Vocabulary Acquisition and Vocabulary Assessment of Young Iranian EFL Learners

Fatemeh Mollaei *

Islamic Azad University, Shiraz Branch, Iran

Mohammad Sadegh Bagheri

English Department, Faculty of Humanities, Islamic Azad University, Shiraz Branch, Iran

Abstract

This study aimed at investigating the vocabulary acquisition and vocabulary assessment of young Iranian leaners studying English as a foreign language. It discusses the issues and factors tied to vocabulary acquisition and assessment through observation and instruction. To this end, students' performance as well as their achievements were required to be assessed. Researchers selected the most appropriate instrument, a teacher-created test, and observed the classroom dynamics as well as the students' feedback each session. The participants including sixty seven boys and girls (male= 35, and female = 32) aged 9-10 were all native speakers of Persian language and were studying English in three branches of an English Language Institute of the city of Shiraz. Descriptive statistics and independent sample t-test were administered to analyze the test results. According to the results obtained from the quantitative data, there was no significant difference between boys and girls performance in regards with vocabulary acquisition. Further, oral and written assessments were recognized as the most proper testing methods for young Iranian EFL learners.

Keywords: vocabulary acquisition, oral assessment, written assessment

INTRODUCTION

Many learners consider the second language acquisition as essentially a matter of learning vocabulary, thus they devote a great deal of time to memorizing lists of L2 words and resort to their bilingual dictionary as a basic communicative resource. Additionally, after a lengthy period of being preoccupied with the development of grammatical competence, applied linguistic scholars and language teachers identify the significance of vocabulary learning and are exploring methods of promoting it more efficiently. From different viewpoints, vocabulary can be regarded as a priority area in language teaching; requiring tests to follow the learners' progress in vocabulary learning; to assess how sufficient their vocabulary knowledge is to fulfill their communication needs.

Vocabulary acquisition is taken into account for science understanding, since the majority of concepts and terms in science are specific to a certain discipline or field and are not used in casual conversation. In this vein, Snow (2008) maintains those concepts used in everyday language are occasionally employed in ways that are not scientifically proper. Students need to involve in a variety of explicit vocabulary acquisition activities to get acquainted with such a great number of new words and concepts. 95%- 98% of the words in science text need to be familiar in order for a reader to imply the meaning of new words.

Teaching vocabulary has lately become one of the common research subjects in English language studies. Nam (2010) believed that vocabulary encourages the students to improve the four basic language skills as listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Hence, teaching vocabulary through efficient methods performs a crucial role in a foreign or second language acquisition. These days, the academics are comparing the previous methods of teaching vocabulary with the latest ones to seek for more effective ways. One of these popular comparisons has been made in the context of representing a new vocabulary item in semantically related (SR) and semantically unrelated (SUR) sets. According to Mirjalili, Jabbari, and Rezai (2012) definition, semantically related sets are words which have identical semantic and syntactic characteristics grouped under a common term (e.g. flower names) and semantically unrelated sets are the words which do not share the same semantic and syntactic characteristics and are not come with any concept.

On the other hand, vocabulary acquisition and assessment are considered as the basic principle in the instruction of English as a second language. Although, it is liable to errors, teachers find assessing the students' vocabulary proficiency time-consuming and repetitious work. Assessment for young learners reflects and assists their learning, motivates them to build their confidence, allows leaners to achieve success and takes place over time (Shin & Crandall, 2014).

In some aspects, vocabulary testing is considered as a simple activity; a subject of selecting an appropriate number of target words and assessing whether each one is known through a developed test format such as multiple-choice, matching, gap-filling, or some forms of translation. Such tests continue to be regularly carried out in foreign/second languages teaching for a range of assessment goals and, if well designed, can be highly reliable and effective gauges of learner competence. However, since the past thirty years, the dominance of the communicative approach to language teaching has been resulted in various challenges to the validity of the conventional vocabulary test and this has prompted some rethinking of the nature of lexical ability as well as how it can best be assessed. The most comprehensive discussion of the matters may be found in Read's (2000) book on vocabulary assessment. Generally speaking, the best assessment is one that serves as a true picture of the number of words a person knows and an understanding how the individual's abilities can identify the meaning of the word from context clues.

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Vocabulary, or word knowledge, is regarded as an essential element in school success for many reasons. Vocabulary is greatly corresponded with content-area success; poor vocabulary knowledge adversely affects a student's ability to fully take part in classroom activities and conversations. Students with weaknesses in vocabularies find understanding much of the oral and written language difficult, i.e. they fail to process new words within the rapid flow of classroom conversation.

In normal course of language use, words fail to occur by themselves or in isolated sentences but as integrated elements of entire texts and discourse. They belong to specific textbooks, conversations, stories, jokes, letters, legal proceedings, newspaper advertisements, etc. The way a word may be interpreted is substantially influenced by the context in which it occurs. In communication situations, it is quite possible to compensate for apparent paucity of specific words knowledge. Some words can be disregarded, while the meaning of others can be guessed by means of background knowledge of the subject matter, contextual clues, and so on. Provided that learners associate the words with their background knowledge in a meaningful network, they will remember and retrieve new vocabulary items more easily. In other words, activating background knowledge and developing associations are essential to the successful development of word knowledge. Listeners may apply different kinds of strategies, ask for repetition, seek clarification, and check whether they have interpreted the message accurately.

Word knowledge is multidimensional. Having known the word meaning requires the phonological form (sounds, syllables), morphological form (prefix, root, and suffix), spelling, the role which the word plays in sentences, and the linguistic history or etymology. Teachers have to take into account all these dimensions through explicit vocabulary instruction in order for enhancing students' vocabulary growth. However, vocabulary is essential to knowledge acquisition and development of thought. Students with expanded words knowledge develop more abstract language to classify new terms and concepts. They often lose ideas without labels provided by words, because they have no systematic labels to file newly learned concepts. This is particularly true in content areas such as science, social studies, and math.

At first glance, it seems reasonable to assume that assessing the vocabulary knowledge of the second language learners is necessary and straightforward. In a sense that words are the fundamental building blocks of language; the units of meaning from which larger structures like sentences, paragraphs and texts are developed. To native speakers, though the most rapid growth occurs in childhood, vocabulary knowledge resumes to be acquired naturally in adult life in response to new concepts, experiences, social trends, inventions, and opportunities for learning. On the contrary, for learners vocabulary acquisition is normally a more deliberating and demanding process. Even at an advanced level, learners are conscious about limitations in their knowledge of the second language or L2 words.

Different parties including teachers, students, administrators, policy makers, and parents may raise concerns for educational assessment (Sidhu, Chan & Sidhu, 2011). In this respect, Teasdale and Leung (2000) maintain that policy makers define assessment as standards to monitor the quality of education; administrators benefit assessment to monitor the strengths and weaknesses of an educational program, while teachers view assessment as a medium to test students' progress and performance. In addition, parents regard assessment as a form of feedback on their child's achievements and as an indicator of the school's accountability for efficient teaching and learning. Students also consider assessment as an evidence of their ongoing performance and progress.

In this sense, the assessment system not only impacts teaching and learning but it does affect the society in general. Hence, new approaches to assessment are definitely required for educational reform. The most appropriate testing method to assess proficiency in vocabulary and grammar is within the context of assessing oral or written language skills, where students reflect their ability to comprehend or employ English vocabulary and grammar in meaningful ways (Shin & Crandall, 2014). Hughes (2003) claim that because vocabulary covers a large portion of what teachers teach young learners, it needs to be assessed through some activities such as matching pictures with words, unscrambling words, labeling pictures, sorting words by content, completing word puzzles, and providing missing letters in words. Indeed, there are common mechanisms in vocabulary assessment: a) teacher-created tests, b) observational data, i.e. what can be inferred of the persons' vocabulary via having a conversation with them, c) vocabulary games, and d) standardized tests.

McKay (2006) believes that students can be demanded to self-assess or report their own English vocabulary development. Toward this end, they can keep a vocabulary notebook, write down new words they encounter and show whether they have seen the word before (Shin & Crandall, 2014). Further, they can be asked to hand over their vocabulary notebooks and mark their own progress when they have learnt what a word means or can use it in a sentence. However, scholars in the field of language testing have a rather different perspective on vocabulary-test items of the conventional kind. Such items fit neatly into what language testers call the discrete point approach to testing. This involves designing tests to assess whether learners possess the knowledge of particular structural elements of the language including word forms, word meanings, sentence patterns, sound contrasts, etc. In the last thirty years of the twentieth century, language testers progressively moved away from this approach, to the extent that such tests are now quite out of step with current thinking about how to design language tests, especially for proficiency assessment.

One of the concerns in teaching disciplinary vocabulary is the lack of available, classroom-friendly assessment of vocabulary that may be used to measure students' vocabulary growth and to inform vocabulary instruction (Stahl & Bravo, 2010). Stahl and Bravo (2010) state that discrete-embedded, selective-comprehensive, and context-independent and context-dependent can be applied to classroom-based vocabulary assessments in the content areas.

