

## The Impact of Different Tasks on Iranian EFL Students' Vocabulary Learning

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**Abstract:** Learning vocabulary is an essential part of language learning. The aim of the paper was to investigate the impact of different tasks on Iranian EFL students' vocabulary learning in Payam-e-Nour University in Bushehr, Iran. The total number of sixty male and female students participated in the study. Homogeneity of the subjects was ascertained by a General English Proficiency Test (Nelson Test). The test consisted of 50 multiple choice vocabulary, grammar and reading comprehension items. In this study, three kinds of tasks such as reading comprehension, reading comprehension with fill-in gaps and sentence writing used to collect data via pre-test and post-test. They were devolved by Richek' book [1] based on the target vocabulary learning. The data analysis revealed that the significant impact of task involvement on the incidental learning of vocabulary by EFL learners.

**Key words:** Task-based instruction • Extensive reading • Incidental vocabulary acquisition • Context • Vocabulary knowledge • Implicit learning • Explicit learning

### INTRODUCTION

The aim of the paper was to investigate the impact of different tasks on Iranian EFL students' vocabulary learning in Payam-e-Nour University in Bushehr, Iran. There is no doubt that vocabulary plays a vital role in language learning. Hatch and Brown [2] mentioned that vocabulary is the list of words that speakers of a particular language use. Gass and Selinker [3] said that native speakers usually understand the language users if they have grammatical errors result in the structure, but vocabulary errors may lead to communication misunderstanding. Linse [4] pointed that "vocabulary should be integrated into teaching the four skills listening, speaking, reading and writing" [p.122]. Nation [5] indicated that extensive reading is useful for vocabulary growth and is called incidental learning.

In this study, the researchers have to consider the concept of task as a general idea that used in their research, according to Richards and et al [6] "the concept of task is central to many theories of classroom teaching and learning and the school curriculum is sometimes described as a collection of tasks. From this viewpoint,

school work is defined by a core of basic tasks that recur across different subjects in the curriculum. The teacher's choice of tasks determines learning goals, how learning is to take place and how the results of learning will be demonstrated. In second language teaching, the use of a variety of different kinds of tasks is said to make teaching more communicative since it provides a purpose for a classroom activity which goes beyond the practice of language for its own sake" [373]. Nunan [7] defined task as an activity that necessarily involves language. Ellis [8] pointed out several criterial features of a task: a) a task is a work plan; b) a task involves a primary focus on meaning; c) a task involves real-world processes of language use; d) a task can involve any of the four language skills; e) a task engages cognitive processes; f) a task has a clearly defined communicative outcome. Lee [9] mentioned that a task has two objects: 1. A classroom activity or exercise that has: a) an objective obtainable only by the interaction among participants; b) a mechanism for structuring and sequencing interaction; c) a focus on meaning exchange. 2. A language learning endeavor that requires learners to comprehend, manipulate and produce the target language as they

perform some set of work plans. According to Bygate and *et al.* [10] a task is an activity which requires learners to use language, with emphasis on meaning, to attain an objective.

Many researchers suggested second language vocabulary knowledge used as a significant role in language learning. Nemati and Bayer [11] considered a scheme to teach and learn vocabulary that will help students retain the learned vocabulary items for a longer period of time. In their research, they used from different types of mnemonic learning strategies, the Depth of Processing Hypothesis, seemed likely to help learn and later recall vocabulary. They revealed that difficulties student's faces regarding vocabulary learning are mostly rooted in lack of systematic practicing, which must first be dealt with in the educational system and later in the classroom. They suggested that teachers and instructors should play their role through embedding these strategies in their teachings. They added that most forgetting happens immediately and right after learning in the classroom. So, teachers should provide opportunities for students to have time to do the first part of structured reviewing in the class after teaching is completed by the teachers. This is the most important part in the process of learning and teaching. This means that teachers should divide each session into two parts, teaching and reviewing (at least 20 minutes of the class time). According to this study, this is what the teachers can do for students. Furthermore, the learners were required to continue repetition after learning and complete the later phases and chains in the reviewing process. Maghsoudi [12] investigated that the effect of text-generation on incidental vocabulary learning in EFL and ESL contexts. One hundred and thirty two students participated in the study. In this research, the learners were required to rearranged the sentences into the sequence that made the maximum sense to them (text-generation). While performing the task, students were supposed to guess the meanings of those vocabulary items. The findings of the study revealed that those students who were in ESL context scored significantly higher than the students who were in EFL context. In addition, outcome of this research showed that text-generation had significantly impact either on EFL or ESL students in incidental vocabulary learning. Laufer and Hulstijn [13] considered incidental vocabulary learning. In this study, students were required to perform a task involving the processing of some information without being mentioned in advance that they would be tested afterwards on their recall of that information. In

