Improving EFL Learners’ Vocabulary Learning via Dictionary Tasks

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Abstract

Developing the autonomy and vocabulary learning of learners specially language learners is one of the important issues in foreign language teaching area. Therefore, this study aims to investigate the effectiveness of different dictionary tasks in EFL learners’ autonomy and vocabulary learning. To this aim, 60 EFL guidance and high school students (13-17 years old) were chosen. They were divided into two groups, experimental group (n=30) and control group (n=30). First, a pretest was given to both groups. Then, the teacher of experimental group gave different tasks for using dictionary in teaching new vocabularies and reviewing last words for 8 sessions. The tasks were chosen based on some features such as novelty, attractiveness, easiness, etc. For example, students were supposed to identify the place of stress or find the synonyms for each word. At the end, a posttest was given to both groups. [T-test was used to analyze data]. The findings of the study revealed a significant relationship between using dictionary tasks and improving EFL learners’ autonomy and permanent vocabulary learning. This study can help the teachers who seek effective ways to teach vocabulary and improve learners’ autonomy, and also teachers who can’t employ new technologies. Moreover, it can be beneficial for learners who search for self-study effective vocabulary learning techniques.

Key words: dictionary task, vocabulary learning, autonomy, EFL learners.

Introduction

This part consists of two parts. In the first part, articles and researchers on autonomy is presented. After that, some information about vocabulary learning could be seen.

Literature Review

Autonomy

It is believed that the ultimate educational goal of language teachers is to help learners become autonomous. In language education, the idea of learner-centered practice and autonomy has been integrated into communicative language teaching (Benson, 2001). From this perspective, responsible learners „accept the idea that their own efforts are crucial to progress in learning and behave accordingly (Scharle & Szabó, 2000, p. 3). In what condition does autonomy occur? According to the self-determination theory (SDT) (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Ryan & Deci, 2000; Ryan & Lynch, 2003), people become more self-determined with essential human needs: autonomy, competence and relatedness. Autonomy stems from psychological processing of the individual, whereas relatedness is constructed in the social context, and competence has both conditions. In fact, these conditions interact with each other and contribute to motivation and personal growth (Ryan & Deci, 2000)

Taking responsibility for one’s own learning is a recurrent notion in works on autonomy (Holec 1981; Dickinson 1987; Little 1991; Benson 2001). Specifically, Holec (1981, 3) defines autonomy as “the ability to take charge of one’s own learning”, which involves making decisions about different aspects of the language learning process (determining objectives, monitoring progress, or evaluating performance, among others). Along similar lines, Little (1991, 4) views autonomy as “a
Autonomous learners are those who seek the opportunities to learn outside classroom setting and create their own instructional settings freed from the teacher (Breen & Mann, 1997).

In order to understand the term better, Little (1994, p. 81) noted what autonomy is not:

- Autonomy is not a synonym for self-instruction; in other words, autonomy is not limited to learning without a teacher.
- In the classroom context, autonomy does not entail an abdication of responsibility on the part of the teacher; it is not a matter of letting the learners get on with things as best they can.
- On the other hand, autonomy is not something that teachers do to learners; that is, it is not another teaching method.
- Autonomy is not a single, easily described behavior.
- Autonomy is not a steady state achieved by learners.

Autonomy is an essential characteristic for a good language learner. The importance of autonomy in language learning can be observed in Omaggio’s definition of a good language learner (cited in Wenden, 1991) which characterizes good language learners as people who are aware of their learning styles and strategies and know how to adapt them for different learning conditions; know about their strengths and weaknesses; and use every opportunity to communicate in the target language.

The key to fostering autonomy seems to be support. Support given by teachers may be technical such as teaching learners some strategies, cognitive or meta-cognitive. It may also be a psycho-social support where the teacher encourages learners to take control of their own learning and assists them in gaining self-confidence. Of course, the teacher has to learn to help the learner learn which requires teacher training. The fostering of autonomy is clearly desirable in language teaching. Teachers should support their learners using different methods. As Benson (2001, p. 224) mentioned “autonomy takes a variety of forms, there is no single best method of fostering it”. Studying different methods may contribute to fostering learner autonomy in language learning settings.

Vocabulary Learning

Vocabulary learning is a very important task of second language learners—maybe the most important one. As McLaughlin points out, vocabulary development is the "prime task of adult L2 learners" (1978:324). This is why adults carry dictionaries, not grammars, when they travel in foreign countries (Hatch 1978, cited by McLaughlin 1978). One can keep the communication going provided one knows the content words needed. The existence of "foreigner talk" and "baby talk", in which a lot of grammar features (not the content words) are simplified (Ferguson 1971), shows the importance of vocabulary from a different angle.

