In the Name of the Almighty

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The Effect of Incidental Vocabulary Learning on Vocabulary Retention and Recall: A Case of Iranian EFL Learners

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To My Wonderful Parents,

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and

To My Kind Brother and Sister

Abstract

This research aimed at investigating the relationship between incidental vocabulary learning, type of tasks, time devoted on tasks, and vocabulary retention of EFL university students. The following research questions were addressed in this study: (1) Are tasks with a higher involvement load (i.e., writing) more effective for vocabulary retention than tasks with a lower involvement load (i.e., reading comprehension and reading in the form of cloze)? (2) What is the difference in the performance of the students considering the time devoted to each task? Or do participants perform differently on different tasks when time restriction is a major factor? (3) Do the performances of the participants on the immediate test of recall differ from theirs on the delayed test?

To provide plausible answers for the aforementioned questions, 67 EFL university students were selected to participate in the study. After matching the participants on their proficiency by a TOEFL test, they were then divided into two groups with three sub groups in each. The participants were all given three different tasks to perform, such as MC reading comprehension, reading in the form of cloze, and composition writing. Then, for each task, they took an immediate vocabulary test and later a delayed one to test their retention.

In order to analyze the obtained data, three statistical procedures such as one-way analysis of variance, two-way analysis of variance, and paired sample t-test were run. As a result, the study came to significant findings: (1) The results indicated that the more the involvement loads of a task, the better the vocabulary retention in both immediate and delayed vocabulary tests. (2) Regarding the second question, the participants who performed the tasks without time restriction had a better performance in the immediate and delayed vocabulary tests than the participants who performed the tasks with time restriction. (3) Substantial learning cannot be expected with one exposure to target items, however "involving" a task is. That is task efficacy of vocabulary learning is largely constrained by the lapse of time between the two tests, regardless of the length of the initial exposure to the target words.
The results of this study show that vocabulary retention is higher in the students performing the task with a higher involvement load (writing). The findings of this study can be help for both English teachers and EFL students.

Key Words:
Incidental Vocabulary Learning; Involvement Load; Task; Vocabulary Retention

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List of Abbreviations

EFL	English as a Foreign Language
ESL	English as a Second Language
L2	Second Language
MC	Multiple Choice
TOEFL	Test of English as a Foreign Language

CHAPTER ONE
Introduction

1.1. Overview

Many learners of a second or foreign language feel concerned with the burden of vocabulary learning and worry about how to tackle the formidable task of learning many thousands of words. For learners at the beginning level, intentional and explicit learning of new lexical items generally accounts for most of their vocabulary knowledge, as their insufficient vocabulary largely inhibits them from acquiring new words incidentally via extensive reading. Explicit attention of the beginners is directed toward the various aspects of word features (e.g., form, meaning, and use), which are to be imprinted on the

memory of the learners with deliberate attempts, whether they are learned through rote learning or other vocabulary exercises. This exclusive dependence on intentional learning, nonetheless, fails to address the needs for intermediate and advanced learners, who in general process new pieces of information in a second language not so much to acquire specific words as to glean meanings from visual and verbal input. For instance, intermediate and advanced learners may read extensively for pleasure or use a second language for communication, yet they may well "pick up" certain words in the process of such endeavors—a condition termed incidental vocabulary learning, as the acquisition of the words is but a by-product of another main cognitive activity (Hulstijn, 2001). Since the laborious nature of intentional learning precludes the possibility of its being a major means of cultivating a large-sized lexicon, the incidental-learning mode manifests as a viable alternative for vocabulary development. A large number of studies have been done to enhance the incidence of incidental vocabulary learning and thereby vocabulary retention, like marginal glosses, dictionary use while reading, reading for pleasure, and so on. It is also believed that deep elaboration on the meaning of an unknown word positively affects incidental vocabulary learning (Hulstijn, 1992; Watanabe, 1992). Thus inferred meanings are remembered slightly better than given meanings.

Nevertheless, an investigation into the research on vocabulary acquisition reveals an eminent precedence accorded to the intentional-learning mode. Empirical studies and reviews probing the efficacy of intentional learning are in great abundance (e.g., Dickinson, 1978; Konopak et al., 1987). However, the primary emphasis on intentional learning clearly runs counter to most human learning, which is cogently argued to occur incidentally (e.g., Eysenck, 1982). A neutral stance is also

advanced, which contends that these two learning modes should be regarded as complementary rather than dichotomous (N. Schmidt, 2000). Thus, it may be justified to claim that incidental learning in its own right merits further investigation.

