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The Study of Vocabulary Awareness Effect on Intermediate Language Learner's Depth of Vocabulary Knowledge

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Abstract: Every single day, we use spoken and written words to communicate thoughts, ideas and emotions. Sometimes, we are successful in communication and sometimes we are not quite successful. We can say what we mean by use of good vocabulary knowledge. Facing with a written text, a good vocabulary is a very important tool. By having a good knowledge of vocabulary, you will be able to choose the best appropriate word. The purpose of the present study was set out to investigate the effects of vocabulary awareness on depth of vocabulary knowledge. In order to measure the effects of vocabulary awareness instruction on student's depth of vocabulary knowledge, a Word Associates Test (WAT) was administered to both groups in pretest and post test. After comparing the mean scores of pre test and post test results, it was revealed that vocabulary awareness instruction group outperformed the control group in reading comprehension performance but not in depth of vocabulary knowledge, so, vocabulary awareness instruction does not influence participant's depth of vocabulary knowledge.

Key words: Vocabulary awareness, Iran language learners, depth of vocabulary, knowledge, Word Associates Test (WAT), vocabulary knowledge

INTRODUCTION

Knowledge of L2 vocabulary is multi-faceted. It not only means direct translation of the L2 vocabulary but involves many other aspects of knowledge as well. Many researchers have offered definitions for word comprehension. Grendel defines it as "knowing the meaning of a word". Vygotsky claims that "a word without meaning is an empty sound, no longer a part of human speech". Nation (2001) presents a word knowledge framework suggesting that a person's knowledge of a word should be both receptive and productive, "to cover all aspects of what is involved in knowing a word" (Nation, 2001).

According to Nation and Newton (1997) vocabulary is knowledge of words and word meanings. Actually vocabulary is more complex, vocabulary mastery is not only knowing the words and its meanings but also knowing about how the words sound and how the words are used in the context. Miller and Gildea state that knowing a word by sight and sound and knowing its dictionary definition are not the same as knowing how to use the word correctly and understanding it when it is heard or seen in various contexts. Building up a useful vocabulary is central to the learning of a foreign language at primary level (Cameron, 2001). Someone who has a lot of vocabulary of foreign language, she/he could learn language easily. Since, vocabulary is all about words and good mastery of vocabulary helps someone understand language. It is supported by Wallace (1982) who says that vocabulary is one of the most important parts of languages because when speaking a language, the speakers need several words to convey ideas. Therefore, people can understand what the speakers mean. When a learner intends to learn foreign language, he/she has to learn the vocabulary of the foreign language first. Bernhardt comments that knowledge of words is now considered the most important factor in language proficiency and school success, partly because of its close relation with text comprehension. Without knowledge of words, understanding sentences or texts is not possible. The present research may be served as a reference for researchers in a way that they research on the connection between vocabulary knowledge and reading comprehension of non-Persian texts.

Literature review

Vocabulary learning strategies: Learning strategies are the 'process by which information is obtained, stored, retrieved and use' (Rubin, 1987). They are specific actions, behaviors, steps or techniques that students employ consciously to improve the progress in

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'internalizing, storing, retrieving and using the L2' O'Malley and Chamot divided learning strategies into three major types: metacognitive, cognitive and social/affective. Oxford added in two other types: compensation and memory while Schmitt (1997) included two more namely, determination and consolidation. In the following these strategies are described in brief.

Metacognitive strategies: They are strategies for monitoring the process of language learning and use, taking steps to efficiently regulate and plan the learning processes.

Cognitive strategies: They are the strategies to manipulate information in a task, so that, the learners can either acquire or retain the information from the task. When learners meet unknown words, they use social strategies to ask people around them such as the classmates, friends, teachers or parents for the explanation of the words. Thus, they are strategies that relate to human relationship. Affective strategies relate to one's emotional control. They help suppress negative feelings when one meets an unknown word.

Memory strategies: They involve relating the unknown words with previously learnt words and may need the learners to connect the new unknown words to personal experiences and pictures and images.

