

IN THE NAME OF GOD

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**University of Isfahan**  
**Faculty of foreign languages**  
**Department of English language**

**M. A. Thesis**

**A study of the Effect of Different Techniques of Teaching  
Lexical Items on Lexical Recall: a Case of Iranian  
EFL Learners**

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To my husband  
For his help, support and  
patience all throughout our  
newly-begun life;

And

To my parents  
for their never-ending help  
and concern

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## **Abstract**

This research attempt sought to investigate how the two different mnemonic non-verbal approaches (the key-word method and Pictorial method) to teaching lexical items affect recall and whether instruction through the key word method leads to a better and more persistent learning of vocabulary.

For this purpose, 60 adult female elementary students studying English at a language school in Isfahan were chosen to participate in this study. Their homogeneity was made sure of by a Nelson test of language proficiency. To assure the novelty of the target words, a pretest of vocabulary was administered at this stage. The participants were then randomly divided into three equal groups (two experimental groups and one control group), each containing twenty students. The first experimental group (EG1) received instruction based on the key word method. The participants were helped to construct a mental picture of the lexical items using the keyword method. Pictorial method which is based on a pictorial representation of the unfamiliar word was used for the instruction of the target words in the second experimental group (EG2). Using the method the participants were helped to pair pictures with words in L2. The control group (CG) received ineffective instruction with translation and rote repetition.

At the end of the treatment, a multiple-choice posttest of vocabulary was administered to compare vocabulary achievement among the three groups. In addition, some vocabulary quizzes were used to measure the participants' short-term memory recall of the lexical items. Analysis of the results of the posttest revealed a positive effect for the key word method, resulting in the rejection of the first null hypothesis. Comparison of the results of immediate posttest and delayed posttest of the groups further helped reject the second



null hypothesis since the results showed that the participants who used the key word method could store and retain vocabulary items in their long-term memory better than those who used pictorial method or translation.

**Key words:** Mnemonics, Key word method, Pictorial method, Long-term memory, Short-term memory, Recall.

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## **CHAPTER ONE**

### **Introduction**

#### **1.1. Overview**

Experienced teachers of English as a second language know very well how important vocabulary is. However, for many years, there was little or no emphasis on vocabulary. In fact, it was supposed that students could learn all the words they need without the help of their teachers. Krashen (1985, P. 87) maintained that vocabulary is something learners pick up while improving their reading; therefore, all the teachers need to do is to provide enough comprehensible input for the learners, and vocabulary acquisition will in fact take care of itself. This view that vocabulary plays second fiddle to reading

was the result of structural linguistics and audiolingualism (Nunan, 1999). Proponents of audiolingualism argued that foreign language learning would be most effective if learners concentrated their efforts on mastering the basic sentence patterns of the language. Once these patterns had been memorized, new vocabulary could be slotted in.

Some specialists in methodology at that time seemed to believe that the meanings of words could not be adequately taught, so it was better not to try to teach them. It is not simply a matter of learning that a certain word in one language means the same as a word in another language. Much more needs to be learned; and there were those who felt the complexities were too great to be dealt with in the class (Allen, 1983).

Most influential in that era was Charles Fries's *Teaching and Learning English as a Foreign Language* (1945), which was based on American structural linguistics. Fries believed that grammar should be the starting point of language learning. Since he was influenced by behaviorist psychology, he believed that learning is a matter of habit formation. His audiolingual method incorporated these ideas by paying a lot of attention to drills of basic sentence patterns and their pronunciations and new words were introduced just to make the drills possible.

In the 1960s, there was a shift from structural linguistics to generative linguistics. This shift brought about revolutionary changes in linguistic theory. However, the idea that lexis is secondary to that of grammar did not change. The interest of generative linguists centered mainly on rule-governed behavior and on the grammatical structure of sentences and did not include concerns for the appropriate use of language.

In 1972, Hymes emphasized communicative competence, and stressed the sociolinguistic and pragmatic factors governing effective use of language. Communicative language teaching, which evolved from these notions, promoted fluency over accuracy and consequently shifted the focus from sentence-level forms to discourse-level functions. However, here again it was generally assumed that vocabulary is secondary and will take care of itself (Schmitt, 1997).

Within the last two decades, this view has changed dramatically. Today, there is more attention to techniques for teaching vocabulary. One reason is this: A number of research studies have recently dealt with lexical problems. Through research the scholars are finding that lexical problems frequently interfere with communication; communication breaks down when people do not use the right words (Allen, 1983). Further, psycholinguistic studies were providing insights concerning mental processes involved in vocabulary learning, such as memory, storage and retrieval.

Researchers now view vocabulary as an important language component upon which effective communication relies (Oxford & Scarella, 1994). Recently, study of vocabulary learning is considered as a "promising area of inquiry" (Ellis, 1990, P. 214).

Therefore, in recent years, the teaching of vocabulary has assumed its rightful place as a fundamentally important aspect of language development. This is partly due to the influence of comprehension-based approaches to language development, partly due to research efforts of influential applied linguists (see, for example, Carter and McCarthy (1998)) and partly due to the exciting possibilities opened up by the development of computer-based language corpora (Nunan, 1999).