Scientific investigation of learning the foreign language vocabulary, the building blocks of communication, has been largely neglected in the favor of research in other areas of language acquisition in the first three decades of the second half of the century. Holley (1973) observes the role of vocabulary learning in foreign language education, which is held to be secondary. That is because of the first language acquisition research findings, which have misled the teachers. In fact, in first language acquisition, children start acquiring with a small range of vocabulary until structural patterns are mastered; so by relying on these findings, the role of vocabulary is pushed into the background (Carterand McCarthy 1988). According to Eeds and Cockrum (1985) while there exists a wide variety of ways to deal with vocabulary, the use of dictionary as the conventional method of instruction, in both first and second language learning, has been triggered. Marckwardt (1973), for example, comments:

- Dictionaries often supply information about the language not found elsewhere. Dictionaries often supply information about grammar, usage, status, synonym discrimination, application of derivative affixes, and distinctions between spoken and written English not generally treated in textbooks, even in a rudimentary fashion (cited in Bensoussan, Sim and Weiss, 1984: 263).
- Laufer (1990), similarly, believes that when word looks familiar but the sentence in which it is found or its wider context makes no sense at all, the learner should be encouraged to consult a dictionary (p.154). Consulting a dictionary during
an independent reading helps readers to find the meaning of the difficult vocabulary, ascertain the meaning of the unfamiliar word based on contextual information and provide further exposure for the word in other contexts, with different collocates and constructions, by making the student think about the words in relation both to the passage being read and the dictionary. In regard to the use of dictionary in second language learning, there are a number of studies reported in literature.

A handful of L2-based studies have been conducted on the effects of dictionary use on reading and vocabulary learning. Bensoussan et al. (1984) did a pilot study to ascertain the effect of dictionary use on students’ performance on a reading comprehension test. Ten different passages with multiple-choice questions were administered to approximately 900 first-year students at Haifa University. Finally, he concluded that there was no significant difference in test scores between those who used the dictionary and those who did not. Luppescu and Day (1993) examined whether the use of a bilingual dictionary enhanced vocabulary learning on a reading task. A group of Japanese university students (N = 293) read a story that included 17 unknown words whose meaning could be inferred; half the group had access to a bilingual dictionary while half had no dictionary. After reading, all were given a multiple choice vocabulary test. The group that had access to the dictionary had a mean score on the vocabulary test that was 50% higher than the no dictionary group. This suggests that the use of a bilingual dictionary can enhance vocabulary learning (through reading). Knight (1994) investigated the effects of bilingual dictionary use on vocabulary learning and reading comprehension in L2 learners with different L1 verbal abilities. Participants (N = 112) were university students studying Spanish at an intermediate level; they were randomly put into a dictionary or no dictionary group. Results indicated that there were significant differences favoring the dictionary group on both vocabulary learning (supply and select contexts, immediate and delayed tests) and reading comprehension measures.

Learning English as a global language is an activity which people feel they need to engage in throughout their lives --- mainly in a self-learning mode. However, English teachers are unavailable outside the schools and learners need to find reliable information that they can refer to when they encounter a variety of problems related to English. English dictionaries can fill this void. In an EFL setting such as Korea, where target language input is limited, a dictionary is an invaluable reference to the English language. They provide learners with useful linguistic and cultural information, especially when teachers are unavailable and the learners are responsible for their own learning (Walz, 1990; Cubillo, 2002).

Homstad and Thorson (2000) suggest that within the communicative paradigm independent learning is an important goal – learners are “expected to be active participants in their own learning, to be risk-takers, and to use language to create meaningful communication” (p. 9). The dictionary is one tool that may help language learners to meet these expectations. According to Kirkness (2004), the dictionary has long been and still is “an essential source, if not indeed the principal source, of information on language for all members of literate societies who might have questions on any aspect of the form, meaning, and/or use of a word or words in their own or in another language” (p. 54). Asher (1999) views dictionary use as a “gateway to independent learning” (p. 66) – an important life-skill alongside such things as literacy in information and communications technology (ICT) and the use of calculators. Chambers (1999) also perceives dictionary use as a life-skill that requires practice and potentially leads to greater linguistic competence. Chambers is positive about the increased learner autonomy that access to a dictionary brings. Students no longer have to depend on memory. They now have opportunity to be imaginative, creative and more experimental with language, and are no longer reliant on having to ask a teacher if they do not know a word. Horsfall (1997) maintains: A dictionary can help pupils with both the simplest problems and with the most difficult. It can reveal misconceptions, because it is a private check for a pupil on a word … [thereby becoming] a positive motivator and confidence-builder, showing the learner that he/she can proceed without the teacher. It is both a teaching aid and a learning aid. (p. 7)

**Research Questions and hypotheses:**

Following research questions were posed for this study:
Q1. Do dictionary tasks have any significant effect on EFL learners’ autonomy?
Q2. Do dictionary tasks have any significant effect on EFL learners’ vocabulary learning?

The following null hypotheses are considered:
H0.1. Dictionary tasks have no significant effect on EFL learners’ autonomy.
H0.2. Dictionary tasks have no significant effect on EFL learners’ vocabulary learning.

**Method**
Participants

Our participants were 60 male EFL guidance and high school students (13-17 years old) from Birjand city, South Khorasan, Iran. They were divided into two groups, experimental group (n=30) and control group (n=30).

