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The Comparison Between Task-based and Systematic Instruction in Productive Vocabulary Retention

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ABSTRACT

This study compared the effect of task-based and systematic instruction on L2 learners' productive vocabulary retention. The participants of the study were 73 Iranian female intermediate EFL learners who were divided into a split information task group (n=25), a shared information task group (n=25), and a systematic instruction group (n =23). Before treatment all the participants were given a fill in the blanks pretest to check their vocabulary production ability. Then the new words were taught to the three groups. Two weeks after the end of the treatment, the vocabulary productive delayed posttest was administrated. The results showed that task-based instruction improved the learners' productive vocabulary retention significantly more than systematic instruction providing that the task type was taken into account. The participants under task-based instruction could follow some principles (Thornburg, 2002) essential for moving the new words from short-term store into permanent long-term memory such as repetition, retrieval, pacing, active Use, cognitive depth, personal organizing, and attention, and as a result, they could have more successful performance in the vocabulary productive delayed posttest than the systematic instruction group.

Introduction

Vocabulary is the meaning-carrier of a language which is required to be understood and to be utilized in listening, speaking, reading, and writing (Nation, 2001). Almost in all of EFL educational situations, vocabulary learning is one of the most or perhaps the most important basis of language learning. EFL teachers teach vocabulary and grammar to their students as the two most basic elements of the English language. Vocabulary production focused by the study, is one important aspect of lexical knowledge; productive vocabulary knowledge is in fact the learners' ability to use the learned vocabulary in writing or speech.

An outstanding problem is that there are controversies between EFL teachers on the appropriateness of direct vs indirect vocabulary instruction, decontextualizing vs contextualizing vocabulary instruction, teacher-centered vs learner-centered vocabulary instruction, and instruction with analytic view vs instruction with holistic view towards vocabulary learning. One of the other problems which most of EFL learners face is that they forget the learned vocabulary after sometime and can not use them trough English language production.

One of the most outstanding learner-centered and contextualizing vocabulary teaching methods is task-based linking to Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), which applies activities involving real communication and the use of language for carrying out meaningful tasks. The concept of task-based instruction was developed in the 1980s by second language acquisition (SLA) researchers and teachers who were discontented with teacher-centered and form-oriented language teaching practice. In fact task-based instruction is characterized by activities that engage language learners in meaningful and goal-oriented communication to solve problems, to complete projects, and to reach decisions; the activities are intended to communicate meaning, not to focus on linguistic elements.

Systematic vocabulary instruction focused by the study is a kind of teacher-centered decontextualizing explicit vocabulary instruction which includes a set of several vocabulary teaching strategies; each strategy concentrates on one linguistic element contained in knowledge of a word. In fact, this type of vocabulary teaching method does not recommend one specific instructional strategy but several explicit strategies that lead to depth of word knowledge and enhance word learning, word memory, and word recall for later use. The present study was intended to compare the effect of task-based and systematic instruction on EFL learners' productive vocabulary retention.

Based on the above literature, the following research question was addressed in this study:

1. Is there any significant difference between the effect of task-based and systematic instruction on L2 learners' productive vocabulary retention?

Methodology

Participants

The participants were Iranian female EFL learners of Shahid Imaniyan high school in Najafabad, Iran, native speakers of Persian, ranging in age from 15 to 18, studying English as the first foreign language, and selected based on their English proficiency scores. They took an Oxford Placement Test [OPT, Allan, 2004]. seventy three learners whose scores were between 2 SDs above and below the mean were selected for the subsequent stages of the study and were randomly divided into three groups: split information task group and shared information task group of 25 and systematic instruction group of 23.

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Materials

Three kinds of materials containing OPT, a List of 40 words, and a fill in the blanks vocabulary productive test were used in the study. KR-21 formula indicated that the reliability of the fill in the blanks test was 0.86.

Procedures

The list of 40 words was given to the participants and they were asked to write the correct meaning or definition of each word either in L1 or in L2. Thirty words, whose meaning was not known by the participants, were selected to teach to them in three sessions. The pretest was administrated one month before the treatment. In pre-task session, the two task-based instruction groups received training on how to infer meaning of new words from context based on Jenkins, Matlock, and Slocum's strategy (1989). Through treatment one of task-based instruction groups received split information task and another one shared information task. In systematic instruction group the teacher explicitly taught the same sets of the target words. Two weeks after the end of the treatment, the vocabulary productive delayed posttest was administrated.

