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**The Effect of Gloss Types on Vocabulary Learning by Iranian EFL
learners**

A THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS
FOR THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF ARTS IN TEACHING ENGLISH AS A
FOREIGN LANGUAGE

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Abstract

This study was undertaken to investigate the effect of textual glossing, specifically L2 Single glosses and L2 Multiple-choice glosses, on reading comprehension and vocabulary learning of EFL learners. 102 civil engineering students studying at Islamic Azad University of Mashhad were chosen. Participants read an English text under three different conditions: L2 Single Gloss, L2 Multiple-choice Gloss, and No Gloss. The participants read the text for comprehension; the experimental groups were able to consult the glosses attached to the text. Having answered the comprehension questions, the participants received an immediate vocabulary test to check their incidental vocabulary learning and vocabulary recall. To assess their vocabulary retention, the test was repeated two weeks later. At the end, two questions were asked to find out learners' preferences for the two gloss types. The findings revealed that glossing significantly affected reading comprehension; furthermore, L2 Single glossing was proven as a more facilitative type for text comprehension. The participants who had glosses outperformed their peers on vocabulary recall and retention. While there was no statistical difference between the types in vocabulary recall, participants with access to L2 Multiple-choice glossing retained more words and performed significantly better in vocabulary retention, confirming *Mental Effort Hypothesis* and *Involvement Load Hypothesis* (Laufer & Hulstijn, 2001). Results of two questions demonstrated that participants give preferences to L2 Single glossing in contrast to their actual performances.

Keywords: Glossing, Incidental vocabulary learning, Reading comprehension, Vocabulary recall, Vocabulary retention.

Dedication

Dedicated to my mother for her patience, understanding and emotional support; also to my father for instilling the importance of hard work and higher education.

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List of Abbreviations

EFL: English as a Foreign Language

L1: First Language

L2: Second Language

TOEFL: Test of English as a Foreign Language

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

1.1. Introduction

Several studies have revealed the advantage of having glosses for text comprehension and vocabulary learning (Jacobs, 1994; Ko, 2005; Lomicka, 1998; Watanabe, 1997). However, few attempts have been made to explore the vocabulary glosses used by Iranian university students, particularly non-English majors. This chapter begins with a background related to the topic. Then the statement of the problem and the significance of the study are presented. The latter is followed by research questions and hypotheses. The chapter will end with stating some of the study's limitations.

1.2. Background

For many university students who study foreign languages as a part of their general education, reading comprehension and vocabulary learning have been considered as essential skills for their language learning. Research has revealed that there is a relation between vocabulary knowledge and reading comprehension (Nagy, Herman, & Anderson, 1985; Nation & Coady, 1988). In other words, reading functions as both the cause and the result of vocabulary learning. On the one hand, learners

should have a minimum size of vocabulary knowledge for comprehending a text; on the other hand, they depend on contextual clues to guess the meanings correctly.

Learners are frequently impeded by too many unfamiliar words during acquisition of either first language or foreign language. However, this obstacle is more considerable in foreign language learning contexts where reading is a main source of vocabulary growth (Nagy & Herman, 1987; Seal, 1991).

While memorizing word meanings deliberately (L1 translation, for example) are a traditional way for vocabulary teaching, teaching vocabulary through context has become a new strategy. Nation (2001) claimed that a fixed core of word meanings cannot be enough for language use. He stated that presenting new words in context may demonstrate a broader view of how words can be applied. Contexts, moreover, provide a chance of meaning inferring. That is, when learners encountered unfamiliar word in a text, they are supposed to get the meaning based on the contextual clues.

Krashen (1989) supports vocabulary acquisition from reading. He assumed that words can be learned while learners are attempting to comprehend the text. Empirical studies later revealed that incidental vocabulary learning takes place through reading (Duppy & Krashen, 1993; Knight, 1994; Nagy et al., 1985; Pitts, White, & Krashen, 1989).

Nevertheless, some studies (Nagy & Herman, 1987; Parry, 1993) indicate that vocabulary learning from reading is not always effective. In Hulstijn, Hollander and Greidanus (1996) study, learners often failed to learn the meaning of newly encountered words from reading. Several reasons can be mentioned: presence of unfamiliar words was ignored by readers, students inferred meanings of unfamiliar words incorrectly, and contextual clues were inadequate to guess the word meaning.

To solve these problems, vocabulary glosses were introduced (Hulstijn, 1992). The subsequent research (Ko, 2005; Lomicka, 1998; Paribakht & Wesche, 1997; Watanabe, 1997) pointed out that glossing enhance reading comprehension as well as vocabulary learning. Nation (2001) noted that text with glosses makes the process uninterrupted. Glosses not only decrease incorrect inferencing, but also draw learner's attention to the unfamiliar words and promote use of more difficult authentic texts (Nagata, 1999).

However, the effects of glossing on reading comprehension and vocabulary learning have brought mixed results. For reading comprehension, some indicated significant effect of glossing on reading comprehension (Davis, 1989; Jacobs, 1994), whereas some Jacobs, Dufon, and Fong (1994) found no significant effect. On the part of vocabulary growth, provision of glosses found to be effective for immediate recalls (Hulstijn, 1992; Hulstijn et al., 1996; Watanabe, 1997) but the effect decreased the following weeks.

Providing a text with glosses minimizes the difficulties arising from insufficient context and lessens the probable incorrect inferences. However, its effect is limited to immediate recall. Then, how about vocabulary retention? Hulstijn (1992) recommended the use of multiple-choice glosses to overcome this problem and increase the learners' mental processing which was diminished by provision of single glosses.

Multiple-choice glosses together with *mental effort hypothesis* were proposed by Hulstijn (1992). The hypothesis states that inferencing requires mental effort; consequently the greater the mental effort, the better the recall and retention of new information.

