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The Effect of Vocabulary Building on Students Academic Achievement in English Language at Elementary Level

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Abstract

This study was conducted to examine the study the effect of vocabulary building activities on students' academic achievement in English language at elementary level.

The main objectives of the study were: a) to examine the difference between academic achievements of elementary level students in English taught by vocabulary building activities, and by traditional method for teaching English; b) to examine the

Language in India www.languageinindia.com

13 : 1 January 2013

Kifayat Khan, Dr. Muhammad Iqbal Majoka and Dr. Umbreen Ashfaq

The Effect of Vocabulary Building on Students Academic Achievement in English Language at Elementary Level

difference between academic performance in vocabulary, comprehension, creative writing and language translation of students taught by vocabulary building activities and traditional lecture method for teaching English.

This study was conducted to examine the effect of vocabulary building activities on student's performance at elementary level. This study was experimental in nature and pre-test and post-test equivalent group design was followed for this study. Following methods and procedures were adopted to conduct this study.

All the students learning at elementary level in district Haripur constituted the population of this study. A survey of the elementary schools was made to seek the feasibility of experiment. In the light of feasibility survey, GGH School Basso Maira was selected for experiment. The students of 7th class of this school were taken as participant of the study. All the student of 7th class (n=56) were divided in to two equal groups using matched sampling on the basis of test scores in pre-test. One group was taken as experimental group and other was considered as control group. To measure the effect of treatment on students' achievement, a test was prepared under the guidance of a research committee. This test was used as pre-test as well as post-test. This test was validated using judgmental validation followed by pilot testing.

The collected data was arranged in to table and analyzed by using mean score, standard deviation and test as statistical tools. The analyzed data was interpreted in to findings of the study. Conclusions were drawn from these findings. And finally recommendations were made in the light of findings and conclusions.

The data analysis showed that activity base method for teaching vocabulary is very effective method of teaching at elementary level. It does not strengthen only the Language in India www.languageinindia.com

13 : 1 January 2013

Kifayat Khan, Dr. Muhammad Iqbal Majoka and Dr. Umbreen Ashfaq

The Effect of Vocabulary Building on Students Academic Achievement in English Language at Elementary Level

vocabulary, but also it accelerates students learning in comprehension, creative writing and language translation. On the basis of research findings, following recommendations were made a) Activity based method should be adopted for better learning. English teachers are provided in-service as well as pre-service training in vocabulary building activities. This teaching technique is made part of curriculum for Elementary teacher training programs; b) Teacher should use activities for students for better learning; and c) Further research be conducted using activity method for teaching language in large classroom to see its effect on various aspect language learning.

Key words: Gender difference; classroom management; content management; conduct management; covenant management; time management

Introduction

Building a large vocabulary is essential when learning to read in second language. People with large vocabularies are more proficient readers than those with limited vocabularies (Beglar & Hunt, 1995, Luppescu & Day 1993). However, it is crucial to understand that learner can best build a large vocabulary through reading. Most recently, the national reading panels (2000) concluded that comprehension development cannot be understand without a critical examination of the role played by vocabulary knowledge. Student's success in school mostly depends upon their ability to read with comprehension. There is an urgency to providing instructions that equips students with the skills and strategies necessary for life long vocabulary development.

Vocabulary tasks should be restructured as necessary. It is important to be certain that students fully understand what is asked of them in the context of reading, Language in India www.languageinindia.com

13 : 1 January 2013

Kifayat Khan, Dr. Muhammad Iqbal Majoka and Dr. Umbreen Ashfaq

The Effect of Vocabulary Building on Students Academic Achievement in English Language at Elementary Level

rather than focusing only on the words to be learned. Restructuring seems to be most effective for low achieving or at risk students. Dependence on single vocabulary instruction method will not result the optimal learning. A variety of methods can be used effectively in which words are to be learned. Linking new meanings to language that is already known can positively affect vocabulary learning (Gray 1997; Ney 1996; Richardson 1980; Schmitt 1995). These links are now commonly known as cognitive strategies, and are widely reported in vocabulary acquisition research. However it is necessary to use different techniques and activities for language learning.