Consolidation strategies: They are different strategies to consolidate what is learned. By using the strategies, the learners try hard to remember the new words learned. They may do written or verbal repetitions, repeat the words over time, do rote learning, connect the new word with synonyms and antonyms and take notes in the lessons.

Determination and compensation strategies: Determination strategies are used to discover meanings and obtain initial information of unknown words. They involve analyzing the part of speech and affixes of the unknown words, L1 knowledge, guessing from contexts, making use of pictures or images and using dictionaries. Compensation strategies such as guessing the meaning of unknown words are used when learners meet unknown words. Determination strategies work closely with incidental vocabulary learning. When learners read texts and meet unknown words, lexical inferencing skills are employed to decode the words.

Rouhi and Negari (2013) designed a research to explore the role of size and depth of vocabulary knowledge in reading comprehension performance of Iranian EFL learners. To this aim, 50 EFL students studying at Islamic Azad University of Kerman, Iran participated in the study. A two-tailed pearson correlation and multiple regression analyses were run in order to analyze the scores obtained from three tests, VLA, WAT and RCT. The results revealed that: size, depth of vocabulary knowledge and reading comprehension are positively and significantly correlated to each other both size and depth are of equal importance in Iranian EFL learner's success in reading comprehension performance and comparatively, size correlated more strongly to the success of Iranian EFL learners in reading comprehension performance than depth of vocabulary knowledge.

A similar study which was carried out by Azman Mokhtar in 2010, the VLT was administered among 360 Malaysian diploma students at University Technology MARA, Perlis. Although, the researchers were not mainly concerned with the student's total score on the test they were concerned in whether the students knew an adequate number of words with high-frequency or not. Hence, working within this context, the present researchers deemed it indispensable to launch a study where vocabulary is paid little heed to in most reading comprehension courses.

In another study, Farvardin and Koosha (2011) attempted to investigate the relationship between vocabulary knowledge and reading comprehension and to find out which aspect of vocabulary knowledge, breadth or depth has greater impact on determining reading comprehension performance. Hence, three language tests were used viz. a reading comprehension test, vocabulary levels test revised by Schmitt (1997) word associates test. A total of 78 freshmen majoring in TEFL at Islamic Azad University of Najafabad, Iran, participated in the study. The results of the two-tailed pearson correlations and multiple regression analyses revealed that: test scores on vocabulary breadth, depth of vocabulary knowledge and reading comprehension were positively correlated, vocabulary breadth was a stronger predictor of reading comprehension than depth of vocabulary knowledge and breadth and depth of vocabulary knowledge were closely interrelated.

The obtained results further suggested that both breadth and depth are useful predictors of reading comprehension performance and even a combination of the two associates better with reading comprehension than either one alone.

As a result, focusing the previous researches on the field of study revealed that there was a relationship between vocabulary knowledge and reading

comprehension. Vocabulary knowledge had a significant effect on reading comprehension ability of the learners.

In other words, no reading comprehension is possible in native/Foreign language without understanding the text's vocabulary. When the percentage of unknown vocabulary increases, the possibility of comprehending the text decreases. The previous studies indicated that there was a need for further research to look closely at the relationship between vocabulary knowledge and reading comprehension.

Despite the importance of the researches in the domain of study, no research studies have been conducted on the investigation of connection between vocabulary awareness and reading comprehension in genuine Persian texts. Therefore, there is a need for further research in this area. Accordingly, this research measures the connection (relationship) between vocabulary awareness and the reading comprehension in genuine Persian texts among EFL learners in Zanjan, Iran.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Design: The design of this study is quasi experimental. In this study the participant students are divided into two groups. The experimental group receives the specially designed reading comprehension instruction including vocabulary awareness raising activities. However, the control group in this study received reading comprehension instruction based on traditional approach. The Quick Oxford Placement Test (QOPT) was used for homogenizing the learners. After administration of the placement test, 56 intermediate EFL learners were selected as the main members of the current research. The intervention occurred in the spring of 2016 in 14 sessions, twice a week (Saturday and Monday). Two classes, as control and experimental groups participated in the study and both groups had the same teacher.