contrast, the subjects in an international learning situation were told in advance that their recall would be tested afterwards. For example, the students were given a list of words and asked them to correct any spelling errors. Afterwards, the learners were tested on the recall of all the words in the list. They used another technique to investigate incidental learning in this research was that they asked the students to learn something, but no information targeted for subsequent testing. In this process, the subjects were given a text to read and tell them they would be asked to recall the contents of the text.

**Types of Vocabulary Learning:** The use of vocabulary knowledge in learning language linked to types of vocabulary learning. The researchers had to discuss four types of vocabulary learning: incidental, intentional, implicit and explicit in this paper.

Postman and Keppel [14] stated that the terms incidental and intentional learning were originally used in the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century by American behaviorist psychology, conceptualizing learning in terms of stimulus-response contingencies. The use of the terms incidental and intentional learning in the psychological literature goes back to the beginning of the twentieth century and has been used in experimental psychology for a long time [13, p. 10]. Incidental learning is the process of learning something without the intention of doing so. Incidental Vocabulary Learning motivates learners for extensive reading. It involves learners' ability to guess the meaning of new words from the contextual clues. However, 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" [15 p. 271]. Hulstijn [15] added that intentional and incidental learning were first investigated within the context of behaviorist psychology. [12, p.28] argued that "Intentional learning is used to refer to any learning activities the learner undertakes with the intention of gaining new knowledge". Intentional vocabulary learning used based on synonyms, antonyms, word substitution, multiple choice, scrambled words and crossword puzzles, regardless of context. It is not so effective, because learners are more prone to rote learning. They can guess the meaning of the new words without undergoing cognitive process.

Explicit and implicit learning are considered to be different in kind in the process of language learning and teaching. Ellis [16, p.1] argued that "implicit learning is acquisition of knowledge about the underlying structure of a complex stimulus environment by a process which takes places naturally, simply and without conscious operations". According to Ellis [17 in implicit learning, learners have high level of awareness of the product of learning. Explicit learning involves awareness. [16] mentioned that the vast majority of our cognitive processing is unconscious. Thus there is no consensual definition of implicit learning. Explicit learning is less problematic; it is conscious learning [p.1]. Dekeyser [18] argued that explicit EFL involves some sort of rule being thought about during the learning process, in other words, learners are encouraged to develop metalinguistic awareness of the rule. This can be achieved deductively or inductively. Implicit instruction is directed at enabling learners to infer rules without awareness.

**Purpose of the Study:** The aim of the paper was to investigate the impact of different tasks: 1) reading passage 2) reading passage with fill-in gaps and 3) sentence writing with the list of target words. In this research, the subjects were required to answer (read) only one of the three tasks. The learners divided into three groups and each group had responsibility for only one task. Their performance compared based on immediate post-test and delayed post-test.

**Research Questions:** The present study seeks to answer the following questions:

- Do different tasks have significant impact on Iranian EFL students' vocabulary learning in Payam-e-Nour University of Borazjan, Bushehr?
- Is there significant difference in accompanying different tasks with reading in Iranian EFL students' vocabulary learning in Payam-e-Nour University of Borazjan Bushehr.

**Research Hypotheses:**

- H01. There is a different impact in different tasks on Iranian EFL students' vocabulary learning in Payam-e-Nour University of Borazjan, Bushehr.
- H02. There is a significance difference in accompanying different tasks with reading in Iranian EFL students' vocabulary learning in Payam-e-Nour University of Borazjan Bushehr.