However, few researchers have ever attempted to precisely focus on the effect of different kinds of vocabulary instructions on vocabulary development. Even fewer have tried to investigate the effect of some particular new methods of vocabulary teaching, such as mnemonic methods, on word retention and compare the results with the traditional methods. *This* is, precisely, the aim of this study.

In sum, it is intended through this research study to investigate the effects and compare the results of instructing vocabulary using the key word method and illustration by pictures in terms of vocabulary development and retention.

## **1.2. Statement of the problem**

In order to use any language for communication, it seems necessary to know a good number of vocabulary items, although it doesn't always lead to a successful communication. But regarding learning a foreign language, the task of vocabulary learning may seem formidable.

Committing new vocabulary items and their meanings to memory is one thing, recalling them is another. Usually just a fraction of items that have been memorized with so much difficulty are transferred to long-term memory and can be remembered whenever necessary.

Human beings have the ability to remember a large number of lexical items of a foreign language for a long time and even for ever, but the accuracy of recall is influenced by the way of encoding; different techniques of instruction on vocabulary seem to affect recall differently.

Teachers have always been interested in how learners go through learning vocabulary. If we know more about different techniques of vocabulary

teaching and about the fruitfulness of each technique, we can help learners overcome the difficulty of vocabulary learning.

A number of researchers examined the fruitfulness of different techniques of vocabulary instruction and different strategies of vocabulary learning. Nation (2001) proposed a guessing strategy based on clues extracted from context. Similarly, Schmitt and Schmitt (1995) recommended arranging the notebook in a loose-leaf binder or index card file, in which, for instance, students write word pairs and semantic maps, which help them visualize the associative network of relationships existing between new and familiar words. Lewis (1993), concentrated on lexical chunks as the foundation of teaching. For him language consists of grammaticalized lexis, not lexicalized grammar.

Mnemonics are basic kinds of associations or strategies used by learners to increase the retention and retrieval of lexical items (Hatch and Brown, 1995). Kellogg and Howe (cited in Chunk and Plass, 1996) showed that foreign words associated with actual objects or imagery techniques are learned more easily than words without these associations. In addition, Thompson (1987), reports the result of a study on the effectiveness of spatial mnemonics as follows: "subjects who used the spatial mnemonics recalled twice as many words after five weeks than those who studied the words by rote learning" (Groniger, 1997, P. 45).

Up to now, learners in Iran mostly memorize word lists through translation techniques; there appears to be a need to compare the effects of these techniques with some non-verbal ones to find out which one is more fruitful.

So, considering the students' need for vocabulary learning and their interest in learning effective techniques for learning new words, the present study is

intended to find out the influence of two non-verbal methods of teaching vocabulary and compare them with a traditional verbal method (translation).

The two non-verbal methods are:

1) key-word method based on mnemonics using imagery. In this method the students are helped to construct a mental picture of the lexical items using the keyword method. For example, to teach the word "magician", we can use an L1 word, which is phonetically similar to the English word. Here the teacher can use the Persian word "aji-maji" as the key word. Then a mental image should be constructed in the minds of the participants; for example, a magician who is saying "aji-maji" to a bird and changes it into an elephant (if we want the image to be bizarre). They can even draw a figure of the image. According to Hatch and Brown, there are five steps essential to vocabulary learning: encountering new words, getting the word form, getting the word meaning, consolidating word form and meaning in memory, and using the word. The second step, getting the word form, appears to be getting of a clear image- visual or auditory or both- of the form of the vocabulary item. This step includes "associating new words with words that sound similar in my native language, writing the sounds of words using sound symbols from my native language, associating words that are similar to words in other languages I have studied, associating a word with a similar English word I know,..."(Hatch & Brown, 1995, P. 378).The importance of having a clear image of the form of a word becomes apparent when we think about what happens when we try to retrieve words.

2) Pictorial method, which is based on a pictorial representation of the unfamiliar word. Using this method the students are helped to pair pictures with words in L2; they receive no verbal definition. For example, for the word

"magician" they are provided with the picture of a magician. Successful language learning outside the school is generally in a situation where the learner can *see* what is named by the word to be learned. Whenever possible, that condition of successful vocabulary learning should be provided in second language classroom (Allen, 1983).

The control group receives instruction with translation and rote repetition. Prince (1996), states that simply knowing translations for L2 words "does not guarantee that they will be successfully accessed for use in an L2 context" (P. 488). Therefore, translation seems to be ineffective.

The present study deals with the problem of lexical attrition over time and attempts to test the effect of two non-verbal methods of vocabulary teaching and compare their effect with a traditional verbal method (translation) to find out which method leads to a better recall. The objective of this study is therefore, testing the effect of two non-verbal methods of vocabulary instruction on retention and retrieval of the learnt words among elementary students.

Considering language learning conditions in Iran, in which learners usually memorize word lists through translation techniques, there appears a need for students to be presented with some non-verbal techniques of vocabulary teaching to be better able to learn, retain and recall vocabulary. Moreover, it is one of the important and frequently asked questions of students that "how can we learn vocabulary in an effective way?" they usually find vocabulary learning difficult and assert that they can not remember many of the words they have learnt. Thus, this major problem led to a number of sub-problems, which were investigated in the light of an experimental design. They will be stated in the following section.