Review of Related Literature

The study was designed to examine the competence difference of male and female students in English language at secondary level. In connection with this study, review of literature includes the following topics:

- Definitions of language
- Position of English language in Pakistan an overview.
- Aims of teaching English at secondary level.
- Skills of English language and gender difference.
- Language behaviour and language system
- English language competence and performance.
- Gender difference in language learning and competence.
- Gender attitude towards English language
- Socio economic status and academic achievement.
- Factors affecting the gender differences.
- Variation in language use process.
- Gender biological versus sociological theories.

Language in India www.languageinindia.com

13 : 1 January 2013

Kifayat Khan, Dr. Muhammad Iqbal Majoka and Dr. Umbreen Ashfaq

The Effect of Vocabulary Building on Students Academic Achievement in English Language at Elementary Level

Definitions of Language

Different experts have defined language in different ways. According to Sapir (1921), “Language is purely human and non-instinctive method of communicating ideas, emotions and desires by means of voluntarily produced symbols.”

In *Outline of Linguistic Analysis*, Bloch and Trager (1942) stated, “A language is system of arbitrary vocal symbols by means of which a social group co-operates.” Hall (1968) tells us that language is “The institution whereby humans communicate and interact with each other by means of habitually used oral auditory arbitrary symbols”

Chomsky’s (1957) book *Syntactic Structures* stated that, “From now on I will consider a language to be a set (finite or infinite) of sentences, each finite in length constructed out of a finite set of element”.

Position of English Language in Pakistan: An Overview

English occupies an important place in everyday life and educational system of our country. In Pakistan English continues to be the medium of instruction for secondary schools, colleges and universities.

English plays an important role in many fields including the following.

- 1) English is an official language
- 2) English is the court language
- 3) English is the language of international trade and industry.

Language in India www.languageinindia.com

13 : 1 January 2013

Kifayat Khan, Dr. Muhammad Iqbal Majoka and Dr. Umbreen Ashfaq
The Effect of Vocabulary Building on Students Academic Achievement in English
Language at Elementary Level

- 4) English is considered to be a window on the modern world through which we are able to see the scientific, technological, commercial and educational development taking place (Parida, 2007).

Place of English in School Curriculum

Curriculum is derived from Latin word “currere” meaning “to run”, thus curriculum is the medium to realize the goals and objectives of teaching a particular subject of study (Parida, 2007)

Importance of Vocabulary in Language Learning

Words are the building blocks in a language. By learning the lexical items, we start to develop knowledge of the target language. Based on our experience of being a language learner, we seem to have no hesitation in recognizing the importance of vocabulary in L2 learning. Meara (1980) points out that language learner admit that they encounter considerable difficulty with vocabulary even when they upgrade from an initial stage of acquiring a second language to a much more advanced level. Language practitioners also have reached a high degree of consensus regarding the importance of vocabulary. The findings in Macaro’s survey (2003) indicate that secondary language teachers view vocabulary as a topic they most need research to shed light on to enhance the teaching and learning in their classrooms. Therefore, it may be claimed that the role of vocabulary in L2 learning is immediately recognized and implications for teaching from substantial research are in great demand.

The acquisition of vocabulary at an early age has been shown to be a critical predictor of later success (Becker, 1977; Joshi, 2005; Neuman, 2006 & 2005).

Vocabulary size has been linked to academic achievement (Baumann & Kameenui, Language in India www.languageinindia.com

13 : 1 January 2013

Kifayat Khan, Dr. Muhammad Iqbal Majoka and Dr. Umbreen Ashfaq

The Effect of Vocabulary Building on Students Academic Achievement in English Language at Elementary Level

1991); as a predictor of overall reading comprehension (Yovanoff, Duesbery, Alonzo & Tindal, 2005); and is said to affect the ability to think at a deeper cognitive level, the ability to express ideas clearly, and the ability to learn new ideas more quickly (Neuman, 2006). The inability to read has many detrimental effects to the progress of students, including low self-esteem, lack of attendance, and disciplinary problems (Hasselbring, Goin, Taylor, Bottge, & Daley, 1997). The problem appears to be large scale, with as many as 36% of fourth graders reading below age appropriate levels and more prevalent in minority cultures such as Black, Hispanic, and Native American (Perie, Grigg & Donahue (2005).