Furthermore, the appeal for a keen research interest in incidental learning is recently responded by a major strand of research on vocabulary acquisition from context (e.g., Coady, 1997b; Konopak et al., 1987; Nation & Coady, 1988; Prince, 1996; Swanborn & de Glopper, 2002), which accommodates rigorous theoretical as well as empirical interest in the relationship between incidental vocabulary learning and extensive reading. Drawing on the results of this line of enquiry, the investigation of incidental vocabulary acquisition gains fresh insights from research on textual aids (Herman, Anderson, Pearson & Nagy, 1987; Hulstijn, 1992; Watanabe, 1997), on dictionary use (Cho & Krashen, 1994; Hulstijn, Hollander & Greidanus, 1996; Knight, 1994; Luppescu & Day, 1993), and, akin to the nature of the present study, on tasks (Joe, 1995, 1998; Paribakht & Wesche, 1997; Wesche & Parabakht, 2000). In search of a plausible explanation for the superior effect of one approach or task over another, researchers sometimes claim that the benefits may be attributable to the greater depth of processing (Craik & Lockhart, 1972) that one approach or task induces than the other.

Therefore, the present study aimed to examine whether retention of vocabulary acquired incidentally differs among various tasks and times. Accordingly, three tasks (reading comprehension, reading comprehension in the form of cloze and writing) are designed and compared with moderator variable of time-on-task in the current study to investigate the efficacy of these tasks on vocabulary retention.

1.2. Statement of the Problem

Knowing words is the key to understanding and being understood. After decades of relative neglect, lexis is now recognized as central to any language process. Research has shown that intermediate and advanced L2 learners enlarge their vocabulary to a great extent through incidental learning during reading activities (Huckin & Coady, 1999). Incidental vocabulary learning does indeed take place but only incrementally and in small quantities. Thus, given the undeniable usefulness of incidental vocabulary learning for the improvement of automatic word recognition and vocabulary enlargement, the educationally relevant question remains as how this incidence of incidental vocabulary learning can be improved for the best retention of vocabulary items. Current directions in cognitive and sociocultural educational psychology stress an activity-driven perspective on learning (e.g. Arievitch & Haenen, 2005; Bransford, Brown & Cocking, 2000; Bruer, 1993). That is, a student constructs knowledge through his/her own (mental) actions. Knowledge of a second language can not be 'transmitted'; the students themselves must perform some kind of action in order to acquire it.

One way of promoting student (mental) activity in the classroom is through the use of tasks. There is not one single, generally accepted definition of a task (Bygate, Skehan & Swain, 2001, R. Ellis, 2003; Littlewood, 2004). Littlewood (2004) proposes two dimensions along which these existing definitions of tasks can be classified. These dimensions are degrees of focus on form or meaning and degrees of task involvement. The latter deals with 'the learner's active personal involvement with the task' (p. 323). Littlewood indicates that although there is a general agreement about learner involvement, i.e., it should be as high as possible; it is still not clear how this can be achieved. Task-based

research has studied a number of task properties that are conducive to second language learning and that might result in higher learner involvement (e.g. Bygate, Skehan & Swain, 2001). In the 80s and 90s, a substantial part of task-based research was based on Long's Interaction Hypothesis (1981). A number of task properties that could facilitate interaction were studied (for an overview of these studies, see e.g. Crookes & Gass, 1993; Ellis, 2003b; Gass, Mackey & Pica, 1998; Pica 1994). Examples of task properties that enhance interaction are information gaps and paired student interaction (Doughty & Pica, 1986) and convergent tasks (Duff, 1986). According to Skehan (2002), more recently the research focus has shifted towards task properties that promote some kind of Focus on Form. Examples are the effects of planning (Foster & Skehan, 1996), task repetition (Bygate, 2001), and degree of explicitness (Rosa & Leow, 2004).

On the basis of the theoretical background, it is hypothesize that these task properties are still too broad to account for and to predict task effectiveness in a precise way. Task effectives can also be operationalized by taking into account the way in which the content to be learned is processed. In this perspective, different types of processing are considered key component of task effectiveness. Craik & Lockhart (1972) introduced the Depth-of-Processing Hypothesis, which predicts that amount of retention is related to deep and meaningful processing. For example, semantic processing is 'deeper' than phonological processing and thus leads to better retention. However, the concept of depth-of-processing has proved difficult to operationalize (Baddeley, 1997). Laufer and Hulstijn (2001) take a step in that direction, and propose the Involvement-Load Hypothesis, which specifies a number of factors that lead to 'deep' processing. This hypothesis predicts that the effectiveness of incidental