

THE EFFECT OF READING VERSUS TRANSLATION TASKS ON IRANIAN EFL LEARNERS' KNOWLEDGE OF LEXICON

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ABSTRACT

The present study investigated the effect of reading versus translation tasks on Iranian EFL learners' knowledge of lexicon. The main question this study tried to answer was whether there would be any difference between the means of the two participant groups in a vocabulary posttest if the groups were taught with two different teaching methods. To investigate the answer to the question, 60 B.A. translator trainees were selected from among a population of 100 through administering an Oxford Placement Test. Then, they were divided into two thirty-member groups, one the experimental and the other, the control group of the study. Then, a pretest of vocabulary was administered to the groups. During a 10-session treatment, the subjects in the experimental group received teaching vocabulary through reading tasks, while the subjects in the control group received teaching vocabulary through translation tasks. Then, the two groups participated in the posttest of vocabulary and the means of the two groups were compared via applying a T-test. Also, a one-way ANCOVA was applied to show a within-group comparison for both groups. The results indicated that the participants' vocabulary knowledge in the experimental group increase more than the control group as a result of a different treatment.

Keywords: Vocabulary, Vocabulary Knowledge, Vocabulary Learning, Reading Tasks, Translation Tasks, Lexicon, Iranian EFL Learners

INTRODUCTION

Vocabulary is one of the most difficult aspects of learning a foreign language, particularly in an EFL context. Vocabulary learning plays a major role in English language learners' success. Words constitute the genesis of all languages, and learning any language either the first language or any subsequent languages is deemed pointless without learning words (Thornbury, 2002).

Vocabulary and the paradigms related to it have a long tradition of research in second and foreign language teaching, and one of the central concepts of research in this area is how words are learned (Carter 2001, p. 42). At the time when vocabulary learning connected word lists to be memorized through repetition and rote memorization, most researchers focused on rehearsal strategies and dealt with questions such as the number of repetitions required for learning a list of words, the number of vocabulary items that can be learnt at one time, or the timing of repetitions (Lado, Balwin, & Lobo, 1967; Seibert, 1927 cited in Gu & Johnson, 1996, p. 644). Recently, vocabulary has become a focus of research because of the growing tendency to develop incidental vocabulary learning. This article focuses on the teaching of vocabulary to EFL learners with different methodologies to find out whether Iranian EFL learners' knowledge of lexicon is affected differently when they are taught through translation tasks or reading tasks.

Theoretical Framework

The framework of the theories of the current study turns round translation theories as well as task-based language teaching theories particularly reading tasks. The study of proper principle of translation is termed as translation theory. On the one hand, translation theory recognizes that different languages encode meaning in differing forms, yet guides translators to find appropriate ways of preserving meaning, while using the most appropriate forms of each language. Basically, there are two competing theories of translation. In one, the predominant purpose is to express as exactly as possible the full force and meaning of every word and turn of phrase in the original, and in the other the predominant purpose is to produce a result that does not read like a translation at all, but rather moves in its new dress with the same ease as in its native rendering.

On the other hand, just like teaching methodology, reading theories have had their shifts and transitions. Starting from the traditional view which focused on the printed form of a text, and moving to the cognitive view, that enhanced the role of background knowledge in, addition to what appeared on the printed page; they ultimately culminated in the meta-cognitive view which is now in vogue. It is based on the control and manipulation that a reader can have on the act of comprehending a text.

In vocabulary acquisition, a distinction is frequently made which superficially appears to correspond to the implicit-explicit debate: that of incidental vs. intentional vocabulary acquisition. Here, incidental vocabulary acquisition is generally defined as the 'learning of vocabulary as the by-product of any activity not explicitly geared to vocabulary learning' and is contrasted with intentional vocabulary learning, defined as 'any activity geared at committing lexical information to memory' (Hulstijn, 2001, p. 271). The fact that incidental vocabulary acquisition takes place in second language learning is generally acknowledged among researchers. Most scholars agree that except for the first few thousand most common words, L2 vocabulary is predominantly acquired incidentally (cf. Huckin & Coady 1999). Explicit learning is characterized as involving the learner's online awareness, whereas implicit learning is seen as an automatic process without awareness of either the acquisition process or the resulting knowledge (cf. Reber, 1993, p. 12). Inferring unknown word meanings from context does indeed involve conscious cognitive operations, i.e. selective attention, hypothesis formation and strategy application.

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Helati (1989) examined the conditions in which oral translation was used as an exercise to build vocabulary knowledge. He stated that this activity could be conducted in a way not to contradict the principle of communicative approach and in this way translation would lead to effective results. Shamash (1990), also, conducted a research in this area with the aim of rejecting the claim that the use of L1 language would show the transition process and impede the development of thinking in English. According to Shamash (1990), the learners started by writing about their lives in their L1 or a mixture of their L1 and English. Then, they translated this text in to English with the help of bilingual tutors or learners. It was supposed that in this way learners could overcome the problems of vocabulary, sentence structure, and language confidence. It was shown that, little by little, the learners came to a stage in which they were willing to take risk with English, as starting with L1 gave them a sense of security and validated their lived experiences.

