

Incidental Vocabulary Acquisition: The Effect of Reading and  
Listening to Stories on Vocabulary Acquisition of Iranian EFL  
Students

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## **Dedication**

To my father, who taught me that miracles are possible.

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## Abstract

The purpose of this study was to determine if students could learn vocabulary incidentally through silent reading and listening to stories read aloud to them. The study further aimed at investigating the relative effect of each of these methods on EFL vocabulary acquisition. Two classes of students in Kish Language Institute of Mashhad were the participants of the study. They were forty male EFL learners whose age ranged from 12 to 14. Each class consisted of twenty students. The classes were randomly assigned to experimental and control groups. As for their proficiency level, it was supposed that they were almost at the same level of proficiency, since according to the syllabus of the institute, both classes were in the twelfth grade. Students listened to and read silently a total of four short stories over a period of two weeks. Two tests with a design similar to Nation's Vocabulary Level Test (Nation, 1990) were designed for the purpose of this study. Before implementing the tests in the study, they were piloted to a similar group of students and item facility, item discrimination, and choice distribution, as well as the reliability of the tests was computed. Results from pre tests and post tests administered to the experimental and control groups were compared to see if an increase in their vocabulary knowledge occurred. Results indicated that students learned a significant amount of vocabulary through both methods although a much greater gain was seen through reading short stories silently.

**Key words:** vocabulary acquisition; incidental/ intentional learning; implicit/explicit learning

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## 1.1 Overview

In the area of L2 lexical teaching and learning, one can distinguish two types of vocabulary learning: incidental learning and intentional learning. Incidental learning is defined as "the type of learning that is a by-product of doing or learning something else" (Nation, 1990, p. 34), whereas, intentional learning is defined as "being designed, planned for, or intended by teacher or students themselves" (Nation, 1990, p. 34). In terms of vocabulary learning, incidental learning always means "the approach of learning vocabulary through texts, working on tasks or doing other activities that are not directly related to vocabulary" (Nation, 1990, p. 35). In contrast, intentional learning always "focuses on vocabulary itself, and combines with all kinds of conscious vocabulary learning strategies and means of memorizing words" (Nation, 1990, p. 35). Accordingly, "Vocabulary form, collocation, and parts of speech are mainly the results of incidental learning, while the sense of a word, meaning symbolizing, and innuendo between words need intentional learning" (Nation, 1990, p. 35).

Although acquiring vocabulary incidentally through reading and listening in context fosters an elaborate processing of words and facilitates its retention in memory (Huchin & Bloch, 1993; Nation, 1990; Schouten-Van Parreren, 1992), guessing from context is a complex and often difficult strategy to carry out successfully. As many linguists put it, acquiring the vocabulary incidentally through reading and listening has the following limitations:

Firstly, according to Nation (1990), students have less vocabulary than sufficient for successful incidental learning. He argues that successful guessing in context occurs when about 95% of the lexical items in a text are already known.

Secondly, according to Kelly (1990), inferring word meaning is an error-prone process. He states that "Even if one knows 98% of the words in a text, unless the context is very

constrained, there is little chance of guessing the meaning correctly" (p. 23).

Thirdly, according to Hulstijn (1989), "inferring word meaning is likely to be a very slow process. Considering that many L2 learners have a limited amount of time to learn words, it is not perhaps the most efficient way to approach the task" (p. 12).

Finally, according to Hulstijn (1989), inferring word meaning does not necessarily result in long-term retention.

He further claims that even if a student has enough vocabulary and is exposed to a word in a rich context, acquisition does not automatically result at the first time. What is more, "because guessing from context fails to direct students' attention to word form and meaning at the same time, relatively little learning occurs" (Hulstijn, 1989, p. 29).