Teachers and professional practitioners can test student vocabulary knowledge and growth via various informal assessments. Sometimes teachers intend to employ quick assessment method for testing their students' abilities in associating a new word with a synonym or general meaning. In doing this, short teacher-made tests may work. Teacher-constructed tests can take many forms and generally test recognition - the ability to select an appropriate answer- rather than the more difficult recall - the ability to offer a word from memory. Typical teacher-created tests are sorts of recall assessments that require defining a word by:

1. Giving/choosing a definition
2. Giving/choosing a synonym
3. Giving/choosing an opposite
4. Giving/choosing a classification
5. Giving/choosing a picture
6. Giving/choosing examples
7. Giving/choosing an explanation of how something is used.
8. Giving/choosing a word to complete a context

Other effective testing methods for gauging vocabulary acquisition are oral assessment and written assessment. Writing assessment was initiated as a classroom practice during the first two decades of the 20th century, whilst high-stakes and standardized tests also appeared at this time. During the 1930s, the attitudes of assessment shifted from using direct writing assessment to indirect assessment since those tests were more cost-effective and were believed to be more reliable. Indirect writing assessments usually involve multiple choice tests on vocabulary, grammar, and usage.

Assessing vocabulary through writing is a method to calculate the number of mature words - words containing eight or more letters - a student used in a timed writing sample, even if the word was misspelled, in response to a specific prompt. In this respect, the teacher provides a uniform writing prompt, teach students to think about the prompt for one minute, and gives three minutes to students for writing. Although, offering students a special writing prompt may not evaluate the entire depth of their writing skills.

The major focus of assessing young learners' achievements is associated to their oral language progress. Assessing vocabulary through speaking is another informal way to assess vocabulary. Teachers can appraise students' performance in oral language. Even after children have developed some literacy in English, oral language assessment is still significant since much of children's language learning includes interacting with others orally (Shin & Crandall, 2014).

METHOD

Design

The present study was conducted within an instruction and then a test in which the collected data was analyzed both qualitatively and quantitatively. There were two independent variables: school boys and school girls.

Subjects

The participants were sixty-seven (N=67) male and female young learners studying at three branches of English Language Institutes in the city of Shiraz and were given the same teaching procedure. The participants, aged 9-10, were all native speakers of Persian who were learning English for the first time. They were selected through convenient sampling and from different intact classes and were assigned into two groups: 35 male and 32 female learners.

Instrumentation

Quantitative and qualitative approaches were administered in this study. A teacher-made test and an observation were used as the means of measuring the learner's vocabulary acquisition. A teacher-designed test was in the form of dictation (written task) including some pictures in which the students were asked to write the name of each word below the picture or guess the first letter of each word and then circle that letter. The pictures were extracted from the book called "First Friend 1" taught in the institutes. The words were covered during 20 sessions lasted a term in parallel with the procedure of teaching. To further identify which assessment was appropriate for vocabulary acquisition, the teacher observed the class.

Research Questions and Hypothesis

1. To what extent, is there any significant difference between Iranian young male and female learners in terms of their vocabulary acquisition?
2. What kind of assessment is appropriate for Iranian EFL young learners?

Hypothesis: Oral assessment and written assessment considered as the most appropriate tools to appraise Iranian young learners.

Data Collection Procedures

The performance of elementary students in vocabulary acquisition was examined in this study. They were studying the book "First Friend 1" consisted of mainly vocabularies and some basic but simple structures. The book was taught in 20 sessions, each lasted 90 minutes, through flashcards and songs based on the teaching procedure in the institute. Each session they learned about 7 words, spelled it chorally and individually, played games with flashcards, wrote words down in their notebooks both in class and as assignments for home, and did their workbooks. At the end of each session they had enough time to work on the new words and then had a board dictation or filling the blanks to foster their acquisition. Then their workbooks were checked and corrected. The teacher also asked the students to practice and write their mistakes again as well as checking and rating their notebooks. The written assignment and oral practice were established to work on words for better acquisition. Meanwhile, each session a dictation was taken to review the taught materials and further was practiced in case of any problems. At the end of the term - a session before final exam - a test was made to assess the students' acquisition progress as well as practice and review the problematic items

so that the highly problematic items were recognized and could be solved before their final exam.

Scoring Rubrics

Each and every learner's paper was scored in terms of the dictation and first letter guessing. For each mistake, one mark was reduced and the total scores were calculated out of twenty. The teacher was liable to rate the papers. It is worth to mention that the teacher has been teaching kids in EFL Institutes of Shiraz for 12 years.

