The Effect of Contextualized Vocabulary Teaching on Learners’ Vocabulary Learning and Retention

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ABSTRACT: The purpose of this study was to investigate the role of contextualized vocabulary instruction in the vocabulary learning of Iranian EFL learners at intermediate level at Eram English Institute in Gograg, Iran. Also, an attempt was made to explore whether there would be effects on learners vocabulary retention. To do so, the participants were 60 students who were randomly divided into two experimental (30) and control groups (30). The experimental group was exposed to contextualized vocabulary teaching. Conversely, the control group concentrated on traditional definition-based vocabulary teaching. After the treatment, the control and experimental groups’ performance were analyzed based on pretest, posttest and retention test data. The two posttest data analyses demonstrated that there was a significant difference between the control and the experimental groups. Principally, the experimental group’s scores were statistically more significant than the control group, that is, the results indicated that the contextualized vocabulary instruction may be applied as a useful vocabulary teaching method in language learning classrooms. Also, the analysis of the retention results demonstrated that statistically there were significant differences between both of the experimental and control group learners in terms of their retention of target vocabulary two weeks after conducting post-test.

Keywords: Contextualized vocabulary teaching, Vocabulary retention, Vocabulary learning.

INTRODUCTION

There are different views regarding the importance of vocabulary throughout the SLA history. Yet which method to take on in teaching or learning vocabulary is not resolved well until now. Language scholars criticized that there was lack of interest to lexis in older grammatical syllabuses and approaches. This is the same about more latest communicative approaches. Communicative linguistic theorists were criticized for placing little attention on vocabulary and its instruction while focusing more on structures, functions, notions, and communication strategies (O’Dell, 1997). Nattinger and De Carrico (1992) studied large authentic language expressions and reported that these expressions plays role in language use particularly in organizing what people mean. In that respect, they felt that these expressions should be considered mostly in teaching vocabulary. Lewis (1993), in his well-known Lexical Approach, put away the ordinary observation of the language instruction into both grammar and vocabulary. He claimed that language just included lexical phrases. Emphasizing on “grammaticalised lexis” rather than “lexicalized grammar”, he offered communicative approach along with tough focus on lexis in particular.

Above all, vocabulary instruction in recent years takes the advantages of several improvements in the world. Firstly, it has used some developments in investigating the lexicon from linguistic point of view. Secondly, it has moved away from psycholinguistic investigations into the mentally studying lexicon to the communicative attitude in teaching. The changes in the attitude towards vocabulary have also led to changes in the definition of lexical competence in recent years, i.e., word knowledge. In contemporary approaches to
language learning, knowing a word does not mean knowing its translation or its dictionary definition only; it has taken on some new meanings.

One of the innovative methods of language instruction is the Communicative Approach (CA) in which the general concern is bringing language learners into nearer contact with the target language by firstly admitting fluency over accuracy. In the 1970s educators observed that although making sentences, students could not use them outside the classroom, thus it was noted that mastering linguistic structures was not sufficient for genuinely communicating. Therefore being aware of linguistic rules did not lead to the use of the language (Widdowson, 1978). In other words, communicative competence should be focused more than linguistic competence was required. Another important aspect of this approach is that all the grammar and vocabulary, which is learned and exploited, grows naturally out of the range of functional and situational contexts that are part of the lessons.

Finocchiaro and Brumfit (1983) studied the role of context in CA. They claimed that language formal features should not be dealt without its usage. In other words, teachers and language instructors ought to consider even the vocabulary forms under the sight of communicative context (Beale, 2002). In this way, learners are always considering context in finding the words meaning. Thus, this study will concern the importance of context in vocabulary teaching as well as some relevant studies indicating such importance.

Vocabulary has a critical position in language learning and is indispensable for the language learner although it has not always received much attention in the area of second language acquisition research and practice. The role of vocabulary in language teaching has always been viewed variously in approaches since the era of Grammar Translation Method (GTM) up to the present day. In fact, the role of vocabulary to language acquisition is no more controversial among language scholars. Nevertheless, which method to take on is still a matter of controversy? One specific aspect is beyond argument though; the importance of context in vocabulary learning, which will be presented in the following sections.

Taking into consideration the critical role of vocabulary learning in second or foreign language learning, one can absolutely understand the importance of vocabulary teaching as well. In the past, vocabulary instruction and knowledge were often given little concern in second language programs, however lately vocabulary knowledge and its position in teaching vocabulary has been regarded more than before (Richards & Renandya, 2002). A number of research studies have dealt with lexical problems, that is to say, problems which language learners face in vocabulary learning. The research findings have also showed that lexical problems often deal with communication. In detail, “communication breaks down when people do not use the right words” (Allen, 1983). It does not look to be different in the EFL classrooms in Iran where the focus of vocabulary teaching is greatly based on traditional definition-based vocabulary teaching i.e. grammar translation method. Students are always facing two problems; they are unable to encode the meanings of the words they faced. As a second problem, students know the meaning of the word but they could not use the vocabulary in an appropriate context. As a result, the learners are not provided with opportunities which would enable them with deeper processing of new vocabulary items in their minds as well as with sufficient exposure to the new vocabulary in many contexts, leading to a lack in L2 learners’ receptive word knowledge i.e. the words and expressions that learners may apply properly in their language usage (Lauffer, 1998). To put in simple words, teaching new items in isolation or with word lists prevents students from using the new word for communicative purposes, which really is serious drawback.

Word retention is another big problem to the students. Students tend to forget words quickly. Another problem is that they may remember words but they do not know how to use them appropriately. It has often been suggested that learning vocabulary by using it in contexts should be employed as the main approach to improve vocabulary knowledge.

In fact, this thesis filled the gaps in a way that in addition to a pre-test and a post-test, most importantly it included one delayed retention test to measure students’ vocabulary retention and subsequently their achievements. In better words, it compares the findings of the pre-test, post-test and the delayed retention delayed test to find out the effects of two vocabulary teaching methods i.e. contextualized or memorization strategies on learners vocabulary learning.

The main purpose of this study is to examine the effect of contextualized vocabulary teaching on learners’ vocabulary learning and retention. The results of this research will help both teachers and authors to improve and develop their approaches to vocabulary teaching.

**METHODOLOGY**

In order to make out the function of contextualized vocabulary instruction in students’ vocabulary knowledge, quantitative data were collected. The data were obtained from vocabulary test. The lexical items provided in the checklist were the vocabularies that the students worked on them in classes. The checklist included 40 vocabulary items. Both groups took English 6 hours a week, and the instruction took more than 6
weeks. All of the participants from the experimental and control group were asked to complete the same vocabulary checklist given on a pre- as a post- test to determine whether there were gains in effective vocabulary acquisition during the sessions. Finally, both groups received retention test two week after the treatment.

**Participants**

The participants were 60 students aging from 18 to 25 years old. They were randomly assigned into two groups of 30. The students were at intermediate level at Eram English Institute in Gorgan. They took part in the institute for 20 sessions (2 sessions a week). Instruction hours were the same for both control and experimental groups.

The current study was of experimental nature, which intended to identify the role of contextualized vocabulary instruction on learners’ vocabulary knowledge. In line with this purpose, the subjects were divided into experimental and control group according to their proficiency level. Each class had the same teacher. The teacher was simultaneously the researcher so as to do away with the variable in teacher instruction. Instruction hours between the control and experimental group were the same.

**Materials**

The instrumentation in this study included a pretest and two posttests. A 40 item multiple-choice test of vocabulary, which was developed by the researcher, was used as the assessment tool in the pre-test, post-test and retention phases. The vocabulary items in the test were mainly selected from the new lexical items taught and exposed to during the course. The criterion for selecting the words was their frequency and the feasibility of being taught contextually.

The Post-test and retention test were the same as pretest to measure whether students changed over time due to a treatment and the other one was to measure learner retention respectively. The aim of these two tests was to reveal the efficacy of the treatments provided to the experimental group during the research. The test results of different period of time were compared to identify the improvement in students’ proficiency and retention of vocabulary. Contextualized presentation influenced students’ vocabulary retention and learning. The classroom treatment carried out to support learners’ vocabulary acquisition process more capably by means of instruction procedures, which were designed to increase cognitive processing of the selected words in reading texts.

For the purpose of the study, the book entitled “Interchange 2” was used for both experimental and control groups. This is an intermediate-level book. It should be mentioned that contextualized vocabulary learning strategy is not appropriate for beginners since it implies that the student has already acquired a certain level in L2 in order to be able to read a second language and infer meaning of particular words from the main context. It needs more intricate cognitive processes by the learner who is actively seeking meaning as opposed to mere memorization of a list of words, which conforms to its opposite strategy of de-contextualized vocabulary learning. 20 passages were taught to the students during 20 sessions with 90-minute class period. One of the main advantages of this book was that students learn words best by seeing them repeatedly in different six contexts with abundant practices. Students were to actively figure out definitions by analysis and using explicit or inferred meaning.

**Procedure and Instruments**

The participants (N=60) were randomly assigned into two groups. Each class had the same teacher. The teacher was at the same time the researcher in order to eliminate the variable in teacher instruction. In terms of the hours of instruction, there were no differences between control and experimental group. At first step, a 40-item researcher-made vocabulary test was given to both groups. The participants in the groups worked on the selected words in reading texts and they were required to predict the meaning of target words through five contextual clues i.e. synonym, antonym, definition, comparison and contrast. In particular, learners were taught to use contextual clues to find or predict the meaning of unfamiliar words in reading texts that required active participation of the students.

The participants in the control group will learn the words through rote memorization of word lists. After a treatment period taking for 20 sessions, the control and experimental groups’ performance was analyzed according to pretest and posttest data. The control group just dealt with course book vocabulary exercises, which could be considered traditional definition based vocabulary instruction such as fill-in-the blanks, guessing the meaning or matching exercises.

The experimental group was provided with meaningful context for vocabulary learning and to establish a connection between target words and students schemata and finally to trigger active participation of the students’ context clues, which are considered as sources providing information about a word to help learners comprehend the word meaning. This word or phrase directly or indirectly lead readers to word’s meaning.
RESULTS

In this section, the research findings will be presented on the basis of the research questions:
1. Does contextualized vocabulary teaching have any significant effects on vocabulary learning?
2. Does contextualized vocabulary teaching have any significant effects on vocabulary retention?

Regarding the first and the second questions, quantitative data obtained through the vocabulary pre-test, post-tests and would be discussed in detail. As aforementioned, in order to see whether contextualized vocabulary teaching have any significant effects on vocabulary learning or in other words whether there were any differences between the control and experimental groups from their vocabulary knowledge point of view at the beginning of the study, an independent samples t-test was applied to the pre-test scores of the learners in both groups.

In accordance with the obtained results of the t-test, almost no significant differences (p<0.05) were found between the two groups from their pre-test scores point of view before the treatment. Scores of pre-test for experimental and control groups were given below:

Table 1. Differences between the Experimental and Control Groups’ EFL learners (N=60) based on their Pre-test Scores.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Sd</th>
<th>T</th>
<th>P</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Experimental</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>45.24</td>
<td>5.69</td>
<td>-041</td>
<td>0.967</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Control</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>47.13</td>
<td>8.02</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

According to Table 1, the two groups’ knowledge of vocabulary were almost the same before starting the treatment. Moreover the statistical results proved that the two groups i.e. experimental and control groups were not statistically different from each other that is the experimental group (Mean = 45.24) and the control group (Mean = 47.13). There were 40 multiple-choice questions testing vocabulary knowledge and the score is 2.5., so (40x2.5) the total scores are out of 100.

Afterward, considering whether contextualized vocabulary teaching have any significant effects on vocabulary learning or in other words whether there were any differences between the control and experimental groups from their vocabulary knowledge point of view after the treatment was carried out, an independent samples t-test was applied to the post-test scores of the learners in both groups.

Table 2. Differences between the Experimental and Control Groups’ EFL learners (N=60) based on their Post-test Scores.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Sd</th>
<th>T</th>
<th>P</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Experimental</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>83.52</td>
<td>3.24</td>
<td>7.9</td>
<td>0.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Control</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>51.82</td>
<td>6.45</td>
<td>-</td>
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</table>

Regarding table 2, showing the post-test results obtained at the end of the treatment, the experimental and control group of the study were statistically significant from each other (p<0.05). It can be concluded that the treatment sessions including word map, semantic mapping and guessing enabled participants to comprehend and apply lexical items effectively. After considering the Mean scores of both groups, it was depicted that there was a big difference between the experimental group (M: 83.52) and the control group (M: 50.90).

As seen in table 4.2, the experimental group did better than the control group and this difference was statistically significant (0.000<0.05). It may be claimed that those participants attending in the experimental group would be able to apply the taught lexicon more productively and more consciously associated with the main course book reading passages.

Regarding the second question of the study i.e. to see whether contextualized vocabulary teaching have any significant effects on learners’ vocabulary retention, retention test the same as a pre-test and post-test was conducted. It should be mentioned that the retention test was carried out two weeks after the post test. Here, an independent samples t-test, like pre-test and post-test, was applied to the retention test scores of the learners in both control and experimental groups. Scores of retention test for experimental and control groups were given below:
Table 3. Differences between the Experimental and Control Groups’ EFL learners (N=60) based on their retention Scores.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Sd</th>
<th>T</th>
<th>P</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Experimental</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>72.45</td>
<td>4.25</td>
<td>8.1</td>
<td>0.850</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Control</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>40.35</td>
<td>7.24</td>
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</table>

As seen in the table 3 above, the retention test results illustrated that both the experimental and control group of the study were statistically significant from each other (p<0.05). In effect, When the Mean scores of both groups are considered, it was seen that there was a big difference between the experimental group (M: 72.45) and the control group (M: 40.35). It can be concluded that the effect of treatment sessions would last even some weeks or maybe months (cautiously) while the effect of teaching vocabulary through traditional translation instruction was transient and temporary.

**DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION**

The analysis of the vocabulary pre-test results illustrated the fact that, before conducting contextualized vocabulary instruction, both the experimental and control groups did not differ considerably in their target vocabulary knowledge. In other words, both groups were alike in their ability to understand and even making use of the target words.

