

A Reappraisal Perspective on Written Tasks Types and Vocabulary Acquisition and Retention of EFL Learners

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Abstract: The current study investigated the effectiveness of the type of written exercises on L2 vocabulary retention. To this end 53 Iranian EFL university students practiced ten previously unencountered lexical items in three types of written exercises: multiple choice exercise (MC), filling-in-the blank exercise (FW) and sentence writing exercise (SW). The participants were given a mini-dictionary designed to help them both for meaning and usage of the target words while doing the exercises. An unannounced posttest was administered and the data were analyzed by running a Kruskal-Wallis Test. The findings revealed that the mean of MC exercise was significantly different from two other exercises, but no significant differences were found between FW and SW exercise. The findings confirm Folsie that the depth of word processing is not the salient feature of vocabulary retention, but the amount of investment in word processing is more important [1].

Key words: Vocabulary Acquisition • Retention • Vocabulary-learning tasks • Task-based instruction

INTRODUCTION

After decades of neglect, second language vocabulary acquisition has begun to receive increasing attention in recent years. Researchers have investigated this important area from different perspectives, such as strategies for learning vocabulary [2-4], the value of a dictionary in promoting vocabulary learning [5-7], the role of input in enriching learners' lexical knowledge [8, 9], the effect of mnemonic techniques [10, 11], etc. It has been only recently, after extensive focus on grammar, that SLA researchers and second language teaching experts have started paying more attention to vocabulary learning and teaching. In fact, some researchers now claim that, compared to the other components of language, vocabulary is the most essential one. McCarthy, for example, states, "no matter how well the student learns grammar, no matter how successfully the sounds of L2 are mastered, without words to express a wide range of meanings, communication in an L2 just cannot happen in any meaningful way" (p. 1) [12]. It is also argued that students, while communicating in the target language, find vocabulary to be the greatest hurdle to using the language [13].

Research highlight the importance of vocabulary knowledge for second language (L2) learners in reading [14, 15], speaking [16, 17], in listening [18, 19] and in writing [20-23]. Schmitt notes that L2 students need approximately 2000 words to maintain conversations, 3000 word families to read authentic texts and as many as 10000 words to comprehend challenging academic texts [25]. Research has looked at which vocabulary learning strategies learners use [26-30] and how L2 learners' vocabularies develop [31, 32, 33, 25]. No communication can take place without one knows the lexical items that can carry the meanings of the message. As Wilkins puts it, "While without grammar very little can be conveyed, without vocabulary nothing can be conveyed" (p. 111) [34].

In order to foster their learning of new words, it has been suggested that students need to work on exercises that cause them to pay careful attention and make deeper mental processing of these new words. As many scholars [35, 36] have argued, paying attention to the new language is considered a prerequisite for any learning to occur. This is, however, a necessary, but not sufficient, condition. What is more important is what the students do with the new material and how they process this new information [37, 38].

Incidental vocabulary learning studies [35, 5, 39] have shown that reading alone does not adequately facilitate the long-term retention of these unfamiliar words regardless of the methods learners use to find out their meanings, whether by using inferencing, looking words up in the dictionary, or providing students with glosses.

Many scholars [36, 40] argue that the most incidental vocabulary learning results from reading. Extensive research [5, 36, 39] has been carried out to investigate this relationship. Research on vocabulary acquisition through reading has compared various methods and strategies for learning the new words that appear in the context. These methods include meanings and looking words up in the dictionary. These different methods and strategies for discovering the meanings of new words in a text have been the subject of considerable debate and the experiments carried out for evaluating them have produced contradictory findings. Regardless of the method and strategy used while reading, it has been shown [41] that incidental vocabulary learning through reading only yields a very low rate of retention. This view is also supported by Pressley *et al.*, who argue that “learners can derive vocabulary meanings from context, but this process alone does not foster retention of meanings” (p. 108) [11].

Due to the fact that vocabulary gains that can result from reading are not sufficient, there seems to be a need for effective tasks to reinforce what the students have learned during the reading session. As Stoller and Grabe [42] have suggested, L2 reading and related vocabulary activities might be one appropriate way to direct and enhance the effects of incidental learning resulting from reading. Wesche and Paribakht have argued that “tasks provide learners with varied and multiple encounters with given words that highlight different lexical features, promoting elaboration and strengthening of different aspects of word knowledge” (p. 196) [43]. There are a number of studies that have attempted to investigate the effectiveness of vocabulary learning tasks on the development of L2 learners’ vocabulary knowledge and retention of newly learned words. Such studies have indicated the superiority of reading plus ‘word-oriented’ tasks [44] over reading alone in terms of lexical acquisition.