**Methodology of the Study:** The methodology of the present study, including participants, the instruments and the procedures applied to answer the questions.

**Participants:** The subject for this study were 60 students in the age range of 19-22 at undergraduate level in Payam-e-Nour University of Borazjan, Bushehr who were participated in this study. In addition, the learners' mother tongue was Persian. English used as foreign language in Iran.

**Instruments:** The instruments used in this paper: General English Proficiency Test and different tasks: reading passage, reading passage with fill-in gaps and sentence writing with the list of target words. The General English Proficiency Test consisted of 50 multiple choice vocabulary, grammar and reading comprehension items. The test was selected to assess the participant's level of proficiency in English. There were two kinds of reading-based tasks and one writing-based task. Two main passages were used in this study. They were taken from "The World of Words" [1] Richek' book prepared vocabulary for college students. In this study, the researchers intended to know which one of the three tasks was more beneficial for vocabulary learning.

**Procedure:** The period of instruction was fifteen minutes; the students were given the three tasks, in addition, the learners divided into three groups and each group had responsibility for only one task. Their performance compared based on immediate post-test and delayed post-test. The time limit was set in such way as to allow the students to attempt every item in the selected tasks with sufficient time to answer. The method of scoring was adopted in such a way that every item received a point from zero to one. To achieve the purpose of the research, the procedures were adopted: Administration of the proficiency test, administration of the three tasks and analysis of collected data. In the first step, the researchers administered English general proficiency test. The administration of the proficiency test was administered to the three groups of learners. The General English Proficiency Test consisted of 50 multiple choice vocabulary, grammar and reading comprehension items. The test was selected to assess the participant's level of proficiency in English. In administering the test, the researcher piloted the test for the target group. In addition, 15 students in the target group were used as participants in this research. The General English Proficiency Test was found to be appropriate for the

participants' performing level. Its reliability through the K-R 21 formula turned out to be .68 for the target group. In this experiment, the students who scored between one standard deviation below or above the mean score were selected for the purpose of collecting data in the present study. All of the selected students were studying in Payam-e-Nour University of Borazjan, Bushehr city in Iran. In the second step, reading for general meaning: Each subject read the text (on paper) and tried to understand the general meaning. All the target words appeared in text context in bold font. This stage was introduced into the study in order to avoid too many look-ups for general comprehension, during the task, as opposed to look-ups provoked by the task. In the third step, administration of immediate post-test. Once the task completed, the sheet was collected and the learners were asked unexpectedly to present the meaning of each word in English or Persian language. Hence the incidental acquisition of vocabulary was operationalized in the study as the ability to recall the word's meaning in L1 (first language) or L2 (second language). To achieve this purpose, the participants had no information for subsequent testing. In the last step, administration of delayed post-test: The test above was administered to the learners for a week later in the classroom without any information for the administration of the test in order to assess their long-term retention of the target words.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In this paper, the work of the three groups in their post-tests was calculated. All of the means and standard deviations for the immediate and delayed post-test were considered. There was a one-week interval between the immediate and delayed post-tests. Content words (nouns, verbs and adjectives) made up 58% of the total number of words in the text. The remainders were mainly function words (e.g., articles and discourse connectors) and a few adverbs.

In table 1, descriptive statistics of the immediate and the delayed tests were reported and the mean and standard deviations of the immediate and the delayed tests were calculated. The results of analysis of the tests for EFL learners are presented in Table 1.

Table 1 described the mean scores, sample numbers and standard deviations for the three groups. Table 1 showed that the performance of Group 2 was better than Group 1 and the performance of Group 3 was the most best of the other groups in their both the immediate and delayed post-tests. The tests were analyzed utilizing the computer programmed from ANOVA.