The analysis of the post-test results demonstrated that statistically there were significant differences between both of the experimental and control group learners from their knowledge of target vocabulary point of view after the treatment. The level of vocabulary knowledge of the experimental group students was better and higher than the level of the control group’s learners. Even if both groups had shown significant development in their knowledge of vocabulary once compared to their relevant initial level of vocabulary knowledge. In detail, contextualized vocabulary instruction seemed to have a great effect on learners’ vocabulary.

In this regard, the findings of the research in were in line with some researches (Qian, 1996; Soureshjani, 2011) in that contextualized vocabulary instruction produces greater gains than rote learning of vocabulary alone. Based on the studies conducted by the above researchers in EFL context, contextualized vocabulary learning always leads to better recall.

Extra analysis of post-test results indicated that the experimental group that had benefit the contextualized vocabulary instruction outperformed significantly than the control group learners. Consequently, it was shown that contextualized vocabulary instruction created better results learner’s ability to understand their meaning. It can be concluded that contextualized vocabulary treatment may help learners to develop productive vocabulary knowledge, while the traditional definition-based vocabulary instruction or rote learning just provide learners with receptive knowledge of vocabulary. Therefore, this finding confirms Qian (1996) finding that there was a statistically important improvement in the learners’ ability to define and use the target vocabulary that was taught through contextualized teaching. Regarding two facts i.e. the target participants in the current study were intermediate learner and decontextualized vocabulary instruction is useful for beginner-level learners (Waring, 1995), it would be said that as language learners ability develops, progressively the methods of teaching vocabulary should be based on more context-based vocabulary learning. He concluded that beginner learners have trouble understanding the text since they are not equipped with sufficient amount of vocabularies.

As a final result, it was confirmed that those who were in experimental group participated more in the learning process. The more the learners employed the words, the deeper they learned the vocabulary. In this regard, the learners would take advantage of turning their receptive vocabulary into productive vocabulary. At this time, the instructor and learners’ position in contextualized vocabulary instruction is of outmost significance. Introducing the new words, the instructor in the experimental group provided learners with chances to search for the meaning and use of vocabulary items.

The analysis of the retention results demonstrated that statistically there were significant differences between both of the experimental and control group learners in terms of their retention of target vocabulary 2 weeks after conducting post-test. The finding of this part of study was in line and some other researches (Dupuy & Krashen, 1993; Gardner, 2004; Horst et al., 1998) Who felt that that the amount of incidental learning are really small and they largely relied on quantities of input. Furthermore, it was confirmed that in EFL language classes, learning vocabulary through rote learning is lower and needs multiple exposures to be remembered.

The findings of the current study offer several pedagogical implications for teaching vocabulary through contextualized method. As for material developer, it should be added that, though a number of encounters are required for learning a new vocabulary item, there is no organized vocabulary review of vocabulary items in almost nearly all of the textbooks. This condition makes learners to memorize the meanings of the vocabulary items in long lists since language learners do not know other helpful substitution methods and imagine that
vocabulary memorization is one of the most excellent ways to learn new vocabularies. Also, tasks included in textbooks should consider preceding known vocabulary to measure the amount of latest input which is satisfactory and difficult enough without being overwhelming to students. As for teachers, they should not focus exclusively on guessing and reading comprehension or frequently traditional definition based vocabulary exercises.

It seemed that the results will be even more hopeful if the contextualized vocabulary instruction is taken and implemented for a longer period of time for the group of learners. Teachers benefitting from contextualized vocabulary teaching as a teaching method should know their students' vocabulary knowledge levels to design suitable tasks. The activities should be significantly comprehensible to the majority of students so that new input can be inferred adequately and fairly.

As for students, contextualized vocabulary strategy is not appropriate for beginners since it considers that the student are previously in a level that they can read a second language and deduce meaning of particular words from the context by themselves. Contextualized vocabulary learning will result in better retention because as contextual elements helped memory. Words learned from a list or just their definition seemed as an effectual strategy for test and quick vocabulary recall. Nevertheless, it will not develop students' ability to use vocabulary learned in this way in relevant contexts. This method helps vocabulary retention and vocabulary use in real aim of language learning (Henning, 2003).

The results of the current research need to be confirmed and validated by other collection instruments and procedures including conducting private interviews, student diaries and etc. to make sure that the results to be more reliable. It seems that there is no simple way of building second or foreign language lexicon.

Therefore, for future researches, several parameters that must be considered before asking about the most effective ways of vocabulary instruction are offered. It includes comparing different proficiency levels, gender, age and larger period of time. In other words, further research with a great number of EFL learners in classes of different proficiency levels, gender, age, needs and textbooks may introduce further information about the probable effects of contextualized vocabulary teaching on vocabulary learning.

REFERENCES