Depth of processing, however, does not account for the better retention in incidental learning only. Even in intentional learning, where the subjects are asked for later recall of the target words, what the subjects do with the words (i.e. nature of processing) is what matters

irrespective of the high motivation they might have as a result of knowing that they will be tested later.

Learners, the word and the method of presentation are paid attention in L2 vocabulary researches. Also research on the methodology of vocabulary teaching finds that explicit teaching of vocabulary results in better retention than in incidental learning from natural text-based input such as book passages [5, 6, 27, 28, 31, 45, 46, 47]. Laufer showed that better results, in vocabulary acquisition from reading both short and long text, could be achieved if reading were supplemented with word-focused tasks [44].

Writing and fill-in-the-blank activities are very common vocabulary tasks in ESL & EFL classrooms. Among the very few studies that have tackled these two tasks are those of Hulstijn and Laufer [48] and Folse [49]. In Hulstijn and Laufer’s study, the tasks investigated were: a) answering comprehension questions, b) filling-in-the-blank of a passage and c) composition writing. The findings showed that writing was superior to the other two tasks in promoting learning and retention of the new words, while the task of answering comprehension questions was the least useful. In Folse’s study, the tasks investigated were: a) one fill-in-the-blank exercise at the sentence level, b) three fill-in-the-blank exercises at the sentence level and c) writing original sentences. Folse found that students who did the three fill-in-the-blank exercises at the sentence level did significantly better than the other two groups and there was no significant difference between the other two conditions.

As we have seen, Hulstijn and Laufer [48] compared the two types of activities at the text level, while in Folse [49], the two activities were studied at the sentence level. Both studies produced different outcomes with regard to the effectiveness of the two types of treatments (writing and fill-in-the-blank). This discrepancy can perhaps be attributed to one of two factors. First, the two studies had different experimental designs. In addition, it could be that writing is more helpful at the text level than filling-in-the-blank, while at the sentence level, both tasks have equal effect.

Background

L2 Vocabulary Exercises: Vocabulary exercises vary greatly according to which aspect of word knowledge is being practiced. Exercises focus on other aspects of word knowledge, besides a word's meaning; such as the word's spelling, part of speech, morphology, meaning in a

specific context, connotation, synonyms.... In addition, the directions for a given exercise vary considerably. Therefore, the amount of time required, degree of difficulty, the type of retrieval and the number of vocabulary retrievals are affected by these two factors.

Some studies [39, 47] show that L2 vocabulary retention is higher for students who complete written activities after a reading task than for students who complete another reading assignment after reading task. According to Paribakht and Wesche, the perspective of a language teaching program which aims at developing learners' reading proficiency and related receptive vocabulary, a reading-based, incidental learning approach, may be adequate, but for programs which aim at developing learners' production skills, rapid vocabulary expansion and some measure of influence over what is learned, such an approach would appear insufficient [39].

Factors Affecting the Efficacy of Written Exercises for L2 Vocabulary Retention: The two important factors in exercise design are "attention" and "noticing" which have been extensively debated in L2 acquisition studies [50, 51]. The design of a certain type of exercise might serve to make a particular L2 word more salient by drawing attention to the word, potentially resulting in the student noticing the word.

A third factor assumed important in the efficacy of an exercise is depth of processing [52, 53]. On the other hand, the deeper the processing, the better learning. Nation identifies three important psychological conditions that are shared by effective vocabulary learning activities [54]. These conditions are noticing, retrieval and generation.

Noticing and attention are not easily differentiated (for a useful discussion of the two see [55]). Therefore, several scholars [54] define noticing as attending to the linguistic material. During noticing, the word is taken out of its message context for a certain period of time to be studied as a single item, a process referred to as de-contextualization.

A more important factor in the efficacy of an exercise type than depth of processing is multiple retrievals of the target word. Retrieval or the summoning up of the word (to use McCarthy's [12] term) is the second psychological process that enhances the learners' memory for the new words. Retrieval can be both receptive and productive. Receptive retrieval takes place during listening or reading and involves matching the

sound or the written form of the word to the meaning stored in the learner's memory. In productive retrieval, by contrast, meanings that the learner intends to express need to be given forms. There are two processes that are involved in the retrieval process; accessing the item and distinguishing it from other similar items [37].

