

The Effects of Reading Only vs. Reading plus Enhancement Activities on Vocabulary Learning and Production of Iranian Pre-University Students

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Abstract

The present research was conducted to examine the relative effectiveness of two instructional approaches to second language vocabulary learning: the “Reading Only” (RO) approach and the “Reading Plus” (RP) approach. To carry out this study, sixty EFL students from Shahed Pre-University Center of Isfahan were selected and divided into two groups of thirty after a standardized test (The Nelson Test) was administered to 120 of them to determine group homogeneity. In the “Reading Only” group, the students only read several reading passages. In the “Reading Plus” group, the subjects read passages and then did a series of text-based vocabulary exercises. The analysis of the results revealed a significant difference between the two groups. The results indicated that “Reading Plus” group had significantly outperformed the ‘Reading only’ group. This strongly suggests that the ‘Reading Plus’ approach to foreign language vocabulary learning is highly effective in promoting a deep and stable knowledge of vocabulary.

Keywords: Reading only, Reading plus enhancement activities, Implicit learning, Explicit learning, VKS

Introduction

In the literature of English language teaching and learning a recurring theme has been the neglect of vocabulary. It was often given little priority in language programs and was often left to look after itself and received only incidental attention in textbooks and language programs (Hedge, 2008; Richards and Renandya, 2002). French (1983) believes that vocabulary has been neglected in the past decades because 1) those who were involved in the teacher-preparation programs during the past few decades felt that grammar should be emphasized more than vocabulary, 2) specialists in methodology believed that students would make mistakes in sentence construction if too many words were learned before the basic grammar had been mastered, and 3) those who gave advice to teachers said that word meanings can be learned only through experience and can not be taught in the classroom. More recently, however, a number of researchers have become interested in vocabulary instruction. They have wakened up to the realization that vocabulary is an important area worthy of effort and investigation. It has, consequently, gained popularity in the general field of English language teaching and learning and become a guest of honor (Coady and Huckin, 1997; Richards and Renandya, 2002; Hedge, 2008). There is now general agreement among vocabulary specialists that it is at the heart of communicative competence (Coady and Huckin, 1997).

Implicit vs. Explicit learning and teaching of vocabulary

The major way in which vocabulary knowledge is increased is by learning through context. Although aural language experience is important, written language normally contains a higher proportion of difficult or low frequency words. Thus, reading is considered to be the major vehicle for continued vocabulary acquisition (Nagy, Herman and Anderson, 1985; Nation and Coady, 1988). There are, however, different methods of teaching and presenting words through reading texts. The first method is called incidental learning (Richards and Renandya, 2002; Hatch and Brown, 1995). Coady (1997a) calls it reading alone or context alone as “the first position on the continuum is labeled context alone. It proposes that there is actually no need or even justification for direct vocabulary instruction” (p.275). This, he believes, is based on Krashen’s idea (1989) that if students can comprehend the text successfully, they can learn all the words they need from the context (Coady, 1997a). Nagy, Herman and Anderson (1985) argue that teachers should promote extensive reading because it can lead to greater vocabulary growth than one program of explicit instruction alone ever could.

There are of course other researchers that accept the efficiency of context alone (reading alone), but they say that repeated exposures to new words are needed. Chun and Plass(1996) stated that “the research on learning words in context found only 5% to 15% probability that a given word would be learned at first exposure” (p.184). Many researchers, however, do not believe in the efficiency of context alone and call for the second method - reading plus vocabulary enhancement activities or explicit teaching of vocabulary (Coady and Huckin, 1997). Lyster (1990) and Swain (1988) reject the efficiency of context alone and believe that progress in this method is slow and haphazard. Nation and Coady (1988) indicate that “the very redundancy or richness of information in a given context which enables a reader to guess an unknown word successfully could also predict that the same reader is less likely to learn the word because he or she was able to comprehend the text without knowing the word” (p.101).Paribakht and Wesche (1993) concluded from introspective ESL student data that most of the students ignored unknown words in reading texts unless reading comprehension questions specifically required that they be understood. The purpose of this study is to compare the efficiency of these two methods. Therefore, the following question is addressed in this study:

Does reading comprehension plus vocabulary enhancement exercises lead to more efficient learning and production of selected vocabulary items than does an equal amount of learning time spent on reading additional texts that incorporate the same words?

Subjects

The subjects of this study were sixty male students studying at Shahed Pre – university Center of Isfahan. Their native language was Farsi and their age ranged from 17 to 19. To account for group homogeneity, a Nelson test (Norman and Fowler, 1986) was administered to about 120 students, and 60 students that had the same level of proficiency were chosen, and the rest of them were discarded. The selected students were then randomly divided into two groups of 30.

Materials

Two main passages were used in this study. They were taken from *English (1) and (2)*, a book which had been prepared for pre – university students by the Ministry of Training and Education. It is now replaced by a new one containing different passages but the same design. The first passage was on *Danger: Children at work*, consisting of 5 short paragraphs, and the other one was on *Mountain Rescue*, consisting of 6 short paragraphs. The reason for choosing them was that first they were prepared for pre-university students so they were at the correct level, and then they were not contained in the textbooks of the students so only RP students had access to vocabulary exercises. To check the novelty of the words, two weeks before the study, words were determined and pre-tested and the known words were discarded. Ultimately 30 words were chosen as target words.

There were two other passages, one on *Animals are beautiful people*, and the other one on *Is it always true to say the grass is greener?* , incorporating the same words. They were composed by the researcher and edited by a native English speaker to account for its authenticity. These passages were used in the RO class: 1- to expose the students to the target words again; 2- to compensate for the class time which was spent on vocabulary enhancement activities in the RP class.

Procedure

Participants in this study were divided into two groups, RO and RP. In the RP class, students read the selected texts and answered the accompanying comprehension questions. They then did a series of vocabulary exercises on the target words from the selected texts. There were different exercises developed for this group such as noticing exercises which made the students notice the words like underlining, highlighting, making a list of them; manipulation exercises like word formation exercises, derivative exercises; interpretation exercises like multiple-choice cloze tests; matching exercises and finally production exercises like using the target words in appropriate contexts. The exercises used in the RP treatment were taken from Coady and Huckin (1997: 182 – 184).

In the RO class students likewise read the selected texts and answered the accompanying comprehension questions. Instead of doing vocabulary exercises, however, after reading a main text they read a supplementary composed text to present again the target words from the main text. The aim was to further expose the students to the target words through reading and to compensate for the class time which was spent on vocabulary exercises in the RP class. The students attended the study for three weeks and two sessions a week.

Vocabulary Test

To test students' vocabulary gain, the vocabulary knowledge scale (VKS) developed by Paribakht and Wesche (1993) cited in Coady and Huckin (1997:179-181) was used. This instrument uses a 5-point scale combining self

– report and performance items to elicit self-perceived and demonstrated knowledge of specific words in written form. The scale ratings range from total unfamiliarity, through recognition of the word and some idea of its meaning to the ability to use the word with grammatical and semantic accuracy in a sentence. The students were presented with a list of target words and asked to indicate their level of knowledge for each, and for self – report levels IV and V, to demonstrate this knowledge.

VKS scoring accepts self – reported word knowledge of categories I and II for scores 1 and 2, and requires a demonstration of knowledge for higher scores. Wrong responses in self – report categories III, IV or V will lead to a score of 2. A score of 3 indicates that an appropriate synonym or translation has been given for self – report categories III or IV. A score of 4 is given if the word is used in a sentence demonstrating the learner’s knowledge of its meaning in that context but with inaccurate grammar (e.g., a target noun used as a verb), or a mistakenly conjugated or derived form is given (e.g., “losed” for “lost”). A score of 5 reflects both semantically and grammatically correct use of the target word, even if other parts of the sentence contain errors. The reliability of the VKS has been determined by Paribakht and Wesche. It was established through test – retest administration of a word list (N = 32) to 93 students at 6 different proficiency levels in 1992. The resulting Pearson correlation indicated that the instrument can elicit acceptably reliable responses.

