

Impact of Vocabulary Acquisition Techniques on Students' Learning.

Case of First Year English Language Students at Sétif

**تأثير تقنيات اكتساب المفردات على تعلم الطلاب.
حالة طلاب السنة الأولى في اللغة الإنجليزية بجامعة سطيف 02**

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Abstract:

Vocabulary plays an essential role in teaching English as a foreign language. This study aims at determining how the vocabulary acquisition techniques affect the vocabulary ability of first-year students at Sétif 2 University and investigate their attitudes towards the techniques of instruction. The research study was one-group pretest and post-test design. The instruments employed were in-class exercises regarding an analysis of word structures and context clues, a vocabulary proficiency test, as well as a questionnaire surveying the students' opinions toward the instruction. The pretest and post-test results were calculated for descriptive statistics. The study revealed that the students' post-test results were higher than their pretest results. The results of the questionnaire also illustrated their very favorable attitude toward the instruction of vocabulary acquisition techniques as a whole.

Keywords: vocabulary, learning, teaching, techniques, advanced students.

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الملخص:

تلعب المفردات دورًا أساسيًا في اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية، حيث تهدف هذه الدراسة إلى تحديد كيفية تأثير تقنيات اكتساب المفردات على قدرة المفردات لطلاب السنة الأولى في جامعة سطيف واستكشاف توجهاتهم تجاه تدريس التقنيات. اعتمدت الدراسة البحثية على تصميم مجموعة واحدة من الاختبار القبلي والاختبار البعدي. كانت الأدوات المستخدمة عبارة عن تمارين داخل الفصل فيما يتعلق بتحليل بنيات الكلمات ومفاهيم السياق، واختبار إجادة المفردات، بالإضافة إلى استبيان يستقصي آراء الطالب تجاه التعليمات. تم حساب نتائج الاختبار القبلي والاختبار البعدي من أجل الإحصائيات الوصفية. وكشفت الدراسة أن نتائج الاختبار البعدي للطلبة كانت أعلى من نتائج الاختبار القبلي. كما أوضحت نتائج الاستبيان موقفهم الإيجابي تجاه تعليم تقنيات اكتساب المفردات ككل.

الكلمات المفتاحية: المفردات، التعلم، التدريس، التقنيات، الطلاب المتقدمون.

1. Introduction

It is generally assumed that language learners who have a good command of vocabulary will speak more confidently, will write well, will listen at ease, and will read and understand quicker than those who lack vocabulary. Therefore, when learning a language, including English, the importance of mastering its vocabulary is unquestionable. In other words, mastering vocabulary is very significant for learners who learn English as a foreign language since this can support them in speaking, writing, listening, and reading.

Nowadays students are required more often to tackle complex texts. However, they often lack the fundamental vocabulary for success in learning content-area subjects and reading academic texts. Vocabulary development is imperative to reading comprehension. Without proper vocabulary-based teaching, students' vocabulary slit may broaden with each passing year. Therefore, one of the biggest challenges to teachers in every classroom is to make sure that students acquire the appropriate vocabulary skills to succeed.

As learners of English as a foreign language, Algerian students, like all other students around the world, have to overcome quite a lot of obstacles, not the least of which is vocabulary. In fact, for many students, vocabulary poses the greatest threat of all. Students cannot get their messages across because they do not possess adequate vocabulary to make what they want to convey understandable to others.

Undergraduate students of English language at Mohamed Lamine Debaghine Sétif 02 University, in different classes and at different levels

have dissimilar ranks of language proficiency. During their first year, the freshmen are in a big trouble when they are assigned to read more in English. A limited vocabulary makes them encounter the problem of text comprehension. If they have more vocabulary knowledge, they are likely to be more successful in their learning. Accordingly, providing students with more vocabulary is the most appropriate method to help them improve their English vocabulary skill. The researcher believes that for most students any one particular technique of learning vocabulary may not prove efficient enough. A combination of certain techniques might enable students to better acquire and retain words unknown to them. Therefore, this research was conducted to investigate the impacts of vocabulary acquisition techniques on students' vocabulary knowledge as well as to explore their attitudes towards using those techniques.

2. Research Questions

This study seeks to answer the following questions:

- To what extent did the selected vocabulary acquisition techniques contribute to English language students' improvement of their vocabulary acquisition?
- What are their attitudes towards teaching these techniques as a whole?

