlook on vocabulary (Richards & Rodgers, 2001; Jesa, 2008). At times, language teaching methodologies have attached great importance to vocabulary learning, and sometimes it has been neglected (Schmitt, 2000). In practice, grammar and pronunciation are at the core of language learning, while vocabulary is neglected in most foreign language classes (Fernández, Prahlad, Rubtsova, & Sabitov, 2009; Farghal & Obiedat, 1995). Nowadays it's widely accepted that vocabulary learning is one of the essential elements both of acquisition of one's native language and of learning a foreign language (Morra & Camba, 2009). Learning vocabulary is seen as a key element to achieve a high level of proficiency in the target language by a large number of theoreticians (Boers & Lindstromberg, 2008). Also researchers, teachers and others involved in foreign language learning are paying special attention to foreign language vocabulary acquisition (Zu, 2009). It is believed that having a large and varied vocabulary is the indicator of communicative competence and it is one of the important aspects of language learning (McCrostie, 2007).

Like writing and reading, vocabulary knowledge is one of the components of language skills (Nation & Waring, 1997). It should be considered as an integral part of learning a foreign language since it paves the way to communication. That is to say, even an adequate knowledge of vocabulary alone could be enough for a relative degree of communication to take place (Wallace, 1982). Also Celce–Murcia and Rosensweig (1989) agree that

vocabulary should be recognized as a central element in language instruction from the beginning stages. They further state that having an adequate stock of vocabulary with a minimum number of structures often helps the learner more not only in reading comprehension, but also in achieving more efficient survival communication than having a perfect command of structures with an inadequate amount of vocabulary.

1.2 Statement of the Problem

Although vocabulary has been the subject of many studies, a number of researchers agree that there is very little research carried out in the field of vocabulary learning (Folse, 2004; Hunt & Beglar, 2005) and that the most effective means of vocabulary learning is still unclear (de Groot, 2006). According to Allen (1983), all experienced language teachers confirm the important role of words and know that the lack of them leads to feeling of insecurity. Department of Educational Technique (2002), also states that the lack of vocabulary comprehension blocked learners from the communicative application. So it is of prime importance to attempt to find the most effective technique of vocabulary teaching.

What students, teachers, materials writers, and researchers have all agreement upon is that learning vocabulary is an essential part of mastering a second language (de Groot, 2006). However, it is useless if the students achieve a lot of words or receive a large number of vocabulary but they can't remember or retain them in their long-term memory. In fact learning vocabulary is a matter of remembering and the students need not only to learn a lot of words, but to remember them. Wei,M.(2007) states that nowadays long-term

retention has received wide attention as one of the greatest problems in learning new words. If the learners can't store and retrieve words immediately, they will forget the learned words very soon. Seligman (1996) argues that this forgetting (attrition) is a common problem, and it is a natural fact of learning. Both learning and forgetting occur until the word is mastered and fixed in the memory. Therefore, the problem of remembering a large number of vocabularies is common for the English learners around the world as well as Iranian students.

Working memory or short-term memory can process new information, but its capacity is limited. Long-term memory can organize and store unlimited complex information with schemata for afterward retrieval (Wartik, 1993; van Merriënboer, 2005). According to Wartik and Carlson –Finnerty (1993), "anything remembered has gone through three phases: a learning stage, in which information is perceived by the brain; a storage stage, in which information is filed; and a retrieval stage, in which information that has filed is recovered for us" (p.36). The brain has two ways of storing information. The first way is our short term memory. We can only retain information there for up to 30 seconds, and in most cases hold only up to seven items there at one time. The second is our long term memory. 'Long term memory' describes our ability to recall information days, weeks, and even years after the original input. In contrast to our short term memory, long term memory has the capacity to retain endless amounts of information (Gairns & Redman, 1986, p86).

In order to solve the above-mentioned problem, different techniques for facilitating vocabulary retention have been proposed in methodology text books each of which with its own merits and demerits. As Armstrong (2000) mentioned, due to the students' differences

teachers use a broad range of teaching strategies with their students. Among the different vocabulary retention techniques which can help the students to store a large number of vocabularies in their long-term memories and recall or retrieve them, this study attempts to investigate on contextualization and visual aids techniques.

The Contextualization method is one of the vocabulary teaching methods which have been studied by some scholars and they have reported differently on it. Some demonstrate the facilitating effects of contextualization on word recognition (Nash & Snowling,2006; Redouane,2004), and some people like Liu and Nation (1985) recognize contextualization method as a complex and often difficult strategy to carry out.

According to Atkins et al. (1996) whenever the situation of teaching is changed, teachers need to be aware of appropriate methodologies for introducing and consolidating new vocabulary items. Using visual aids is seen as one of the most valid way of communicating the meaning of a word. However , Nation(1978)states that any ways of communicating meaning involve the changing of an idea into more observable form is likely to be misunderstood, and may not convey the exact concept of the word. However, an advantage of using visual aids is that learners see an example of the meaning and this may help them to remember of the word. Doff (1988)asserts, “the use of real objects, pictures and mime for suitable vocabulary is a very effective method as it is direct, interesting, and it makes an impression on the class”(p.14). Gairns and Redman (1986) points out that the most general visual aids that are displayed in the language classrooms include flashcards, photographs, blackboard drawings, wall charts, and realia and that other form of visual aids such as mimes and gestures are often used to supplement other ways of

conveying meanings. Goodman (1987) proposed that for the most part, visuals are more easily understood by learners of all ages in that a picture seemed worth a thousand words and avoid lengthy and difficult word definitions. Jordan (1997) also claims that vocabulary development is of concern to all four language skills which can be facilitated through visual approach by associating words, remembering them and extending the networks.