To put it in a word, research on learning from context shows that although incidental learning does occur, it has limitations and prerequisites and learning is small and cumulative (Nagy, Herman & Anderson, 1985). This should not be seen as an argument that learning from context is not worthwhile. It is by far one of the most important vocabulary learning strategies and an essential part of any vocabulary learning program. However, focusing on incidental learning alone is not sufficient (Nation, 1990). For fast vocabulary expansion, however, more and more research points to the ineffectiveness of just using incidental vocabulary instruction and the need to accompany it with intentional learning (Haynes, 1993). For instance, the meta-analysis of nearly one hundred independent studies by Stahl and Fairbanks (1986) demonstrates that intentional vocabulary instruction is a useful adjunct to natural learning from context.

## **1.2 Statement of the Problem**

Many research studies show that vocabulary is one of the best indicators of intellectual ability and an accurate predictor of overall verbal intelligence and success at school (Sternberg, 1987). Moreover, a rich vocabulary is a valuable asset and an important attribute in many areas of life, not just in school. Salesmen, politicians, sportscasters, radio personnel, and teachers are only a few professions where a good vocabulary proves to be essential. Moreover, those possessing a strong vocabulary will have other advantages in areas of everyday life such as at social events, meetings and interviews (Huckin & Coady, 1999).

According to A. P. Herbert (n.d.), "words are the tool of thought, and you will often find that you are thinking badly because you are using the wrong tools" (as cited in Ghazanfari, 1994, p.1).

Since possessing a rich vocabulary is so important, the search for more effective methods for vocabulary teaching and learning seems to be a justifiable effort. Researchers differ in their opinions as to which method is the best and produces the best results. Generally, studies on vocabulary acquisition can be classified into two extremes; on the one hand, there are those who believe that vocabulary is acquired for, the most part, incidentally (Jenkins, Matlock, & Slocum, 1989). On the other hand, some researches support the hypothesis that intentional vocabulary acquisition accounts for the most part of vocabulary acquisition in a second or foreign language (Huckin & Coady, 1999).

## **1.3 Significance of the Study**

Compared to grammar and pronunciation, vocabulary (usually viewed as a third language sub skill) has attracted little investigation in second language research (Meara, 1982; Gitsaki, 1992; Prince, 1996). A reason which has been stated for this lack of research interest is that, unlike grammar and pronunciation, vocabulary is not clearly defined by rules

and is therefore not easily operationalized for research purposes (Mehrpour, 2008).

Moreover, for a relatively long period of time vocabulary was viewed as a language subskill that develops in parallel with a major language skill, such as reading and writing (Taylor, 1997).

All the above-noted points reveal the fact that vocabulary acquisition is in desperate need of investigation in both second and foreign language learning situations.

There are two general approaches to vocabulary teaching/learning: incidental and intentional, with their respective techniques (Mehrpour, 2008). In the intentional approach to vocabulary teaching/learning, "decontextualizing techniques such as word lists, and flash cards are employed" (Mehrpour, 2008, p. 56). In incidental approach, "contextualizing techniques like listening and reading practice are utilized". (Mehrpour, 2008, p. 56) . A review of the related literature revealed the fact that there is no consensus of opinions on the superiority of intentional approach to vocabulary teaching/learning over the incidental approach or vice versa.

The present study holds significance in that it has tried to shed more light on this issue by focusing on two techniques which are widely used in incidental approaches to vocabulary teaching/learning, that is, reading stories silently, and listening to short stories read aloud.

#### **1.4 Research Questions**

The researcher has tried to find answer to the following questions in this study:

- 1) Is there any improvement in EFL learners' vocabulary proficiency knowledge after they read short stories silently?
- 2) Is there any improvement in EFL learners' vocabulary proficiency knowledge after they listen to short stories read aloud to them?

- 3) Which of the two procedures of reading short stories silently by EFL learners or listening to short stories read aloud to them is more effective in improving their lexical proficiency?

## 1.5 Research Hypotheses

The following hypotheses were formulated on the basis of research questions:

H<sub>0</sub>1: There is no improvement in EFL learners' lexical proficiency knowledge after they read short stories silently.

