Merit and Demerit of ESL and EFL Context in Incidental Vocabulary Learning

Mojgan Yarahmadi, Ph.D.

Merit or Demerit of ESL and EFL Context in Incidental Vocabulary Learning

Mojgan Yarahmadi, Ph.D.

---

1. Introduction

English has become the world language. It is the most dominant foreign language in Iran. Presently, it is an undeniable necessity rather than a mere school subject, and has found its way to the heart of the Iranian society. But its usefulness is connected with vocabulary learning.

Hence, numerous studies have been conducted regarding three aspects of the quartet model of person, task, strategy, and context. That is to say, the effect of person (teacher/learner), strategy and task have been surveyed in so many researches. But still, an ideal solution for the problem of vocabulary learning is not found. And Iranian EFL learners, like before, are not learning the target vocabulary under ideal conditions. Therefore, a drastic change is necessary. Of course, this proposition does not signify the total rejection of the traditional or commonly used techniques for vocabulary learning. But it stresses the fact that vocabulary learning is a problematic area for Iranian EFL learners.

This research gives a new insight. Its motto is that, "although teacher's role in intentional, as well as the learner's role and motivation in incidental, and the role of methods such as text-generation as a help to discovery learning are important factors, the role of context should be taken into consideration."

2. Intentional and Incidental Vocabulary Learning

Vocabulary is a key component of second/foreign language proficiency. Put it in another word, vocabulary learning is a must. It can take place in two general ways: intentional and incidental.

Intentional vocabulary learning is the rehearsal and memorizing techniques invoked by learners when they have the explicit intentions of learning and retaining lexical information. Participants in an intentional learning situation are told in advance that their learned vocabulary will be tested afterwards.

Incidental vocabulary learning occurs without the specific intent to focus on vocabulary learning. It means learning words while reading to get the meaning, to answer some questions, to do a task but not to learn a word. Learners are required to perform a task involving a processing of some information without being told in advance that they will be tested afterwards on their recall of that information.

The strategy a learner uses and the effectiveness of it for vocabulary learning depends on the learner the learning task. Text-generation is a problem–solving task, which refers to organizing and rearranging the scrambled sentences into well-written paragraphs.

3. Text Manipulation

Interest in sentence-scrambling exercises derives from the general interest in text manipulation. It is used as a way of examining text structure and as a teaching/learning aid in a holistic approach to language learning.

According to Johns and Lixune (1999) there are four types of text manipulation: substitution, deletion, insertion, and reordering.

Einstein et al. (1984) found that the recall of a fairy tale was significantly better if subjects were required to fill in deleted letters as they read the fairy tale than when they just read the passage for comprehension. In a similar fashion, McDaniel (1984) found that deleting letters from the words expressing certain events in a story enhances the recall for those events. It has been proposed that letter deletion enhances memory because it induces extension or controlled processing of lexical items.

In an experiment by Mc Daniel et al (1986), generation effect occurred for randomly ordered sentences. Subjects were given a descriptive text. There were 14 sentences in the text. Subjects in the control condition were given a normal version of the description text where sentences were presented in their proper order. Subjects in the text-scrambling condition were presented with 14 pieces of paper, with a different sentence from the passage typed on each piece. They were told to rearrange the sentences into the sequence that made the maximum sense to them. In a subsequent incidental memory test, they were asked to write down as much of the text as possible. A mnemonic advantage has been reported for scrambled texts.

In his experiment, Joe (1998) discusses the effects of text-based tasks promoting generation that have on incidental vocabulary acquisition. He believes that a large proportion of vocabulary is acquired incidentally from written contexts. However,

in text-based studies promoting generative processing, it is not clear if, or to what extent, generation influences incidental vocabulary learning.

Here, Joe (ibid) tries to explain that reading a text helps in acquiring incidental vocabulary. He also explains that the relationship between text and generative processes is not clear enough, but it helps in vocabulary learning.

Another study which was done by Paribakht and Wesche (1997) examined whether reading comprehension plus vocabulary enhancement exercises led to more effective acquisition of vocabulary items or not. The results of their study indicate that learners in the 'reading only' treatment acquired some words but their knowledge of many of these words tended to stay at the recognition level. In the 'reading plus' treatment, however, learners learned more words and their knowledge of many of these words reached higher levels over a specific period of time.