Instrumentation

A teacher-made test was administered for examining the vocabulary knowledge. Some dictionaries were also given to the students.

Procedure

First, a pretest was given to both groups. Then, the teacher of experimental group gave different tasks for using dictionary in teaching new vocabularies and reviewing last words for 8 sessions. The tasks were chosen based on some features such as novelty, attractiveness, easiness, etc. For example, students were supposed to identify the place of stress or find the synonyms for each word. At the end, a posttest was given to both groups. T-test was used to analyze data.

Results and Discussion

Having collected the results of interviews in the pretest, the researchers analyzed the data for autonomy employing independent t-test. The purpose of this analysis was to estimate the participants’ autonomy before the study began. Table 1 shows the results for this analysis.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Groups</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>t</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>P</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Exp.</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>24.71</td>
<td>8.11</td>
<td>.36</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>.06</td>
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<tr>
<td>Cont.</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>23.63</td>
<td>7.96</td>
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As the results of Table 1 show, there is no statistically significant difference \(t(58) = .36, p = .06\] between experimental \((M = 24.71, SD = 8.11)\) and control \((M = 23.63, SD = 7.96)\) groups with regard to autonomy level which confirms the homogeneity of the participants at the outset of the study.

To investigate the effect of study treatment, the participants’ autonomy was assessed in posttests via t-test analysis. Table 2 shows the results for this analysis.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Groups</th>
<th>N</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Exp.</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>34.46</td>
<td>6.51</td>
<td>2.71</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>.00</td>
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<tr>
<td>Cont.</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>26.18</td>
<td>7.09</td>
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As the results of Table 2 show, there is a statistically significant difference \(t(38) = 2.71, p = .00\] between experimental \((M = 34.46, SD = 6.51)\) and control \((M = 26.18, SD = 7.09)\) group. This difference indicates that the participants in experimental group outperformed those in control group revealing the effect of using dictionary tasks. Therefore, the first null hypothesis that using dictionary tasks has no significant effect on EFL learners’ autonomy is rejected.

To measure the effect of using dictionary tasks on the participants’ vocabulary learning, the researcher analyzed the data employing independent t-test. Tables 3 and 4 show the results for these analyses.

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Groups</th>
<th>N</th>
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TABLE 3:
RESULTS OF T-TEST ANALYSIS FOR VOCABULARY LEARNING (PRETEST)
As the results of Table 3 show, there is no statistically significant difference \[t (58) = .58, p = .21\] between experimental (M = 25.66, SD = 6.93) and control (M = 25.39, SD = 7.17) groups with regard to vocabulary learning which confirms the homogeneity of the participants at the outset of the study.

To investigate the effect of study treatment, the participants’ learning vocabulary was assessed in the posttest via t-test analysis. Table 4 shows the results for this analysis.

**TABLE 4: RESULTS OF T-TEST ANALYSIS FOR VOCABULARY LEARNING (POSTTEST)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Groups</th>
<th>N</th>
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<th>SD</th>
<th>t</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>P</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Exp.</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>37.33</td>
<td>6.23</td>
<td>1.76</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cont.</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>32.16</td>
<td>6.82</td>
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</table>

As the results of Table 3 show, there is a statistically significant difference \[t (58) = 1.76, p = .00\] between experimental (M = 37.33, SD = 6.23) and control (M = 32.16, SD = 6.82) group. This difference indicates that the participants in experimental group outperformed those in control group revealing the effect of using dictionary tasks. Therefore, the second null hypothesis that using dictionary tasks has no significant effect on EFL learners’ permanent vocabulary learning is also rejected.

**Conclusion**

As the findings of this study demonstrate, the technique of using new dictionary tasks in classrooms can enhance the learners’ autonomy level. The results also proved that being exposed to different aspects of words in a word group has significant effect on EFL learners’ vocabulary learning. It showed that learners’ autonomy and vocabulary learning in a second or foreign language can depend on their amount of exposure to written forms of a word beside the other words and derivations. Meanwhile, the results of the present study indicated that the participants’ sentence and grammar knowledge can also be improved by this technique because the researchers considered several factors and criteria in testing items and scoring procedures related to grammatical points.

In addition, the results indicated that to achieve a better performance in a well-known issue like vocabulary learning and psychological factor like autonomy, the objects and facilities that seem to be out dated can be useful and beneficial as well. This point can be hope-giving for those who are suffering lack of facilities and new technologies at their schools and classrooms.

Besides, the findings of this study may have some hints for English language teachers, educators and also the learners. It can be beneficial for teachers who are searching for effective ways of improving the learners’ autonomy and lexical acquisition. They can apply this technique to teach, practice, and enhance such abilities of their learners. It is also helpful for learners who are seeking for cheap and available techniques of improving their vocabulary size. It is cheap because there is no need to new technologies such as mobile, computer, data projection, etc. It requires just a small dictionary. It is also available everywhere and easy to carry and use.

**References**


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