The more the incidents of retrieval that takes place at reasonably long intervals, the better the learning. This indicates that practicing the new words at different times is more helpful than practicing them only once or within a short period of time. This is what psychologists refer to as 'distributed practice', as opposed to 'massed practice'. A third factor that is thought to affect the learning of a new word is generation. Nation defines generation as the meeting or using of words in new contexts that are different from the ones where they have been previously met [54]. Generation can be receptive when the item is met in reading or listening and productive when the word is used in an original context when speaking or writing.

The Role of Writing in Vocabulary Retention: Both types of writing (sentence and composition) push the students to use the language in original and meaningful contexts (i.e. this is normally referred to as 'pushed output') [56]. According to Swain pushed output, in addition to improving learner's grammars, has been found to improve vocabulary learning and retention [57].

Joe in her research assigned the subjects randomly to one of three treatment groups [17]. Two experimental groups read and retold a text. One of these two groups received explicit instruction on using generative learning strategies but did not have access to the text during recall. The other group received no explicit instruction but had access to the text. The third group neither read nor retold a text. Joe's findings indicated that students in the two experimental groups were able to retain the unknown words more than the control group. Joe ascribed this to the greater levels of generative processing the subjects were engaged in.

In an answer to why writing is effective in improving vocabulary learning, Coomber et al. attribute this effectiveness to three factors [58]. The first factor is the use of the words in meaningful contexts. The second is the students' utilization of their higher level cognitive functions. The third factor has to do with the nature of the writing process in being slow which allows students to have more time to elaborate on the lexical items.

So we can reasonably conclude that writing in general generates more elaboration than merely matching words to context and such elaboration can be expected to result in better retention.

Methodology

Participants: The subjects who participated in this study were 54 undergraduate students majoring English Translation in Applied and Science University of Mashhad. They were assigned randomly to three different groups. The groups included: 1) sentence fill-in group (henceforth SF), 2) multiple choice group (henceforth MC) and 3) sentence writing group (henceforth SW). The number of participants differed slightly from one group to the other. The total number of participants after the exclusion of certain individuals for different reasons was 54.

The total number of participants in the SF group was 21. Six of those 21 subjects were missed out from the study. Four of those excluded subjects did not attend the pretest session, one of them did not attend the treatment and one of them did not attend the posttest. In the MC group, there were 35 participants. However, 11 were excluded from the study, because 6 participants did not attend the pretest, 4 of them did not attend the treatment and one of them did not attend the posttest.

There were 19 participants in SW group. Five participants were excluded from the study because 3 participants did not attend the pretest and 2 participants did not attend the treatment.

Materials

Target Words: The target words used in this study were 10 words selected from Geer [59]. This number falls within the range suggested by Garins and Redman [60]. They believe that in the sixty-minute lesson between eight to twelve new words should be introduced. Other studies used the same number of new words [44, 48].

The Target Words Included: Recalcitrant, petulant, ineluctable, feral, indolent, refulgent, pellucid, insouciant, fetid and reverent.

One important criterion for choosing the target words was that participants shouldn't be familiar with the words. To this end, a pilot study was conducted. 30 advanced EFL learners, whose proficiency level was much higher than target participants, took part in the pilot study. The results of the pilot study showed that

none of the words was known by learners. Another important factor in selecting the target words was part of speech of target words. Folse believes that most studies use target words of various parts of speech. In this study the target words were adjectives [1]. Ludwig suggests that different classes of words have different psychological difficulty and this factor is a variable in verbal tasks [13]. Laufer states that on a continuum of easy to difficult, nouns are on the difficult end of the continuum and verbs and adjectives are at the middle [31].

Pretest, Posttest: Paribakht and Wesche [46] developed a method to evaluate vocabulary knowledge called Vocabulary Knowledge Scale (VKS). This method was modified by Folse [1]. The modified VKS included three levels of word knowledge. If participants could write a definition, synonym or L1 translation one point was awarded and if they could provide a correct example sentence for the word another point was awarded (ib.). The same test was used for both pretest and posttest.

Mini-Dictionary: A mini dictionary was developed to help participants during treatment session. This mini dictionary consisted of the target words and their relevant information such as part of speech, pronunciation, definition, synonym, L1 translation and phrase or sentence examples. The mini dictionary was developed as the result of consultations with both monolingual and bilingual dictionaries.