3. Methodology :

3.1. Research Design :

The population of the present study consisted of 35 first year students at the department of English language and literature, at Mohamed Lamine Debaghine Sétif 02 University. The data were collected during the first semester of the academic year 2019.

3.2. Instruments

This study employed the following instruments:

- A pretest and a post-test,
 - Exercises for vocabulary acquisition,
- And;
- A questionnaire for gathering information about the students' attitudes towards the instruction of in-class vocabulary acquisition techniques.

4. The Teaching of Vocabulary

Today it is commonly accepted that vocabulary teaching should be part of the curriculum, and taught in a well-planned and regular basis. Some authors, led by Lewis (1993) argue that vocabulary should be at the centre of language teaching, because language consists of grammaticalized lexis, not lexicalised grammar. Numerous aspects of lexis need to be taken into account when teaching vocabulary. The following table lists those aspects according to the work of Gairns and Redman (1986):

<i>Aspects</i>	<i>Definitions</i>	<i>Examples</i>
<i>Boundaries between conceptual meanings</i>	Knowing not only what lexis refers to, but also where the boundaries are that separate it from words of related meaning.	Cup, mug, bowl
<i>Polysemy</i>	Distinguishing between the various meaning of a single word form with several and closely related meanings	Head: of a person Head of a pin Head of an organisation
<i>Homonymy</i>	Distinguishing between the various meaning of a single word form which has anumber of meanings which are not closely related	Accept: to receive – Except: excluding Affect: to influence - Effect: result Aid: to assist – Aide: assistant Air: stuff we breath – Heir: one who will inherit
<i>Homophony</i>	Understanding words that have the same pronunciation but different spellings and meanings	Flour, flower

Synonymy	Distinguishing between the different shades of meaning that synonymous words have	Extend, increase, expand
Affective meaning	Distinguishing between the attitudinal and emotional factors (denotation and connotation), which depend on the speakers attitude or the situation. Socio-cultural associations of lexical items is another important factor	
Style, register, dialect	Being able to distinguish between different levels of formality, the effect of different contexts and topics, as well as differences in geographical variation.	
Translation	Awareness of certain differences and similarities between the native and the foreign language	
Chunks of language	Multi-word verbs, idioms, strong and weak collocations, lexical phrases.	
Grammar of vocabulary	Learning the rules that enable students to build up different forms of the word or even different words from that word	Sleep, slept, sleeping; able, unable; disability
Pronunciation	Ability to recognise and reproduce items in speech.	

The implication of these aspects in teaching is that the objectives of vocabulary teaching must be more than simply covering a certain number of words on a word list. We must use teaching techniques that can help realise this global concept of what it means to know a lexical item. Moreover, we must go beyond that, giving learners opportunities to use the items learnt and helping them to use effective written storage systems.

4.1. Main Techniques of Vocabulary Acquisition

There are two elementary teaching techniques most closely associated with vocabulary acquisition: explicit teaching and inferred teaching. Explicit teaching involves directing students' attention toward a specific learning in a highly structured environment. Explicit instructions begin with setting the stage for learning, followed by an

explanation of what to do, and then students are shown what to do by the teacher, which is followed by multiple opportunities of practice. One of the most characteristic features of explicit teaching is teachers thinking aloud while presenting the process of problem-solving to their students (Schmitt and McCarthy 1997: 239).

Inference is completely a different technique. This method revolves around the ability to deduce the meaning and situation correctly based on the previous knowledge the students possess, i.e. inference from the context. Examples of a task focused on inference can be, find 10 ways to say shut the window! (Schmitt & McCarthy 1997, p. 228).

4.2. Vocabulary Acquisition Techniques Instruction

Although there were many useful strategies and methods employed in previous research to develop students' vocabulary learning, this study aims at preparing students with encountering new words from various sources. Students need to learn techniques for finding the meaning of vocabulary based on two main types. The first one is called an analysis of word structures concerning roots, prefixes, suffixes, and compound words. The latter was an analysis of context clues where readers can guess the meaning from five ways: definition, restatement, comparison, contrast, example, and synonym.

4.3. Word Structure Analysis

Word structure analysis is the process of breaking words down into their basic parts to determine word meaning. In other words, it is just what it sounds like: using the structure, or parts of a word to figure out the meaning of the word. Word parts help students understand and remember the meaning of a word. When using word structure analysis in reading, the students break words down into their basic parts: prefixes, roots, and suffixes.

