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Ladies of
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دانشگاه شهید باهنر کرمان

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**The Effect of Semantic Mapping as a
Pre-reading and
Post-reading Activity on EFL Learners'
Vocabulary Retention**

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Hereby, we recommend that this thesis submitted by *Minoo Ghassabizadeh* be accepted as a partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Science in Teaching English as a Foreign Language (M.Sc.).

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To My Parents

&

My Husband

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"The best of life is that which ever reaches upward and strives toward better things." (Miller, as cited in Schutz, 2001). We should never give up trying to be better than what we are. This goal may not be achieved unless we do our best to improve our knowledge day by day to meet the needs of those who need our knowledge, and find the ways of transferring our knowledge to them. The current research study was an attempt to serve all who look for a way to facilitate learning the vocabulary items of a foreign language in an efficient way.

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Abstract

The present research was conducted to examine the effect of semantic mapping on EFL intermediate learners' vocabulary retention. The design of the study involved two conditions, control and treatment, with pre-testing and post-testing.

To carry out the study two intact classes from Baft Azad University were selected and were given the Nelson Test to confirm their homogeneity. The total number of the participants who got involved in this study after administering the Nelson Test was 64 (32 in each group).

In the experimental group the students were trained to use semantic maps before and after reading a text. In the control group, on the other hand, the students followed the routine of their class time and did not use the semantic mapping technique at all.

At the end of the experiment both groups took the post-test and the mean scores of the two groups were compared by means of an independent t-test. The analysis of the results revealed that the experimental group outscored the control one, and the difference between their performances was statistically significant.

This strongly suggests that the semantic mapping technique is highly effective in promoting EFL intermediate learners' vocabulary knowledge.

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Chapter one: Introduction

1.1. Overview

It is no secret that vocabulary knowledge is the main component of language, and its importance and priority to language acquisition is undeniable. Coady and Huckin (1997) stated that, "Vocabulary is central to language and of critical importance to typical language learner" (p.5). As a matter of fact, without sufficient mental lexicon storage one would not be able to contact with language and other people. The lexical competence is at the very heart of communicative competence - the ability to communicate successfully and appropriately- (Coady & Huckin, 1997). Richards and Renandya (2002) suggested that vocabulary knowledge plays a primary role in communication and acquisition. They also pointed out that vocabulary provides much of the basis for how well learners speak, listen, read, and write. Therefore, limited vocabulary knowledge is considered as a block to language learning and prevents a learner from communicating effectively (Zhihong, 2000).

Regarding the importance of vocabulary knowledge in the process of language learning, many studies are conducted to find the best way of teaching and learning lexical items. In fact, without an extensive vocabulary and strategies for learning new

lexical items, learners may be discouraged from making use of language learning opportunities (Richards & Renandya, 2002). In this regard a wide variety of techniques and strategies are proposed by different scholars. Hunt and Beglar (as cited in Richards & Renandya, 2002) discuss three approaches to vocabulary learning: incidental vocabulary learning, explicit instruction, and independent strategy development, but Nation (2001) argues a systematic rather than an incidental approach to the teaching of vocabulary and points out that vocabulary instruction should be integrated into other components of language such as listening, speaking, reading, and writing. These approaches have proposed different techniques. Semantic mapping, which is the focus of the present study, has been proposed as a useful technique to promote vocabulary learning (Brown & Perry, 1991; Crow & Quigley, 1985; Zaid, 1995).

1.2. Statement of the problem

Vocabulary teaching and learning has always been a challenge to foreign language teachers and learners. For many years little attention was paid to techniques for helping students learn vocabulary. Some believed that there was no need to teach many words before students had got mastery on grammar and sound system of the language (Allen, 1983). In fact, teaching and learning vocabulary were undervalued. It was supposed that learning vocabulary is simply memorizing long lists of new

words along with their mother tongue equivalents (Brown, 2001). After a period of half a century, the tables were turned and vocabulary has changed in status from a neglected aspect of language learning to an area of growing research and publication (Richards & Renandya, 2002). There are now theories of L2 vocabulary learning and a wide range of vocabulary teaching techniques available. Therefore, through increasing interest in vocabulary investigation many traditional techniques and strategies of teaching and learning vocabulary have been discarded. As an example, rote memorization of long lists has been replaced by techniques which lead to meaningful learning. White (1988) stated that in the field of vocabulary teaching it has long been recognized that learning vocabulary is not simply memorizing long lists of discrete items that can be mapped onto mother-tongue equivalents but the words should be used within associative networks because knowledge of the relationship between words is important not only for learning the meaning of the word but also for developing the ability to use the words appropriately. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to investigate the effect of semantic mapping as a meaningful tool of presenting lexical items on EFL intermediate learners' vocabulary retention.

1.3. Objectives of the study

Reviewing the literature related to investigations done on vocabulary, one learns a vast variety of techniques introduced to facilitate efficient vocabulary

learning. Semantic mapping is one out of numerous techniques proposed up to now. However, using this technique in a variety of studies through out the vocabulary literature shows contradictory results. In other words, some have come to this conclusion that semantic mapping enhances vocabulary development, but others have failed to get results in favor of this technique.