Data Analysis

The researchers used the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS, Version 16) to see which one of task-based and systematic instruction was significantly more effective on the participants' productive vocabulary retention.

Results

The effect of the two instructions on the participants' productive vocabulary retention

In order to see if there were significant differences between the performances of the three groups on the vocabulary productive delayed posttest, a one-way ANOVA was run. Table 1 represents the results.

Table 1. ***The Results of the One-Way ANOVA on the Vocabulary Productive Delayed Posttest***

ANOVA

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	367.195	2	183.597	14.630	.000
WithinGroups	878.477	70	12.550		
Total	1245.671	72			

Table 1 shows that the level of significance is less than .05. Thus the differences between the three groups were significant, $F(2, 70)= 183.597$, $p=<.05$ In order to see where the significant differences were, a Post Hoc test (Sheffe) was run. Table 2 represents the results.

Table 2. *The Results of the Post Hoc Test (Sheffe) on the Vocabulary Productive Delayed Posttest*

Multiple Comarisons

Dependent Variable: Productive Delayed Posttest

Scheffe

(l)group (J) group	Mean Difference (l-J)	Std. Error	Sig.	95% Confidence Interval	
				Lower Bound	Upper Bound
split information task shared information task	3.28000*	1.00198	.007	.7740	5.7860
systematic instruction	5.48348*	1.02354	.000	2.9235	8.0434
shared information task split information task	-3.28000*	1.00198	.007	-5.7860	-.7740
systematic instruction	2.20348	1.02354	.106	-.3556	4.7634
systematic instruction split information task	-5.48348*	1.02354	.000	-8.0434	-2.9235
shared information task	-2.20348	1.02354	.106	-4.76340	.3556

*. The mean difference is significant at the .05 level

As it is evident in Table 2, the difference between the performances of split group and shared group on the vocabulary productive delayed posttest is significant $p= < .05$ as well as between those of split group and systematic instruction group $p= <.05$. As it is clear, the difference between the performances of shared group and systematic instruction group on the vocabulary productive delayed posttest is not significant $p= >.05$. Split group outperformed systematic instruction group, but there is no significant difference between shared group and systematic instruction group. In other words, task-based instruction improved the participants' productive vocabulary retention significantly more than systematic instruction providing that the task type was taken into account.

Discussion and Conclusion

The participants under task-based instruction used different vocabulary learning strategies such as note taking, guessing, and social strategies in order to infer the meaning of the target words from the context; according to Lawson and Hogben (1995), more frequent and wider variety of vocabulary learning strategies use results in better retention of words.

One of the suggestions about vocabulary recall and supported by the results of the present study is Ellis and He's (1999a); they stated that a task requiring a production output, yields higher word retention scores than a task which does not require language production. It seems that the group report phase in both tasks led to improvement of the participants' productive vocabulary retention.

Also Groot (2000) considered guessing from context as a very important factor in promoting vocabulary retention; the participants under task-based instruction in the present study tried to guess and infer the meaning of the new words using the contextual clues.

The results also support Paribakht and Wesche's belief (1999) based on which the repetition of the new words and frequent exposure to them in different tasks encourage the learners to pay more attention on the words and lead to transfer of the vocabulary knowledge from short term store to long term memory. They (1999) stated that frequent repetition and exposure stick the vocabulary items to the learners' mind, and this facilitates the retention of the new words.

The participants under task-based instruction could follow some principles (Thornburg, 2002) essential for moving the new words from short-term store into permanent long-term memory such as repetition, retrieval, pacing, active Use, cognitive depth, personal organizing, and attention.

The study was intended to compare the impact of task-based and systematic instruction on L2 learners' productive vocabulary retention. It revealed the following:

- Task-based instruction improves L2 learners' productive vocabulary retention significantly more than systematic instruction providing that task type is taken into account.

Implications of the Study

Based on the finding of the study, the following pedagogical implications can be suggested:

- in L2 vocabulary instruction, more attention should be paid on different types of contextualizing instruction such as task-based instruction by considering their advantages for the learners, instead of limiting the EFL situations to passive decontextualizing instruction which removes L2 vocabulary from any active contextual situation.
- EFL teachers should provide their students with more appropriate productive tasks in which the learners can develop their vocabulary recognition ability to vocabulary production ability.

The present study suffered from several limitations such as small sample of participants and limitations of fund and time.

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