There are many advantages of word structure analysis, such as letting the students confirm the educated guess by making use of the context. Word structure analysis is really a powerful vocabulary tool since knowledge of a few word parts can give students clues to the meanings of a large number of words. Although the meaning suggested by the word parts may not be exact, this process can often help students understand the word well enough that you can continue reading without significant interruption.

When students encounter unfamiliar words, analyzing word structure can prove an effective way to find their meanings. Pittman (2003) affirms that by slowly and steadily studying the most prominent prefixes, roots, and suffixes, students can acquire a vocabulary that is far greater than the sum of its parts. When students analyze a word structure, they break the word into smaller parts or components, which may give a hint of what the word means.

According to Nagy and others (1992), structural analysis can most easily be defined as the use of word parts to help determine the meaning and pronunciation of words. They also estimate that there are as many as 60 % of English words whose meanings can be guessed from their parts. Nagy, Osborn, Winsor, and O'Flahavan go on to say that word structural analysis (1) may also play an important role in remembering the form of new words, (2) may also help students remember the meanings of words, even in cases where the meanings of the parts are not sufficient to reveal the meaning of the whole, (3) can also help with decoding and spelling even when it does not help with meaning, and (4) also benefits readers by allowing them to recognize words more efficiently.

4.4. Analysis with Context Clues

The use of context clues plays a vital role in language acquisition. Actually, most of students' vocabulary acquisition may be attributable to using context clues. Context clues are "the clearly stated or implied words or phrases which help to comprehend unfamiliar words in context because they can activate the corresponding context to clarify the contextual meanings of the words concerned" (Sun & Zhou, 2005, p.49). Context clues are divided into quite a few types depending on various criteria and individuals. Definition, restatement, comparison and contrast are but a few examples.

Yang (2009) concludes in a research that (1) college English teachers should keep the students better informed of the significance and specific functioning of context clues in contextual guessing, and (2) college English teachers should encourage the students to guess word meanings from context instead of inhibiting it when there are adequate context clues offered. However, since a word may have several meanings, the use of context clues will prove effective only when a general meaning of a word is adequate. When the surrounding words are not familiar, when the definite meaning is required, or when the word in

question is a key word, using context clues might not be a good idea. A dictionary should be consulted.

5. Procedure :

At the beginning of the semester, the students were required to do the 50-question pretest. Testing them on vocabulary usage deemed necessary for first-year students within the time allotted (30 minutes). Each student's performance was recorded in terms of points. The pre-test score was used to divide the students into three groups, namely high-, intermediate-, and low-proficiency groups.

The range of the "high" group was higher than 30 right answers, while the range of the "intermediate" group fell between 20-29. The range of the "low" group was lower than 20. Then for the next ten weeks, they were taught and drilled in the various techniques of vocabulary acquisition-roots, prefixes, suffixes, compound words, definition, restatement, comparison, contrast, example, and synonym.

Detailed explanations were given and exercises were assigned and finished in class. After that, the students were given the post-test. The scores from both tests were compared as a way to learn whether and to what extent the vocabulary acquisition techniques affected on their vocabulary capabilities as well as to find out the significant differences. To examine whether the instruction affected all three groups of proficiency, pre-and post-scores were taken to be analyzed. Furthermore, in order to learn what the students thought about and how they viewed the in-class vocabulary activities, they were asked to answer a questionnaire after the post-test. The questionnaire aimed at finding out their opinions about the content, activities, and benefits.

6. Results :

The data obtained from the pre-test/post-test and questionnaires were analyzed for frequency, percentage, mean scores and paired samples t-test. The results were used to answer the research questions.

▪ Research Question 1 :

Table 1 shows that the mean score of the post-test was higher than that of the pretest. As showed by the major difference, it clearly illustrates that the various techniques of vocabulary acquisition studied in class proved rather effective.

Table 1: The results Obtained from Pre-test and Post-test Shown in Three Groups

		<i>Students</i>	<i>Right answers</i>	<i>Difference</i>
<i>Pretest</i>	35	High	8	
		Intermediate	16	
		Low	11	
<i>Post-test</i>	35	High	22	+14
		Intermediate	9	-7
		Low	4	-7

The above table indicates that the results of the three groups were obviously higher than those obtained from the pre-test. The differences of the results of the high-, intermediate-, and low-reading proficiency groups are +14, -7, and -7 respectively. This indicates that all three groups made good progress in English vocabulary ability after they were taught by these techniques for ten weeks.

▪ **Research Question 2 :**

What are their attitudes towards the instruction of vocabulary learning techniques in terms of format and content, activities, and benefits?

