In the Name of God

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Teaching Confusable Words to Iranian EFL Learners: A Corpus Based Approach

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To My Parents

for their Endless Love and Support

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Abstract

Vocabulary is an essential element of every second or foreign language teaching and learning program. The influence of corpora and corpus-based research on educational theories and practices has been most apparent in the areas of vocabulary analysis. Confusable words such as *confident* and *confidant* refer to those lexical items which sound or look alike, but frequently cause confusion. The current study tries to utilize a new approach called corpus based approach in teaching such confusable vocabularies. The purpose of the current study, using a corpus-based approach to teaching confusable words, was threefold. First of all, it tried to study the role of corpus in learning and retaining confusable words. Secondly, it aimed to probe into the role of frequency in learning confusable words. The last objective of the study was to find out the learners' feedback and their attitude toward using corpus in learning confusable words. To this end, 43 male and female freshmen Iranian EFL learners majoring in English literature in Yazd University served as the participants of this study. They were divided into two experimental and control groups. A pretest was conducted to assess the students' ability in perceiving and producing confusable words, prior to the treatment sessions. After 5 weeks of teaching confusable words using BNC corpus for the experimental group and traditional method for the control group, a post-test was conducted followed by a delayed post-test after a month. Finally, to find out the students' feedback on the use of corpus in teaching confusable words, a post study questionnaire was distributed among the participants of experimental group. The results indicated that the use of corpus as a new trend was significantly helpful in teaching confusable words. The results also indicated that the use of corpus can be effective in retaining lexical items. But there is no trace of frequency effect on learning confusable words. The results of feedback questionnaire also

revealed participants' positive feedback toward using corpus in their language learning. The current study will be useful for both students and teachers in that the students and teachers can benefit from corpora in improving and consolidating their lexico-grammatical knowledge.

Key words: Corpus, Confusable Words, Retention, Acquisition

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Chapter One

Introduction

1.1 Preliminaries

Language is one of the most important characteristics of human behavior. In fact language is an activity of human used for the purpose of communication. According to Sapir (1921) language is a method of communication of human through which ideas, emotions and desires are produced by speech organs (as cited in Crystal,2000).

Today's world is the world of communication and the need for learning and ability of using a second language is on the rise. Learning a second language opens up a new perspective toward the world to the person. A second language gives us access to another culture, and our lives take on a new dimension. So the expansion of communication among people brings the emergence of learning a second language to the surface.

According to Dornyei (2009), there are some major differences between L1 and L2 acquisition. The first difference is "differential success" which means that the attainments of learners in these two different contexts are various. The second difference is that L1 acquisition happens through an automatic process while for L2 the condition is invariably optional and demands a great deal of motivation on the side of learner. The third source of alternation between L1 and L2 is the use of pre-existing knowledge in L2 and the fact that second language acquisition constructs on existing L1 knowledge. But there is no prior knowledge in L1acquisiton. Another difference between L1 and L2 acquisition is concerned with implicit and explicit learning and the difference between their mechanism in L1 and L2 acquisition.

So, concerning the differences between L1 and L2, second language acquisition is a complex process which is under the influence of a variety of activities and consists of different parts which demands various types of teaching strategies. As

Neacsu (1990) states, a teaching activity comprises a set of decisions taken by the trainer in order to find a rationale for combining methods, techniques, strategies, means and forms. These decisions will lead to the best use of all potentials of the intended subject. According to him, a teaching strategy can be defined as a way through which it is possible to approach a teaching situation (as cited in Manolea, 2013).

There exists different teaching strategies which can be applied in language teaching process. According to Wehril (2003), the most important teaching strategies include brainstorming, case based small- group discussion, demonstration, games and independent study. Each of these strategies possesses their own advantages and disadvantages.

Brainstorming, which is a process of generating multiple ideas on a specific issue, is one of teaching strategies. The advantages of this strategy are: (a) active involvement of learners in higher thinking activities, (b) improvement of learning condition and (c) accelerating the process of critical learning. The disadvantages of brainstorming are that it needs learners discipline and may not be so much effective for large groups of participants.

The exchange of ideas through a problem-solving process is called case-based small-group discussion. The processes of this strategy of teaching are as follows: (a) active involvement of participants, (b) exploration of existing knowledge by the learners and making a link between what they are learning and what they already know and (c) improvement of critical thinking abilities. The cons of this strategy are as follows: Firstly, it may not be appropriate for the participants of different levels of knowledge and skills, and secondly, it can be difficult to assure that all learners are participating in the tasks.

The next type of teaching strategy is demonstration, which involves performing an activity for the learners to help them change a theoretical issue into a practical application. The advantages of demonstration are (a) helping people to learn by modeling, (b) improvement of self- confidence, and (c) more attention to the details instead of general theories. The disadvantages of demonstration strategy are that it may not be appropriate for different learning rates of participants and it requires special expertise on the side of demonstrator.

