Using Mechanical Technique versus Cooperating with Peers Vocabulary Learning Strategy: A Case of Iranian EFL Learners

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Abstract

This article discusses the effect of Using Mechanical Technique as a direct vocabulary learning strategy versus Cooperating with Peers as an indirect vocabulary learning strategy on reading comprehension skill in foreign language learning. To fulfill the purpose of the study, fifty students were selected and assigned into two groups. The first group (A) was taught vocabulary through Using Mechanical Technique and the second group (B) utilized Cooperating with Peers vocabulary learning strategy. Results showed that Structure Reviewing strategy can lead to higher achievement of vocabulary storage in reading comprehension of EFL undergraduate students.

Keywords: Vocabulary Learning Strategy, Using Mechanical Technique vocabulary learning Strategy, Cooperating with Peers vocabulary learning strategy

Introduction

In order for students to become successful language learners, they should acquire a suitable amount of vocabulary, because vocabulary learning is unavoidable part of language learning. The students that lack the necessary knowledge of vocabulary storage are considered a sign of unsuccessful learners or may face problem in their communication (Nunan, 1995). As having a good command of vocabulary knowledge is an important element of second language acquisition (SLA), effective second language vocabulary acquisition proves important to English language learners (Hunt & Beglar, 2005, p.1). Also "Vocabulary acquisition is the largest and most important task facing the language learner." (Swan and Walter, 1984). "If you spend most of your time studying grammar, your English will not improve very much. You will see most improvement if you learn more words and expressions. You can say very little with grammar, but you can say almost anything with words!" (Thornbury 2002, p. 13).

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By comparing different areas of language learning study, it is possible to state that vocabulary teaching/learning has been left to a position of secondary importance (Richards & Renandya, 2002). According to Decarrico (2001: 285), "vocabulary has not always been recognized as a priority in language teaching." Applying language learning strategies in teaching is the focus of attention in different aspects in foreign and second language teaching (Cohen, 1998; Ellis, 2001; Oxford, 2002; Vilaca, 2008). Researchers have pointed out that strategies may help students *learn to learn* (Oxford, 2002; Cohen, 2003; Mariani, 2004; Chamot, 2004; Vilaca, 2008), contributing to a better development of linguistic, communicative and pedagogical skill, including autonomy and the management of the learning process.

Teaching language learning strategies (LLSs) is beneficial to both English teachers and learners. Language learning strategy instruction improves both the learning product and process because it enhances learners' awareness of how to learn successfully and motivates them (Rasekh & Ranjbari, 2003). It helps teachers to become more aware of their learners' needs and of how their teaching styles are appropriate to their learners' strategies (Oxford, Crookall, et al, 1990), and to direct their teaching efforts (Kinoshita, 2003). Coady (1997) views that vocabulary learning strategies are beneficial to lexical acquisition.

Graves (1987) pointed that, since most learners actually do most of their learning of new words independently, it makes sense to encourage them "to adopt personal plans to expand their vocabularies over time" (p. 177). In fact, theorists now place considerable stress on the importance of foreign language students' developing autonomous learning strategies (see, e.g., Rossini Favretti, Silver, Gasser, & Tamburini, 1994), and books aimed at teachers provide practical advice on teaching vocabulary and encourage student language-learning strategies (e.g., McCarthy, 1990; Nation, 1990; Oxford, 1990). Jones (1998) believes that Oxford (1990) has developed a system of language learning strategies which is more comprehensive and detailed than earlier classification models. Oxford divides strategies into two major classes: direct and indirect. Direct strategies, which "involve direct learning and use of the subject matter; Indirect strategies, which "contribute indirectly but powerfully to learning" (Oxford, 1990, p. 11-12). Indirect vocabulary learning is defined as a technique of vocabulary learning which occurs without the specific intent to focus on vocabulary.

As for strategies of focus on form studies regarding the dichotomy of direct and indirect focus on form, this question may come to mind, which is better and produces more beneficial effects. Researchers and teachers cannot seem to agree. With direct teaching methods, the teacher explicitly introduces the vocabulary and provides the definitions. With indirect teaching methods, on the other hand, a teacher provides various activities that lead students to specific outcomes (Klesius & Searls, 1991).

Cohen and Aphek (1981) found that training students to learn vocabulary using mnemonic associations was effective. Crow and Quigley (1985) used semantic field strategy training to enhance learning vocabulary. O'Malley (1987) found that training English Language as a foreign language (EFL) students to use a metacognitive strategy (self-evaluation) and two cognitive

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strategies (grouping and imagery) improved their vocabulary learning. Brown and Perry (1991) compared the effectiveness of three vocabulary learning strategies: keyword, semantic mapping (elaboration), and a combination of both. Alseweed's (2000) study showed that training students in using word-solving strategies increased high proficiency students' strategy use than low proficiency ones. Rasekh and Ranjbari (2003) found that metacognitive strategy training had a positive impact on enhancing EFL learners' lexical knowledge.

So far, many studies have been carried out in the field concerning vocabulary learning/teaching approaches. For instance, Huckin and Coady (1999) investigated the role of direct and indirect vocabulary acquisition. They conclude that indirect vocabulary learning is not entirely incidental in that learners pay at least some attention to individual words.

In a study, Qian (1996) compared the learning of second language words in lists and in contexts. He employed 63 Chinese university learners of English learning a set of 15 English target words. The No-Context group produced significantly better scores on an immediate recall test than the Context group did; and this difference was also observed on post-test administered one week and three weeks later. The findings of his study suggest that decontextualised L2 vocabulary learning with feedback is more effective for these particular students than contextualized vocabulary learning without feedback. He also provided a comprehensive review of research that compares the learning of L2 words in lists and in contexts. Based on the results of this review he argues that most of these data are equivocal, in that it fails to show significant effects for one method over the other. He also challenges the assumption that contextualized vocabulary learning always leads to superior retention.

Also, Rott (1999) studied the effect of frequency with which vocabulary occur in a reading text and the role of reading as an input resource in vocabulary acquisition. Her study examined whether intermediate learners incidentally acquire and retain unknown vocabulary by reading a text. The result of the study indicated that, regarding retention measures on productive vocabulary knowledge, only half of the subjects displayed a significant rate of retention, and on receptive knowledge, all but one experimental group retained vocabularies over four weeks.

Shmidth (1990; cited in Nyiazadeh, 2009), also states that indirect learning is surely passive in that it can occur when the focus of attention is on some relevant emphasize of input. However, he believes that since indirect learning is useful in task-based language, pedagogy is still a fruitful area of investigation. He further notes that there is an argument that maintains what is learned—whether indirect or direct—is what is noticed.

As far as the review of literature is concerned, there are very few studies which have focused on the effect of direct and indirect vocabulary learning strategies in a foreign language in reading comprehension ability in general and Using Mechanical Technique as a direct vocabulary learning strategy versus Cooperating with Peers as an indirect vocabulary learning strategy on reading comprehension skill specifically, in Iran. So with the gap existing in the literature, the present study is aimed at identifying the effect of these two kinds of vocabulary attempting to

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find out which one serves better in enhancing vocabulary storage in reading comprehension skill among pre-intermediate Iranian EFL learners.

Method

Participants

The researcher selected 120 EFL university students (mostly in the second semester) based on non-random judgment sampling. They participated voluntarily in a homogeneity test adapted from Objective Placement Test (Lesley, et al 2005) as a homogeneity test and fifty students whose scores were one standard deviation above and one standard deviation below the mean (M= 30) were selected. Then they were randomly divided into two groups; group A (11 female and 14 male) and group B (10 female and 15 male). The age of the participants generally ranged from 20 to 25.

Procedure

In this study, 120 Iranian university students (mostly in the second semester) who study in a course other than English as their major in Islamic Azad University of Ahvaz, Khouzestan, Iran, were selected. To make sure of the homogeneity of the learners, the researcher used an Objective Placement Test as language proficiency test (Lesley, Hanson & Zukowski- Faust, 2005). Having obtained the scores and the average mean (M = 30) of the scores calculated. Fifty learners whose scores were around the mean were selected. Therefore the twenty five homogeneous pre-intermediate students were selected to utilize Using Mechanical Technique for developing their vocabulary storage in reading comprehension and other twenty five students in group B were assigned as a group B to utilize Cooperating with Peers vocabulary learning strategy. In this study, the treatment period lasted for ten sessions. On the first session, the students in A Group received introduction on Using Mechanical Technique and students in group B taught Cooperating with Peers vocabulary learning strategy. The procedure was implied by the corresponding researcher (teacher) for both classes. The next section will introduce the treatment period of two strategies briefly.

Using mechanical techniques

To remember what has been read, according to Oxford (1990), mechanical techniques were adjusted as a helpful technique in manipulating, flashcards, with the new word written on one side and the definition written on the other, are both familiar. To contextualize a new expression and get writing practice, learners wrote the new expression in a full sentence on a flash cards. Flashcards were moved from one pile to another depending on how well the learner knew them. Separate sections of the language learning notebook were used useful for words that have been learned and words that had been not reviewed by the learners. Following Oxford (1990), recommendations, the researcher asked students to read and practice the words when they had some free time. For example, they were required to read them on the bus, in lines, etc.

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Cooperating with peers

As Oxford (1990) mentioned, this strategy involves a concerted effort to work together with other learners on an activity with a common goal. Reading activity, simulations, and other active exercises challenged students to develop their ability to cooperate with peers while using vocabulary learning strategy.

Reading, through usually considered an independent activity, was a cooperative enterprise as well. For example, one student works with his/her group on a English- language on reading activity. Each group member had part of the story to read, and together they figured out the entire story through a process of negotiating, requesting, and cooperating (Oxford, 1990).

Results and discussion

After the treatment, to find out the effectiveness of Using Mechanical Technique and Cooperating with Peers vocabulary learning strategy on reading comprehension of two groups and compare the improvement in two groups, both groups took part in a post-test of the vocabulary and reading comprehension test after completing the course.

The researchers dealt with comparing vocabulary learning strategy regarding, a parametric technique for analyzing the descriptive data. In this way, the study investigated the role of the Using Mechanical Technique versus Cooperating with Peers vocabulary learning strategy through independent samples *t*-test analysis, in order to find out, whether these strategies influence students' vocabulary knowledge of Iranian EFL university students at the pre-intermediate level of English reading proficiency or not.

To begin with, an independent sample *t*-test analysis was run on the mean score of the two groups. The results of *t*-test analysis for the effect of this strategy in reading comprehension as an independent variable statistically indicated mean differences are shown in Table 1. The data obtained through post-test (Table 1) were analyzed (using SPSS 11.5 software) in different steps.

Table 1 Result of the *t*-test (post-test of both groups)

	N	Range	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Group A	25	9.00	26.00	37.00	29.2852	3.8312
Group B	25	13.00	24.00	32.00	25.3178	4.3346

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The results of the post-test in the two groups were compared using independent samples *t*-test statistical procedure, whose result showed that the mean scores of the group A (M = 29.28, SD =3.83) was significantly different from the group B (M = 25.31, SD = 4.33). Also the minimum and maximum scores in group A are 26 and 37 while in group B the minimum and maximum scores are 24 and 32 In other words; the group A outperformed the group B on the post-test. In other words, Using Mechanical Technique strategy was more effective than Cooperating with Peers in improvement of vocabulary of Iranian EFL learners at pre-intermediate level.

The findings of this research indicated that Using Mechanical Technique vocabulary learning strategy has positive impact on enhancing vocabulary on reading comprehension of EFL students at pre- intermediate level. With Using Mechanical Technique as a direct teaching strategy, the teacher explicitly introduces the vocabulary and provides the definitions of vocabulary directly and according to the results of this study, Using Mechanical Technique vocabulary learning strategy is an effective strategy comparing to Cooperating with Peers Strategy.

Conclusion and Implication

In order to students match themselves with the suitable and effective strategies, the teachers play the focal role in helping them to select the most appropriate and useful strategy. Using Mechanical Technique strategy because of easy application is suitable and effective in first stages of developing vocabulary of EFL learners comparing to Cooperating with Peers strategy and we experienced it in this study. The results indicate that generally there is a great difference between the group A and the group B performance of the subjects in the learners who were instructed to use Using Mechanical Technique strategy and Cooperating with Peers vocabulary learning strategy. Direct vocabulary learning strategy is the strategies that suggested for learning vocabulary at a particular level of language proficiency such as pre-intermediate level. Concerning the implications related to curriculum developers and material producers it can be stated that they should definitely work in cooperation with both teachers and students. Together with teachers, they should decide what learning strategies they need to identify. It should be the curriculum developers' responsibility to allocate enough time in the curriculum for teachers to conduct strategies research in their classes.

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