Table2: Students' Opinions towards the Instruction of Vocabulary Learning Techniques Shown in Frequency

	<i>Statement</i>	<i>Strongly agree</i>	<i>Agree</i>	<i>Neither agree nor disagree</i>		<i>Disagree</i>	<i>Strongly disagree</i>
	<i>About format and content</i>						
1	<i>The letters were clear and easy to read.</i>	12	23	0	4.75	0	0
		+35					
2	<i>Each step of the presentation was clear.</i>	9	19	7		0	0
		+28					
3	<i>The level of the content suited me.</i>	6	10	10		9	0
		+16				-9	
4	<i>The volume of content was proportional to the study time</i>	3	24	2		6	0
		+27				-6	

Activities							
5	The motivation phase enabled me to learn word structures and contexts.	7	22	6	6	0	0
		+29					
6	The presentation phase offered explanations and examples of word structures and contexts that were clear and easy to understand	5	23	7		0	0
		+28					
7	The practice phase afforded word structure and context exercises	8	20	7		0	0
		+28					
8	The exercises gave me enough knowledge of word structures and contexts to do the activities in transfer activity	10	19	6		0	0
		+29					
9	The post-test helped me evaluate what I had learned	13	18	4		0	0
		+31					

Benefits							
10	The vocabulary acquisition techniques increased my knowledge of meanings of words.	13	17	5	4	0	0
		+30					
11	The vocabulary acquisition techniques increased my knowledge of word structures and contexts.	13	17	5		0	0
		+30					
12	The vocabulary acquisition techniques made me realize the necessity of word structure and context practice.	6	26	3		0	0
		+32					
13	The vocabulary acquisition techniques made me enjoy learning vocabulary	13	19	3		0	0
		+32					
14	The vocabulary acquisition techniques offered variety in learning vocabulary.	8	23	4		0	0
		+31					

Table 2 shows opinions of the 35 first-year students towards the instruction of vocabulary acquisition techniques. The three statements students agreed with the most were no. 1 with +35 (The letters were clear and easy to read), followed by no.12 and no.13 with the +32 (The vocabulary acquisition techniques made me realize the necessity of word structure and context practice, The vocabulary acquisition techniques made me enjoy learning vocabulary). The third was no. 9 and no.14 with the +31 (The vocabulary acquisition techniques offered variety in learning vocabulary). Statement no. 3 (The level of the content suited me) was agreed with the least, +16. What was mostly noticeable from the table was that very few students (only 9) disagreed with any item at all, and not a single item was strongly disagreed with.

The following **table (3)** explains exactly the average of the positive, neutral and negative opinions of the students.

	Positive	Neutral	Negative
Format & Content	26,5	4,75	3,75
Activities	29	6	0
Benefits	31	4	0

These results can be interpreted as having a positive level of opinions on this instruction. As shown in Table 3 above, benefits from the vocabulary acquisition techniques were given the highest positive opinions from the students. In the same way, the other two categories, format and content and activities were given rather high positive opinions.

7. Conclusion

The present study set out to examine how the vocabulary acquisition techniques can effect on English language students' learning of English as foreign language. The research findings testify that the selected vocabulary acquisition techniques contributed to the students' improvement of vocabulary. This is probably because there were such various ways to acquire English words that students did not have to stick blindly to only one particular method of learning vocabulary. This variety may have largely helped encourage and simultaneously spice up the learning process. In addition, students appreciated the importance of vocabulary, that words are major building blocks for any language. That they had greatly benefited from the techniques provided is clearly shown in the progress they made in terms of the pretest and posttest results.

The outcomes from this study suggested that the teachers strongly emphasize and explain more on techniques that students can apply to understand the meanings of unknown words in order to solve the problem of a limited vocabulary. This procedure can help reduce the difficulties when they read the text. In addition, the researcher agreed with what Ellis (2002) suggested to be an important factor. This is frequency, which is a fundamental feature of cognitive processing and acquisition. The words frequently seen tend to be remembered and learned. In this case, practice should be done in class through exercises or activities. Moreover, positive opinions on the instruction of in-class useful techniques were given by the subjects. This finding is consistent with the findings reported by Tabtimsai (2003), who found that students reacted positively to the exercises, and by Summat (2009), who found that the participants had positive attitude towards the use of task-based learning activities to improve the students' vocabulary learning and were confident that they could read and pronounce the target vocabulary after learning by themselves.

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