Results and Discussion

After the posttest was administered and the scores in the form of raw data were gathered, they were depicted through descriptive statistics, and both the central tendency and variability measurements were imposed to the scores. Table 1. shows the descriptive statistics of the scores obtained by the two groups. Then the mean scores of both groups were compared through applying a t–test to find out if the differences between the RO and the RP were significant on the expansion and development of vocabulary in Iranian EFL pre – university learners. The t-value obtained was 2.030. As it is illustrated in Table 2, the t-critical is 1.684, which is lower than the t-value. This tells us that the difference between the mean scores of the two groups is statistically significant. By examining the results it can be concluded that the students who were taught lexical items through the RP method outperformed those who were taught via the RO method.

Table 3. shows the percentage of each word knowledge category for both treatments. As it is indicated the distribution of scores for “not known” categories (1and2) in the RO treatment is higher than that of the RP. The distribution of scores for “known” category 4 and “production” category 5, however, is higher in the RP treatment. Category 3 is nearly neutral. It shows that students have seen the words before, but they are not sure of their knowledge of the word. The distribution of scores for this category is higher in the RO treatment. It can be concluded that RP treatment can lead to better retention and more production.

Conclusion

The results of this experiment indicate that vocabulary exercises are an aid to vocabulary learning. The results of this study are to some extent consistent with the related literature. Vocabulary gain, retention and production were significantly greater via the “reading plus” treatment group. These greater quantitative gains in the “reading plus” treatment can be attributed to the use of vocabulary exercises and tasks that presumably demand different kinds and levels of lexical processing of the target words by learning than did multiple encounters with the same words through “reading only” approach. These exercises directed the learners' attention to specific vocabulary items and required them to analyze and understand the meaning and functions of these words. The varied levels of lexical processing required by different exercise categories appear in many cases to have moved the learners' vocabulary knowledge from a perceived input to an intake (Gass, 1988). In the “reading only” group, however, students simply ignored many of the target words because, apparently, the students did not deem their meanings essential to the understanding of the text as a whole.

The reason for better success of reading followed by vocabulary exercises may be that these exercises ensured learners attention to specific vocabulary items and required learners to analyze and understand the meanings and functions of target words through different tasks. Both the amount and variety of mental processing required may have influenced the likelihood of the learners acquiring more knowledge of particular words (Gass, 1988; Hulstijn, 1992).

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Table 1. Descriptive statistics for the post-test

Group	Number	Mean	SD
RP	30	200.4	26.63
RO	30	185.9	27.82

Table 2. Results of T-test on the means of the two groups

t. value	D.f.	t-crit.	Level of probability
2.030	58	1.684	.05

Table 3. Percentage of each word knowledge category

Word knowledge categories	1	2	3	4	5
RP Group	%1	%21	%46	%13	%19
RO Group	%4	%22	%53	%9	%12

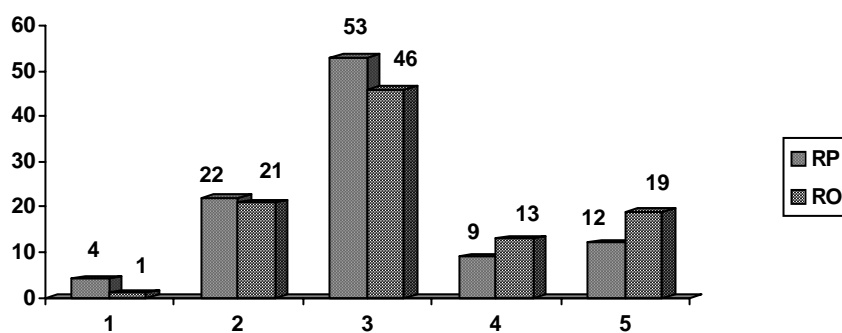


Figure 1. Comparison of word knowledge categories of both treatments

Self – report	
Categories	
I	I do not remember having seen this word before.
II	I have seen this word before, but I do not know what it means.
III	I have seen this word before, and I think it means----- (synonym or translation).
IV	I know this word. It means ----- (Synonym or translation).
V	I can use this word in a sentence: ----- (write a sentence).
(If you do this section, please also do section IV).	

Figure 2. VKS elicitation scale – self report categories