H<sub>0</sub>2: There is no improvement in EFL learners' lexical proficiency knowledge after listening to short stories read aloud to them.

H<sub>0</sub>3: There is no significant difference between the amount of vocabulary knowledge gained after EFL learners read short stories silently by themselves as compared to when they listen to short stories read aloud to them by the teacher.

## 1.6 Definition of Terms

**Implicit Learning.** Implicit learning, according to Hulstijn (1989), is "learning of complex information in an incidental manner, without awareness of what has been learned" (p. 24). It may require a certain minimal amount of attention and may depend on intentional and working memory mechanisms. The result of implicit learning is implicit knowledge in the form of abstract (but possibly instantiated) representations rather than verbatim or aggregate representations.

There are clear similarities between implicit learning and implicit memory. However, Ellis (1994) claims that implicit learning differs from explicit learning in terms of the presence or absence of consciously accessible knowledge. Much evidence supports the

distinction between implicit and explicit learning (Hulstijn, 1989). In addition, brain areas involved in working memory and attention are often more active during explicit than implicit learning (Ellis 1994).

In Hulstijn's article on implicit and explicit second language learning, implicit learning is initially defined as "without teaching and without conscious inductions" (Hulstijn, 1989, p. 49), while it is also stressed that implicit lexical learning does in fact require the learner's attention to word form and meaning.

**Explicit Learning.** Current definitions of explicit learning originate in the field of psychology. These definitions generally focus on the absence or presence of conscious operations as a crucial distinguishing factor, which is in line with Ellis' terminology. Explicit learning is typically defined as "acquisition of knowledge about the underlying structure of a complex stimulus environment by a process which takes place intentionally, simply and with conscious operation", (Ellis, 1994, p. 34).

Explicit learning is said to be characterized by "more conscious operation where the individual makes and tests hypotheses in a search for structure" (Ellis, 1994, p. 40).

**Incidental Vocabulary Acquisition.** Incidental vocabulary acquisition is the process of learning vocabulary without the intention of doing so. It is also learning one thing while intending to learn another (Richards & Schmidt, 2002). In terms of language acquisition, incidental vocabulary acquisition is said to be an effective way of learning vocabulary from context (Day, Omura, & Hiramatsu, 1991)

A general problem with the operational definition of incidental vocabulary acquisition given above is that it seems to suggest that incidental learning occurs unconsciously. As Gass (1999) notes, however, defining incidental vocabulary acquisition as the *side-effect* of another activity neglects the active role of the learner in this process. The fact that learning



occurs as a by-product of reading does not automatically imply that it does not involve any conscious processes. The seeming equation of *incidental* with *unconscious* is also criticized by Ellis (1994), who states that incidental vocabulary acquisition is non-explicit in so far as it does not involve an explicit learning intention (the overall goal of the learner is text comprehension), but that neither the process nor the product of such learning is necessarily implicit in the sense of non-conscious.

The fact that incidental vocabulary acquisition takes place in second language learning is generally acknowledged among researchers. Most scholars agree that except for the first few thousand most common words, L2 vocabulary is predominantly acquired incidentally (Huckin & Coady, 1999). However, as for an exact definition and characterization of the processes and mechanisms involved in this phenomenon, many questions remain unsettled.

**Intentional Vocabulary Acquisition.** Intentional vocabulary acquisition is defined as "being designed, planned for or intended by teacher or students. It always focuses on vocabulary itself, and combines with all kinds of conscious vocabulary strategies and means of memorizing words" (Nation, 1990, p. 74). Nation 1990 further believes that: "sense of word, meaning symbolizing, and innuendo between words need intentional learning" (p. 75).