In other words, "focused vocabulary instruction based on theme-related reading texts and using a variety of techniques have shown greater effectiveness than reading comprehension alone for learning selected vocabulary. Therefore, words practiced in a series of vocabulary-focused exercises following a reading task led to a better retention than words that received additional exposure in texts.

Another influencing factor in vocabulary learning is context of learning. Context is a pervasive and potent force in any learning event i.e., learning is related to the environment in which it takes place. It is the learning environment which includes opportunities for learners to engage in meaningful social interaction with users of the second language.

Gu (2003) believes that learning context refers to the learning environment. It is the socio-cultural-political environment where learning takes place. The learning context can include the teachers, the peers, the classroom climate or ethos, the family support, the social cultural tradition of learning, the curriculum, and the availability of input and output opportunities. Learning context is different from language context which refers to the textual or discourse place in which a particular word or structure can be found. Learning contexts constrain the ways learners approach learning tasks. A learning strategy that is valued in one learning context may well be deemed inappropriate in another context.

The EFL/ESL distinction has been an important one in language pedagogy for many years. Each learning context requires different materials, syllabuses, and pedagogy. Hence, while learning a foreign language one has to keep in mind the distinction between these two different contexts.

In an ESL context, the language is learnt for immediate application. It is used as a means of communication. It is a reference to a situation where English becomes the language of instruction in the schools, as in Philippine or a lingua franca between speakers of widely diverse languages, as in India. In contrast, the language neither is learnt for immediate application nor used as a means of communication in an EFL context. It is learnt for educational purpose. Job opportunities and increasing the possibility of higher education are high and communication in spoken or written form are low priorities in an EFL situation.

Zhan-xiang (2004), talks about the importance of vocabulary in communication. He presents his study on Inner Mongolia (one of the largest in the 55 minority nationality groups in China) and observes that most of them have forgotten what they have learned because they didn't have English environment.

Obviously, those learners in English as foreign language (EFL) context whose native language is not genetically related to English, compared to ESL learners, are not developing their lexicons to the levels which would permit them to function adequately in many English language contexts. They often lack an adequate amount of oral or written input. As mentioned in the previous section, these subjects are taught the knowledge of the language not for day to day communication or immediate application. They just learn the language for a better job opportunity or for higher education. Therefore, their vocabulary lacks efficacy.

4. Research Question

Based on the discussed purposes, the research problem can be formulated in the following manner:

Does text-generation make a significant difference on incidental vocabulary average performance in EFL and ESL contexts?

5. Research Hypothesis

Accordingly, a null hypothesis was posed as:

There is no significant difference between incidental vocabulary learning through text- generation in EFL and ESL contexts.

6. Methodology

6.1. Design

In this study, randomization was not feasible. i.e., all the three groups were intact classes. So, the study called for *quasi-experimental* design.

6.2. Participants

The total number of one hundred and twenty students participated in the study. They were both male and female students at M.A part II (second year). Forty-two of them took part in the pilot study and the remaining seventy-eight students comprised three groups:

The first one was from EFL context. They were Iranian students, studying at Arak Islamic Azad University (Iran), whose mother tongue was Persian. The second group from ESL context consisted of students from the Institute of Advanced Studies in English in Pune (India), whose mother tongue was Marathi. The third group consisted of Iranian students in ESL context who were studying at Poona College and Wadia College in Pune (India).

6.3. Instruments

Two tests, a general proficiency TOEFL test and a teacher-made multiple-choice test of vocabulary, twelve texts, and a questionnaire served as the instruments for this study.

7. Procedures

To accomplish the purpose of the study, the following procedures were carried out:

First of all, three intact classes (Indian students in India, Iranian students in India, and Iranian students in Iran) were selected:

It is worth mentioning that, in all the three groups both male and female students participated. All of them were students of M.A part II (second year). The researcher has chosen this level of students for two main reasons:

First, students in this level (upper-intermediate to advance) are expected to have a particular level of mastery sufficient for performing incidental vocabulary learning through the problem solving task of text-generation easily. Second, this research needs subjects from EFL context (Iran) who were studying in ESL context (India). M.A students of the second year part II who have spent some time in India were

suitable enough to fulfill this purpose. In this case, the researcher was able to test the effect of context of learning on the students' performance.

Then a standard general proficiency TOEFL test (BARRON'S HOW TO PREPARE FOR THE TOEFL 2006, Model test 1) was considered to determine the homogeneity of the subjects with a specific level of proficiency in English. Further, it was intended to act as a criterion to validate (concurrent validity, see below) the vocabulary test which was developed by the researcher.

The result of one-way ANOVA indicated that the three groups did belong to the same population at the beginning of the research.

Next step was text selection. All the twelve passages were chosen from the same TOEFL book which was used to test the students' general proficiency. Passages related to different topics were chosen with an attempt to make them attractive for the subjects.

The next step was to highlight some of the vocabulary items of the selected passages. To do this, the researcher and two other colleagues who had the experience of teaching at this level of students agreed upon forty-five vocabulary items which were likely to pose difficulty for the learners. This list was given to ten students who were at the same level to see whether they were difficult for them or not. It was found out that thirty out of forty-five vocabulary items were difficult. Then, these thirty items were given to twelve other students again at the same level (M.A part II, second year). They were asked to write their definitions. The results indicated that these were really difficult for them. So, they were underlined in the passages as the target vocabulary items.

Then a test of thirty multiple- choice items was developed by the researcher using those target vocabulary items. To standardize it, a pilot study was done by twenty students who shared the same characteristics as those of the main subjects of the study.

Moreover, a special attention was paid to its different kinds of validity (e.g. content validity, face validity and concurrent validity). Its reliability was also estimated by the KR-21 formula. And a reasonable range of reliability was found. (71).

Then, all the three groups took this multiple-choice vocabulary test as the pre-test. The purpose was to asses the subject's prior knowledge of vocabulary, and also to

ensure that there were no significant differences among the members of the groups regarding the target vocabulary reservoir before the experiment.

In the treatment period, students were presented with scrambled texts. Obviously, the target vocabulary items were underlined. They were told to rearrange the sentences into the sequence that made the maximum sense to them (this is called text-generation). Then the organization of the passages was checked by the researcher and the correct order was given. While organizing the randomly ordered sentences into well-written paragraphs, students were supposed to guess the meanings of those underlined vocabulary items.

At the end of the experimental treatment period, all subjects were tested immediately to determine post treatment knowledge of vocabulary. That is to say, the performances of all the three groups were compared and contrasted to examine whether the null hypothesis was supported or rejected.

Here, a significant post-test mean difference between the three groups has been observed. Consequently, the null hypothesis was rejected.
The reasons for the superiority of the ESL context were investigated through a 10-item questionnaire.

8. Results and Discussion

Before starting the treatment, a general proficiency TOEFL test was administered to all the three groups. The following table shows the result of one-way ANOVA in the general proficiency test.

ANOVA

Proficiency Test

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	16.692	2	8.346	.120	.887
Within Groups	5213.269	75	69.510		
Total	5229.962	77			

From the table it is clear that groups did not differ significantly as the obtained F value was found to be non-significant (F=.120; p< .887). That is to say, no significant proficiency test mean differences between the three groups were seen. Hence, it can be claimed that all the three groups are homogeneous.

Afterwards, teacher-made vocabulary test was used as a pre-test. The following table shows the result:

ANOVA

Pre-test

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	15.308	2	7.654	.301	.741
Within Groups	1904.846	75	25.398		
Total	1920.154	77			

As it is clear from the table, F- test showed non-significant value (F=.301; p, .741).That is to say, no significant pre-test mean differences between the three groups were seen.

After the treatment the same pre-testing instrument (multiple- choice vocabulary test) was utilized to check the students' performance in the post-test. All the three groups took part in the post- testing procedure.

ANOVA

Post-test

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	268.692	2	134.346	3.554	.034
Within Groups	2834.962	75	37.799		
Total	3103.654	77			

Here, a significant post-test mean difference between the three groups has been observed. That is to say, the three groups scored differently on the post-test. And the difference was statistically significant. Consequently, the null hypothesis is rejected.

Repeated measure of ANOVA revealed a significant change from pre-test to post - test situation irrespective of the groups. From the mean table it is evident that in the pre-test irrespective of the groups, the mean value was 10.9359 which is increased to 14.346167 in the post-test.

In other words, the treatment period had a positive effect on the performances of all the three groups. It does not matter whether they are in ESL context or in EFL

context. The main objective in this period was to involve the students in a problem-solving task of text-generation. The result supports the logic of *learning by doing*. The more effort to make the learners to be involved in the process of learning the better would be the outcome.

The differential gains for different groups were observed. From the mean values, it is clear that group A had maximum gain (5.115) followed by group B (3.7308) and group C had the least gain (1.3846).group B (3.7308) and group C had the least gain (1.3846).

GROUPS	Pre – test		Post – test		Gain
	Mean	S.D	Mean	S.D	
Group A	11.4231	4.9572	16.5385	5.9278	5.115
Group B	10.7692	4.9583	14.5000	7.4471	3.7308
Group C	10.6154	5.0365	12.0000	4.7860	1.3846
Total	10.9359	4.9316	14.346167	6.3661	3.3718

Figure

Estimated Marginal Means of Measure
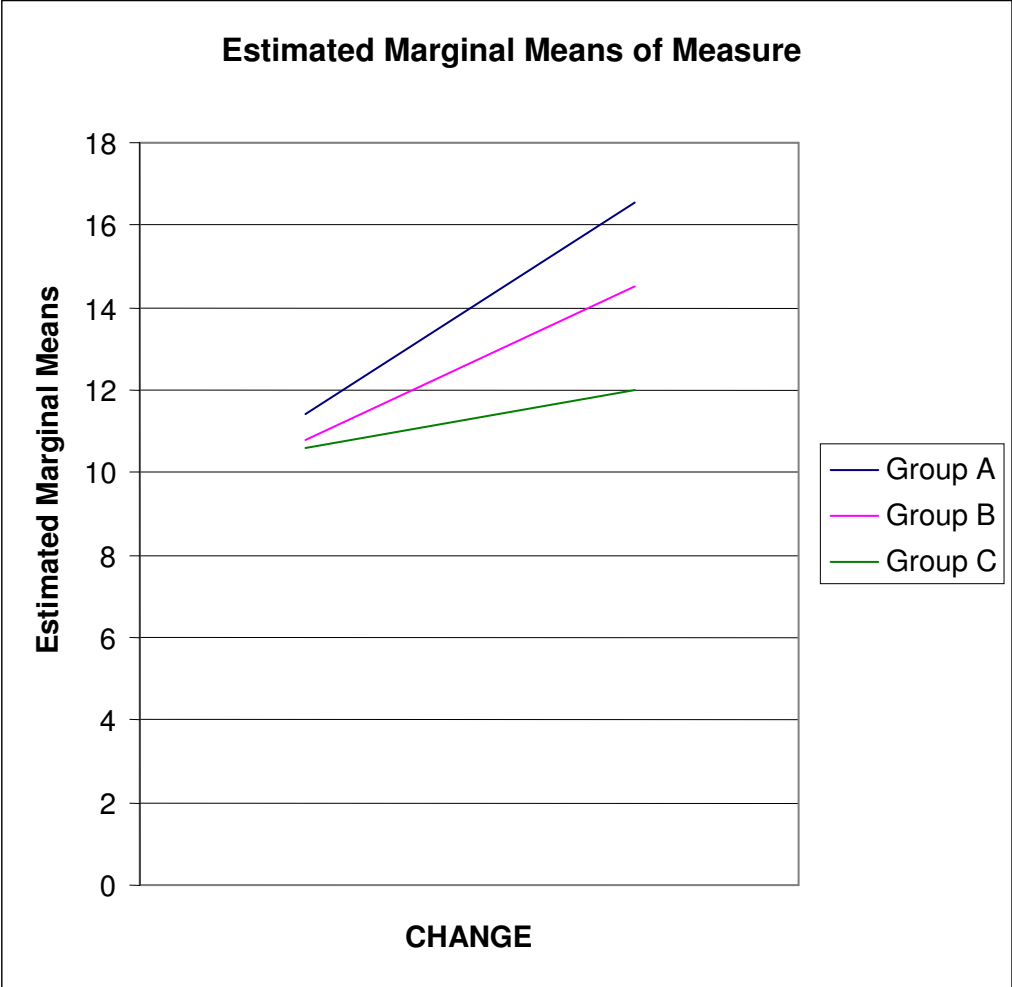
This sharp difference among the groups could be justified in the sense that ESL context can enhance the incidental way of vocabulary learning through text-generation task. The reasons for this superiority of the ESL context is investigated by using a questionnaire. Before administering the questionnaire, it was shown to a group of English specialists in order to review the validity, especially with regard to the structure of the questions and the coverage of the aspects under investigation. As a further check of the reliability, it was tried out with twenty students, a number roughly similar to the population for whom the questionnaire was intended to make sure that the directions were understandable, attainable, and unambiguous. Then based on the specialists' suggestions and the try-out with the students, a final review was carried out.

9. Findings of the Study

The students' performance regarding incidental vocabulary learning through the problem- solving task of text-generation in ESL context (India) is superior to their counterparts' performance in EFL context (Iran). This is proved by the fact that Iranian students who have stayed in India at least for one year, have been able to deal with the unknown vocabulary items more successfully than the Iranian students in Iran. Hence, it can be concluded that the context of learning is one of the most important factors which enhances the incidental way of vocabulary learning.

Linguality, reading extensively outside the classroom, too much emphasis on writing in the examinations, considering the tasks like text-generation as a fun, being more introvert and more independent are some of the positive points with Indian students. Except linguality issue, all the mentioned items besides experience of living abroad which gives the students learning strategies awareness are the positive points with Iranian students in India. But teacher-centeredness, anxiety due to fear of being tested, and the existence of a gap between active and passive knowledge are some of the negative points with the Iranian students in Iran. These points have been investigated to be the main reasons which enhance the rejection of the null-hypothesis.

10. Pedagogical Implications

1. The students in an EFL context like Iran should be provided with an environment, as much as possible, near to the target culture. Without being familiar with the culture of the target country, making an effort to learn it and use its vocabulary would be impossible.

2. Use of audio-visual aids (e.g. pictures, overhead transparency, audiotapes, videos, computers and use of the internet) in a country like Iran where the chances of being in contact with native speakers are so few can be helpful. Indeed, learning in a multicultural world is possible only through the internet and use of it is obligatory and should be encouraged.

3. Professional upgrading of teachers of English in Iran is an urgent need and one way to achieve this goal is through in-service training. Occasionally, the teachers of English can also be sent abroad and help them to improve their proficiency in the teaching.

4. It is a must for teachers, course writers, syllabus designers, administration and governmental educational agencies in Iran to make an attempt to decrease the gap between passive and active knowledge of English language in general as well as in its components such as vocabulary in particular. It is possible by increasing the students ' motivation, increasing their exposure to the English language, and restructuring the educational programs and changing the artificial language learning environment.

On the whole, the emphasis should be upon making the EFL context as close as to the ESL context by providing opportunities to the learners to use the language outside the classroom.

REFERENCES

Einstein, G.O., McDaniel, M.A., Bowers, C.A., & Stevens, D.J. (1984). Memory for Prose: The Influence of Relational and Proposition- Specific Processing. Journal of Experimental Psychology: Learning, Memory, and Cognition, 10, 133-143.

Gu, Y. (2003). Vocabulary Learning in a Second Language: Person, Task, Context and Strategies. Teaching English as a Second or Foreign Language, 7, 1-26.

Joe, A. (1998). What Effects Do Text- Based Tasks Promoting Generation Have on Incidental Vocabulary Acquisition? Applied Linguistics, 19, 357-377.

Johns, F.T., & Lixune, W. (1999). Four Versions of a Sentence- Shuffling Program. System, 27 , 329-339.

McDaniel, M.A. *(*1984). The Role of Elaborative and Schema Processes in Story Memory. Memory and Cognition, 12, 46-51.

McDaniel, M.A., Einstein, G,O., Dunay, P.K., & Cobb, R.E. (1986). Encoding Difficulty and Memory: Toward a Unifying Theory. Journal of Memory and Language, 25, 645-656.

Paribakht, T.S., & Wesche, M. (1997). Vocabulary Enhancement Activities and Reading for Meaning in Second Language Vocabulary Acquisition Retrieved from the website:e/.sagepub.com/cgi/content /refs.

Zhan-xiang, M. (2004). The Necessity of Intensifying English Vocabulary Teaching in the Remote Minority Area College English Teaching. Retrieved from the website:http:// www.asian-efl-journal.com/Article-8-June-mzx-pdf.

Mojgan Yarahmadi, Ph.D.
Islamic Azad University
Arak, Iran
mojgan.yarahmadi@yahoo.com