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Digesting Vocabulary: Email vs. Context

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ABSTRACT

From the first stages of learning a new language we were told the best way to learn and memorize vocabulary is through context. However, the way education is taking advantage of technology has made the conventional methods in question. This study is provided to investigate the effect of Email and Context on vocabulary learning in a comparative way. To this end, 16 first-year University students having French as their second language –divided into two groups of eight- were chosen. During 4 weeks of treatment one group was provided with two short stories, each containing 35 unfamiliar French vocabularies from the pre-test, and the same vocabularies were sent to the other group everyday by Email. The results were collected through post-test and a recall test, in addition with an interview for the Email receiving group to learn the participants' opinions about their learning experience. The post test results did not show any significant difference between the two groups, however the recall test ten days after the experiment showed that the context receiving group was much better in recalling the studied vocabularies than the Email receiving group—although the Email participants were more interested in their learning method. It could be concluded that learning vocabulary through context is still a better help for language learners to store the learnt vocabularies in their memory.

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Introduction

The technological improvements have an immense capacity of changing every field of study. Needless to say, language teaching and learning are among the fields that are affected by these new technological developments. "Since the opportunities that are provided with computers and especially the internet attract the interests of the researchers, Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL) has long been studied by many researchers" (Nilüfer, Bekleyen, 2012). Vocabulary learning is one of the most basic and important aspects of learning a second or a foreign language. As Wilkins (1972) put it, "without grammar very little can be conveyed, without vocabulary nothing at all can be conveyed" (p. 111). Harmer (1994) also echoed, "[I]f language structures make up the skeleton of language, then it is vocabulary that provides the vital organs and flesh (p.153), so it should be dealt with in the best and most sufficient methods. It is always said, the best way to learn and memorize vocabulary is through context but the advantage of technology can't be ignored. The aim of this study is to investigate the impact of Context (short story) along with Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL)—Email— on vocabulary learning of FFL students. Among all computer devises, email is the most wide spread device, particularly for university students' academic usage; the fact that they spend considerable amount of time using this device could be taken advantage of for vocabulary learning. However, vocabulary learning through Context provides the ability to estimate the meaning and function of words. In addition, it gives the learners a chance to encounter the new words repeatedly through the text.

Review of Literature

In recent years, a great number of studies have been carried out in order to investigate the role of computer technologies.

Most of the studies done in this field carryout on a single L2 vocabulary learning program rather than integrating various computer/internet-based programs and evaluating the effect of this integration on the L2 vocabulary learning. Through studies of vocabulary acquisition theories, researchers have suggested guidelines for the design of CALL programs for vocabulary. To name some, Goodfellow (1994) suggests that lexical CALL programs are required to address the learner's need to build a sizeable L2 mental lexicon; to maximize interactivity in the selection, processing and practice of target words; to have a deep learning; to support learning processes which focus on structure in the target-word list; to diagnose and help modify surface learning approaches; and to generate and record data on learning approaches and outcomes. Röllinghoff (1993) describes a lexical program developed by using HyperCard and adapted to several languages including French, English, German, and Spanish. Nara (1992, 1994) presents the design of an on-line Kanji dictionary and its search functions, and reports on the development of a collocational dictionary for Japanese, emphasizing improved monitoring facilities.

There are also empirical vocabulary studies related to the development of lexical CALL programs. In a study observing L2 learners' use of a software system connected with an on-line dictionary, Bland, Noblitt, Armington and Gay (1990) interpret the form of students' queries as an indication of their stage of lexical development. From the results of two experiments with English as a second language (ESL) reader, Coady, Magoto, Hubbard, Graney and Mokhtari (1993) suggest that practice with high-frequency vocabulary through computer-assisted learning does benefit reading.