Data Analysis

First, descriptive statistics was run. The data was subjected to the SPSS software (version 16) to calculate mean, standard deviation, and variance. Moreover, inferential statistics such as independent sample t-tests was employed to analyze the data and to find whether the method of vocabulary acquisition instruction was effective in young EFL learners.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The following section presents the findings emerging from the teacher-constructed test and observation of the classes throughout the term.

To answer the first research question independent-sample t-test was used to compare the mean between male and female young leaners and determine the significant difference of their acquisition of vocabulary. As it can been seen in table 1, the mean for males was 16.44 and for females was 17.48 respectively. Therefore, there was no significant difference between young boys and girls performance in vocabulary acquisition. The results reveal that young learners are similar to one another in a foreign or second language acquisition no matter which gender they have.

Table 1. Mean and Standard Deviation of Boys and Girls Performance

	groups	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
			Group Statistics		
Score	Male	35	16.4429	3.06251	.51766
	Female	32	17.4844	2.55420	.45152

Table 2. Independent t-test for Determining the Difference between Boys and Girls Performance

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means					95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	Lower	Upper
score	Equal variances assumed	2.713	.104	-1.504	65	.137	-1.04152	.69254	-2.42461	.34158
	Equal variances not assumed			-1.516	64.480	.134	-1.04152	.68691	-2.41358	.33054

To answer the second question, researchers concerned with the testing method appropriate for Iranian young EFL learners. In doing this, they observed the young leaners' performance in the class during the term and regarded their experience of professional development. They hence noticed that students in the first grade learned vocabularies earlier and easier comparing to grammar. They find using a single word was more convenient than putting them in an order of making a sentence.

As Teasdale and Leung (2000) state, assessment is considered as an efficient way to check the quality of acquisition to find learners' powers and flaws. Whereas, this study is in favor of investigating vocabulary acquisition and vocabulary assessment of young learners, it recognized two types of oral and written assessments proper in terms of Iranian educational settings and facilities in the English Language institutes.

Young learners performed better in oral skill than the written one, i.e. they instantly produce and write the words seeing for the first time. Children take learning smaller words with one syllable easier than the multi-syllable words and they can memorize vocabularies with more frequency. They also give more attention to the pictures and spell a single word written under them. In other words, young learners remember and respond to the words orally rather than their written form.

At the beginning of each session, a dictation was taken as a written assessment to test learners' acquisition, then each students read their book, played the conversation and spelled the new vocabularies for their oral assessment. Following that, teacher started teaching new lesson by repeating the new words chorally and individually, students then listened to the audio and read the new words. At the end of each session they had to jot new words down in their notebooks as well as writing some samples for their homework.

Many researchers have revealed that females tend to outperform males on verbal memory tasks, whilst males incline to show superior performance to females on visuospatial tasks (e.g. Herlitz, Lovén, Thilers, & Rehnman, 2010; Herlitz & Rehnman,

2008; de Frias, Nilsson, & Herlitz, 2006; Lewin, Wolgers, & Herlitz, 2001; Herlitz, Nilsson, & Bäckman, 1997). De Frias, Nilsson, and Herlitz (2006) claimed that gender differences in verbal fluency, episodic memory, and visuospatial functioning are constant over a 10-year period. As these differences are of similar magnitude for the 35-year olds and the 85-year olds so that age does not moderate sex differences in cognitive abilities.

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATION OF THE STUDY

To conclude this study, not only the words are the easiest elements of the language but also they are the most essential elements of sentence making and paragraph writing. Therefore, concentration on vocabulary acquisition is one of the most critical processes of learning and teachers have to dedicate enough time to take it into account effectively. According to the professional development and class observations during a term (about 20 sessions), oral and written assessments are the most appropriate methods to find the difficulty of the vocabulary acquisition of Iranian young learners.

In this vein, Hughes' idea (2005) confirms the results of this study which is based on learners' assessment through different methods such as matching and labeling the pictures, the applied methods in this research.

This study may have two implications: qualitative and quantitative. The qualitative was the teacher-created test that implied no difference between the genders in vocabulary acquisition. And the quantitative one which was the observation in line with many other researchers in this field. This study may help other teachers use different ways for testing learners' acquisition, particularly written and oral assessments.

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

Some factors imposing limitations upon the present study are going to be enumerated as the following. The first limitation is that only three institutes were examined as to investigate the full performance and success of young learners in vocabulary acquisition future research is required. In addition, for time considerations, a short term observation was administered and a small number of English language institutes were examined. If the researchers had not been pressed for time, they could have tested a greater number of students from various institutes which would increase the accuracy of the obtained results.

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