However, the number of proponents of this technique is somehow higher. They believe that the negative results obtained in some studies are attributed to ignoring some conditions that should have been taken into consideration to get favorable results while applying semantic maps. As an example, learners' unfamiliarity with this technique may result in counterproductive results. Most of studies which got negative results suffered from the students' lack of enough and appropriate instruction of semantic maps (Hall & Strangman, 2002).

The present study attempts to examine the effect of semantic mapping on vocabulary retention through following the recommended conditions to shed light on these discrepancies. In fact, it is going to examine whether EFL learners who use semantic maps both before and after reading a text outperform those who do not use this technique at all, and whether they learn more vocabulary items or not.

1.3.1. Research question

This study was carried out to seek the answer of the following research question:

Are there any significant differences between the performances of EFL intermediate students who use semantic mapping as a pre-reading and a post-reading activity and those who do not use this technique at all?

1. 4. Significance of the study

The priority of vocabulary acquisition in the process of foreign or second language learning itself implies the significance of this study. All who deal with foreign or second language learning or teaching are somehow aware of the critical role of vocabulary in learning another language appropriately. Allen (1983) stated that the need for vocabulary to learn a language is the point in which both teachers and learners agree.

As a matter of fact, lack of sufficient vocabulary knowledge hinders communication. According to a number of research studies carried out in this area, lexical problems break down communication (Allen, 1983). Therefore, with regard to the main goal of the present-day foreign or second language instruction which is enabling learners to use the language properly, the importance of vocabulary as a vital means of successful communication becomes evident. This implies that

vocabulary deserves spending time and investigations because vocabulary improvement is closely related to language learning.

Traditionally, vocabulary learning was simply limited to memorizing long lists of lexical items along with their L1 equivalents. Gradually much attention was paid to vocabulary and efficient ways of learning lexical items. Therefore, rote memorization was replaced by meaningful learning and different techniques were proposed in this regard.

Regarding all these facts, the results of the present study that is an attempt to test the effectiveness of a meaningful tool, semantic mapping, on vocabulary retention is likely to shed light on a small part of literature dealing with profitable ways of vocabulary development. They will also serve both teachers and learners suffering from lack of profitable ways of teaching and learning vocabulary and those who are looking for a way of facilitating vocabulary learning in an enjoyable way. White (1988) noted that knowledge of the relationships between words, on which the foundation of semantic maps is based, is important both for learning the meaning of the words and for developing the ability to use them properly.

On the whole, the technique of semantic mapping makes vocabulary learning a more meaningful, communicative, and creative process on the part of the EFL learners for whom L2 vocabulary learning has the most nerve-racking challenge. It will also introduce EFL teachers a novel communicative approach to teaching L2

vocabulary. Additionally, it will eliminate the problem of students' failure to use the vocabulary they have learned in a productive way. Last but not least, it is assumed that the findings of this study can be of significant importance to the field of EFL material development in general and vocabulary presentation in particular.

1.5. Definition of key terms

1.5.1. Semantic Mapping

Semantic mapping comes under a vast variety of names with different applications. Their primary use has been to assist in the elucidation of the relationship between concepts in situations under study. They are sometimes called as semantic networks, knowledge maps, concept maps, story maps, cognitive organizers, advance organizers, graphic organizers, concept diagrams, structured overviews, and so on (Hall & Stragman, 2002). However, any of these terms is used for specific purposes. As an example, the terms "semantic maps" or "semantic networks" are mostly used in the studies dealing with vocabulary instruction or acquisition.

A semantic map consists of a series of boxes containing labels (concepts). Arrows connecting boxes assist in explaining the perceived interrelationship between concepts and an arrowhead denotes the direction of the relationship. In fact, the result of a semantic map is a series of words laid out in a graphical representation, with reciprocal connections and links (Novak & Gowin, 1984).

Formal definitions can also be given such as: semantic mapping is "a visual and graphic display that depicts the relationships between facts, terms and ideas within a learning task" (Hall & Strangeman, 2002, p.2); "a visual representation of knowledge, a picture of conceptual relationship" (Antonacci, 1991, p.174); "a graphic arrangement showing the major ideas and relationships in text or among word meanings" (Sinatra, Stahl-Gemake, & Berg, 1984, p. 22); "the process of discovering the sense relations or intentional links between words" (Henriksen, 1999). Generally speaking, concept maps are considered as visual aids used to represent the semantic relationships between lexical items (see appendix II).

1.5.2. Vocabulary retention

Vocabulary retention is defined as "the ability to recall or remember things after an interval of time. It may depend on the quality of teaching, the interest of learners or the meaningfulness of the material." (Richards, Platt, & Platt, as cited in Ahmadi, 2005, p. 20).

1.6. Limitations of the study

The present research, like other similar research studies suffers from certain shortcomings as follow:

- True randomization was not possible because of the fact that there was an access only to intact classes.