To examine the effect of a context-embedded approach to second language vocabulary instruction, Kang (1995) conducted a study with elementary school students who had basic

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knowledge of the English alphabet and sentence structure. The instructional methods used for vocabulary learning were: "Paper and Pencil (P&P), Computer-based Word-for-word (CW), Computer-based word-for-word plus Picture (CP), and Computer-based Context (CC)" (p. 46). The P&P condition represented a conventional method of vocabulary learning guided by a human instructor. The CW condition incorporated the same definition-based approach used in the P&P, but employed a computer instead of a human instructor. In the CP condition, pictures were additionally used with the features included in the CW. The CC condition provided students with a situational context first in which the target English vocabulary occurred and then the meaning of the word and an example sentence. The results showed that the group treated by the computer-based context method performed significantly better than any other group in a retention test. This suggests that the presentation of vocabulary with visual, aural and sentence contexts in computer-assisted learning environments would enhance vocabulary learning and teaching.

Research Questions

The present study aims at examining the effectiveness of using Email and Context, as two individual methods on French vocabulary learning in a comparative way. Thus, the following research questions have been addressed in the study:

1. How is learning vocabulary through email different from that of learning in context?
2. What is the attitude of EFL learners towards the use of learning vocabulary via e-mail?

Methodology

Participants

The participants in this study were 16 freshmen students of Isfahan University, whose native language was Persian and were learning French as a foreign language. They were all female aged between 20-25. All of the participants had the same level of proficiency (beginners), who were acquainted with the basic French grammar. At the beginning of the study, it was announced that the participation was voluntary and 16 students accepted to participate in the study. Among them 8 of participants who had access to internet and checked their emails regularly were chosen for the Email group.

Instruments and data collection

At first, a simple short story (under the subject of mythology entitled "Demeter and Persephone") was provided. The reason for choosing this subject was because; although the students were beginners but kids' stories were inappropriate for their age and level of proficiency. In addition, those stories wouldn't be interesting enough for the participants to follow. In week one a vocabulary Pre-test of the key words of this short story was prepared by the researchers to measure the knowledge of the students regarding the words that were planned to be taught. From then on the procedure of the study differed for each group. Group A was assigned with the short story that was divided in two parts, each followed by the definition of the new words. Some of the words were left without a definition so that students could guess the meaning by context- preceding and succeeding words. The first part of the short story was distributed in week 1- one day after the pretest - and the second part was distributed in week 2. The members of this group determined for themselves the number of words to learn each day. For Group B the same vocabularies of the short story were sent to the participants every day by an email. In each attempt they received 5 words with their pronunciations, grammatical

functions, along with Persian meanings and examples (as in examples below). Most of the sentences were taken from the same short story.

Monde (m): /mɔ̃d/ ایند، نی مزره

Le monde des morts.

مردگ ان دن پای.

Rencontrer (v.): /ʁɑ̃kɔ̃tre/ کردن ملاقات

Ce matin j'ai rencontré notre professeur.

ملاقات ک ردم ار نام مل خم حبص زورم.

In order to see the effects of instruction and assessment, both groups were administered a face-to-face vocabulary post-test at the end of the experiment. The post-test includes; multiple choices, filling the blanks, matching the words with their definition and etc. Besides, they took a recall test 10 days after the experiment to see the long term effect of each method on their vocabulary retention. At the end the Email participants were interviewed in order to know their opinions about their learning experience.

Results

As table 1 show, there isn't any significant difference between the two groups from the pre-test. Although the mean scores of the pre-test were very low, they made us certain that the level of vocabularies for both groups were the same, and almost all of the words were unfamiliar to theme.

Table 1. Mean and standard deviation of the pre-test

Group	N	Mean	SD
Context	8	1.21	0.958
Email	8	1.40	0.833

To find the answer of the first research question on the effect of both Context and Email on students, vocabulary learning, the mean scores and standard deviation of the groups in the post test were calculated. As shown in table 2, the participants mean scores were higher in post-test compared to pretest (Table 1). But there were no significant difference in the scores of post-test between the two groups.

