



Vocabulary Plight in Foreign Language Proficiency: The Receptive Skills as a Source

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Abstract

The present paper lays down the perennial importance of the receptive skills as the most appropriate source for the growth of foreign language vocabulary. Supported by many foreign language acquisition (henceforth, FLA) researchers, any language input should come, first, at EFL learners' capacity to read and listen with certain easiness to comprehend and work out the meaning to gain confidence and set motivation. In due course, First year EFL students are presenting the sample population being subject to a language proficiency test. This typical taking-part study intervenes with two groups: '*the experimental*' group receiving the special treatment; and '*the control*' group- whose role is to provide a baseline for comparison and contrast. This intervention design engenders a practical issue through which the researcher attests the necessity to expose EFL learners, explicitly, to the foreign language in its manifold (spoken written, literary, prosodic...) aspects with large and varied forms. Supposedly, learners, in that context and with such intervention remedy, are likely to acquire the target foreign language favorably. So, EFL learners, in reality, could do with the mastery of that language only by reading and/or listening to texts or messages intensively. The results, after the intervention, showed better scores among the experimental group compared to the other (control) group. In fact, the premise that vocabulary could be better attained through the receptive skills was confirmed.

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1. Introduction

The plight of vocabulary acquisition and its perennial importance in second and/or foreign language learning has expanded more and more in different research outcomes. In this research paper, we will not go into fastidious terminology about foreign or second language discrepancies, but in due occasion, we will exhibit related similarity and/or disparity when referring to the status of each term according to the target community (Benrabah, 2015). Hence, steadily, Foreign Language Acquisition (henceforth, FLA) researchers have come to bear out the vital part of the lexical breadth for easy language use and usage. In the same line of thought, Ellis (1997) has exposed the idea that vocabulary comprehension is indispensable to acquire grammar. That is to say, knowing the words in a text allows learners to recognize the discourse, which in turn allows the grammatical model to develop into more apparent schemes. In this sense too, Nation (2001) underlines the significant weight of developing a satisfactory lexical strategy because learners' skills when using the language seem to be tributary to the amount of words they have at their disposal. He adds that a methodical, principled approach to vocabulary expansion equips learners with better language learning.

It is undeniable that developing lexical proficiency in the target language is now seen as the central feature in language acquirement and there is common harmony that there is an acceptable vocabulary level below which learners are likely to resist when decoding the input they are given (Alderson & Banerjee 2002). In this sense, the crucial formula in this research paper is to officially state the significance of the receptive skills as the main suppliers of vocabulary needed to seize, decode and appreciate the input provided through texts in reading or listening activities in and outside language classrooms.

Yet, the preliminary footstep is to instruct EFL learners from an early stage to deal with discourse (written and/or oral) which is, in essence, at their faculty of conception first to generate a motivational position. Subsequently, supplementary steps will pursue with more complicated matters counting difficult vocabulary items since self-assurance has been established, enthusiasm felt and full engagement set among EFL learners.

2. Methodology

Current investigations in language learning-teaching do assert that for the mastery of a particular second/foreign language, we need to guarantee the involvement of receptive as well as productive skills altogether to surround the proficiency in that language. This tendency concedes the verity that the two repertoires should, therefore, be recognized through respectively receptive, then productive reasonable succession (Nation, 2001). Equally, teachers' vision about learners' attitude towards English learning in our (middle and secondary) schools has altered to a great extent. Teachers' view was set on the facts that pupils have gone through recurring unacceptable fallout in written specifically in official exams. Concerning the spoken form of the (English) language, learners at this level of education are not tested and the oral form of the language remains forgotten. In the present days, however, EFL learners have had a rather positive attitude towards the learning of foreign languages in general and English in particular. The reason behind is that English is a chief subject matter in the syllabus emphasized by numerous facts. First, English has been allocated a coefficient of two (2), three (3) and five (5) respectively for '*scientific streams*', '*literature and philosophy stream*' and '*foreign languages stream*' in the secondary school education. As a result, some progress in the 'Baccalaureate exam' has been noticed screening the effect of high coefficient application. Second, the new coefficient attribution shaped motivation in the learners who are, now, engaging even for private

courses to get better their level and seeking to ameliorate not only their grades in the 'baccalaureate exam', but improve their language proficiency within a really-felt academic interest for English.

