

# In The Name Of God

117120

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Faculty of Language and Literature  
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Thesis submitted for degree of M.A.

Title:

**The Effect of Semantic and Thematic Clustering as well  
as Instructional Approaches on Vocabulary Learning**

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February 2009

۱۲۶۸۳۵

دانشگاه یزد  
دانشکده زبان و ادبیات  
گروه زبان انگلیسی

پایان نامه  
برای دریافت درجه کارشناسی ارشد  
آموزش زبان انگلیسی

تاثیر دسته بندی موضوعی و معنایی کلمات و آموزش آنها به طرق  
مختلف در فراگیری لغات

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فروغ میرجلیلی

اسفند ۱۳۸۷

۱۲۶۱۲۵

۱۳۸۷ / ۱۲ / ۹

کتابخانه مرکزی  
دانشگاه یزد

**To My Daughter**

**Sonia Saeidi**

## **Acknowledgements**

My sincerest appreciation first goes to Dr.M.J.Rezaei and Dr.A.Jabbari for supervising this research and for their consistent help and encouragement throughout the course of this work. I must also thank them for the critical reading of this thesis.

I am also extremely grateful to my advisor Dr.H.Allami for his valuable comments and correction.

I would like to thank M.Mirhosseini, a member of the statistics department for his help and guidance.

Finally, I would like to express my deep appreciation to my parents specially my dear father, Dr. G.Mirjalili for his encouragement and help during this study. I would also like to thank my husband for his support and patience. It was my pleasure to carry out my study and raise my daughter, Sonia, at the same time which was both difficult and desirable.

## Abstract

Finding an effective method for vocabulary learning has always preoccupied curriculum developers in general and language teachers in particular. The present study attempts to examine the effects of semantic, thematic and unrelated clustering of words as well as the effects of two instructional approaches, i.e. isolation and context on vocabulary learning.

The subjects of the study constituted 90 learners in three proficiency levels, (1) elementary, (2) pre-intermediate, (3) and intermediate. Each cluster was presented in both isolation and in context. Tests were given immediately after each exposure and also after a two-week interval to examine the effect of time.

A three-way ANOVA was used to analyze the data. The three types of clustering; two instructional methods and three proficiency levels were the independent variables, while the number of recalled words from each eight-word sets was the dependent variable.

The results demonstrated that when the words were presented to the subjects in isolation, they generally recalled the highest number of words from the unrelated set, whereas they could recall the highest number of words from the thematic clustering in context. They also significantly recalled higher number of words in the immediate test as compared to the delayed one. Additionally, the effect of proficiency level did not turn out to be significant.

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# Chapter 1

# Chapter 1

## 1.1 Introduction

Vocabulary is a core component of language proficiency and provides much of the basis for how well learners speak, listen, read and write. Without an extensive vocabulary and strategies for acquiring new vocabulary, learners find it difficult to make use of language learning opportunities around them. Vocabulary knowledge is essential in the process of language learning. Teaching vocabulary becomes more important when considering the future of L2 students because without knowledge of a large number of word meanings students cannot make sense of what they are reading or accurately communicating through writing.

Unfortunately, vocabulary teaching and learning were neglected in the past (Renandya & Richards 2002:255). During the active decades of the mid – twentieth century, vocabulary building was not a priority for researchers or curriculum designers in the context of language teaching and learning. In fact, vocabulary was ignored and downgraded. More emphasis was given to grammatical and phonological structures and teaching vocabulary was not a central goal of second language learning. As a result, learners of English often faced communication barriers in various situations which required a mastery of vocabulary.

Recently, there has been a renewed interest in the nature of vocabulary and its role in learning a language. More emphasis and considerable attention have been paid to vocabulary learning. Various techniques have been introduced and used for teaching vocabulary as a result of which researchers have started testing and

evaluating these techniques. Thematic and semantic clustering was among these strategies proposed by educational researchers and psychologists. Currently new vocabulary items are typically presented to ESL / EFL students in semantically and thematically related sets in the current ESL (English as Second Language) textbooks. Various studies have been conducted on these techniques during the last two decades such as Tinkham (1993, 1997), Waring (1997), and Finkbeiner and Nicole (2003).

As we go through textbooks one of the clusters that we are faced with is semantic clustering of words. They are sets of tightly related collections of words composed of lexical items whose syntactic class and meaning are closely related. For example, Molinsky and Bliss (1989) cluster *daughter*, *husband*, *mother*, *brother*, *aunt*, *uncle*, *cousin*, *grandmother* and *grandfather* in a unit entitled, "My Favorite Photographs" in a book entitled 'Side by Side 1'. All of these words share a common super-ordinate or head term. The assumption that grouping new vocabulary items facilitates learning has caused course designers, teachers and writers to apply it in their curriculum development projects. As a justification of this approach, curriculum developers argue that related words help learners see how knowledge is organized (Dunbar,1992), and the assumption is made that learning this way does not require much effort. However, their belief rests on personal methodology rather than empirical support or theoretical orientation.

Although little empirical support or theoretical assumption exists on the matter, some textbooks have relied on semantic grouping to present vocabulary. There is little of any direct evidence that such lexical clustering facilitates learning.

According to Tinkham (1993), presenting students with new words grouped in semantic clusters is not motivated by empirical support or theoretical concerns.