While some children learn vocabulary well through the use of incidental learning often accomplished by reading age appropriate stories (Rupley & Nichols, 2005), several other factors seem to contribute to the lack of vocabulary. Prior knowledge seems to emerge as a relevant factor in some research (Griswold, Gelzheiser, & Shepherd, 1987; Hasselbring et al., 1997; Kintsch, 1994). Lack of prior knowledge can be linked to a lack of activity outside of school and in some cases low SES (Chall & Snow, 1982). Students of low socioeconomic status (SES) for example, seem to fall behind in their vocabulary knowledge (Graves, 1986), often early in elementary education (White, Graves & Slater, 1990).

Vocabulary Learning Strategies (VLS)

Key Previous Studies on VLS

In the process of investigating and classifying LLS, some studies indirectly involve the strategies specifically applicable to vocabulary learning. Nevertheless, studies on VLS in the early stage tend to focus on a limited number of strategies, such as guessing from context (Huckin *et al.* 1993) and certain mnemonics like the Keyword Method (Pressley *et al.* 1982). More thorough and in-depth studies which Language in India www.languageinindia.com

13 : 1 January 2013

Kifayat Khan, Dr. Muhammad Iqbal Majoka and Dr. Umbreen Ashfaq

The Effect of Vocabulary Building on Students Academic Achievement in English Language at Elementary Level

look at VLS as a group are in need to contribute to a more comprehensive taxonomy of VLS (Schmitt 1997).

A large-scale study on Chinese university learners' VLS was carried out by Gu and Johnson (1996). 850 sophomore non-English majors participated in the survey by filling out a questionnaire composed of three sections: Personal Data, Beliefs about Vocabulary Learning, and Vocabulary Learning Strategies. Researchers correlated responses to the questionnaire with results on a vocabulary size test and a general English proficiency measure. It was found that there were significant positive correlations between the two metacognitive strategies (Self-Initiation and Selective Attention) and the two test scores, whereas mnemonic devices (e.g. imagery, visual associations, and auditory associations), semantic encoding strategies, and word list learning probably correlated highly with vocabulary size, but not with general English proficiency. In a multiple regression analysis, the two metacognitive strategies also emerged as positive predictors of both general English proficiency and vocabulary size. Nevertheless, the second best predictor of vocabulary size, namely Dictionary Looking-Up strategies, did not rank comparably high as a predictor of general English proficiency. Likewise, variables such as extracurricular time spent on English, intentional activation of new words learned and semantic encoding, seemed to play a role in predicting vocabulary size but not in overall English proficiency. The findings suggest that "students would benefit more if they aimed at learning the language skills rather than just remembering English equivalents of all Chinese words" (Gu and Johnson 1996, p. 659).

Another point to be noted in the study is that Visual Repetition and Imagery Encoding were both strong negative predictors of vocabulary size and English proficiency, implying that learners probably should not depend too much on visual repetition or fanciful imagery techniques when committing words into memory. Language in India www.languageinindia.com

13 : 1 January 2013

Kifayat Khan, Dr. Muhammad Iqbal Majoka and Dr. Umbreen Ashfaq
The Effect of Vocabulary Building on Students Academic Achievement in English
Language at Elementary Level

Nation (2001) states that Gu and Johnson's comprehensive study reveals some messages for teachers and learners, three of which are as follows:

Discovery Strategies

Discovery strategies include several determination strategies and social strategies. A learner may discover a new word's meaning through guessing from context, guessing from an L1 cognate, using reference materials (mainly a dictionary), or asking someone else (e.g. their teacher or classmates). There is a natural sense that almost all of the strategies applied to discovery activities could be used as consolidation strategies in the later stage of vocabulary learning (Schmitt 1997).