In like manner, the motivated EFL learners call for more-oriented pedagogy in the direction of increasing additional sessions of reading and listening. For them it constitutes an add-on source of input. For that reason, a planned, well-to-do and lucid input from the start of first-year university stage should be bound for EFL learners so as to assist them build up sufficient useful vocabulary to arrive at understanding both written and oral passages.

From a pure linguistic point of view, complex texts do not persuade students to listen and read and may, even, build up dissatisfaction and demotivation. As a result, for developing learners' motivation and attention, it is crucial to provide content (topic), its structure (layout) and the necessary included vocabulary (meaning) at the reach of listeners and readers. Such procedure will help acquire vocabulary successfully by excelling conception, communication and literacy skills. Nonetheless, increasing vocabulary is a top main concern and an on-going defy. Truly, students, at university, are facing a considerable amount of vocabulary in a multitude of subject areas. Hitherto, due to the powerful interest on content, two (2) sorts of vocabulary are contracted in the different modules of the programme. These are, first, a wide-ranging vocabulary used mainly for communicative purposes and representing central language skills, such as: reading and listening comprehension, oral and written production. Second, a specific vocabulary representing a linguistic terminology associated with the modules of phonetics, linguistics, literature and civilization. The interface of EFL learners with varied and massive sum of vocabulary is left difficult if not impracticable caused by new content-areas with unusual vocabulary. The complexity is felt in the lack of receptive vocabulary which hampers intellectual capacity for understanding. Accordingly, developing students' receptive vocabulary should be reinforced to facilitate the understanding of listening and reading texts.

3. Research Design

The adopted tools of research in this paper include three frequent instruments: a language test, a questionnaire and an interview. The proficiency language test is represented via an original practical plan founded on the comparison of two groups of EFL learners' results. One group will be given an exceptional treatment: '*the treatment variable*' (Johnson & Christensen, 2004). This is meant to inculcate a specific experiment programme through an intervention study where one of the two groups - 'the treatment or experimental group' - will endorse a particular treatment. It (the treatment) stipulates that learners of that group exposed to a number of particular language items inserting new vocabulary learning through a diverse, comprehensible input. The second group - 'the control group' -, however, is brought into action to provide a baseline. Outstandingly, the two groups of learners are apparently analogous to each other before the treatment is applied with random selection in deed.

The following procedure has been carried out. First, the researcher would like to put Krashen's Input Hypothesis (1993) on the check-scale to see if the same principle can be adopted in the Algerian speech community where English totally embodies the status of foreign language. In this concern, the researcher tracks the core feature of the treatment during the treatment or experimental period. Certain fundamentals are then portrayed to grant evidence for the usefulness and validity of the adopted theory. Next, the endeavor of the study is to show unmistakably the underlying theory behind such intervention to achieve an acceptable aptitude in the learning of the targeted foreign language through the attainment of satisfactory amount of vocabulary to assure comprehension first.

The language proficiency tests, in this realistic intervention, represent the most important diagnostic measurements of comprehension amongst the two groups of learners. Likely, the two other tools of measurements (questionnaire and interview) will be implemented as complementary instruments to back up the findings of the language tests administered beforehand.

4. Evidence of the Study

Given that the English language embodies the status of a foreign language in the Algerian speech community, the researcher projects to fetch for support to the proposed aspiration behind the teaching of English at University level in Algeria. The procedure is meant to accomplish a threshold level of proficiency through the provision of satisfactory, wide-ranging and comprehensible or graspable language. In the same vein, Krashen's Input Hypothesis is coupled with the possibility of rendering first-year EFL learners apt to acquire a language and develop its vocabulary learning when there is enough comprehensible and varied input available regardless to the amount of output that may come out lately. In fact, this intervention study is designed to achieve this purpose.

The testees (exclusively, the experimental group) received intense, diverse and comprehensible input during a period of six weeks. That special treatment is meant to make a verdict about whether that formula would lead to any improvement in the EFL students' proficiency in the foreign language.

