Relationship between Providing Persian Equivalents of English Adjectives and Iranian EFL Learners' Active Vocabulary

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Abstract

This study attempted to find the relationship between providing Persian equivalents of English adjectives and Iranian EFL learners' active vocabulary. To this end, 100 students studying English as a foreign language at a Language Institute in Shiraz were asked to participate in this study. Participants were divided into experimental and control groups with 50 participants in each. The sample was homogenous with regard to their English level. To investigate the possible effects of providing Persian equivalents of English adjectives on Iranian EFL learners' active vocabulary, an independent Sample t-test was run on the vocabulary scores of 100 students. After analyzing the data it was found out the performances of all the participants in the "Experimental" group were better than those in the "Control" group.

Keywords: Active and passive vocabulary, Second language learning strategy, Translation

1. Introduction

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).

There are manifold advantages of words. Words conceptualize ideas and adorn them so that even a bitter criticism may look soothing since the power of word can mollify the bitterness of criticism. Moreover, the coining of new words never stops, nor does the acquisition of words. This process is evident even in our first language; we are continually learning new words and add new meanings to the old ones we already know. Therefore, vocabulary learning and enhancing of the number of words one knows is so essential that no language learner can survive without vocabulary. The increased interest in this topic is evidenced by a rapidly expanding body of experimental studies and pedagogical material, most of which address several key questions of particular interest for language teachers. For examples, what does it mean to know a word? Which words do learners need to know? These questions reflect the current focus on the needs of learners in acquiring lexical competence and on the role of the teacher in guiding them toward this goal.

Vocabulary is the knowledge of word meanings. A person's vocabulary consists of all the words he or she knows and understands. Adult learners frequently have larger oral vocabularies than reading vocabularies; they know the meanings of more words than they can read (Jacobson, 2007). Research on vocabulary acquisition involves having an understanding of what 'knowing a word' means, and then based on the definition of the concept of word, one can use appropriate tools and procedures to measure vocabulary knowledge (Bogaard, 2000). Vocabulary knowledge is not "an all-or-nothing phenomenon" (Laufer, 1998; Laufer & Paribakht, 1998), but involves degrees of knowledge (Meara, 1990).

There is now general agreement among vocabulary specialists that lexical competence is at the very heart of communicative competence, the ability to communicate successfully and appropriately (Coady & Huckin1997). Psychologists, linguists, and language teachers have been interested in vocabulary learning strategies for a long time. Numerous studies have been conducted comparing the retention effects of different vocabulary presentation strategies. There are different vocabulary learning strategies that one might use to learn a particular word either as passive or active. But among all of them translation is outstanding.

1.1 Vocabulary Categorization and Definitions of Active and Passive Vocabularies

It is essential to introduce diverse types of vocabularies which everyone may use or come across in their daily usage of the English language (Meara, 1990):

- a. Reading vocabulary
- b. Listening vocabulary
- c. Writing vocabulary
- d. Speaking vocabulary
- e. Focal vocabulary
- f. Passive vs. Active vocabulary
- g. Native and Foreign language vocabulary
- h. Basic English vocabulary

By considering them closely one may easily categorize them into two major groups. Those two groups are "Active" and "Passive" vocabularies. Active vocabulary is vocabulary which is easily accessed from anywhere in the vocabulary network, and in its turn allows easy access to other parts of the system too. Passive vocabulary, on the other hand, comprises vocabulary items that *are* part of the overall system, but which cannot be reached from other parts of the network. In effect, they can only be accessed if an appropriate external stimulation is available. You can recognise passive vocabulary when you see it, or when you hear it, but you are unable to bring it to mind without this external support (Meara, 1990).

Meara (1990) suggests that the distinction between active and passive vocabulary is a clear one, not a gradual one. Passive vocabulary consists of items which respond only to external stimuli; active vocabulary does not require an external stimulus, but can be activated by other words.

1.2 With L1 or Without It

What is L1 in the classroom? Prodromov (2002) provides a set of metaphors illustrating the meaning of the mother tongue in the language classroom. According to him, L1 is:

- 1). A drug (though with therapeutic potential, it can damage your health and may become addictive);
- 2). A reservoir (a resource from which we draw);
- 3). A wall (an obstacle to teaching);

4). A window (which opens out into the world outside the classroom; if we look through it we see the students' previous learning experience, their interests, their knowledge of the world, their culture);

5). A crutch (it can help us get by in a lesson, but it is recognition of weakness);

6). A lubricant (it keeps the wheels of a lesson moving smoothly; it thus saves time);

Particularly from the turn of the twentieth century onwards, many theoretical works and practical methods in language teaching have assumed that a second language (L2) should be taught without reference to the learners' first language (L1). Hence, the use of translation as a teaching technique has been viewed with suspicion by many language teachers, and many proscribe it altogether as a matter of principle. It has become a famous and well-accepted creed among language teachers that the translation hinders the acquisition of L2.

More to the point, in retrospect, many past teaching methods do not advocate L1 use in L2 classes. The Direct Method, the Audio-Lingual Method, and strong proponents of the communicative approach have typically frowned upon the use of L1 in L2 classes. In the current most popular Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) approach, the target language is used during authentic, functional, communicative activities, and students' native language has no particular role in the classroom. Many CLT teachers maintain that the best way for teacher to achieve native-like control of the target language is to think in that language rather than to translate or process the target language into their mother tongue. They argue that by thinking in the target language, students increase their chances of becoming fluent and accurate in that language and avoiding interference from their L1.

While many foreign language educators may have ignored the role of translation in language teaching, from the learners' perspective, translation is still widely used in their learning (Lado, 1967; O'Melley, 1985; Chamot, 1987). Schmitt and McCarthy (1997, p. 2) note that "... a learner's L1 is one of the most important factors in learning L2 vocabulary." Further, it is a widespread observation that even "ideal" bilingual speakers have to, at times, draw on vocabulary from one language while speaking another. This may be taken to indicate that

vocabulary, in addition to other linguistic components in both languages, is organized in the way synonyms and antonyms are organized in one's L1. For instance, Channell (1988, p. 93) states, "L1 and L2 lexicons within the same speaker are clearly linked, phonologically, semantically, and associationally. Speaker s can make conscious links between them".

Emphasizing affective, psychological benefits of L1 USE, Atkinson (1993, p. 13) states that, "for many learners, occasional use of the L1 gives them the opportunity to show that they are intelligent, sophisticated people". Celik (2003) states that bilinguals utilize code- mixing and that use of L1 is justified to a certain extent (appropriateness, practicality, efficiency, affect, etc.) in the teaching of L2, the rationale to use code-mixing in speaking classes is well-supported. Importantly, as code-mixing involves the use of only one lexical item from L1 in an L2 statement, the use of mother tongue is not unchecked.

Harmer (1991, p. 161) notes that the use of translation can be easy and quick way of presenting vocabulary, but warns that it may discourage learners from interacting with words.

1.3 Translation

Quite admittedly, the issue of using L1 in the EFL classrooms often receives little attention or guidance. In fact, the use of L1 in foreign language teaching has been a cause of controversy for many years. In many language schools there is a uniform ban on using L1 in the classroom and students are conditioned into thinking in the second language once they enter the classroom; they should never use L1. However, benefits of using L2 equivalents are so profound that no one should ignore their effects and facilitative role in learning any second language. As Duff (1989) says, teachers and students now use translation to learn, rather than learning translation. Modern translation activities usually move from L1 to L2, (although the opposite direction can also be seen in lessons with more specific aims), have clear communicative aims and real cognitive depth, show high motivation levels and can produce impressive communicative results.

1.4 The Purpose of the Study

This paper is an effort to explore whether or not providing Persian equivalents of English lexical items improves Iranian learners' active vocabulary. In other words, this study intends to determine whether exposing learners to the intended language words along with their translations could improve their active vocabulary scopes by altering the passive words into active ones. Learners of English can understand many difficult English words when reading or listening, but they do not make use of them when speaking or writing in English. This fact indicates the large scope of "passive vocabulary" repertoire than "active vocabulary".

2. Review of Literature

Vocabulary is one of the most obvious components of language and one of the first things applied linguists turned their attention to. Meara (1982) notes that the 1980s and 1990s have experienced a growing interest in vocabulary learning/ teaching. New insights in a range of different research fields have all added to the understanding of vocabulary development. Learning research has established itself as a central focus for language acquisition researchers.