Treatment Tasks: Based on the target words three types of task were designed. These tasks consisted of sentence fill-in task, multiple choice task and sentence writing task. All the sentences used in sentence fill-in task multiple choice task were taken from different dictionaries.

Procedure: The pretest which included the 10 target words was administered to the participants on the first day. No time limit was determined for completing the pretest. On average, participants spent 5- 7 minutes working on the test. Before having out the pretest sheet, the participants were asked to rearrange their seats in order to decrease the chance of copying from other's papers. They were also asked not to leave the room or make any noise after turning in their test paper. The same procedures were used in the posttest session too.

After giving the test papers to participants, the instructions were explained both through L2 and L1. The participants were given a number and asked to write that number and the last 4 digits of their university identification number on their test papers. It was pointed out to the participants that the words were difficult for advanced learners. During the pretest sessions participants were not allowed to take notes of the target words.

After two days the participants were given a filler activity similar to the pretest. The reason of this activity was decreasing the chance that students would remember the words that they had just seen on the pretest. The words in filler activity were easier compared to the target words.

The treatment sessions were conducted two days after the filler activity. The participants in all three groups were given the mini -dictionary first. The target words were read aloud by the researcher and then students were asked to study the words and to discuss their definitions and examples. After clarifying the target words, the participants in each group were given their relevant task sheet. They were asked to complete the task with mini dictionary assistance.

The posttest was administered five days after the treatment session. The some procedures conducted in pretest were used in posttest session. Again there was no time limit for completing posttest. On average, the subjects in the three groups spent approximately 15 minutes doing the posttest.

Scoring the Pretests and Posttests: As it was mentioned, the pretest and the posttest were the same. Since there were 10 target words, the total score was 20. Following Folse's criteria, a score of zero to two was awarded to each target word [1]. The scoring criteria are stated as follows:

- One point is given if the participants provide definition, synonym or L1 translation.
- Another point is given if the participants provide a sentence example for the target word.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The data of present study first were analyzed by One Sample Kolmogrov-Sminov (Table 1) and Test of Homogeneity of Variances (Table 2) to find out whether there is a normal distribution or not. The results showed that there was not any normal distribution among groups.

Table 1: One Sample Kolmogrov-Smirov Test

		Pretest	Posttest	Group
N		53	53	53
Normal Parameters ^{ab}	Mean	.2	1.91	1.72
	Std. Deviation	.817	2.817	.794
Most Extreme Differences	Absolute	.506	.298	.307
	Positive	.506	.298	.307
	Negative	-.400	-.249	-.183
Kolmogorov-Smirnov Z	3.683	2.168	2.238	
Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)		.000	.000	.000

a Test sidtribution is Normal.

b Calculated from data.

Table 2: Test of Homogeneity of Variances

	Levene Statistic	df1	df2	Sig.
Pretest	7.656	2	50	.001
Posttest	31.192	2	50	.000

Table 3: Descriptive Statistics for the Whole Population

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Minimum	Maximum
Pretest	53	.21	.817	0	5
Posttest	53	1.91	2.817	0	9
Group	53	1.72	.794	1	3

Table 4: Descriptive Statistics for Each Group

		N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error	95% Confidence interval for Mean			
						Lower Bound	Upper Bound	Minimum	Maximum
Pretest	MCI-Name	26	.42	1.137	.223	-.04	.88	0	5
	Fill in the blank	16	.00	.000	.000	.00	.00	0	0
	Sentence	11	.00	.000	.000	.00	.00	0	0
	Total	53	.21	.817	.112	-.02	.43	0	5
Posttest	MCI-Name	26	3.46	3.289	.645	2.13	4.79	0	9
	Fill in the blank	16	.50	.966	.242	-.01	1.01	0	3
	Sentence	11	.27	.647	.195	-.16	.71	0	2
	Total	53	1.91	2.817	.387	1.13	2.68	0	9

Table 5: Kruskal-Wallis for Pretest

Pretest	
5.611	Chi-Square
2	Df
.060	Asymp. Sig.

a Kruskal Wallis Test

b Grouping Variable: GROUP

Table 6: Kruskal-Wallis for Posttests

Posttest	
15.297	Chi-Square
2	Df
.000	Asymp. Sig.

a Kruskal Wallis Test

b Grouping Variable: GROUP

The frequency of participants in each group is given in Figure 1. 26 participants (49%) were in MC group, 16 participants (30%) were in SF group and 11 participants (21%) were in SW group. Descriptive statistics for whole population and for each group are provided in Tables 3, 4.