Abdul Rahim (2004, p.161) also states that, contrary to the approaches which advocate the use of the target language and implicit incidental vocabulary learning, there is a need for these methods to be revised and to put emphasis on explicit vocabulary learning. To demonstrate the effect of using translation method in teaching vocabulary, she conducted her study among elementary level EFL learners in Malaysia. In this study, learners' L1 was used as the medium of instruction. The results showed that the translation method has a positive impact on learners recall and retention of the meaning of words that they had learned. Each of these studies in both reading and translation claims for yielding the best results. The meaning of unknown words can be introduced in different ways. None of these ways is better than the other ones in terms of the accuracy of conveyed meaning (Nation, 2005, p. 3). Dictionary strategies, however, are commonly used among L2 Learners in the learning of new words.

Based on the communicative approaches to language teaching, English, as the target language, should be used as the mode of instruction. Nevertheless, there are researchers and teachers who emphasize the benefits of using mother tongue in learning a new language (Abdul Rahim, 2004; Auerbach, 1993). Auerbach (1993, p. 28) believes that using learners' L1 is especially useful in the area of vocabulary. In addition, there are some studies that have examined the use of translation for learning vocabulary (Abdul Rahim, 2004; Saggara & Alba, 2006). However, no research has investigated the usefulness of translation for incidental vocabulary learning. Therefore, the present study is an attempt to compare the effectiveness of reading tasks versus translation tasks for incidental learning of vocabulary.

Statement of the Problem

Learning a second language involves the manipulation of four main skills; speaking, writing, listening, and reading, which lead to effective communication. One crucial factor is the amount of vocabulary one possesses as vocabulary forms the biggest part of the meaning of any language (McCarthy, 1988). Vocabulary, however, is the biggest problem for most learners. In view of this, vocabulary acquisition is currently receiving attention in second language pedagogy and research. However, it is still a contentious issue how learners acquire vocabulary effectively and efficiently. Vocabulary is generally given little emphasis in the university curriculum in Asian countries (Fan, 2003). The situation is the same in Iran as an Asian country. Generally, the emphasis on English teaching in universities in Asian countries is on the four language skills. Vocabulary teaching in many classrooms is largely incidental (Fan, 2003; Catalan, 2003).

Thornbury (2002) believes that lack of vocabulary knowledge impedes language comprehension and production. Allen (1983), also, states that in order to get native-like mastery over a language, learners must learn thousands of words. It can be concluded that without words to express a wider range of meanings, communication in an L2 cannot happen in any meaningful way (McCarthy, 1990).

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The following research questions can be formulated for the following study:

RQ1: Is there any difference between the means of the two participant groups obtained from administering the vocabulary posttest of the study?

RQ2: Do reading tasks affect Iranian EFL learners' knowledge of lexicon differently as compared to translation tasks?

HYPOTHESES

Based on the above-mentioned research questions, the hypotheses of the study are as follows:

H0₁: There is no difference between the means of the two participant groups obtained from administering the vocabulary posttest of the study.

H0₂: Reading tasks do not affect Iranian EFL learners' knowledge of lexicon differently as compared to translation tasks.

METHODOLOGY

Participants

The participants of the study were 60 junior undergraduate translator trainees (both male and female) who were selected from among 100 trainees via administering an OPT and were estimated to be intermediate and whose ages ranged between 19 and 23. They were all native speakers of Farsi, who had studied English for two years prior to the experiment. The junior-level trainees were selected since they had received enough input to answer the vocabulary test as compared to other levels. Then, they were divided into two groups (30 in each, N=30), one the experimental and the other, the control group. The treatment of the study consisted of 10 sessions during which the participants of the control group received teaching vocabulary with translation tasks and the experimental group received teaching vocabulary with reading tasks. The reading tasks emphasized the understanding of the main points of texts and guessing vocabulary from context, also, dictionary use was not allowed.

Materials and Procedure

The materials of the current study consisted of the Oxford Placement Test (OPT), the pretest of vocabulary, the material for the treatment of the study, and the posttest of vocabulary.

The OPT was used to establish the approximate overall vocabulary size of each learner and thus, to homogenize them in terms of their level of proficiency. Vocabulary checklist pretest, also known as the "yes/no test" (Read, 1997), was used to establish that the 10 new vocabulary words were unknown to the students before the treatment. In this type of test, the participants were simply provided with a list of words (no definitions were given) and were asked to check off the words they knew. The pretest items were selected from the book 'A collection of Questions of TOEFL test of English as a foreign language for Ph.D. Exams' by Ramzani (2008).

The material for the treatment of the study consisted of reading-task materials and translation-task materials. The reading task which introduced 10 new words in the context was selected from Essential Words for the TOEFL (by Steven J. Matthiesen, M.A., 2007). The translation task asked the participants to translate each of the new words into Persian. The task, also, required them to translate the English sentences into Farsi using each of the 10 target words.