The conformist decision about the learners' progress is placed over a phase of study approximating six-week period needed to elaborate new teaching outcomes (Dornyei, 2007) using several measures for interpret and decipher the message of a text, be it written or spoken. These criteria are associated with vocabulary learning strategies (VLS) taught to EFL learners in the '*Meanwhile period*' to surmount the trouble of comprehending the lexis enclosed in those texts. They are supposed to bring a degree of less difficulty at the reach of first year EFL learners' level of comprehension. To be down to earth, learners are permitted to make use of diverse sources helping them analyse, work out and comprehend the complex and unusual lexical items. These sources can be displayed in using contextual clues, referencing, inferencing, linguistic and world knowledge and guessing. So, EFL learners are given enough opportunities to achieve a general understanding of the entire text in spite of insignificant and little number of unrelated vocabulary that may hinder their understanding. Including such devices would surely launch a variety of ways helping EFL

learners accomplish effectively the general idea of any proposed text. Moreover, learners' perception about what they could actually do in their pedagogical challenge with texts is ensured by a newly-set confidence to approach new tasks with unknown lexis but with a plethora of tools. To guarantee the usefulness of the given intervention study, self-reports were used to institute how they manage understanding if not all but the majority of tasks related to comprehension of the texts. In fact, the end result gathered through the interviews (self-reports) with learners, they reported that they felt an obvious evolution in their comprehension of the discourse works.

5. Investigation and Analysis

A series of instruments is used to save and collect data in the present study. This diversity of tools is meant to combine dissimilar techniques to analyse the same item. The reason behind this stratagem is that the flaws of one method are often strengths of another, and by combining methods, observers can achieve the best of each, while overcoming their unique deficiencies (Creswell 1988).

The researcher started first asking teachers via open-ended questions. The questions constituted the opening tool of research: interview. Targeted teachers where those being in charge of the receptive skills teaching modules: reading and listening. This is projected to bring forth the ways, techniques and procedures undertaken in the process of providing input in the form of written scripts (reading) or oral/verbal messages/texts (listening).

Interviews are one of the most central sources of case study information (Dorney, 2007). Interviews are guided conversations rather than structured queries (Yin, 2003, p. 89). What is more critical for the tool power is not forcing the interviewees to espouse a particular position and most outstandingly uphold a responsive and non-threatening environment. The types of questions used were mainly open-ended questions rather than those requiring straight forward yes/no

answers. The interviews have had a relaxed format and the questions were aimed at reaching both objective facts and teacher's subjective opinions.

The second tool of investigation was used to illuminate more pertinent results given that it analyzed the teaching situation before and after the administration of the newly-proposed approach. The latter offered different options *vis-à-vis* the customary and common technique where EFL learners were exposed to usual reading texts and listening passages. For this purpose, a Pre-test in language aptitude and vocabulary recovery was set to assess both 'control' and 'experimental' groups. This first-round language test was directed to 1st year EFL learners to constitute altogether an arbitrary sample of learners so as to avoid targeted selection and biased interpretation of the results. The test was set to divulge learners' aptitudes to understand input contained in reading and listening passages via a probable control and mastery of lexical items. The method of testing was conducted through trouble-free texts where the chief instruction required vocabulary recovery to achieve comprehension.

Likely, comparable questions and activities were intended for both groups in terms of length, degree of difficulty and input diversity. Then, the post-test period was piloted after 6 weeks of interval. During that (interval) period, the 'experimental' group was given intense and varied exposure to manifold sets of texts. These texts represented a multiplicity of contexts with a large range of lexical items proposed within the framework. The principle behind is to emphasize the fact that language is understood only when it is comprehensible and that we can overcome language difficulty with certain structures and some vocabulary items only through rich contexts presented continuously and gradually.

Reasonably, contexts should be varied so as to reach diversity in lexical exposure; thus, leading to breadth of vocabulary retention. If followed thoroughly with systematic gradation (from easy to difficult) and loaded (rich and wide-ranging) variety, the stratagem can easily lead learners to progress from their present level of competence to more complicated tasks. In other terms, if the input is comprehensible, varied and adequate to learners' level, they will develop automatically their capacities of working out any

texts and go beyond their initial level of understanding. This rationale is attainable if they are adequately exposed to a variety of contexts representing input a little bit beyond their initial level of understanding.

In here, they can use contextual clues, linguistic knowledge, extra-linguistic and world knowledge information and profit from their repeated experiences of reading and listening to a plethora of texts. In this vein, the proposed hypothesis has taken place during a 6 week-period, where the 'experimental' group was exposed to a great deal of comprehensible input via free voluntary, guided readings and likely in listening. It was persistently conducted in such a way to provide the 'experimental' group of learners with enough input and, most importantly in respect to comprehensibility first. Irrefutably, according to Krashen (1993), these learners will magnify their literacy and strengthen their language proficiency. They may, consequently, accomplish a level beyond the level they attained before being exposed to such technique with rich, varied and comprehensible input. Then, the 'Pre-test' results persuasively confirmed the evidence of the ability of the 'experimental' group to monitor text comprehension better than the other 'control' group since the latter did not get the same occasions provided through the variety of input.