Games as the next type of teaching strategy play the role of motivator in the field of learning which bring some factors to the learning experience such as competition, participation, drills and feedbacks. The pros of this strategy include active involvement of learners, and the improvement of team learning, and the creation of a funny environment for learning. The cons of the games strategy are that it can make some students frustrated for their not being competitive and it can bring feelings of inadequacy in less skilled participants.

The last type of strategy suggested by Wehril (2003) is Independent Study. Independent Study Strategy, as a learning activity, comprises individual or group use of resource materials and computer-based technology. Independent Study can be advantageous for the following reasons: (a) improvement of learning skills and (b) progression of participants' skills on the basis of their own rate of learning. It can be disadvantageous for the difficulty of access to appropriate materials and lack of immediate objectives.

One of the influential features of every second language teaching and learning environment is vocabulary. Vocabulary is a key element of any language learning context. It is crystal clear that knowing the more number of words can lead to better

understanding of what has been heard and read, and better ability in saying what is intended when we are speaking or writing.

The importance of vocabulary for second and foreign language learning is not deniable. This area of teaching is so vast and finding new strategies for teaching vocabularies is the concern of most of the language learning programs.

By the advancement of educational technology, new strategies of teaching vocabularies have been proposed by the investigators. One of the new trends in vocabulary teaching is the use of corpus-based approach .According to Spolsky and Francis (2008) corpus linguistics can be used as an approach for investigating the use of language. The device that this approach uses is computer assisted techniques for analyzing large collections of writing and transcribed speech. The purpose of such investigations is understanding the choices that speakers and writers make in particular conditions, whether typical choices or unusual ones.

There is a category of words in English that sound or look alike which frequently cause confusion. A word like "apprise" which means "telling someone about something" can be easily confused with the word "appraise" which means "examining someone or something to judge the qualities" since their pronunciation and spelling seem similar. The current study tries to utilize a new approach called corpus based approach in teaching such confusable vocabularies.

There are a number of studies describing the effort to investigate the use of corpus linguistics in various areas such as better understanding of learners, teaching materials and the use of corpus linguistics in course design and classroom activities. (Spolsky &Francis, 2008).

The current study tries to find out whether using the corpus-based approach in teaching confusable words can be effective since such lexical items can pose learnability problems for learners of English as a second or foreign language.

1.2 Statement of the Problem

Learning a second language consists of different aspects and elements. Vocabulary is an essential element of every second language teaching and learning program. English is among those languages containing words which sound similar but possess different meanings which are easily confused. Hence, choosing the correct word among the sets of confusable words is a problematic area which needs a closer look. The difference between these words can include the difference in one vowel or in one or two consonants. Example of confusion sets include: "principal" and "principle" or the difference between "allusion" and "illusion"(Banko & Brill, 2011).

The attitude of linguistics has been changed by the passage of time and a shift in ELT from grammar to lexis mirrors this change completely (Liu & Jiang, 2009).In the past, the most important concern of linguistics was grammar. However, the advances in corpus linguistics have introduced lexis as a new trend to this field which is worth doing new investigations. Indeed, the role of corpora in the acquisition of lexicogrammatical elements of language is undeniable (Csomay & Petrovic, 2012).

Nowadays, educational theories and practices have been influenced by the use of corpora and the effect of corpus linguistics is mostly apparent in the areas of vocabulary analysis. Using large electronic collections of texts sampled from actual language use is the main concern of corpus-based approach which may let the researchers have a better classification and identification of vocabulary items

(Spolsky & Francis, 2008).

Learning confusable words needs more practice using novel methods, and there is a need for more investigation in order to find a new strategy and effective approach

for teaching confusable words. This research is going to declare the potency of using a corpus-based approach in teaching confusable words.

1.3 Purpose of the Study

As indicated in the previous section, vocabulary learning is an influential and important part of each language which plays an important role in the improvement of the abilities of learners in different areas and skills such as speaking, reading and writing. Finding new and effective ways of teaching vocabularies is an essential part in pedagogical programs which can improve the efficiency of teaching and learning.

The current research is sought to study the role of corpus in teaching confusable words. The effective nature of each method and approach can be identified when the students can remember what they have learned after a period of time. So, through this study, it is possible to find out the influence of using corpus on word's retention. The frequency of words is another characteristic worth investigation. The role of vocabulary frequency in vocabulary learning was another important purpose of this study.

Exploring the learners' feedbacks and their attitude toward using corpus in learning confusable words constitute another aim of the study. The students express their preferences and contentions on the use of corpus in learning especially on their future learning.

1.4 Research questions

In line with the purpose of study, the current research addressed the following questions: