

The Effect of Explicit Theme-based Instruction on the Vocabulary Learning Performance of Iranian EFL Learners

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Abstract

Vocabulary has been one of the main components of foreign language learning and still many believe that vocabulary knowledge is the most essential part of language ability. The present study aimed at investigating the effect of explicit instruction through theme-based instruction on the vocabulary learning of EFL learners. The participants of the study included 72 Iranian EFL learners, half of whom served as the experimental and the other half as the control group. Vocabulary knowledge of the participants was measured using the Vocabulary Level Test by Cambridge University before and after the treatment. The results of statistical analysis indicated that both explicit instruction through text thematization and regular teaching of vocabulary were effective on the learning of vocabulary but explicit instruction through text-theme procedure had a significantly better effect compared to regular instruction on the learning of the new vocabulary items.

Keywords: explicit instruction, text's theme, vocabulary, vocabulary instruction

Introduction

In the view of Boers and Lindstromberg, (2008), it is very essential to learn vocabulary as a crucial component of language as a requirement for achieving an advanced level of proficiency in the target language. In the same vein, Zu (2009) maintains that today both scholars and educators attach enormous importance to learning L2 language vocabulary. This is because possessing a rich repertoire of vocabulary is indicative of the communicative competence. Consequently, vocabulary is considered as one of the essential dimensions of second language learning. Although vocabulary is of high significance in EFL learning, it seems that the role of the text and more specifically the text's theme in learning vocabulary and the important contribution of the opening constituent(s) of sentences to giving general impression of discourse organization in this regard has been taken for granted, especially within applied studies in EFL contexts (see, e.g., VandeKopple, 1991; Hewings, 2004). In actuality, researchers with different backgrounds have studied the textual implications of inserting specific kinds of constituents in opening position of texts (e.g., Thompson, 1985, on purpose clauses; Schiffrin, 1985, on causal sequences; Kies, 1986, on left dislocations), however; vocabulary learning seems to have rather gone unexplored in this area.

Halliday (1994) considers Theme (in English) as involving everything and is concerned with the reader's initial experiential ('content') constituent of a clause. The investigations on Theme have made use of three main units of analysis, namely, the clause, the T-unit, and the orthographic sentence. The adoption of these units is driven by different grounds. For instance, the clause is considered as the fundamental linguistic context where the Theme-Rheme structure works. As a result, it provides the analytical baseline; the selection of the T-unit speaks to the fact that the structural dominance of an independent clause is a reflection of informational dominance, hence Themes at this level indicates more clearly how a text is unfolding while the sentence is vividly salient for writers as it is orthographically highlighted (it is, of course, less relevant to most

spoken discourse). A review of the literature, however; indicates that although text's theme and vocabulary are crucially important, no study to date, to the best knowledge of the researcher has attempted to investigate the effect of Effect of teaching vocabulary through text's theme on the vocabulary learning performance of EFL learners.

Literature Review

According to Decarrico (2001), the acquisition of lexical items has an important role in L2 learning. This is even the case for first language, the acquisition of which requires the child's engagement in constant learning of new words as well as making adjustments to the pervious meanings of old words. Besides, Celce–Murcia and Rosensweig (1989) assert that both educators and language instructors should take into account vocabulary as a crucial component in second language instruction from the very beginning stages. Similarly, Krashen (1989) believes that vocabulary plays a significant role in language so that it is critical to the language learner. Obviously, nobody can engage in successful communication as long as he/she lacks vocabulary knowledge. As a result, it can be followed that learning vocabulary should be taken into account as the foundation of language so that the efforts aimed at gaining communication skills begin with vocabulary learning.

The findings of research carried out on vocabulary by scholars such as Davis, (1989), Gass (1999), Stein (1993), Wesche et al, (1999) have demonstrated the important role of vocabulary in SLA. On the contrary, the limited knowledge of vocabulary makes it very hard and even impossible for L2 learners to participate in effective communication in the target language. A lot of investigations have examined vocabulary as the main part of language learning, studying its role in second language learning. For instance, Laufer (1997) emphasizes that vocabulary learning is viewed by many as the heart of L2 learning.

According to Schmitt (2002), we cannot consider words as isolated units in language as they have different complicated features. A vocabulary item is made up of multiple aspects (e.g. pronunciation of the word as well as its spelling and meaning). Nation (2001) notes that if learners are supposed to know a word, they should have a variety of knowledge (e.g. how that word is pronounced and how it is spelled). They also need to know its grammatical properties along with the contextual factors impacting its appropriate use.

Knowing the pronunciation of a word implies that the individual is able to recognize the word on being heard. Moreover, he/she can produce the spoken form of the same word. Having knowledge of the spelling of a word means that the individual also knows how the word is written. Nation (2001) believes that knowing both the written and spoken forms of words helps the learners to figure out what is being read and heard. Another important aspect of vocabulary knowledge is knowing the meaning of a word as well as the relationship between the word and a concept. When the L2 learners refer to a dictionary to look up a word, they may face different meanings for the same word. As a result, as Nation (2001) maintains, learners need to know multiple senses of a word that may be manifested in the same form of a written and spoken form.

Having knowledge of what components constitute a word is yet another important angle of vocabulary knowledge, which is related to knowing how one can combine various words through using a root word and annexing some derivational suffixes and prefixes. According to Carstairs-MacCarthy (2002), it is very important to have the knowledge of how one can make new words through derivational suffixes and prefixes, as it is evident by the common and frequent use of derivational prefixes and suffixes. Furthermore, as Nation (2001) says, knowing word parts constitutes a part in our mental dictionary, making important contribution to knowing how words

are organized and stored in our mental dictionary. Schmitt (2002) notes that learners should know the various types of speech parts so as to be able to use them in a grammatical pattern accurately. According to Nation (2001), being aware and knowing the contexts where a word can be used appropriately is another aspect of knowledge of lexical items. The context is a particular condition in which a communicative act takes place. Nation (2001) believes that learners need to know about the appropriateness of a word in specific contexts as a condition required to be able to communicate successfully.

In the area of writing and applied linguistics there have been many studies concerning the various constituents of sentences and texts. Various constituents of sentences and texts and the way they are placed within them bears certain implications to the meaning of a message and the way readers and listeners interpret the incoming information. Halliday has been one of pioneer figure in this respect who introduced the concepts of Theme-Rheme structure. In simple words, theme is referred to the starting point of a sentence which is traditionally occupied by the subject of the sentence, and Rheme is referred to the complementary information in relation to the Theme. For example, in the following sentences taken from Thompson (2006, p. 658), the Themes have been underlined:

Rover joined our household entirely at random. [2] But the relationship with him was entirely satisfying. However, when talking about theme in text the unit of analysis goes beyond noun and phrase and concerns mainly with such units like clause, T unit, and sentence (Thompson, 2006). In the following example taken from Thomson (2006, p. 659) T-unit themes are underlined and clause themes are in italics.

When MNEs are exporting into a foreign market, *host country nationals* will handle everything. As the firm begins initial manufacture in that country, *the use of expatriate managers and third country nationals begins* to increase. As the company moves through the ensuing stages of internationalization, *the nationality mix of the managers in the overseas unit* continues to change to meet the changing demands of the environment.

The functions of theme have been mainly discussed in Systematic Functional Linguistics based on works of Fries (1981/1983). According to Fries, Theme is defined as the provision of a framework for the interpretation of the clause so that it orients the receiver/reader to what will be communicated. Martin (1992) describes Theme as a tool used to scaffold the rhetorical structure of a text. Matthiessen characterizes it as creation of a local context for the clause (1995a), indicating the present 'logogenetic growth-point' in the instantial system of the text (1995b). Put it other way, it shows which part of the experiential and/or interpersonal meanings in the text will be developed.

Method

Participants

The participants of the current study were 72 Iranian EFL learners at intermediate level of language proficiency. They were chosen from an initial group of 90 learners by singling out those whose language proficiency scores (Oxford placement test scores) were within the range of $\pm 1SD$. They were studying English for general purposes at a private language institute and had managed to pass the prerequisite courses and exams to reach the intermediate level of language proficiency. In terms of gender, 40 students were female and 32 students were male. No valid information was available regarding their motives of the participants for studying English and also not much was known about their previous educational and socio-economic background. All of them seemed determined enough to continue their English studies as they had paid their tuition fee and regularly

attended their previous classes. Previous exam scores also indicated that all of the participants were roughly at the same level of language proficiency except for few cases who were supposed to remain at the intermediate level classes provided they remedy their previous week points by performing better in the following classes.

Instruments and Materials

The first instrument in the current study was Oxford placement test (OPT) for measuring the language proficiency of the participants so that only those whose language proficiency were equal would participate in the study. OPT contained 60 items which tested the general proficiency language knowledge of the learners.

In the present study the dependent variable was vocabulary knowledge which was measured using Vocabulary Level Test (2005) by Cambridge University (see Appendix A for a sample page). Since the vocabulary test included all levels and were a comprehensive one including too many items only those parts related to intermediate, upper intermediate and advanced levels were used in the study. The test had a multiple choice format and respondents needed to choose the correct option and mark in their answer sheet. Totally there were 148 items and the reliability of the test was estimated using Cronbach's Alpha on a pilot sample of 30 language learners and it was found 0.81 which is quite acceptable index of reliability. Table 1 shows the statistics related to pilot sample on vocabulary scores.

Table 1
Descriptive Statistics of Pilot Sample

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation	Cronbac h's Alpha	Cronbach's Alpha Based on Standardiz ed Items	N of Items
V Pilot	30	37.00	57.00	46.46	5.612	.816	.808	16
Valid N (listwise)	30							

Based on the item analysis of the vocabulary test, the vocabulary items with difficulty level below 50 were considered to be included as the course materials. Totally, 78 items had difficulty level of 50 or below 50 which were considered as vocabulary items for teaching.

Procedure

Initially, using the results of the study, those participants with extreme scores or those whose OPT score laid out of the range of $\pm 1SD$ were removed from the study leading to a sample of 72 EFL learners with homogeneous level of language proficiency. After selecting the participants of the study and making the necessary arrangement for conducting the experiment, all the participants of the study took the vocabulary placement test. Then the participants were divided into two groups; one serving as the experimental group and the other one as the control group. The vocabulary scores of the two groups were compared using independent samples t-test to make sure

about the homogeneity of the two groups in terms of knowledge of vocabulary. Afterwards, each group was further divided into classes to receive the instruction. In the experimental group, students received explicit instruction by text's thematizing new word drawing on Halliday (1994) alongside their main course content. In Halliday (1994) the first experiential constituent of a clause is theme and accordingly the first clause within a T-unit is called text's them. For instance, in the following example from Thompson (2006, p.659), the underlined clause is a text's theme.

When you have a dog, you put in food and attention, and what you get out is unconditional affection and respect.

Therefore, in the present study new vocabulary items were text's thematized to make it more salient and noticeable. For instance, in explaining the meaning of the word *bitter* teacher explained the meaning of the word bitter by exemplifying the word as the text's theme of a T-unit. For example:

When you eat something bitter, your mouth gets hot and you get a feeling of burning in your mouth.

The explicit teaching was based on the guidelines proposed by Sterns (1992). Therefore, the vocabulary items were written on board and students were asked to guess the mean of the new words. Students got to discuss the meaning of new words in pairs and afterwards, their ideas were written on the board. Next teacher explained the meaning of the new words and provided some examples in a way that new words were text's thematized. Students were asked to make some example sentences using the new words just explained and described.

As in the control group no explicit instruction of new vocabulary items in a text's thematized manner were given to students and students just noticed the vocabulary items on the board along some example sentences. Students were asked to guess the meaning and write some example sentences based on their hunches. Afterwards, they were asked to consult their dictionaries and check if their guesses were correct or not and accordingly correct their example sentences. Finally, students were provided with actual meaning of the new words by the teacher. Like experimental group, control group received similar explicit instruction except that there was no instruction of new vocabulary items in a thematized manner.

The English course took about 12 sessions each one lasting for almost 2 hours. In each session 20 minutes were devoted to vocabulary instruction and in each session 6 to 10 vocabulary items were instructed. After the instructional period, students took the same vocabulary test they had taken before attending the classes to understand the effect of instruction on vocabulary learning. To understand the effect of treatment on the learning of vocabulary, students' vocabulary scores were once compared within groups and once between groups using paired samples t-test and independent samples t-test respectively.

Results

Homogeneity of the Participants in Terms of Language Proficiency

The first step of the study was selection of EFL learners with homogeneous level of language proficiency. To this end, OPT was administered and those learners whose scores were within the range of $\pm 1SD$ were chosen as EFL learner with homogeneous level of language proficiency. Table 2 shows the results of OPT on the initial sample of 90 learners.

Table 2
Results of OPT for the Initial Sample of 90 Learners

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
OPT	90	18.00	60.00	39.7444	6.73672
Valid N (listwise)	90				

As seen in Table 2, the mean score of the sample is 39.74 (SD=6.73). In order to determine the learners with homogeneous language proficiency those whose scores were mean score $\pm 1SD$ (39.74 $\pm 1SD$) were selected. Table 3 shows the 72 EFL learners whose scores were within the range of $\pm 1SD$.

Table 3

The Scores of OPT for the Learners with scores within the Range of $\pm 1SD$

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
OPT Homogenized	72	33.00	46.00	39.7778	3.45687
Valid N (listwise)	72				

After the homogenizing process, the mean score of the sample was 39.77 (SD=3.45) which was not very different from the initial sample of learners. however standard deviation was reduced drastically which is an indication of less dispersed scores.

Next, students were divided into experimental and control groups and afterward the vocabulary scores of the two groups were compared to ensure the homogeneity of two groups in terms of vocabulary knowledge. Table 4 shows the descriptive statistics of the two groups of the study.

Table 4

Descriptive Statistics of the Experimental and Control Groups of the Study

Groups	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Experimental	36	46.6944	5.40275	.90046
Control	36	47.0000	5.34522	.89087

As seen in Table 4, experimental group had a mean score of 46.69 (SD=5.40) and control group had a mean score of 47.00 (SD=5.34). To make sure that two groups are not significantly different independent samples t-test was run on the vocabulary scores between the two groups. Table 5 shows the results of independent samples t-test on the vocabulary scores before the treatment.

Table 5

Results of Independent Samples t-test and Kolmogorov Smirnov test of Normality on the Vocabulary Scores before the Treatment

	Kolmogorov-Smirnova			Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means					
	Statistic	df	Sig.	F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	
Experimental	.060	36	.200*	Equal variances assumed	.000	.988	-.241	70	.810	-.30556	1.26668
Control	.056	36	.200*	Equal variances not assumed			-.241	69.992	.810	-.30556	1.26668

As seen in Table 5, the data of the two group were normally distributed ($P > 0.05$) which legitimizes the use of t-test. Based on the results of t-test there is no significant difference between the experimental and control groups in terms of vocabulary knowledge ($T = 0.24$, $P = 0.081$) which demonstrates the homogeneity of the groups in terms of vocabulary knowledge.

The effect of Treatment on the Learning of Vocabulary

After the treatment period, participants' knowledge of vocabulary learning was measured again using the same vocabulary test administered before the treatment. In order to understand about the effect of explicit instruction of text's theme on the vocabulary learning, participants' vocabulary scores were compared once within group and once across groups. Table 6 shows the comparison of vocabulary scores within the groups or between pretest and posttest in other words.

Table 6
Comparison of Vocabulary Scores between Pretest and Posttest of the Groups

		Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Experimental group	Pretest	46.6944	36	5.40275	.90046
	posttest	79.1389	36	5.78744	.96457
Control group	Pretest	47.0000	36	5.34522	.89087
	Posttest	71.2778	36	5.42803	.90467

Based on descriptive statistics, experimental group had a mean score of 46.69 (SD=5.40) in pretest and a mean score of 79.13 (SD=5.78) in the posttest. On the other hand, control group had a mean score of 47.00 (SD=5.34) in the pretest and a mean score of 71.27 (SD=5.42) in the posttest. In order to decide about the significant effectiveness of the instruction on vocabulary learning paired samples t-test was utilized. Table 7 shows the results of paired samples t-test on the pretest and posttest scores of the groups.

Table 7
Results of Paired Samples t-test on the Pretest and Posttest Scores of the Groups

		Paired Differences		t	Sig. (2- df tailed)	Kolmogorov- Smirnova	
		Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean		Statistic	d f Sig.
Experimental group	Pretest	-3.244E1	1.57561	.26260	-123.55 35 .000	Pretest	.060 3 .20
	- posttest					posttest	.098 3 .20
Control group	Pretest	-2.427E1	1.57863	.26310	-92.27 35 .000	Pretest	.056 3 .20
	- Posttest					Posttest	.074 3 .20

Since the Kolmogorov Smirnov test of normality indicated that data were normally distributed ($P > 0.05$), the use of paired samples t-test was permitted based on the assumptions of parametric statistics. The results of paired samples t-test indicated that difference between pretest scores and posttest scores in both groups were significant leading to the conclusion that both explicit instruction through text's thematizing and regular instruction were effective in the learning of new vocabulary items. In the next step comparison was conducted across the groups on posttest scores to know if the both types of instructions affected the vocabulary learning to the same or difference extent. Table 8 shows the results of independent samples t-test between experimental and control groups.

Table 8

Results of Independent Samples t-test between Experimental and Control Groups on Vocabulary Posttest Scores

	Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
	F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
								Lower	Upper
Posttest Equal variances assumed	.286	.595	5.944	70	.000	7.86111	1.32243	5.22360	10.49862
Equal variances not assumed			5.944	69.714	.000	7.86111	1.32243	5.22341	10.49881

As demonstrated in Table 7, the vocabulary posttest scores were normally distributed ($P>0.05$) and according use of independent samples t-test was correct. Based on the results of independent samples t-test there was significant difference between experimental and control groups in terms of vocabulary achievement ($T=5.94$, $P=0.05$). Since the experimental group had a mean score of 79.13 ($SD=5.78$) and control group had a mean score of 71.27 ($SD=5.42$), it was concluded that explicit instruction through text's thematizing was significantly more effective than the regular instruction of vocabulary.

Discussion and Conclusion

The purpose of the current study was to explore the use of explicit use of text's thematizing in the instruction of English vocabularies to Iranian EFL learners. Participants of the study included 72 foreign language learners roughly at intermediate level of language proficiency. Study adopted a pretest posttest design containing on control group and once experimental group. Based on the analyses of the vocabulary scores before and after the instructional period, it was found that both regular instruction containing explicit teaching of vocabulary and explicit teaching through text's thematizing were effective in learning of new vocabularies. However, when the vocabulary scores were compared between the groups after the instructional period, it was revealed that explicit teaching through text's thematizing was significantly more effective than the regular instruction of vocabularies. Findings of the study suggests that text's thematizing is a viable technique in helping students to better capture the meaning of new words and remembering them. The effectiveness of the explicit teaching through text's thematizing can be attributed to two main factors. First, the better performance of experimental group in learning the new vocabularies can be due to advantage associated to explicit teaching. Researchers such as Coyne, McCoach, and Kapp (2007), Elleman, Lindo, Morphy, and Compton (2009), Maynard, Pullen, and Coyne (2010), and Pollard-Durodola, Gonzalez, et al, (2011) all argue in favor of explicit teaching of vocabularies. They believe that vocabulary instruction may not be that much effective unless it is taught explicitly. This positive effect of explicit teaching was also evident in the control group. The control group also contained explicit teaching of vocabulary and the effect of this explicit

teaching was positive in control group although it could not have the same positive effect as in the experimental group.

Secondly, in the experimental study, new words were exemplified through making the words salient by incorporating the new words in the text's theme of the sentence. According to Halliday (1985 as cited in Hawes & Thomas, 2012, p.176) Theme can be summarized as "1. The leftmost part of the clause, 2. Up to, and including, the first ideational element, 3. What the message will be about, and 4. The remainder of the clause, following Theme, constituting Rheme". Therefore it is concluded that theme is the "starting point" which is considered important and central to the text (Dejica-Cartis & Cozma, 2013). Accordingly, thematizing can make students more sensitive the new words contained in the text's theme and stimulate their attention and focus. As the attention is more directed towards the target input there is more chance in the change of input into intake and consequently more learning (Schmidt, 1990, 2001). Salemi, Rabiee and Ketabi (2012) also found the superiority of explicit learning over implicit learning by pointing to the fact that students' attention is directed to specific features during explicit instruction.

Based on the literature and also findings of the present study explicit teaching through text's thematizing has the potentials to positively affect the learning of new vocabularies. Literature on text's theme and explicit teaching suggests certain benefits for the use of explicit teaching and text's thematizing of new words for vocabulary instruction. Moreover, the current study indirectly contributes to the instructional theories emphasizing attention and noticing as in the noticing hypothesis (Schmidt, 1990) However, more research in various contexts of language learning is needed to come up with clearer picture regarding the efficacy of explicit teaching and text's thematization on the learning of new words.

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