For affirmation or negation of the awaited progress, a final and last tool of data collection (a questionnaire: a self-report) was set at the end of the intervention study. It was a sort of opinion poll addressed to those (experimental group) learners to certify their progress or simply negate. Therefore, the questionnaire required from the 'experimental' group of EFL learners to report their own experience with the new introduced programme (intervention study). They were also requested to reveal possible changes in their language proficiency compared to a 6 week-period before. The types of questions were semi-guided. So, EFL learners were asked to answer simply by 'yes' or 'no' sometimes, and other times they were invited to add on other alternatives and expand with more information in needed. Presumably, the intention behind is methodologically significant. It serves as a measurement tool to diagnose the efficiency of the

approach carried out during the period of treatment by the testees themselves.

In self-reports, respondents' responses constitute a strategy where learners themselves are implicated in the comment and in the conclusion of the study. Here, they can articulate their views and voice their opinions about the experience they went through. Relatedly, they are arguing for the validity or failure of the framework, i. e., their reports are meant to represent a 'validation interview' (Holliday, 2004). After analyses and interpretation, the reports claimed significant outcomes in language proficiency and sorted out by a noticeable progress made by the end of the intervention study. Besides, EFL learners felt endowed with a parallel engagement to go through more complex input and through different means of communication, as: academic books, television shows, documentaries, movies, radio broadcast (BBC and the like) and the ICT's diverse uses, such as: Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and others. This is the dream of the new generation of English learners.

. Therefore, if there is accord between the researcher theory and the participants' reports; then, the study's strength is reinforced. Also, respondents' corroboration can also boost 'generalizability'. Consequently, the assignment of applying such a framework can be reached by affording time and efforts. Jointly, administrative and pedagogical staffs should collaboratively work to initiate their learners into an ongoing process of readership and interest in the language in all its manifestations.

6. Conclusion

Most of the EFL students studying at the university graduation level have come to possess an acceptable aptitude in English. Their overall mastery is largely characterized by a considerable know-how of the main grammatical structures of the English language with modest written skills. On the other hand, their comprehension is tightly related to the sum of vocabulary they hold as a linguistic or background knowledge. Since they go on board with texts intended for native speakers (original input), they are facing many novel words that can be specialized terms of

particular academic fields, like phonetics, literary studies, etc, and the massive number of non-specialized words that characterize general English courses representing the mainstream modules, such as: discourse comprehension modules, oral expression and the like.

Arguably, a sequence of objective tests should be placed at early stages to first-year EFL learners to get to a desirable threshold level in terms of vocabulary possession leading to the required ability of understanding both written and spoken language. In this framework, the results of the two tests can be used to help identify areas of weakness, set learning goals, plan future vocabulary programmes, measure vocabulary growth and assign graded reading and listening.

The tests have tried to answer this question: *Is the learners' poor performance in reading and listening a result of insufficient vocabulary knowledge?*

In like manner, some EFL learners felt more anxious in concerns of understanding spoken English. The reason could be because, first, they have not been trained during their former basic education; and second, they have, by large, learned English mainly through reading. As a matter of fact, all the official national exams in middle or secondary levels are maintained through the written format and the reading skills only. Subsequently, they have not had enough contact with the spoken language in former stages of education, unless their teachers' talk in the classroom.

Likewise, EFL learners who belong to the 'experimental' group receiving intense, rich and various input of the target language have shown considerable progress in vocabulary possession and knowledge. As a result, English word-knowledge constitutes an essential aspect of discourse comprehension for all learners who wish to gain proficiency in the target language, hence English. It is, thus, important that teachers know what vocabulary knowledge their learners have and be aware of how they can systematically help them increase their lexical repertoire for further complex situations with different input. To accomplish this goal, we need to include substantial graded reading, indirect vocabulary teaching and providing a vocabulary focus in

different language activities. Actually, the post-test has allowed checking how much learners' vocabulary has developed over the six-week-treatment period. Without a doubt, cautious consideration should be forwarded towards developing vocabulary through the two receptive skills since the environment does not provide spontaneous input delivery in the target language.

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