In Table 2, the results of the ANOVA indicated that there was a statistically Significant difference in the immediate post-tests among Group 1 ( $M = 3.35, SD = 1.73$ ), Group 2 ( $M = 4.00, SD = 1.89$ ) and Group 3 ( $M = 6.82, SD = 1.39$ ),  $sig. = .000$ . It was also demonstrated that there was also a statistically significant difference in the delayed post-tests among Group 1 ( $M = 2.60, SD = 0.94$ ), Group 2 ( $M = 2.95, SD = 1.70$ ) and Group 3 ( $M = 3.85, SD = 0.98$ ),  $sig. = .008$ .

The table 3 and 4 presented the detailed results of the immediate and delayed post-tests of the learners.

In table 3 and 4 the result of detailed immediate and delayed post-tests were reported. The results showed that there was a significant difference in performance among group 3 with both groups 1 and 2 ( $sig. = .000$ ), but there was not a significant difference between groups 1 and 2 ( $sig. = .447$ ) in the immediate post-test. In the delayed post-test, the result of tables indicated that there was not a significant difference between group 1 and 2 ( $sig. = .655$ ), but the difference was significant between group 3 and 1 ( $sig. = .007$ ) and there was also a significant difference between group 2 and 3 ( $sig. = .07$ ).

Furthermore, the scores of all participants declined from the immediate post-test to the delayed post-test. The decline may have been due to the one-week time interval between the immediate and delayed post-tests.

**Implications of the Study of Vocabulary:** Celce-Murcia [19] argued that "vocabulary learning is central to language acquisition, whether the language is first, second, or foreign. Although vocabulary has not always been recognized as a priority in language teaching, interest in its role in second language learning has grown rapidly in recent years and specialists now emphasize the need for a systematic and principled approach to vocabulary by both teacher and learner" [p.285]. Davies and Pearse [20] mentioned that 'in communication, vocabulary is often more important than grammar' [p.59].

The results of the present study revealed that incidental learning of vocabulary; need to be paid more attention than what is being done at present. According to [19] incidental vocabulary learning is learning that occurs when the mind is focused elsewhere, such as on understanding a text or using language for communicative purpose. In addition, a common view in vocabulary studies is that we have not been explicitly taught the majority of words we know and that beyond a certain level of proficiency in a second language, vocabulary learning is more likely to be mainly implicit (incidental). Swanborn and De Gloppe [21] believed that vocabulary knowledge is highly correlated with reading comprehension and for

Table 1: Means and Standard Deviation of Immediate and Delayed Post-tests

		N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error	95% Confidence Interval for Mean	
						Lower Bound	Upper Bound
Immediate	1	20	3.3500	1.73281	.38747	2.5390	4.1610
	2	20	4.0000	1.89181	.42302	3.1146	4.8854
	3	20	6.8250	1.39807	.31262	6.1707	7.4793
	Total	60	4.7250	1.25009	.29049	4.1437	5.3063
Delayed	1	20	2.6000	.94032	.21026	2.1599	3.0401
	2	20	2.9500	1.70062	.38027	2.1541	3.7459
	3	20	3.8500	.98809	.22094	3.3876	4.3124
	Total	60	3.1333	1.34626	.17380	2.7856	3.4811
difference	1	20	.7500	1.26179	.28214	.1595	1.3405
	2	20	1.0500	.75915	.16975	.6947	1.4053
	3	20	2.9750	.61878	.18308	2.5918	3.3582
	Total	60	1.5917	1.37930	.17807	1.2354	1.9480

Table 2: The results of the Immediate and Delayed post-tests

		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Immediate	Between Groups	136.525	2	68.262	23.991	.000
	Within Groups	162.188	57	2.845		
	Total	298.712	59			
Delayed	Between Groups	16.633	2	8.317	5.250	.008
	Within Groups	90.300	57	1.584		
	Total	106.933	59			
difference	Between Groups	58.308	2	29.154	30.810	.000
	Within Groups	53.938	57	.946		
	Total	112.246	59			