Guessing through Context

Nation (2001, p.232) maintains that "incidental learning via guessing from context is the most important of all sources of vocabulary learning". Over the past two decades, this strategy has been greatly promoted since it seems to "fit in more comfortably with the communicative approach than other, more discrete, Discovery Strategies" (Schmitt 1997, p.209). Context tends to be more interpreted as simply textual context. Nevertheless, some other important sources of information should also be taken into account when guessing, such as knowledge of the subject being read, or knowledge of the conceptual structure of the topic. In Liu and Nation's (1985, cited Nation 2001) study, it is found that a minimum requirement for the guessing to happen is that 95% of the running words are already familiar to the learner. Clarke and Nation (1980, cited Nation 2001) present an inductive five-step approach to guess, including:

Step 1. Find the part of speech of the unknown word.

Language in India www.languageinindia.com

13 : 1 January 2013

Kifayat Khan, Dr. Muhammad Iqbal Majoka and Dr. Umbreen Ashfaq

The Effect of Vocabulary Building on Students Academic Achievement in English Language at Elementary Level

Step 2. Look at the immediate context of the unknown word and simplify this context if necessary.

Step 3. Look at the wider context of the unknown word. This means looking at the relationship between the clause containing the unknown word and surrounding clauses and sentences.

Step 4. Guess.

Step 5. Check the guess.

It must be noted here that the use of the word form comes after the context clues have been used. Some studies (e.g. Laufer & Sim 1985, cited Nation 2001) have suggested that learners made wrong guesses probably due to their heavy reliance on word form. When learners make an incorrect guess based on word-part analysis, they may twist their interpretation of the context to support the incorrect guess. Thus, the most difficult part of the guessing strategy is to make learners delay using word form clues until after using contextual information (Nation 2001).

Dictionary Use

Reference materials, primarily a dictionary, can be used in a receptive or a productive skill in language learning. A common situation is that, for example, when a learner meets an unknown word in the text and fails to infer the meaning through context, they might be advised to consult a dictionary. Looking up a word in a dictionary is “far from performing a purely mechanical operation” (Scholfield 1982, p.185); instead, a proficient dictionary user “is often required to formulate and pursue several hypotheses and make use of prior knowledge of various sorts, especially information derived from context” (Scholfield 1982, p.185).

Language in India www.languageinindia.com

13 : 1 January 2013

Kifayat Khan, Dr. Muhammad Iqbal Majoka and Dr. Umbreen Ashfaq

The Effect of Vocabulary Building on Students Academic Achievement in English Language at Elementary Level

Except for locating the unknown word in the alphabetic list, which seems to be the skill most dealt with in respect of training dictionary use, other important facets involving effective dictionary use receive little attention (Scholfield 1982). Since many lexical items in a language have more than one meaning, learners should be instructed how to reduce multiple options by elimination.

Scanning all of the definitions in the entry before deciding which is the one that fits is a good idea proposed by Underhill (1980). After choosing a seemingly reasonable sense from the definitions in the entry, a user then needs to “understand the definition and integrate it into the context where the unknown was met” (Scholfield 1982, p.190).

The most sophisticated parts involving dictionary use arise when none of the senses in the entry seems to fit the context or more than one fits. In these situations, a user may need to infer a meaning that comes from the senses in the entry or “seek further contextual clues in the source text to disambiguate” (Scholfield 1982, p.193). Each of the above skills may be practiced separately through well-designed activities and only in this way can effective dictionary use be maximized and misunderstanding minimized.

Memorization Strategies

In general, memorization strategies refer to those involving making connections between the to-be-learned word and some previously learned knowledge, using some form of imagery or grouping. It is held that “the kind of elaborative mental processing that the Depth of Processing Hypothesis (Craik & Lockhart 1972; Craik & Tulving 1975) suggests is necessary for long-term retention” (Schmitt 1997, p.213).

Language in India www.languageinindia.com

13 : 1 January 2013

Kifayat Khan, Dr. Muhammad Iqbal Majoka and Dr. Umbreen Ashfaq

The Effect of Vocabulary Building on Students Academic Achievement in English Language at Elementary Level

Thus, memorization strategies play an important role in helping learners to commit new words into memory and in the whole process of vocabulary learning. Schmitt includes twenty-seven memorization strategies in his 58-item VLS taxonomy.

Examples of memorization strategies contain “study word with a pictorial representation of its meaning”, “associate the word with its coordinates”, “use semantic maps”, “group words together within a storyline”, “study the spelling of a word”, “use Keyword Method”, or “use physical action when learning a word”, etc. Among the numerous mnemonics, the Keyword Method is also one of three strategies Nation (1990) proposes to apply when dealing with low-frequency words. This technique involves a learner finding a L1 word which sounds like the target L2 word and creating an image combining the two concepts. A number of studies (e.g. Pressley *et al.* 1982) have indicated that the Keyword method is an effective method of improving word retrieval.

2.3.4.2 Cognitive Strategies

In Schmitt’s VLS taxonomy, cognitive strategies primarily refer to written and verbal repetition as well as some mechanical means involving vocabulary learning. Although repetition as a learning strategy is not much praised by those supporting the Depth of Processing Hypothesis, it is popular among learners and may help them achieve high levels of proficiency (Schmitt 1997). In Schmitt’s study, for example, up to 76% of Japanese learners reported they used verbal and written repetition as consolidation strategies, making them the second and third most-used strategies separately. Other cognitive strategies involve using some kind of study aids, such as taking notes in class, taping L2 labels onto their respective physical objects, or making a tape recording of word lists and studying by listening. Vocabulary notebooks are also recommended by numerous scholars (e.g. Gairns and Redman

Language in India www.languageinindia.com

13 : 1 January 2013

Kifayat Khan, Dr. Muhammad Iqbal Majoka and Dr. Umbreen Ashfaq

The Effect of Vocabulary Building on Students Academic Achievement in English Language at Elementary Level

1986; Schmitt 1995; Fowle 2002) to be implemented by learners to facilitate vocabulary acquisition.

Meta Cognitive Strategies

The study by Gu and Johnson (1996) has found that meta cognitive strategies are positive predictors of vocabulary size and general English proficiency, showing the significant role the meta cognitive strategies play in language learning. Thus, a need is seen to train students to control and evaluate their own learning through various ways, such as using spaced word practice, continuing to study word over time, or self-testing, all of which are included in Schmitt's taxonomy.

In this way, learners will take more responsibility for their studies and overall learning effect may be improved. Another important strategy in this group involves the decision to skip or pass a new word when it is judged to be a low frequency one which may not be met again for a long time. The fact that even a native speaker only knows a portion of the huge amount of words in a language suggests that an efficient L2 learner is supposed to spend their time and efforts on those words most relevant and useful to them.

Research on Vocabulary Development and Its Outcomes

The bulk of research on vocabulary instruction examines its effect on reading. Researchers explored students' acquisition of word definitions after practice with dictionary definitions (Anderson & Kulhavy, 1972); synonym pairs, word lists, and three-sentence passages (Gipe, 1979); word association tasks or the keyword method (McDaniel & Pressley, 1984; Pressley, Levin, & McDaniel, 1987);

Research Methodology

Language in India www.languageinindia.com

13 : 1 January 2013

Kifayat Khan, Dr. Muhammad Iqbal Majoka and Dr. Umbreen Ashfaq

The Effect of Vocabulary Building on Students Academic Achievement in English Language at Elementary Level

This study was conducted to examine the effect of vocabulary building activities on student's performance at elementary level. This study was experimental in nature and pre-test and post-test equivalent group design was followed for this study. Following methods and procedures were adopted to conduct this study.

Population

All the students learning at elementary level in district Haripur constituted the population of this study.

Sample

A survey of the elementary schools was made to seek the feasibility of experiment. In the light of feasibility survey, GGH School Basso Maira was selected for experiment. The students of 7th class of this school were taken as participant of the study. All the student of 7th class (n=56) were divided in to two equal groups using matched sampling on the basis of test scores in pre-test. One group was taken as experimental group and other was considered as control group.

Research Instrument

To measure the effect of treatment on students' achievement, a test was prepared under the guidance of a research committee. This test was used as pre-test as well as post-test. This test was validated using judgmental validation followed by pilot testing. This test was consisted of 4 parts having 100 items in all.

Data Collection

Language in India www.languageinindia.com

13 : 1 January 2013

Kifayat Khan, Dr. Muhammad Iqbal Majoka and Dr. Umbreen Ashfaq

The Effect of Vocabulary Building on Students Academic Achievement in English Language at Elementary Level

Both experimental and control group were tested by administering achievement test before and after the treatment. Test scores of students on pre-test and post-test served as data for this research.

Data Analysis and Interpretation

The collected data was arranged in to table and analyzed by using mean score, standard deviation and test as statistical tools. The analyzed data was interpreted in to findings of the study. Conclusions were drawn from these findings. And finally recommendations were made in the light of findings and conclusions.

The data were analysis and interpretation as follows: Building a large vocabulary is very essential for learning a second language. Learner can best build a large vocabulary by different activities. To prove the effect of activities on vocabulary building, an achievement test was prepared this test was used as pretest and post-test. The test consisted of four parts, comprehension test, vocabulary test, creative writing and language translation. This test was taken before and after the treatment, to see the difference between mean score of the student. Students were divided in to two groups, control group and experimental group. Control group was taught by traditional lecture method and experimental group was taught by through vocabulary building activities. The collected data was arranged in to following tables.

Table 1: Difference between mean score of experimental and control group in comprehension on pre-test.

| Comprehension test | N | Mean score | S D | t |
|---------------------------|----------|-------------------|------------|----------|
| Control group | 28 | 10.79 | 3.40 | 0.79 |
| Experimental group | 28 | 11.50 | 3.47 | |

Language in India www.languageinindia.com

13 : 1 January 2013

Kifayat Khan, Dr. Muhammad Iqbal Majoka and Dr. Umbreen Ashfaq

The Effect of Vocabulary Building on Students Academic Achievement in English Language at Elementary Level

Table 1 shows that on pretest, the calculated value of t (0.79) is less than critical value of t (2.00) at (0.05) level of significance. Thus there was no significant difference between reading comprehension score of experimental and control group on pre-test.

Table 2: Difference between mean score of experimental and control group in vocabulary in pre-test.

| Vocabulary Test | N | Mean score | S D | t |
|--------------------|----|------------|------|------|
| Control Group | 28 | 18.39 | 6.23 | 0.12 |
| Experimental Group | 28 | 18.18 | 7.21 | |

Table 2 shows that on pre-test. The calculated value of t (0.12) is less than critical value of t (2) at (0.05) level of significance thus there was no significant difference between vocabulary scores of experimental and control group.

Table 3: Difference between mean score of experimental and control group in creative writing on pre-test.

| Creative Writing | N | Mean Score | S D | t |
|--------------------|----|------------|------|------|
| Control Group | 28 | 10.39 | 2.74 | 1.85 |
| Experimental Group | 28 | 10.82 | 3.04 | |

Table 3 shows that on pre-test the calculated value of t (1.85) is less than critical value of t (2:00) at 0.5 level of significance. Thus there was no significant difference between creative writing score of experimental and control group.

Table 4: Difference between mean score of experimental and control group in language test on pre test.

| Language Translation | N | Mean Score | S D | t |
|----------------------|----|------------|------|------|
| Control Group | 28 | 10.68 | 3.18 | 0.66 |
| Experimental Group | 28 | 11.32 | 4.50 | |

Table 4 shows that on pre test the calculated value of t (0.66) is less than critical value of t (2:00) at 0.05 level of significance. Thus there was no significant difference between language translation scores of experimental control group on pre-test.

Table 5: Difference between mean score of experimental and control group on total scores in English.

| Total score | N | Mean score | S D | t |
|--------------------|----|------------|-------|------|
| Control group | 28 | 50.46 | 13.11 | 0.56 |
| Experimental group | 28 | 52.68 | 12.21 | |

Table 5 shows that on pre test, the calculated value of t (0.56) is less than critical value of t (2.11) at 0.05 level of significance. Thus there was no significant difference between mean scores of experimental and control group on total scores in English on pre-test.

Table 6: Difference between mean score of experimental and control group in reading comprehension on post-test.

| Comprehension test | N | Mean score | S D | t |
|--------------------|----|------------|------|------|
| Control group | 28 | 10.89 | 3.07 | 2.24 |
| Experimental group | 28 | 12.57 | 2.50 | |

Table 6 shows that on post-test the calculated value of t (2.24) is greater than critical value of t (2.00) at 0.05 level of significance thus there was a significant difference between reading comprehension mean score of experimental and control group on post-test. Because mean score of experimental (12.57) is greater than that of control group (10.89). Experimental group showed significantly better performance after treatment.

