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The Effect of Forced Output on Vocabulary Learning in Iranian EFL

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Abstract

The present study was designed to investigate the effect of forced output on vocabulary learning in Iranian EFL learners. Second-semester learners attempted to learn 40 new English words in one of two conditions while viewing word-picture pairs. In the no-writing condition, the participants viewed each word twice for 6 seconds each time and in the word-writing condition, they viewed each word twice for 6 seconds each time and were also asked to write the word once. Immediate and delayed post-tests on productive vocabulary knowledge were administered and scores were submitted to an independent-samples t-test. The results indicated word writing can inhibit word learning during the initial stages of L2 lexical learning by exhausting processing resources needed to encode new word forms.

Key words: EFL, forced output, output hypothesis, vocabulary

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1.1. Introduction

The crucial role that lexis plays in foreign language learning and teaching has been repeatedly acknowledged in theoretical and empirical foreign language learning vocabulary research. Learning a language entails learning numerous aspects about that language, including its pronunciation, writing system, syntax, pragmatics, rhetorical modes for reading and composition, culture, and spelling, but the most important aspect is vocabulary. EFL learners soon discover that their lack of vocabulary knowledge impedes their ability to comprehend or express themselves clearly in English. With poor vocabulary, communication is constrained considerably. You can get by without grammar; you cannot get by without vocabulary.

Vocabulary specialists (Coady, 1997; Coady and Huckin, 1997) state that lexical knowledge is the heart of language learning. Singleton (1999) in the introduction to his seminal book on the mental lexicon, states that "the major challenge of learning and using a language –whether as L1or as L2- lies not in the area of broad syntactic principles but in the 'nitty-gritty' of the lexicon" (p. 4). According to Nunan (1999), an extensive vocabulary is believed to help learners "to outperform their competence" (p. 103). It means that a sizable vocabulary having been learned by L2 learners is contended to enable them to partly handle unpredictable communicative situations.

The literature also shows that vocabulary knowledge plays an important role in developing learners' listening (Elley, 1989; Ellis, 1994), speaking (Joe, 1998), reading (Haynes & Barker, 1993; Huckin & Bloch, 1993), and writing (Hinkel, 2001; Laufer & Nation, 1995; Lee, 2003; Leki & Carson, 1994; Walters & Wolf, 1996).

Despite these facts, Folse (2004a) showed a lack of vocabulary instruction in Curriculum of an intensive academic ESL program. With observing classes, he found that, first, there was no overall plan of vocabulary instruction in the curriculum. Whereas grammar had been taken into account across all levels, words were taught as needed. Second, the most common student language question to arise in all five daily classes-grammar, reading, writing, speaking, and TOEFL-was vocabulary. Third, the class where vocabulary was covered most depended on the instructor, not the class subject.

Since the vocabulary is considered as the most important element in learning a language, researchers are busy attempting to provide more effective methods of teaching and learning L2 vocabulary to foreign language (L2) teachers and learners. Thus researches have showed, throughout the years, great attempts have been made to come up with sound approaches to account for foreign language vocabulary learning processes. Such approaches have been distinguished in various ways. The most commonly drawn distinction is the one between incidental and intentional learning (Huckin & Coady, 1999; Hulstijin, 1992). Extensive reading, as incidental learning approach, was the focus of many studies (Krashen, 1989; Grabe, 1991). However some researchers (Luafer, 2003) raised some doubt about the effect of reading on L2 vocabulary learning.

Research has also looked at which vocabulary learning strategies have been used by learners (Lessard-Clouston, 1994; Prince, 1996; Schmitt & Schmitt, 1993). But not all of them have been proved as effective strategies. The effectiveness of semantic elaboration on vocabulary teaching and learning has been studied, and researchers find that it is effective for long-term retention (Kondo, 2007; Hague, 1987; Machalias, 1991).

However some studies (Barcraft, 2004) provided negative evidence towards this method. It depends on the amount and kind of elaboration and also the nature of tasks to be performed at study and test (Craik and Tulving, 1975).These findings are in line with theoretical frameworks that emphasize specificity of processing type, such as transfer-appropriate processing theory (Morris et al., 1977) and the type of processing-resource allocation model (Barcroft, 2004).

Research also studied the keyword method extensively (Atkinson and Raugh, 1975; Brown & Perry, 1991) and highlighted that the keyword method is the best memory technique in vocabulary learning and teaching and consistently produces L2 vocabulary gains. Theoretical support for semantic and mnemonic strategies comes from Craik and Lockhart's (1972) Depth of Processing Theory, which claims that memory for an item depends on the level or relative depth at which the item is processed in a learner's cognitive system. In fact, this theory, based on the amount and kind of processing, provides a potential framework for comparing different strategies. (Brown and Perry, 1991).