Deliberate teaching of vocabulary is one of the least efficient ways of developing learners' vocabulary knowledge. Nonetheless it is an important part of a well-balanced vocabulary program. The main problem with vocabulary teaching is that only a few words and a small part of what is required to know a word can be dealt with at any one time. This limitation also applies to incidental learning from listening or reading, but it is much easier to arrange for large amounts of independent listening and reading than it is to arrange for large amount of teaching. Teaching can effectively deal with only a small amount of information about a word at a time. The more complex the information is, the more likely the learners are to misinterpret it (Nation, 2001).

2.1 What Is Vocabulary Development?

According to National Reading Panel (2000) vocabulary refers to the words we know and use to communicate effectively. There are two broad categories of vocabulary – oral vocabulary and reading vocabulary. Oral vocabulary refers to the words we recognize and use when listening or speaking. Reading vocabulary refers to the words we recognize and use in print. These two broad categories of vocabulary can then be broken into four distinct types:

Writing vocabulary Speaking vocabulary Reading vocabulary

Listening vocabulary

The development of all of these types of vocabulary is essential for student success.

2.2 Vocabulary Learning Techniques and Strategies

There are various approaches and techniques through which learners can develop their range of vocabulary. These approaches and techniques should be adapted to the level of students, the situation in which they are learning, their age, etc. Thopmson (2004) has developed some strategies and techniques for this purpose as follows:

Mnemonic Techniques: Mnemonic means "aiding memory" often referred to as memory trick. Mnemonic works by developing retrieval plan during encoding so that a word can be recalled through verbal and visual clues.

Linguistic Mnemonics: The Peg Method: this method allows unrelated items, such as words in a word list, to be recalled by linking them with a set of memorized "pegs" or "hooks".

Spatial Mnemonics: The Loci Method: to use this ancient technique, one imagines a familiar location, such as a room. Then one mentally places the first item to be remembered in the first location, the second in the second location, and so forth.

Spatial Grouping: Rearrange words on a page to form different kinds of patterns such as triangles, squares, columns, and so on.

The Finger Method: Associate each item to be learned with a finger.

Visual Mnemonics: Pictures: Pair picture with words you need to learn.

Visualization: Instead of using real pictures, visualize a word you need to remember. This is much more effective than merely repeating the word.

Physical Mnemonics: Physically enacting the information in a word or a sentence results in better recall than simple repetition.

2.3 Vocabulary: Research and Teaching Strategies

According to Jacobson (2007) vocabulary is the knowledge of word meanings. A person's vocabulary consists of all the words he or she knows and understands. Adult learners frequently have larger oral vocabularies than reading vocabularies; they know the meanings of more words than they can read.

2.4 The Current Research on Vocabulary Learning and Teaching

Najafi (2002) tried to find out what vocabulary method is more efficient. She considered the two techniques of vocabulary definition vs. translation. She tried to find the effect of gender of learners (girls and boys). I n the translation technique the participants received L2 words and their Persian equivalents, the students were given the vocabulary test the day after instruction. The second group received vocabulary through synonyms, antonyms or the teacher's explanation.

The findings of her study showed that the gender had no effect on vocabulary learning: boys and girls gained almost the same scores on vocabulary test. In the 1950s, Allen (1983) states, people began to notice that vocabulary is not a simple matter. It is not simply the matter of learning that a certain word in one language means the same in another language. Much more needs to be learned; and there were those who felt the complexities were too great to be dealt with in class.

2.5 The Place of Translation in English Language Teaching

According to Štulajterova (2007), today there is a great deal of emphasis on the study of foreign languages. The ability to speak a foreign language is no longer merely an advantage – it is becoming a necessity. As a result, linguists and methodologists are looking for more effective approaches to language teaching. One of the suggested methods is translation. Until recently, translation was out of favor with the language teaching community.

The reason why translation is, even today, ignored by many teachers as an effective language learning activity is mainly because teachers often feel that translation involves no oral interaction and therefore is not a communicative activity, and that it is not suited to the general needs of the language learner. Moreover, many of them consider use of the mother tongue in foreign language teaching undesirable, or feel that translation is time-consuming, boring and irrelevant. This does not have to be the case.

Štulajterova (2007) aimed to find out about the place of translation in the current curriculum of English language as a school subject. His findings suggest that translation, particularly of texts, is used neither sufficiently nor effectively enough. If translation as a classroom technique is to help student achieve competence in the foreign language, it must be used sensibly, systematically and on a regular basis. We consider this purposeful approach very important. There is no point in merely handing out texts to the learners with the instruction "Translate". Students should not be required to translate without having been given practice in the skill. Furthermore, as Štulajterova (2007) suggested it is essential that the teacher always explains what the purpose of each activity is – the students need to know why the activity is being done.

2.6 Translation Advocates

Harmer (2002) claims that very often learners resort to the mother tongue when the choice of task is not compatible with their L2 level; as it is natural for them to use L1 to communicate, while the teacher does not create situations that would make it natural for them to use English; since the teacher does not use too much target language and ,consequently , students feel comfortable to use their mother tongue as well; finally, as there are different learning styles and abilities that allow some students to use the L2 more easily.

While many foreign language educators may have ignored the role of translation in language teaching, from the learners' perspective , translation is still widely use in their learning (Lado et al. 1967; O'Malley et al. 1990;Chamot et al. 1996).Corder (1981) would rather emphasize more on viewing L1 as a priceless resource which learners can use for translation to make up their limitations in learning an L2.He proposed to reframe the concept of 'interference' as 'intercession' in order to consider learners' use of their L1 as a strategy of communication.

Translation has a very useful contribution to make in the teaching of certain groups of learners as Widdowson (1979) has suggested. A number of recent publications have given evidence of a movement to re-assess the potential contribution which translation can make to English teaching.

2.7 Objections to using translation

We can consider possible problems with using translation by looking at possible negative impact on learners and then on teachers.

Learners may not see the value of translation as an activity to help them learn English, and instead see it as a specialised, and difficult activity.

Translation requires a motivated class. The teacher needs to have a sophisticated knowledge of the L1 and the L1 culture. Without this translation can create more problems than benefits. This level of awareness is almost impossible in a multi-lingual class. Translation is time-consuming and difficult but the teacher must be as good as and better than the learners at it, to be able to manage the activity well.

2.8 The Use of Students' First Language (L1) in the Second Language (L2) Classroom

According to Morahan, (2007) the issue of the use of students' first language (L1) in the second language (L2) classroom has been debated for many years. In recent years focus has been shifting towards inclusion of L1 in the language classroom. Research has shown that the occasional use of L1 by both students and teachers increases both comprehension and learning of L2 (Cook, 2001; Tang, 2002).

3. Method

3.1 Participants

This study was conducted with 100 students at a Language Institute in Shiraz. The participants were divided into experimental and control groups with 50 Participants in each. The sample was homogenous with regard to their English level. They were all at the advanced level, studying the same textbook.

3.2 Instruments

The instruments used in this study included a vocabulary list, consisting of 70 adjectives that aims to identify familiar or unfamiliar vocabulary items. Since the goal of this study was to understand whether the target words would be turned into productive vocabularies, a vocabulary test was designed by the researcher.

3.3 Procedures for Data Collection

As was mentioned earlier, participants were divided into experimental and control groups with 50 participants in each. Both groups were taught 50 adjectives .The procedure for selecting 50 words was as follows:

Once 70 advanced words were selected, another important task was to check whether participants knew the meaning of the items or not. This was very important because the results of the research would not be precise if the participants already knew the words. Consequently, students under experiment were given a list of words. Then, a short time was allotted to them to take a look at the list and put a tick before the words whose meanings they knew, and also to write one sentence for each word they had ticked. The justification for allotting a short time was to prevent participants from focusing on the words, so that they would not be able to commit some of the items to memory. Thus, 50 words (adjectives) out of 70 that had not been familiar to the participants were chosen. In teaching the selected words, the experimental group were taught the English items along with their L1 translation, whereas, the control group were taught the definitions of the intended lexical items in the target language.

It is worth mentioning that in teaching the control and experimental groups, the same teaching framework was implemented: that is, a consistent set of procedures was utilized to teach the words. This concordance was of great importance to alter teaching variability caused by different methods into identical ones. As it is clear, the way for determining whether one particular word is active or passive is to consider whether that item can be used in a written or spoken context.

The reason for such a thing resides in the fact that it has regularly been seen that some learners are familiar with some particular words but are unable to use them in natural conversations. In other words, they lack the knowledge of how to use them properly. That is why it is necessary for a word to be used in written and spoken contexts in order to be determined as either passive or active vocabulary (Black, 1985).

Moreover, the teaching of the words was done in the first 30 to 35 minutes of each class when the participants were fresh and ready. It is necessary to say that the 50 selected adjectives were taught in 5 sessions to 100 participants. After five sessions of instruction, in the sixth one, both groups were given the vocabulary test made by the researcher.

3.4 Procedures for Data Analysis

Once the test was administered and the corresponding data were gathered, data analysis was carried out using the SPSS package. Version 18 of Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) was used to carry out the statistical analysis. To investigate the possible effects of providing Persian equivalents of English adjectives on Iranian EFL learners' active vocabulary, an independent samples t-test was run on the vocabulary scores of both groups. By examining the mean score in both the experimental and control groups, it would be possible to decide which group performed better on the test generally.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Results

An independent samples t-test would be run on the learners' total vocabulary scores of the two mentioned groups. The mean and the standard deviation of each group would be also calculated to see which group perform better.

The mean has been calculated as 25.36 for "control" group and 35.98 for "experimental" one. This indicates that the experimental group performed better (Table 1 presents the results). In the Independent Samples t-test, that presented in Table 2, it can be seen that two different t-values have been computed. One of them is on the assumption that the variances in two the groups are equal, and the other on the unequal variances assumption .The significance value for Levene's test is .925, which is greater than .05 and not significant. Therefore, we should consider the row in which variances are assumed to be equal. We come to know that the t-value is 12.253 and the significance magnitude has been calculated as .000, with the degrees of freedom of 98 and mean difference equals 10.620. This indicates that the experimental group performed better.

4.2 Discussion

It will become transparent that since the mean score of the "experimental" group, is higher than that of the "control" group, the former group performed better on vocabulary test than did the latter. This indicates that the words whose L1 meaning was given to the learners could be used freer and more productively than those whose L2 definitions were provided. Moreover, we can conclude that providing L1 equivalents of English adjectives have had significant impact on turning them into "active vocabularies" which, in turn, will help them perform better.

5. Conclusion

With regard to the research question which was about the relationship between L1 translation and learners' active vocabulary, it can be deduced that , since the performances of all the participants in the "Experimental"

group were better than those in the "Control" group, translation strategy thus assisted the participants to recall more words as revealed by the test. That is, the group in which the instruction was through L1 equivalents of English words (adjectives), participants were able to use the words more productively than others.

Thus, the positive relationship between L1 translation and the active use of vocabulary has been substantiated and the null hypothesis is rejected. We found that contrary to the conventional method of teaching L2 to students, that is, teaching L2 without reference to L1 and avoiding it totally, the teaching approach tried out in this study endorsed introducing L1 equivalents of language words to Iranian learners of English. What can be said as the final conclusion is that, language instructors should not consider learners' mother tongue as an obstacle to vocabulary development. Instead, they are recommended make use of them to enhance and boost learners' active vocabulary.

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	group	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
	experimental	50	35.98	4.474	.633
Voc. score	control	50	25.36	4.188	.592

Table 1. Group Statistics for total vocabulary scores

According to Table 1, The mean has been calculated as 25.36 for "control" group and 35.98 for "experimental" one. This indicates that the experimental group performed better.

Table 2. Independent Samples Test on total scores

	Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means				
	F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2taile)	Mean Difference	
Equal variances assumed	.009	.925	12.253	98	.000	10.620	
Equal variances not assumed			12.253	97.575	.000	10.620	

Table 2 shows that two different t-values have been computed. One of them is on the assumption that the variances in two the groups are equal, and the other on the unequal variances assumption .The significance value for Levene's test is .925, which is greater than .05 and not significant. Therefore, we should consider the row in which variances are assumed to be equal. We come to know that the t-value is 12.253 and the significance magnitude has been calculated as .000, with the degrees of freedom of 98 and mean difference equals 10.620. This indicates that the experimental group performed better.