Alongside the huge discussion of the various different techniques of teaching vocabulary to be chosen one important issue is the personality type of the learners. A number of theories hold that personality factors significantly influence the degree of success that individuals achieve in learning a second language (Gass& Selinker, 1994). Investigations of individual differences have led to the determination that there are styles of thinking called cognitive styles. Hansen and Standsfield (1982) define the cognitive style as variations among learners in performed manners of speaking, organization, analysis and recall. The possible relation between language learning and cognitive styles was suggested first by Brown (1973, as cited by Rezaeian , 2012) . Later other studies supported the existence of such a relationship (for example: Carter, 1988; Hansen & Stansfield, 1981, and Witkin et al.1977). Students with different types of cognitive style may need different instructional strategies to improve their long-term vocabulary retention. Bachman (1990) proposes that one of the potential sources of the problems in vocabulary retention refers to the differences in the cognitive characteristics of the learners and suggests that one of these cognitive characteristics is field dependence/ independence.

The construct of field dependence, as one of the cognitive style dimensions, has been extensively researched and is viewed as one of the most significant factors when

contemplating educational problem (Ausburn&Ausburn,1978; Witkn&Goodenough,1981.). Hansen and Stansfield (1982) characterize field dependents as warm, outgoing, sociable, and highly emotional. They contend that field independents do not like social activities. According to Messick (1976) “the field independent person tends to articulates figures as discrete from their background and to easily differentiate objects from embedding context, whereas the field dependent person tends to experience events globally in an undifferentiated fashion. Field independent (or analytical) individuals have more facility with tasks required differentiation and analysis”(p.5).

According to (Witkin, Dyk, Faterson, Goodenough, & Karp, 1962/1974; Witkin, Lewis, Hertzman, Machover, Meissner, & Wapner, 1954/1972; Witkin, 1976)” (as cited in Witkin, Moore, Goodenough & Cox, 1977, p. 1) “Among the cognitive styles identified to date, the field-dependence-independence dimension has been the most extensively studied and has had the widest application to educational problems”. Witkin et al., (1974) argued “individual differences in cognitive style are affected by child rearing practices, an interplay with ecology and social structure” (p. 14). Furthermore, Witkin et al., (1974) found “a field-dependent cognitive style is likely to be predominant in social settings characterized by insistence upon adherence to family and social authority and the use of severe or even harsh socialization practices to enforce this conformance” (p. 16).

Witkin et al., (1974) found “children from social settings showing less emphasis on conformity would tend to be more field-independent and show other signs of more developed differentiation than children from settings emphasizing conformity” (p. 25). Witkin (1967) and Witkin et al., (1974) claimed individual differences in cognitive styles

are related to differences in family experiences while growing up. In essence, cognitive styles are the end-products of particular socialization processes. Witkin (1967) also believed “performance of relatively field-dependent or field-independent fashion was a highly stable feature of an individual’s cognitive functioning over time” (pp. 236-237).

Witkin (1967) noted the contrasting differences between field dependent (global) and field independent (articulated) cognitive styles. He stated “the field-dependence-independence dimension is a continuous one, most persons falling between these two extremes” (p. 236). Witkin (1967) argued “In a field-dependent mode of perception, the organization of the field as a whole dominates perception of its parts; an item within a field is experienced as fused with organized ground. In a field-independent mode of perception, the person is able to perceive items as discrete from the organized field of which they are a part (p. 236).

Witkin, Moore, Goodenough and Cox (1977) noted several characteristics between individuals with field dependent-independent cognitive styles. The field dependent individual’s perception was strongly dominated by the prevailing field. They tended to adhere to the organization of the field as given. They were likely to use the structure or organization of the provided field. Field dependent individuals were also more in tune with social components and the environment. They were sensitive to social cues and were interested in what others say and do. Field dependent individuals were drawn to people and liked to be with people. In contrast, field independent individuals perceived items as more or less separate from the surrounding field. They were more likely to overcome the organization of the field or restructure it, when presented with a field having a dominant

organization. Field independent individuals were also more likely to impose their own structure and organization. They were viewed as more analytical and interested in the abstract and theoretical. They were seen as more independent in that they were not influenced by their peers, teachers or authority figures. They were seen to have a more impersonal orientation and not as sensitive to social undercurrents as field dependent individuals.

The researcher of the current study as a teacher who has been teaching in the secondary public high school in Iran has experienced and observed that In Iran English as a Foreign Language (EFL) is taught academically in class for a limited period of time each week with no immediate communication purpose. Students are exposed to abundant words and grammatical rules. Language teachers have been teaching vocabulary as a core component of language proficiency by means of traditional methods such as asking students to learn the definitions of words, often by looking them up in the dictionary and recording them on paper. Memorizing list of words is also a traditional method of vocabulary development which can be boring, time-consuming, and ineffective to many students. Language learners often complain that they forget new words soon after learning them. Thus, the effectiveness of vocabulary retention methods is a very important element in second language (L2) pedagogy.

As students do not usually apply the words in appropriate context and traditionally try to learn it through rote memorization , the researcher of the present study considered it highly worth of investigation to find out if there is any significant difference between the