Table 3: The Detailed Results of Immediate and Delayed Post-Tests

Dependent Variable	(I) group	(J) group	Mean Difference (I-J)	Std. Error	Sig.	95% Confidence Interval	
						Lower Bound	Upper Bound
Immediate	1	2	-.65000	.53342	.447	-1.9336	.6336
		3	-3.47500	.53342	.000	-4.7586	-2.1914
	2	1	.65000	.53342	.447	-.6336	1.9336
		3	-2.82500	.53342	.000	-4.1086	-1.5414
	3	1	3.47500	.53342	.000	2.1914	4.7586
		2	2.82500	.53342	.000	1.5414	4.1086
Delayed	1	2	-.35000	.39802	.655	-1.3078	.6078
		3	-1.25000	.39802	.007	-2.2078	-.2922

Table 4: The Detailed Results of Immediate and Delayed Post-Tests

Dependent Variable	(I) group	(J) group	Mean Difference (I-J)	Std. Error	Sig.	95% Confidence Interval	
						Lower Bound	Upper Bound
Delayed	2	1	.35000	.39802	.655	-.6078	1.3078
		3	-.90000	.39802	.070	-1.8578	.0578
	3	1	1.25000	.39802	.007	.2922	2.2078
		2	.90000	.39802	.070	-.0578	1.8578
difference	1	2	-.30000	.30762	.595	-1.0403	.4403
		3	-2.22500	.30762	.000	-2.9653	-1.4847
	2	1	.30000	.30762	.595	-.4403	1.0403
		3	-1.92500	.30762	.000	-2.6653	-1.1847
	3	1	2.22500	.30762	.000	1.4847	2.9653
		2	1.92500	.30762	.000	1.1847	2.6653

reading to beginning for vocabulary learning, high frequency words of language must be taught explicitly. However, beyond a certain level of proficiency, vocabulary learning seems to be more effective if occurs incidentally. Thus, learners can take the control of their vocabulary learning in hand. In the end of discussion of implications of the study of vocabulary in this paper, the researchers would like to add definition of task regarding to pedagogical tasks defined by Nunan [22] a piece of classroom work that involves learners in comprehending, manipulating, producing, or interacting in the target language while their attention is focused on mobilizing their grammatical knowledge in order to express meaning and in which the intention is to convey meaning rather than to manipulate form. The task should also have a sense of completeness, being able to stand alone as a communicative act in its own right with a beginning, middle and an end [p.25].

### CONCLUSION

The role of vocabulary as an important aspect of language learning and teaching in order to develop the knowledge of second and foreign language learners has been conducted in recent years by many researchers is very interesting. One way is used in learning vocabulary is that learners should be asked to acquire vocabulary learning strategies in order to cover the meaning of second or foreign language words. [19] indicated that "incidental learning from exposure to texts will be greatly facilitated if learners use vocabulary learning strategies. These strategies will undoubtedly be required initially, in any case, as students are encouraged to make the transition to independent learning by determining meanings of the less frequent words they read or hear" [p.290]. He added that learners should approach independent learning of vocabulary by using a combination of extensive reading and self-strategies. In this paper, the performance of the learners regarding incidental vocabulary learning among the three groups has been observed in different tasks. The results of the paper confirmed the effectiveness of incidental vocabulary.

The aim of this study was to investigate whether the integration of extensive reading plus vocabulary-enhanced exercises could enhance EFL students' vocabulary learning by answering two research questions: 1) Do different tasks have significant impact on Iranian EFL students' vocabulary learning in Payam-e-

Nour University of Borazjan, Bushehr? 2) Is there significant difference in accompanying different tasks with reading in Iranian EFL students' vocabulary learning in Payam-e-Nour University of Borazjan Bushehr. Thus, in this paper, the results of the study significantly support the evidence of incidental vocabulary learning in EFL learners as a result of performance on tasks with different degrees of involvement.

The result of the present research indicated that the hypotheses of the study were accepted and there was a significant difference in immediate post-test among the three groups and a significant delayed post-test mean difference between the three groups has been observed.

Therefore, each one of the three tasks was significantly different from the others in vocabulary retention; the writing task was the most powerful in keeping the words in learners' short-term and long-term memory. Although, there were differences in the extent of vocabulary retention through the tasks, it can be concluded that from this research is that each significant change from immediate and delayed post-tests was the result of the treatments used in this study.

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