In a similar view, L2 vocabulary research has also considered the degree of involvement load in which a task to be performed and the researchers found that retention for L2 vocabulary items was best in a condition in which learners require to invest greater amount of time and processing effort (Hulstijn & Laufer, 2001).

Second language (L2) researchers and language instructors are also interested in the role of input (i.e. samples of the language to which a learner is exposed) in foreign language acquisition. Krashen (1985) maintains that, during the early stages of foreign language acquisition, learners will be successful when they are exposed to large amounts of comprehensible input. According to Krashen's input hypothesis (Krashen, 1985), human beings

acquire languages in only one way – by understanding messages, or by receiving "comprehensible input". In fact, Krashen's claim strongly downplays the role of output or interaction that comprehensible input is both necessary and sufficient for language acquisition. He argues that: "Speaking is the result of acquisition, not its cause. Speech cannot be taught directly or very early in the language classroom. Speech will emerge once the acquirer has built up enough competence via comprehensible input" (p. 2).

Despite the significant influence that the Input Hypothesis has had on SLA studies since its inception, it has received strong criticisms from several researchers (e.g., Gass, 1988; McLaughlin, 1987; Swain, 1985). Swain (1985) argue that second language learners will be more successful if they are required to produce output (language produced by a learner) even in early stages of language learning.

The theoretical basis on the importance of output was first put forth by Swain (1985, 1995) in her Comprehensible Output Hypothesis. Swain (1985) argues that while comprehensible input and the emphasis on interactional negotiation is essential, the role of interactional exchanges in second language acquisition "may have much to do with 'comprehensible output' as it has to do with comprehensible input" (p. 236).She has also argued that output can help learners through requiring them to move away from relying a great deal on top-down processing strategies towards relying more on specific means of expression and syntax needed to produce language.

In 1985, pushed output hypothesis was proposed by Swain. After then, some few studies (Kowal and Swain, 1997; Nobuyoshi and Ellis, 1993) have given it qualified support. According to Swain (1995), the act of "pushing" leads learners to make more effort and to "stretch" their

interlanguage resources which in turn forces them to progress language more deeply and helps them to move beyond their current stage of language acquisition.

In evaluating the role of output in foreign language learners, a distinguish can be made between output with access to meaning and output without access to meaning. According to VanPatten (2003), output with access to meaning is output that involves "activating the lexical items and grammatical forms necessary to express particular meanings" (p. 63). When a learner says, "where is the dishwashing liquid?" to a store clerk while shopping in a grocery store, or when a learner engages in some type of meaning-oriented exchange in a language classroom, is an example of output with access to meaning. On the other hand, output without access to meaning refers to producing language without engaging in this type of meaning-oriented mental activity. When a learner, for example, copies a target word when he or she sees the target word for the first time without intending to convey meaning while doing so.

Regarding to output without access to meaning, some previous studies demonstrated negative effects for word writing (Barcraft, 2006), sentence writing (Barcraft, 2000, 2004a; Folse, 1999) on productive L2 vocabulary learning, and word and fragment writing (Barcraft, 2007) on productive and receptive L2 vocabulary learning. However, some other studies (Hummel, 2010; Thomas and Dieter, 1987) showed that word writing positively affected vocabulary learning.

Research on word writing and L2vocabulary learning has been limited, but the overall pattern of results showed that having learners to write target words (copying new words without access to meaning) negatively affect their ability to learn those words. Because, from an input processing perspective, this type of output may decrease new word learning by exhausting

cognitive processing resources that otherwise could be used to encode target word forms and establish form-meaning connection.

Due to a lack of quantitative studies on Swain's (1985) Pushed Output Hypothesis, the current study attempted to examine effects of forced output (word writing) on foreign language learning. In fact, it examined how output without access to meaning-copying target words (word writing)- affects productive L2 vocabulary learning. The present study was designed to explore how requiring learners to write target words, a kind of output without access to meaning, affects processing resource allocation during word-level input processing and, in turn, L2 vocabulary learning.

1.2. The Purpose of the Study

Vocabulary knowledge is an important element in second language (L2) acquisition. By learning new words, students can increase their listening, speaking, reading and writing vocabularies and can improve comprehension and production in L2.

Previous studies have assessed the effects of forced output (writing target words in sentences and word writing) on different measures of vocabulary learning. Both (sentence writing and word writing) involve output. The difference is that sentence writing involves tasks such as elaborating on the meaning of the target words, processing for syntax, and writing other words in the sentence. Thus it is a kind of output with access to meaning. Researchers, on the effects of sentence writing and vocabulary learning, have produced mixed conclusions. Coomber et al., (1986), for example, found that writing new words in sentence affects positively. Others (Pressley et al., 1982) reported that sentence writing to produce no effect while Barcroft (2000, 2004a, 2006) and Folse (1999) claimed that writing new words in sentence to produce negative effects relative to alternative methods, such as picture-word pair.