Since the number of participants in each group was less than 30 and there was no normal distribution in groups, a nonparametric test should be used to analyze the data. To this end Kruskal-Wallis was run. The alpha level for all analyses was set at .05 for tests of significance. The results of Kruskal-Wallis revealed that the mean of pretests in three groups was not significant ($P=.06$, Table 5). However, the mean of posttests in three groups was significant ($P=.00$, Table 6).

Moreover, Mann-Whitney Test was run to compare groups two by two. The results of this test showed that the posttest mean between MC and SF groups and between MC and SW groups were $P=.002$ and $P=.003$, respectively. It means the difference between each pair is significant. However, the mean of posttests between SF and SW groups was not significant ($P=.611$).

Wilcoxon Signed Ranks Test showed a significant difference between mean of pretest and posttest in MC group ($P>.001$), but this difference for SF and SW groups was not significant ($P=.066$ and $P=0.18$, respectively).

The effect of treatment in three groups was calculated by Kruskal-Wallis Test. The results of this test showed that the mean of treatment in three groups was significant ($P=.003$). Moreover, Mann-Whitney Test showed that the mean of treatment was significant between MC and FW groups and MC and SW groups ($P=.007$ and $P=.008$, respectively). However, this amount was not significant between FW and SW groups ($p=.761$). Figure 2 shows the treatment effect in each group.

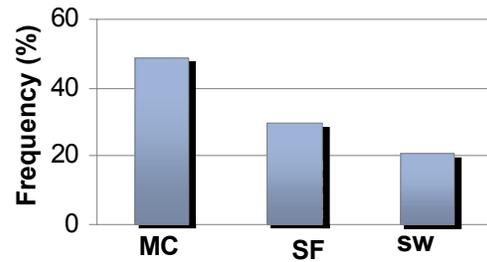


Fig. 1: Frequency of Participants in Each group

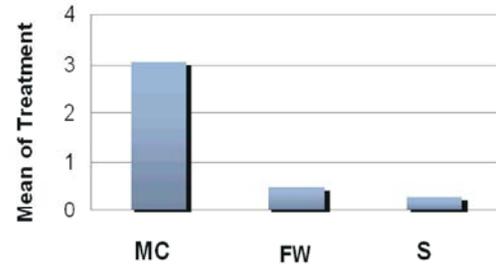


Fig. 2: Treatment Effect in Each Group

Findings and Interpretations: The analysis of data revealed that the MC group significantly outperformed the other groups. The differences between MC group and two other groups were significant. Although Hulstijn and Hulstijn & Laufer found a significant difference between SF and SW exercises, the findings of the current study did not support them [38, 48].

The depth of processing is deeper and more mental processes are used in SW exercises than two other ones. But it should be considered that not all these mental activities would be necessary for vocabulary retention. In SF exercises students are involved both semantically and syntactically. Due to matching nature of this exercise, students either compare the target words to select the appropriate ones for the blank in question or they process the context in which the blanks are to find syntactic or semantic clues for selecting the target words. During the processing of the context, students will have the target words in their minds and will think about the most appropriate choice to complete the sentence. In doing MC exercises the processing is only semantically. Students have to process the sentence by its meaning and there is no use syntactic clue. Students focus on meaning not on grammar.

From the above discussion we infer that most of the time subjects spent in MC exercises was invested in the processing of the target words, while in SF and SW exercises less processing time was spent for the target words themselves and more was spent on the processing of other aspects of language like grammar.

Since more time is devoted to the processing of the target words in MC exercises, the retention of words is longer than two other exercises.

Classroom Implications: In this study we saw how different written tasks can contribute to vocabulary retention. The current study looked at the effectiveness of MC exercises for learning new words and these results do not support SW or SF exercises in vocabulary learning. Since vocabulary plays a great role in ESL and EFL classes, learning of new words is an important issue in these classes. ESL and EFL teachers always try to find the easiest and the most effective ways to help their students to stick new words in their minds. The findings of the current study can help these teachers to reach their aims. They can use MC exercises for practicing and recycling of new words. By applying this kind of exercise students only focus on the target words and do not overload their minds with processing of other aspects of language that do not contribute to vocabulary retention.

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