Table 7: Difference between mean score of experimental and control group in vocabulary test on post-test.

| Vocabulary test | N | Mean score | S D | t |
|--------------------|----|------------|------|------|
| Control group | 28 | 20.11 | 7.31 | 3.54 |
| Experimental group | 28 | 27.14 | 7.5 | |

Table 7 shows that on post-test the calculated value of t (3.54) is greater than critical value of t (2.00) at 0.05 level of significance. Thus there was a significant difference between vocabulary test mean scores of experimental and control group on post test. Because mean score of experimental group (27.14) is greater than that of control group (20.11), experimental group showed better performance, than control group in vocabulary test after treatment.

Language in India www.languageinindia.com

13 : 1 January 2013

Kifayat Khan, Dr. Muhammad Iqbal Majoka and Dr. Umbreen Ashfaq

The Effect of Vocabulary Building on Students Academic Achievement in English Language at Elementary Level

Table 8: Difference between mean score of experimental and control group in creative writing on post-test.

| Creative writing | N | Mean score | S D | t |
|---------------------------|----------|-------------------|------------|----------|
| Control group | 28 | 11.32 | 3.24 | 3.50 |
| Experimental group | 28 | 14.11 | 2.63 | |

Table 8 shows that on post-test, the calculated value of t (3.50) is greater than critical value of t (2.00) at 0.05 level of significance. Thus there was a significant difference between creative writing mean scores of experimental and control group on post test. Because mean score of experimental group (14.11) is greater than that of control group (11.32), the experimental group showed significantly better performance than control group in creative writing after treatment.

Table 9: Difference between mean score of experimental and control group in language translation in post-test.

| Language Translation | N | Mean Score | S D | t |
|-----------------------------|----------|-------------------|------------|----------|
| Control Group | 28 | 11.39 | 3.12 | 2.10 |
| Experimental Group | 28 | 13.04 | 2.82 | |

Table 9 shows that on post-test, the calculated value of t (2.10) is greater than the critical value of t (2.00) at 0.005 level of significance. Thus there was a significant difference between language translation mean score of experimental and control group in post-test. Because mean score of experimental group (13.04) is greater than that of control group (11.39) experimental group showed significantly better performance than control group in language translation after treatment.

Language in India www.languageinindia.com

13 : 1 January 2013

Kifayat Khan, Dr. Muhammad Iqbal Majoka and Dr. Umbreen Ashfaq

The Effect of Vocabulary Building on Students Academic Achievement in English Language at Elementary Level

Table 10: Difference Between mean score of experimental and control group in total score of English on post-test.

| Total Score | N | Mean score | S D | t |
|---------------------------|----------|-------------------|------------|----------|
| Control group | 28 | 53.71 | 14.45 | 3.68 |
| Experimental group | 28 | 66.89 | 12.26 | |

Table 10 shows that on post-test the calculated value of t (3.68) is greater than the critical value of t (2.00) at 0.05 level of significance. Thus there was significant difference between mean scores of experimental and control group in total scores of English on post-test. Because mean score of experimental group (66.89) is greater than that of control group (53.71). Experimental group showed significantly better performance than control group in total scores of English on post-test after treatment.

Conclusion

Activity based method for teaching vocabulary is very effective method of teaching at elementary level. It does not strengthen only the vocabulary, but also it accelerates students learning in comprehension, creative writing and language translation.

Recommendations

Following recommendations were made in the light of findings and conclusions of this research:

- i. Activity based method should be adopted for better learning. English teachers be provided in-service as well as pre-service training in

Language in India www.languageinindia.com

13 : 1 January 2013

Kifayat Khan, Dr. Muhammad Iqbal Majoka and Dr. Umbreen Ashfaq

The Effect of Vocabulary Building on Students Academic Achievement in English Language at Elementary Level

vocabulary building activities. This teaching technique be made part of curriculum for Elementary teacher training programs.

- ii. Teacher should use activities for students for better learning
- iii. Further research be conducted using activity method for teaching language in large classroom to see its effect on various aspect language learning.

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Language at Elementary Level