Studies on word writing and vocabulary learning are limited. Word writing, according to Vanpatten (2003), also involves output, but this kind of output does not require access to meaning. Because it does not activate the lexical items and grammatical forms necessary to express particular meaning. Research found that word writing (Barcroft, 2006) and word and fragment writing (Barcroft, 2007) affect negatively vocabulary learning. Barcroft (2006) accounts for, according to the resource depletion for output hypothesis, to copy target words while attempting to learn them constitutes an incompatible task or distraction because output without access to meaning can exhaust processing resources that otherwise could be used to learn the target word form and to make appropriate form-meaning mapping.

Due to a lack of quantitative studies that either refute or support Swain's (1985) The Pushed Output Hypothesis, the purpose of present study was to investigate the effectiveness of forced output hypothesis in helping learners to acquire productive knowledge of new lexical items in comparison with picture-word pair. Swain (1985) has argued that output may help learners by requiring them to move away from relying a great deal on top-down processing strategies and contextual cues during comprehension towards relying more on specific means of expression and syntax needed to produce language. But what is question is the effect of output without access to meaning- copying target words- on vocabulary learning.

From an input processing perspective, it was expected that copying new words while attempting to learn it through viewing the word-picture pair, can exhaust cognitive processing resources that could be used to encode new word forms and establish new form-meaning mapping. Therefore, the goal of undertaking this study is to test whether: To write new lexical items affects negatively productive vocabulary learning.

1.3. Statement of the Problem

Although vocabulary has attracted increased interest since the 1980s, many second/foreign language researchers and teachers continue to give little or no attention to it. They assume that students will learn words incidentally and, therefore, vocabulary is not systematically covered in most curricula. Sokmen (1997), for example, states that vocabulary has incidentally been learned in the EFL classroom:

> For many of us, our perspective on the teaching of vocabulary was greatly influenced by the top-down, naturalistic approaches of the 1970s and 980s. The emphasis was implicit, incidental learning of vocabulary. We were taught the importance of directing L2 learners to recognize clues in context. … . Textbooks emphasized inferring word meaning from context as the primary vocabulary skill. (p. 237)

Schmitt and McCarthy (1997) also report that vocabulary is a crucial component of overall communicative competence but it still is an aspect of language that is often neglected in language classrooms.

Not surprisingly, one of the main difficulties facing pupils in foreign language learning lies in the huge number of words they have to acquire because a lack of vocabulary presents a serious linguistic obstacle to nonnative English-speaking learners and also provides many problem with speaking, listening, reading, and writing. Meara (1980) points out that language learners admit that they encounter considerable difficulty with vocabulary even when they upgrade from an initial stage of acquiring a foreign language to a much more advanced level. Politzer (1978) argues that vocabulary errors seem to be the most serious ones for learners and,

in terms of interaction, the most disruptive ones for native speakers. As Meara (1984), in study of L2 university students, states that second language learners' lexical errors outnumbered grammatical errors.

In Iran, English is taught as a foreign language and, therefore, it isn't an official language, and there usually is no immediate or specific requirement for learners to make use of the language in any communicative situation, therefore, except in classroom, they have no exposure to vocabulary outside the language teaching context and unfortunately, classes tended to be quite teacher-centered with students giving only short answers to teacher questions. Swain (1985) argues that the problem is that these learners had had little opportunity to engage in two-way negotiated exchanges in the classroom. She puts it in this way:

> To achieve native-speaker competence, the meaning of 'negotiating meaning' needs to be extended beyond that usual sense of simply 'getting one's message across'. Simply getting one's message across can and does occur with grammatically deviant forms and sociolinguistically inappropriate language. (p. 248)

Thus, teachers should employ effective methods to teach vocabulary to students. For the reason these facts, the researcher was motivated to take steps for the improvement of the condition by comparing the effects of requiring learners to write target words, forced output hypothesis, with word-picture repetition alone.

1.4. Research Questions

The present study was an attempt to address the following research questions:

1) Does forced output have any effect on vocabulary learning?

2) If the answer to question 1 is 'yes', is the effect of forced output a short or long term retention?

Based on the research questions, the following hypotheses were formulated.

1.5. Research Hypotheses

1) Forced output does not have any effect on vocabulary learning.

2) The effect of forced output on vocabulary learning on the basis of short and long term retention is significant.

1.6. Significance of the Research

Virtually all second language learners and their teachers are well aware of the fact that learning a foreign language (L2) involves the learning of large numbers of word. Words are the building blocks in a language and no one can ignore the importance of the vocabulary in language teaching and learning, especially in foreign language learning. Based on students' experience of being a language learner, they seem to have no hesitation in recognizing the importance of vocabulary in foreign language learning. By learning the lexical items, they start to develop knowledge of the target language.