**Extensive Reading.** There is a strong connection between incidental vocabulary learning and extensive reading, perhaps because of the definition of extensive reading. According Powel (2005), extensive reading is a "pleasurable reading situation where a teacher encourages students to choose what they want to read for themselves from reading materials at a level they can understand" (p. 29). Krashen's *comprehension hypothesis* claimed that comprehensible input is a necessary and sufficient condition for language development, and extensive reading provides this condition. Through the provision of engaging language-

learner literature, extensive reading programs aim to develop reading fluency, and reading skills in general, while at the same time consolidate knowledge of previously met grammatical structures and vocabulary.

**Intensive Reading.** According to Yueping and Xiangming (2006) intensive reading is a kind of reading in which:

Course normally covers a limited number of texts a semester, but thoroughly and slowly. The course does not focus on teaching reading skills, but rather on the training

of integrated language skills. As far as reading comprehension is concerned, intensive reading deals with comprehension mostly at lexical and syntactic levels.

(p. 80)

## **2.1 Overview**

The chapter begins with a review of the literature about the role of vocabulary in the acquisition of a second or foreign language. The discussion is followed with a review of literature on different ways through which vocabulary in a second or foreign language is acquired. Next, some empirical studies are mentioned to answer the question of how much vocabulary does EFL/ESL students have or need at different language acquisition levels. The chapter ends with an in depth review of the empirical studies on the incidental vocabulary acquisition.

## **2.2 The Role of Vocabulary in Language Learning and Teaching**

The crucial role that lexis plays in second language learning and teaching has been repeatedly acknowledged in theoretical and empirical second language acquisition (SLA) vocabulary research. In the introduction to his seminal work on the mental lexicon, Singleton (1991) states that "the major challenge of learning and using a language -whether as L1 or as L2- lies not in the area of broad syntactic principles but in the lexicon" (p. 4). Ellis and Sinclair (1996) argue that "the heart of language comprehension and use is the lexicon" (p. 243). Other researchers have gone even further in arguing that "the single most important task facing language learners is acquiring a sufficient large vocabulary" (Ludwig, 1984, p. 557), or that "the most striking differences between foreign learners and native speakers is in the quantity of words each group possesses" (Laufer, 1988, p. 113).

Numerous studies have revealed that the English language proficiency of second language learners correlates with their vocabulary learning (Gu & Johnson, 1996; August, Carlo & Dressler, 2005).

Learning a second language largely means learning its vocabulary, as "vocabulary skills make a significant contribution to almost all aspects of second language proficiency" (Gu &

Johnson, 1996, p. 647). Similarly, Lewis (2002) emphasizes that "The single most important task facing language learner is acquiring a sufficient large vocabulary" (p. 34).

According to Brutton (1981), there is significant correlation between "English vocabulary knowledge, listening comprehension, syntactic skills, and the ability to handle metalinguistic aspects of language, such as providing definitions of words" (p. 69).

Hasbun (2006) maintains that "There seems to be a very close relationship between vocabulary knowledge and a students' proficiency in a second or foreign language" (p. 38).

Although proficiency in second or foreign language is not determined by vocabulary knowledge alone, it plays a pivotal role. "By far the greatest lexical obstacle to language proficiency is insufficient number of words in the learner's lexicon. Lexis is the best predictor of success in second or foreign language learning, better than syntax or general reading ability" (Laufer, 1997, cited in Hasbun, 2006, p. 38 ).

Hasbun (2006) conducted a study with twenty-five EFL college students to determine whether there is significant vocabulary development if vocabulary is explicitly and systematically taught in a reading course. Results indicated that there was a significant difference for 42 (87.5%) of the words tested. Of the six remaining words, half were never studied in class. In other words, there was no significant gain for only three of the words systematically practiced, that is, most of the students were able to recognize most of the words. As a matter of fact, 31 out of 39 words taught were recognized by at least 80% of the students.

### **2.3 How Is Vocabulary Acquired?**

In the area of second language acquisition, vocabulary is acquired in a variety of ways. Schmitt and Meara (2002, cited in Schmitt, 2002) classified words into two groups, that is, high frequency and low frequency words. They maintained that high frequency words "need