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The Effect of Reading Purpose on Incidental Vocabulary Learning and Retention among Elementary Iranian Learners of English Language

Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the

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Language (TEFL)

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We hereby recommend that this thesis

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To my thesis supervisor for his extensive

knowledge

And

To my family for their unconditioned love

and support

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Abstract

Foreign language learners read texts for different purposes. A reader's purpose affects everything about reading (Tovani, 2000). This study, situated in an EFL context, aimed at discovering the way purposes behind reading activities influence vocabulary knowledge gain and retrieval. Seventy five elementary learners of English were randomly assigned into one control group (i.e., free reading) and two experimental ones (i.e., reading comprehension and reading to summarize). A modified text was administered to all the three groups. The text was followed by an immediate and a delayed post-test for the aim of word learning and retention check. The data in both immediate and delayed post-test revealed a statistically significant difference between the mean scores of the three groups ($P<.05$). The study indicated that both vocabulary learnig and retention were greatly influenced by the purposeful reading activity. The Scheffe post-hoc test revealed that the mean scores of the summarizing and reading comprehension groups were significantly different from the mean score of the free reading group. But the results did not indicate any significant differences between the mean scores of the two groups of summarizing and reading comprehension. However, the strength of association (.21) for the immediate post-test and (.68) for the delayed one showed a great effect size which means that a large part of the variance between the three groups can be explained by reading purpose. The data also confirmed that summarizing group yielded better outcome than the other two conditions in production tests. The findings also suggest that a large portion of the errors can be ascribed to intralingual difficulties in differentiating the correct forms of the words.

Keywords: Incidental vocabulary learning, Retention, Reading purpose

Contents

Chapter One

Introduction…………………………………………………………………..…..1

Chapter Two

Review of Literature…………………………………………………………….....10

Chapter Three

Method………………………..…..……………………….…………56

List of Tables

List of Figures

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

1.1. Overview

Human ability to function in today's social and economic worlds is exceedingly influenced by his language skills and word knowledge. Learning a language shaped by views of the nature of language, teaching and learning cannot be achieved without learning numerous aspects of that language, including its pronunciation, writing system, syntax, pragmatics, rhetorical modes for reading and composition, culture, and spelling, and its most weighty aspect, vocabulary (Folse, 2004). Laufer and Sim (1985) list four areas of language development in order of decreasing significance in reading ability in L2 as follows: knowledge of vocabulary, subject matter, discourse markers, and syntactic structure. In total, Laufer and Sim found that vocabulary is the most important and syntax is the least important. Similarly, Hunt and Beglar (2005, p. 2) argue that "the heart of language comprehension and use is the lexicon".

Although correlation does not imply causality, empirical inquiries have shown that good L2 readers, writers, speakers, and listeners know much more vocabulary. While grammar knowledge deficiency can limit conversation, vocabulary knowledge gap can ban conversation. Vocabulary is pivotal to concept formation, acculturation, enunciation and, apparently, all learning (Manzo & Sherk, 1971). Wechsler (1958) sees rich vocabulary as the best measure of intelligence and cultural development. Learning new lexicon (i.e., vocabulary acquisition) is one of the most vital processes in human development. Without a proper system for learning and acquiring words, we could never acquire language, and without language, human culture could not be developed and could not be retained. Despite this fact, comparing to other fields of research in second language acquisition, it can be possible to maintain that vocabulary teaching and learning has been left to a position of neglect (Meara, 1980) and secondary importance (Richards & Renandya, 2002) for decades. DeCarrico (2001) avows "vocabulary has not always been recognized as a priority in language teaching" (p. 285). But thanks to computer-aided research and psycholinguistic studies, there has been a renewed attention in the nature of vocabulary and its role in learning and teaching in the past decades, and second language (L2) vocabulary acquisition has shifted to "a position of some importance" (Meara, 2002, p. 393) and interest in the field of Second Language Acquisition (SLA) has attracted intensive research efforts. This

growth of interest in the domain of vocabulary development centers on themes such as the relationship between vocabulary knowledge and reading proficiency (Koda, 1989; Qian, 2002; Stanovich, 1980); word frequency and its role in vocabulary learning (Nation, 2001, 2002; Tekmen & Daloglu, 2006); learning strategies (Chamot, 1987, 2001; Kirmizi, 2010; Nunan, 2002; Nassaji, 2004; Oxford, 1989); background knowledge and its effect on vocabulary development (Mahdavy, 2011; Paribakht & Wesche, 1999; Pulido, 2003, 2004, 2007; Rott, 2000); contextualized and decontextualized vocabulary learning (Amirian & momeni, 2012; Biemiller & Boote, 2006; Laufer & Shmueli, 1997; Nagy, 1997) and also incidental versus intentional vocabulary learning (Ellis & He, 1999; Horst, Cobb, & Meara, 1998; Johnson & Thomson, 1962; Klauer, 1984).

The relationship between L2 vocabulary knowledge and L2 reading ability is well established (Haynes, 1993). There is empirical evidence that second-language learners rely heavily on their vocabulary knowledge and that a gap in their lexical knowledge is "the largest obstacle for second-language readers to overcome" (Huckin & Bloch, 1993, p. 154). Whereas language research (Laufer, 1992) suggests that text comprehension may be accomplished with a vocabulary size of 3,000 word families or 5,000 individual words (Hirsh & Nation, 1992; Laufer, 1989), a vocabulary size of 8,000–9,000 word families is needed to achieve 98%–99% lexical coverage of texts, consenting to more accurate guessing of unknown lexicon in their context and more pleasurable reading (Nation, 2006; Schmitt, Jiang, & Grabe, 2011).

There is a general consensus among vocabulary learning researchers that incidental vocabulary acquisition through reading does occur and that this learning is crucial (e.g. Krashen, 1989; Nagy, 1997; Nagy, Herman, & Anderson, 1985; Paribakht, 2005; Paribakht & Wesche, 1999; Woodinsky & Nation, 1988). Attentiveness on meaning-focused reading will lead in gradual improvement of vocabulary size, the expansion of lexical knowledge and development of reading fluency. Implicit learning through meaning-focused reading can occur incidentally as a result of learners' engaging in such activities as narrow reading, rereading, timed and paced readings, intensive and extensive reading (Hunt & Beglar, 2005, p.15). Zimmerman (1997, p. 123) supposes that a sizeable amount of lexical gain takes place incidentally through exposure to new words in meaningful contexts. According

to Nagy, Anderson, and Herman (1987), American children may acquire 3000 words annually between Grade 3 through 12. This is much greater than the number of words that children learn from vocabulary instruction in the classroom, which has been estimated to be about 200 to 300 words per year (Jenkins & Dixon, 1983). In other words, a large proportion of children's vocabulary growth could not be directly attributable to formal instruction and learners are able to pick up vocabulary through: a) extensive reading, b) communicative interactions, and c) exposure to natural input such as movies, TV, etc.

A word of caution is in order here. Folse (2004) forewarns against incorrectly applying L1 vocabulary acquisition theory to L2 vocabulary acquisition, especially in respect to vocabulary learning from context. Richards and Renandya (2002) also warn of dilemma that ESL learners face while struggling to learn a large amount of vocabulary.

Morgan and Rinvolucri (2004) accentuate the importance of learner differences consideration with regards to learning styles, multiple intelligences, and neurolinguistic programming. Lastly, Clark and Ishida (2005) declare that for EAP students, "merely being exposed to academic texts in their content classes is not sufficient for the development of vocabulary knowledge...explicit attention needs to be paid to vocabulary knowledge as a part of instruction" (p.11).

Many factors might affect the rate of SL incidental vocabulary acquisition. Among these factors are the reader's age, reading skill, and several text and word characteristics (Swanborn & de Glopper, 1999). Other studies point at, for instance, student's existing topic knowledge, their vocabulary size, and their potential familiarity with the concepts represented by the unknown words (Mahdavy, 2011; Paribakht & Wesche, 1999; Pulido, 2003, 2004, 2007; Rott, 2000) and more recently reading purpose (Linderholm, 2006; Linderholm & Cong, 2003; Linderholm, Cong, & Zhao, 2008; Linderholm & van den Broek, 2002; Swanborn & de Glopper, 2002). Skillful readers are purposeful (Merisuo-Storm, n. d.). They read to obtain information, to enjoy literature, to locate specific information, and to learn from text.

In spite of the fact that a large number of experimental and quasi-experimental studies have determined the effectiveness of extensive reading in vocabulary promotion in both EFL and ESL classroom settings, little attention has been paid to the investigation of new

words acquisition as a byproduct of reading activities with different purposes. Having a purpose prior to reading helps readers determine what is important, what is remembered, and what comprehension strategies a reader uses to enhance meaning (Tovani, 2000). It also helps them to locate information more quickly.

The premise underlying this line of research is the belief that a large number of words learned in the L1 result from extensive and multiple exposures rather than direct instruction, and therefore successful vocabulary learning in a second language might also proceed in the same way. Furthermore, prompted by RAND Reading Study Group (2002) which sees the need for research in reading comprehension as critical and also prompted by current findings in reading suggesting that variation in reading purpose might affect the processing and recall of words, this study explores some different ways in which learners' lexical processing may be affected by variation in reading goals.

1.2. Statement of the Problem

Nearly all second language learners and their teachers are well aware of the verity that learning a second language entails the learning of a vast majority of words. They are also aware of the extent to which limitations in their vocabulary knowledge limit their communication skills (Nation, 2001). Consequently, many learners are somewhat anxious when faced with such a huge task (i. e., learning the vast number of words they need to acquire in order to become fluent in their L2). The current evidence suggests that it requires between 2000 to 3000 word families to understand spoken English (if 95% of coverage is adequate) or between 6000 to 7000 word families if 98% coverage is needed (Schmitt, 2008). Furthermore, vocabulary learning is not just a matter of quantity or size (number of words to be learned); it also involves knowing a great deal about each item which is often referred to as "depth" or quality of vocabulary knowledge (Schmitt, 2008; Richards, 1976). It includes knowledge of word frequency, its collocations, register, case relations, word associations, semantic structure, syntactic behavior, etc. (Richards, 1976). Although the pivotal role of vocabulary in overall communicative competence (Schmitt & McCarthy, 1997) is generally accepted, it is still a victim of discrimination (Levenston, 1979).