The posttest of the study was a parallel to the pretest and was used to check the effectiveness of the treatment. Although a variety of vocabulary tests with more detailed information about the participants' depth of knowledge on individual words were available, a multiple choice format was selected for this experiment since this type of test seemed to be more sensitive to small gains in vocabulary knowledge.

RESULTS

Descriptive Analysis of the Data

Table 1. Descriptive analysis of the pretest (PR) and the posttest (PO) of the experimental group of the study

Test	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Variance
PR voc	30	8.3333	1.82574	3.3333
PO voc	30	15.2667	2.13240	4.5471

As indicated in table1, the number of participants has been 30 in the experimental group (N=30). The mean of the pretest scores was shown to be 8.3333 ($\bar{X}_{PR}=8.3333$) as compared to the mean of the posttest scores which was 15.2667 ($\bar{X}_{PO} = 15.2667$). The variance in the POvoc scores indicates that there is more variety in the POvoc scores than the PRvoc scores.

Table 2. Descriptive analysis of the pretest (PR) and the posttest (PO) of the control group of the study

Test	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Variance
PR voc	30	6.7333	1.52978	2.340
PO voc	30	12.1333	3.05956	9.360

As indicated in table2, the number of participants has been 30 in the control group (N=30). The mean of the pretest scores was shown to be 6.7333 ($\bar{X}_{PR}=6.7333$) as compared to the mean of the posttest scores which was 12.1333 ($\bar{X}_{PO} = 12.1333$). The variance in the POvoc scores indicates that there is more variety in the POvoc scores than the PRvoc scores.

Inferential Analysis of the Data

Table 3. The result of the independent t-test of the study

T-Test Results	Observed t	df	Sig.(2-tailed)	Mean Differences
Between the Posttests of the Experimental and the Control Groups of the study	4.602	51.795	.000	3.13333

As indicated in table 3, the t-value of the study calculated between the posttest scores of vocabulary in the experimental and the control group of the study was 4.602 ($t_{obs}= 4.602$) and the degree of freedom was 51.795 ($df=51.795$). Finally, the level of significance was calculated as to be .000 ($p=.000$).

Further, the result of the one-way analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) is as follows:

Table 4. The covariance matrix between the pretest and posttest scores of the experimental and the control groups of the study

Matrix	Between the pretest and the posttest of the Experimental Group	Between the pretest and the posttest of the Control Group
Covariance	0.039	0.118

According to table 4, the covariance between the pretest and posttest scores in the experimental group is .039 ($COV_{PRPOE}= .039$) while it is 0.118 ($COV_{PRPOC}= 0.118$) in the control group of the study. This means that the degree of statistical distance between the pretest and posttest scores in

the experimental group is lower than the control group which is representative of the closeness of the scores in the control group; thus, it can be concluded that the control group of the study has undergone no significant change as a result of the treatment of the study.

DISCUSSION

The first hypothesis of the study which targeted the lack of difference between the means of the two participant groups obtained from administering the vocabulary posttests of the study was rejected. The observed t (4.602) obtained (table 3) was higher than the critical t (2.000) which was high enough to reject the first null hypothesis of the study. The second hypothesis of the study which stated that reading tasks did not have any effect on Iranian EFL learners' knowledge of lexicon was also rejected. A good reason can be the covariance coefficient result that is 0.039 for the experimental group that shows the distance between the scores and as a result the effectiveness of the treatment of the study, as compared to 0.118 for the control group which shows the closeness of the scores in the control group and as a result the ineffectiveness of the treatment of the study.

The main concern of this study was to test the assumption whether reading tasks could bring about any difference on the improvement of vocabulary knowledge of Iranian EFL learners. The current investigation provided support for the value of reading as effective teaching method, and the use of reading as evidenced by the significant differences found between the learners in the control and experimental groups. Better performance of the experimental group may have been due to the unique characteristics of reading. The finding of this study showed that reading could afford a valuable method in language classroom for students at the intermediate level and hence, could be used to facilitate the process of vocabulary learning. Such a finding did not contradict Nagy, Herman, and Anderson (1985), Nagy, Anderson, and Herman (1987), or Nagy (1997) that showed that students could learn vocabulary from context but confirmed that for vocabulary learning to take place from reading that the texts used were of central importance. These findings lent support to Rott's (1999) claim that 'enhanced reading conditions' lead to more gains in vocabulary acquisition.

For feasibility reasons the size of this study was rather limited. Nevertheless, some of the issues emerged in this study would deserve further attention and more detailed investigation. In the current study only 120 students participated. The same study should be repeated with a larger number of subjects from a much wider population, which could result in more power to generalize in detecting the impact of reading and translation tasks on vocabulary learning. The experiment should be repeated trying out the same methods with students representing other levels of linguistic proficiency. Further studies should take into consideration other relevant variables to find if vocabulary learning contributes to them or not. Since the current experiment only looked at minor gains in vocabulary for a follow-up study to be conduct a longer-term experiment to track gains in the depth of vocabulary knowledge acquired over time by each of the tasks.

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