Table 2. Mean and standard deviation of the post-test

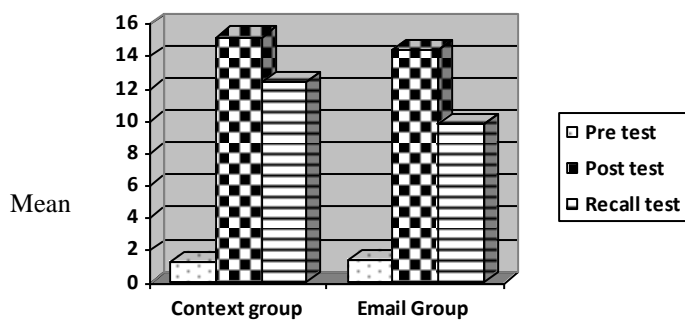
Group	N	Mean	SD
Context	8	15.18	1.60
Email	8	14.37	2.53

So it could be inferred that both methods were effective on participants. Then to answer the second research question which was to find out which method has the best effect on the participants long term memory, we provided a recall test 10 days after the post test (that is 17 days after the experiment). This was the main part of our experiment, because "vocabulary learning involves memorizing the sound, written form, and meaning of a word as well as having the ability to retrieve the three from memory." (Zhang, Haisen, 2011). And this happens when the newly learned vocabulary items transferred into long-term memory, which refers to "representations that can be remembered for durations longer than can be attributed to short-term memory. Long-term memory can involve information presented minutes ago or years ago" (proctor & Vu, 2033, p. 44). As it is showed in table 3, the results proved that the effect of remembering vocabularies which were studied through context was significantly more than those of email.

Table 3. Mean and standard deviation of the recall test

Group	N	Mean	SD
Context	8	12.43	2.258
Email	8	9.81	0.997

Figure 1. Graphic representation of each group's performance



As mentioned earlier, this study also examined the participants of Email group's attitude toward their learning experience. They also touched upon the fact that the method was quite exciting to them and it was interesting to learn vocabulary in this context.

We also understand that learning vocabulary through Emails had some disadvantages for the participants. As we were studying the post & recall test papers, we noticed that Email participants paid less attention to the examples of the words, or the gender of the nouns during their study, that is why they couldn't answer the questions related to those parts. In fact they only had focused on the main part of the emails – words and their meanings. Since the main part for the context group was the context itself, it leads them to better results. It worth mentioning that it is the characteristic of French language that; in order to use a word properly there are some other elements you should learn rather than the meaning of the word. If the word is a verb you should know the way it is conjugated or at least (for beginners) be familiar with its conjugated form, and if it is a noun it's necessary to know its gender in order to use the proper article. The mentioned elements were regarded in both the used short story and the sent E-mails.

Conclusion

Due to the integral role of vocabulary in language learning, Language learners' knowledge of vocabulary should be expanded in order to help them develop their language skills and to be successful in their learning. As the results of this study show, context could still be used as an effective method in teaching and/or learning vocabulary, to be more exact, on the ability of retrieving studied vocabularies. Since it provides more chances for students to encounter the new vocabularies, and familiarizes the students with the functions and usages of words. But the fact that technology has its advantages which could possibly improve the learning outcome cannot be ignored. As it is proposed by Al-Jarf (2007) "in learning environments where technology is unavailable to EFL students and instructors, use of technology from home and even as a supplement to traditional classroom techniques helps motivate and enhance EFL students' learning and acquisition of English vocabulary." In addition, as this study found the use of technology implies a positive attitude on learners which could be taken advantage of. Although it may sometimes be difficult to change traditional teaching methods, as suggested by Blake (2008) "Constant change is a frightening phenomenon for most people, but that is the inherent nature of the technology field" (p.12), but the conventional methods - learning through context- have gradually become boring for the younger generation of students and lack interest, technology could be of great help to solve this problem. In this way, instead

of using each method individually we could find a way to use technology as a complementary for the conventional methods.

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