Only recently has empirical finding (Swanborn & de Glopper, 2002) supported the view that reading proceeds very differently depending on the reader's purpose for reading. Unfortunately, a sizeable number of students do not efficiently modify their cognitive processing to meet specific educational goals. This study investigates the relationship between different reading purposes– reading the text in free manner (with no explicit instruction and procedure from the teacher); reading the text for comprehension; and reading the text for summarizing and extracting the gist of the text– with the amount of the words learners acquire incidentally.

1.3. Objectives of the Study

The present study aims at investigating the effect of reading purpose on incidental vocabulary learning. In other words, the study intends to explore how the rate of vocabulary learning of readers will be affected by the variability of the purposes behind reading activities. The participants of this study read the modified text for three purposes of a) reading for free, b) reading for comprehension, and c) reading to summarize the text. As a result, the research aims at discovering how much vocabulary is acquired incidentally and as a byproduct of reading for these three different purposes. Furthermore, the study intends to explore whether output-oriented reading purposes would result in a better outcome than the input-oriented ones.

1.4. Significance of the Study

The study's focus is on the acquisition of vocabulary. It presents some empirical findings on vocabulary learning and retention, relates them to some research theories of reading comprehension, and draws some conclusions about the conditions in which optimal vocabulary learning occurs.

The virtue of this study is that it allowed for the measurement of reader's lexical gain and retention influenced by the learner's reading purpose which is relatively a new area of investigation in second language acquisition. This study focuses on Iranian EFL learners' incidental vocabulary gain, a case which has been rarely dealt with. The practice of reading for a purpose is a powerful one. It motivates readers who might otherwise overlook the

6

value of reading the text. It also provides a gentle push for readers who read too quickly over material and who might otherwise skip over key messages in the text. Reading for a purpose can keep learners engaged and focused throughout the guided reading lesson. It is hoped that this study could establish the significance of considering the specific purpose for reading for both instructors and readers in classroom setting.

While earlier works on this field mostly explored the effect of learners' reading purpose on incidental vocabulary gain while just receiving input tasks, what distinguishes the present study from the prior ones is its examination of the effect of reading purpose in both input and written output tasks simultaneously. This study investigates learners' incidental lexical gain and retrieval in two different skills of reading and writing jointly. This advantage can set the ground for reading and writing theory in drawing potential benefits from this work. As Barkhuizen (2004, p. 555) clearly propounds "learning is evident in output, a display of the learner's ability in the language". Gass and Magnan (1993) claim that SLA researchers and theorists are still in the theory-building stage pertaining to the role of writing in general language acquisition. Writing, with regard to vocabulary, should go a further step beyond practicing already learned lexical items to using and incorporating newly learned ones. It is hoped that this study, in addition to its contribution to building a comprehensive vocabulary acquisition theory, can contribute to the process of building a comprehensive reading and writing theory that takes into consideration, among other important variables, the role of the summary writing in acquiring recently/newly learned words. In sum, the present thesis aims to make contributions to reading, writing, vocabulary learning research, vocabulary instruction, and to language learning overall.

1.5. Definition of the Key Terms

In order to provide a clearer understanding of the problem under investigation, certain terms employed in the study are defined as follows:

1.5.1. Incidental learning is "the learning of vocabulary as a by-product of any activity not explicitly geared to lexical learning" (Laufer & Hulstijn, 2001, p. 554).

1.5.2. Initial learning is the "vocabulary knowledge measured immediately after completing vocabulary task" (Kim, 2008, p. 314).

1.5.3. Retention is the "vocabulary knowledge measured two weeks after the tasks" (Kim, 2008, p. 314).

1.5.4. Reading purpose is "the goal that reader has in mind when starting to read" (Swanborn & de Glopper, 2002, p. 96).

1.5.5. Summarization is defined as "how we take larger sections of a text and reduce them to their bare essentials: the gist, the key ideas, the main points that are worth noting and remembering" (Jones, 2003, p. 1). In other words, summarization is "the process of condensing a source text into a shorter version preserving its reformation content" (Barzilay & Elhadad, 1999, p. 10).

1.6. Research Questions

This study explored learners' incidental vocabulary learning and retention in an EFL context (i.e., Iranian high schools) as a byproduct of reading purpose under three conditions: a) learners had a free reading of the text, b) learners read the text for comprehension, and c) learners read and summarized the text. Two broad research questions guided the study:

1. Does reading purpose have any impacts on incidental vocabulary learning?

2. Does reading purpose have any impacts on incidental vocabulary retention?

1.7. Research Hypotheses

In order to find satisfactory responses for the research questions, the following null hypotheses are proposed:

H_{01}: Reading purpose has no statistically significant effect on incidental vocabulary learning.