Instruments: Two instruments were utilized to find answer for the research question of this study:

- Oxford Placement Test (OPT)
- Word Associates Test (WAT)

The vocabulary awareness instruction were as follows:

- Some important words from the passage were bolded, italicized and underlined. This was done to raise participant's awareness about vocabularies
- One student was asked to summarize the passage orally with his/her own words
- The students were allowed to guess the meaning and also to ask about miscomprehensions
- Some realias were used for teaching new vocabularies
- Different pictures were used for teaching some words

The treatment lasted for 14 days of instruction: two sessions every week, each session 20 min. In the control group, the learners did not use any specific awareness raising strategy. In fact the teacher followed all stages of reading instruction except vocabulary awareness raising step (underlined words, bolded words, etc.). As the third step, all participants take the post-test which was the same as pretest. It needs to be added that the test items of WAT had focused on the vocabularies which were used in reading comprehension passages during treatment.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The null hypothesis was concerned with the role of vocabulary awareness on intermediate student's depth of vocabulary knowledge. An independent samples t-test procedure was used to compare depth of vocabulary knowledge difference of experimental and control group before receiving treatment (vocabulary awareness raising). However, before comparing the results of the two groups on depth of vocabulary knowledge there was a need to check if mean scores are different or not. Descriptive statistics for the depth of vocabulary knowledge related to pretest among participants of experimental and control group are indicated in Table 1.

Since, the mean scores of the two groups was not equal (experimental group = 76.21; control group = 82.14), the researcher carried out an independent samples t-test to see if this difference is statistically significant or not. Table 2 provides detailed information about t-test results.

As the Table 2 indicates, levene test result is higher than 0.05 which by itself indicates that the two groups are homogeneous. Since, levene test t-test result is not equal to 0 = 0.59), it is needed to have the equal variance assumed (the first row) for the Sig. (2-tailed) which equals 0.511. As the t-test result indicates the two groups were

Table 1: Descriptive statistics for pretest depth of vocabulary knowledge of control and experimental groups

	Group statistics			
Grouping	N	Mean	SD	SE mean
WAT pre				
Experimental	28	76.21	20.189	3.749
Control	27	82.14	11.234	2.123

Table 2: Independent sample t-test for significance of pretest depth of vocabulary knowledge difference

	Levene's equality	Test for of variances	t-test for equality of means				
Independent samples test	F-value	Sig.	t-values	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean difference	SE difference
Reading							
Equal variances assumed	3.707	0.059	-0.662	55.000	0.511	-3.039	4.590
Equal variances not assumed	-	-	-0.665	52.101	0.509	-3.039	4.568

Table 3: Descriptive statistics for post test depth of vocabulary knowledge

	Group statistics			
WAT post grouping	N	Mean	SD	SE mean
Experimental	28	81.10	19.478	3.617
Control	27	84.14	14.762	2.790

Table 4:Independent sample t-test results for post test reading comprehension

	Levene's equality	Test for of variances	t-test for equality of means				
Independent samples test	F-value	Sig.	t-values	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean difference	SE difference
Reading							
Equal variances assumed	5.056	0.029	-1.365	55.00	0.178	-5.936	4.349
Equal variances not assumed	-	-	-1.378	44.131	0.175	-5.936	4.308

**Significant at 0.01

not significantly different before the treatment. Then, there is a need to check post test results to see if the two groups are different in their depth of vocabulary knowledge scores or not. If mean differences are statistically significant, it can be claimed that the difference has been the result of treatment. As the post test result indicated, the depth of vocabulary knowledge means were different after the treatment. Descriptive statistics for post test depth of vocabulary knowledge score difference of both groups are indicated in Table 3.