Vocabulary is perhaps the most important component in foreign language learning. Language is based on words and without words, communication is extremely difficult and limited. Knowledge of vocabulary is also the key component of reading ability. It is the key to student understanding what they are reading. Students need to know what the majority of the words mean before they can comprehend what is being read.

Regarding the importance of vocabulary knowledge in learning L2, McCarthy (2001), in an interview for Cambridge Connection, states that vocabulary forms the biggest part of the meaning of any language, and the vocabulary is the biggest problem for most learners. So the researcher has always been interested in ways of helping learners in building up in big vocabulary as fast as efficiently as possible.

Stahl and Nagy (2006) also reported that words are tools we use to access our background knowledge, express ideas, and learn new concepts. Folse (2004a), in an intensive academic program, found that the students of English as Foreign Language (EFL) were asked what could improve EFL program, they expressed a strong desire for vocabulary instruction. Nassaji (2004) found that ESL students who had wider vocabulary knowledge made more effective use of certain types of lexical inferencing strategies than their weaker counterparts.

Regarding that learning a foreign or second language, at intermediate and advanced levels of proficiency, involves the acquisition of thousands of words, language learners look for to achieve effective ways to increase opportunities for learning new words and retaining them in long-term memory. But, unfortunately, forgetting is a common problem and language learners often complain that they forget new words very soon after learning them. So, because of the importance of vocabulary learning, teachers also like to know in what way instructional programs can help students to foster the acquisition of so many words.

1.7. Limitations

The current study was limited in several ways. The first limitation is the fact that the present study was carried out with a small number of Iranian students of English as a foreign language at Islamic Azad University of Izeh. It seems that the study would have been more

informative and the results would have been more generalizable if done based on a larger n-size. The second is that the proficiency level of the participants in the present study was low and there is a need to conduct similar experiment with different population and more proficient level learners. Also the pictures were colorful and it might have an effect on participants' learning.

In this study, learners' vocabulary gain was measured through productive (picture-to-English) post-tests. Future study is needed to determine how alternative type of measure, receptive (English-to-Persian) post-test, affects word gain.

The last limitation of the study was on methodology. The immediate and delayed post-tests were given to the participants in 8th and 10th weeks. In these tests, the pictures of all the experimental target words were presented to the participants and they were asked to write the words in English. However, the first 5 target words were given in the first week of the study and the last 5 target words were given in the 8th week. Therefore, there is a time measurement problem in the post-tests. In short, retention period for each target word is not measured in a fixed time period.

1.8. Definition of Key Terms

EFL: English is the second language of anyone who learns it after learning their first language in infancy in the home. Using the term this way, no distinction is made between second language, third language, etc. However, English as a Second Language is often contrasted with English as a Foreign Language. Someone who learns English in a formal classroom setting, with limited or no opportunities for use outside the classroom, in a country in which English does not play an important role in internal communication (China, Japan, and Korea, for example), is said to be learning English as a foreign language. Someone who learns English in a sitting in which the

language is necessary for everyday life (for example, an immigrant learning English in the US) or in a country in which English plays an important role in education, business, and government (for example in Singapore, the Philippines, India, and Nigeria) is learning English as a second language.

Forced Output: In defining of output (language produced by a learner), it, at first, is necessary to point to the role of input in language learning. Krashen (1985) maintains that L2 learners will be successful when they are exposed to large amounts of comprehensible input and are not forced to produce output, particularly during the early stages of L2 development. But others (e.g., Swain, 1985) argue that learners will be more successful when they are required to produce output, even during the early stages of L2 development.

With assessing these two positions, VanPatten (2003) claims that a distinction can be made between two types of output, including output with access to meaning and output without access to meaning. He argues that the first type of output can help the learners develop the language. According to VanPatten, output with access to meaning involves "activating the lexical items and grammatical forms necessary to express particular meanings" (p. 63). Output without access to meaning, on the other hand, refers to producing the language without engaging in this type of meaning-oriented mental activity. For example, when a learner copies a target word when he or she sees the word for the first time without intending to convey meaning when doing so.

Output Hypothesis: In the 1980s, Canadian SLA researchers Mirrell Swain advanced the output hypothesis, that meaningful output is as necessary to language learning as meaningful input. However, most studies have shown little if any correlation between learning and quantity

of output. Today, most scholars contend that small amount of meaningful output are important to language learning, but primarily because the experience of producing language leads to more effective processing of input.

Vocabulary: A person's vocabulary is the set of words within a language that familiar to that person. A vocabulary usually develops with age, and serves as a useful and fundamental tool for communication and acquiring knowledge. Acquiring and extensive vocabulary is one of the largest challenges in learning a second language.

Historical Background to Vocabulary Acquisition

2.1. Vocabulary Acquisition: A neglected aspect of language learning

The term vocabulary refers to a list or set of words for a particular language or a list or set of words that individual speakers of a language might use (Hatch & Brown, 1995). It is