In multiple-choice gloss, multiple alternatives are given for an unfamiliar word, either in the margin or within the text. Having searched and evaluated all the

alternatives of a multiple-choice gloss, learners are supposed to infer the correct option. Since this process requires mental effort for deducting word meanings, it is expected to lead to long term retention of the new lexical item. A number of studies have investigated the effects of multiple-choice glosses. Some suggested the superiority of multiple-choice glossing over single glossing for vocabulary retention (Hulstijn, 1992; Watanabe, 1997), others reported no difference between the two types (Rott, William, & Cameron, 2002; Rott & William, 2003).

Although previous studies examined the effect of different types of glosses on reading comprehension and incidental vocabulary learning, the findings remained inconclusive and required further research.

1.3. Statement of the Problem

Various techniques are available to present and introduce new vocabulary in a text. Dictionary use and guessing from context are two common ways. In case of dictionary use, looking up unknown words distract the readers' attention and interrupt the process of reading. In addition, there is a possibility of choosing inappropriate meaning, since several meanings are given for a single word. In case of guessing from context, also there is a possibility of incorrect inferences for a reader. Therefore, glossing is introduced as a means to eliminating those limitations.

Since Davis (1989) noted a single unfamiliar word can make a sentence or passage "incomprehensible", glossing is used widely in different EFL textbooks. Very few textbooks used by Iranian university students are also provided with glosses. Some textbook writers noticed the value of glossing which assist learners to deal with unfamiliar words and comprehend a text more easily.

In our country, textbooks usually provide L1 (Farsi) glosses or even when it is provided in L2 (English), the learners supply the L1 translation for unfamiliar word. The fact that many university students use these self-made L1 glosses indicates that they consider L2 glosses insufficient, also suggests that they feel psychologically insecure about understanding the meaning until they relate them to their mother tongue. This problem may arise from the improper glossing, that is the definition or a synonym given for unfamiliar word is above learner's level of proficiency. However, providing L1 glosses is in contrast to Krashen's Input Hypothesis. Therefore, the current study was designed to determine whether L2 vocabulary glosses can assist intermediate learners in reading comprehension and incidental vocabulary learning if so which type of glossing is more effective.

1.4. Significance of the Study

For many students reading well and acquiring a sizable vocabulary are recognized as their fundamental goal in the development of L2 proficiency (Harley, 1996). L2 texts aided with vocabulary glosses may improve learners' vocabulary knowledge and enhance reading comprehension at the same time. The current study tries to find out if Iranian university students can acquire vocabulary and read effectively with the assistance of glossing.

It is expected that non-English major students can benefit the use of the vocabulary glosses for efficient reading and vocabulary learning. Vocabulary glosses play a vital role in bridging the gap between L2 text and L2 learners' limited vocabulary knowledge. Vocabulary glosses can assist learners to handle unfamiliar words and enhance reading fluency. As a result, learners may not be interrupted by unknown words and achieve success in reading. Furthermore, providing learners with

vocabulary glosses is an aid to reading comprehension and vocabulary learning which is similar to providing students with strategies to achieve self-study in learning.

Instructors and textbook writers can benefit from the findings of this study. Most EFL instructors have the experience of employing vocabulary glosses in order to help non-English majors undertake the reading process more smoothly. EFL textbook writers may also desire to know which type of vocabulary glosses can help university students. It is hoped that the findings can be helpful in the sphere of syllabus design, too.

1.5. Purpose of the Study

This study aimed at investigating the effect of different types of vocabulary glosses, especially L2 single glosses and L2 multiple-choice glosses, on learners' reading comprehension, vocabulary gain and vocabulary retention. Therefore, the purpose was to compare gloss condition with non-gloss condition, as well as L2 single gloss versus L2 multiple-choice gloss conditions. Moreover, the researcher tried to elicit the subjects' attitudes toward vocabulary glosses and reported a type of glossing they preferred.

1.5.1. Research questions and hypotheses.

The following questions were addressed in the study:

1. Does access to glosses (i.e., L2 Single glosses and L2 Multiple-choice glosses) make any significant differences on Iranian EFL learners' reading comprehension and incidental vocabulary learning?
2. Do different types of glosses (i.e., L2 Single glosses and L2 Multiple-choice glosses) make different contributions to Iranian EFL learners' performance on reading comprehension?

3. Do the two gloss types (i.e., L2 Single glosses and L2 Multiple-choice glosses) affect Iranian EFL learners' performance on recall and retention of vocabulary?

4. Do Iranian EFL learners have special preferences to either type of glossing?

To answer these research questions, the following null hypotheses were formulated:

1. There is no significant difference on Iranian EFL learners' reading comprehension and incidental vocabulary learning when glosses are available.

2. There is no relationship between different types of glosses (i.e., L2 Single glosses and L2 Multiple-choice glosses) and Iranian EFL learners' performance on reading comprehension.

3. There is no relationship between gloss types (i.e., L2 Single glosses and L2 Multiple-choice glosses) and Iranian EFL learners' performance on recall and retention of vocabulary.

4. Iranian EFL learners do not have special preferences to either type of glossing.

1.6. Definition of Key Terms

1.6.1. Incidental vocabulary learning.

Most researchers agree that L2 vocabulary is mostly learned incidentally, except the first few thousand most common words (Huckin & Coady, 1999). Schmidt (1994) says that incidental vocabulary learning refers to the learning without an intention to learn, or as the learning of one thing, e.g. vocabulary, when the learner's primary objective is to do something else, to communicate (as cited in Xu, 2010, p. 117). Incidental vocabulary learning could be defined as the by-product of another activity,