Descriptive statistics show that while the mean score of experimental group's depth of vocabulary knowledge is M = 81.10 that of control group is M = 84.14. However, the difference needs to be statistically confirmed. To this end, an independent samples t-test was carried out. The t-test results of post treatment depth of vocabulary knowledge indicates that the reading comprehension scores of experimental group has not significantly changed by treatment (Sig. 2-tailed = 0.178). t-test results have been shown in Table 4 t-test results for $p<0.05$ equaled 0.00.

Therefore, based on the results of data analysis reported above, the null hypothesis, predicting an insignificant role of vocabulary awareness in learner's depth of vocabulary knowledge was retained.

The research revealed that vocabulary awareness does not influence depth of vocabulary knowledge in a significant way. This finding is in contrast with Nilforushan who conducted a study to the effect of teaching vocabularies through increasing the awareness on the evaluation and potency dimension of deep vocabulary knowledge. This contradiction could be explained by the existing differences between the two studies. The main source of contradiction could have been the adopted approaches toward vocabulary acquisition. While in the present study the researcher worked on reading comprehension vocabularies, Nilforushan instructed vocabularies through concept mapping.

In another study Rouhi and Negari (2013) designed a research to explore the role of size and depth of vocabulary knowledge in reading comprehension performance of Iranian EFL learners. Their findings are in contrast with our findings in a way that a two-tailed Pearson correlation and multiple regression analyses were run in order to analyze the scores obtained from two tests, VLA, WAT. The results revealed that a size and depth of vocabulary knowledge positively and significantly correlated to each other and this contradiction reason may be the gender of participants in these studies, in the present study the participants were female language learners while Rouhi and Negari (2013) used both male and female participants in their study.

The findings of the research showed that although vocabulary awareness enhances reading comprehension this improvement is not achieved through deepening vocabulary knowledge. Then, if learners are expected to have a deep knowledge of vocabularies, vocabulary awareness instruction is not suggested to be utilized in classroom context. In fact, the effectiveness of vocabulary awareness instruction in developing reading comprehension knowledge of the intermediate participants might have been due to its novelty and would diminish as time goes by. Moreover, the ineffectiveness of vocabulary awareness instruction in enhancing depth of vocabulary knowledge might have been related to insufficient exposure to vocabulary awareness instruction.

CONCLUSION

The present study indicated that various explanations regarding the obtained results and existing contradictions can be offered. Firstly, learner's proficiency could have been a decisive variable on the effectiveness of vocabulary awareness instruction. Then, it might be the case that for effectiveness of vocabulary awareness instruction EFL learners need to have threshold level of general English proficiency. As mentioned in chapter three the participants of this study were intermediate level students their English proficiency. Then, the contradiction between this study and previous studies might be related to the difference in the nature of the participants. Moreover, the role of context of the study should not be ignored. The contradictory findings of this study might be due to the fact that previous studies had used different instruments while the present study used WAT and reading comprehension test in general. The length of treatment might be an important contextual factor too.

The focus on participants, context (general reading comprehension), proficiency and age lies in the fact that as mentioned in chapter four these factors interact with the degree to which vocabulary awareness instruction influences depth of vocabulary knowledge. For instance, advanced participants might be better than intermediate and elementary participants in terms of their ability to use depth of vocabulary knowledge in more efficient reading comprehension.

Whatever the case, the main focus of this study was to investigate the usefulness of vocabulary awareness instruction on intermediate learner's depth of vocabulary knowledge. As it was shown, vocabulary awareness instruction group (experimental group) outperformed the other group (control group) in reading comprehension performance but not in depth of vocabulary knowledge. Since, the researcher did not assign any classroom time on teaching vocabulary awareness (in fact the time was allocated during material designing through the process of selecting and bolding the target vocabularies, it can be stated that vocabulary awareness instruction is not very time consuming and it can be achieved very easily through input enhancement techniques. Short-term results might not be equal to longer-term results. The effects of long term vocabulary awareness instructions on depth of vocabulary knowledge needs more attention and exploration.

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