

Enhancing the Iranian EFL Learners' Reading Comprehension through Implicit Vocabulary Learning Strategy

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Abstract: *This study examines the impact of Discussing Your Feelings with Someone Else as an implicit vocabulary learning strategy of Iranian intermediate EFL learners. In order to identify the aforementioned group in terms of language proficiency, an Objective Placement Test was administered to a population of 130 intermediate undergraduate EFL students at the Omidiyeh Islamic Azad University in Khouzestan, Iran. Ultimately, sixty intermediate students were selected and assigned into two experimental and control groups. The experimental group was taught vocabulary learning strategy through Discussing Your Feelings with Someone Else as an implicit vocabulary learning strategy for developing their vocabulary storage in reading comprehension. After ten sessions of treatment, the two groups were given a post-test of an achievement vocabulary test. Data analysis was conducted through samples t-test statistics. It demonstrated that the experimental group who utilized Discussing Your Feelings with Someone Else as an implicit vocabulary learning strategy outperformed the control group.*

Key Words: *Vocabulary Learning Strategy, Implicit vocabulary learning Strategy, Reading Comprehension, Discussing Your Feeling with Someone Else Strategy*

Introduction

Vocabulary acquisition is crucial in all parts of our academic life and it is necessary element to academic development, the teaching situation becomes more difficult when our vocabulary storage is not enough and acceptable. In other hand, many native or non-native English speakers will want to improve and enlarge their English vocabulary whether at the school, college or the university level (Grieser, 2009). Vocabulary knowledge is essential to students' academic success because if students do not understand the meaning of the words in the text, they will

have difficulty understanding the content. Vocabulary knowledge is the single best predictor of students' academic achievement (White, Graves, & Slater, 1990).

Pittman (2003) looks at EFL vocabulary learning as the most important element of language learning, and Martin (1991) asserts that building a good vocabulary is a lifetime project for most educated people. In addition, having a good storage of vocabulary has a direct relationship in commanding in the four language skills of reading, writing, listening and speaking and with standardized test-taking (Pittman, 2003). Also according to (Xiao-hui, Jun, & Wei-hua, 2007), the knowledge of students in language proficiency in vocabulary, plays very important role in text comprehension. Moreover, understanding new vocabulary should be meaningful to students by connecting these words to something they already know (Iwai, 2007).

Weak storage of vocabulary will trigger into communication problems. Also for communication purposes, vocabulary is a very important component for the sake of receiving the necessary knowledge. Therefore, teachers should pay special attention in teaching vocabulary and introduce the suitable strategies to help students in enhancing their new and unknown vocabulary (Hall & Sabey, 2007). According to Cahyono & Widiati (2011), the vocabulary command and having very good vocabulary storage supports each of the language skills. Knowledge of vocabulary is very effective in affecting learners' comprehension on other skill like reading and listening, meanwhile it also affects the way learners convey their ideas into writing and speaking. Oxford (1990) comprehensively defines "Learning strategies are specific actions taken by the learner to make learning easier, faster, more enjoyable, and more self-directed, more effective, and more transferable to new situations (p. 8). Takač (2008) explains that VLS are "specific strategies utilized in the isolated task of learning vocabulary in the target language" (p.52) and adds that learners could, in fact, use them in any other field of language learning.

According to Schmitt (1997), "Vocabulary learning strategies could be any action which affects this rather broadly-defined process" (p. 203). Similarly, Cameron (2001) defines VLS as "actions that learners take to help themselves understand and remember vocabulary" (p. 92). Nation (2001) states that vocabulary learning strategies are part of general language learning strategies. Thus, it can be claimed that vocabulary learning strategies can contribute successfully to learning. Although there are many factors that make students successful or unsuccessful in language learning, using or not using appropriate VLS might be one among them. In addition, Sener (2009) confirms that "vocabulary is central to language and of critical importance to the typical language learner" (Zimmerman 1998, p. 5).

The increasing body of research on VLS, particularly in the last two decades as Atay and Ozbulgan (2007) also maintain, wishes to shed more light on learners' strategy repertoire and facilitate second/foreign language vocabulary learning and recall. All in all, research shows that many learners employ learning strategies in vocabulary learning more frequently than in any

other language learning activities (O'Malley, Chamot, Stewner-Manzanares, Küpper, & Russp, 1985).

Ellis (2008) defines explicit and implicit knowledge in this way:

“Implicit knowledge is intuitive, procedural, systematically variable, automatic, and thus available for use in fluent unplanned language use. It is not verbalizable. ... Explicit knowledge is conscious, declarative, anomalous, and inconsistent (i.e., it takes a form of fuzzy rules inconsistently applied) and generally accessible through control processing in planned language use. It is verbalizable ... like any type of factual knowledge it is potentially learnable at any age.”

Hunt and Beglar (1998) point out that many vocabularies are learned implicitly through extensive reading and listening. Accordingly, motivating learners to read and listen extensively can provide them with great opportunities to learn new vocabularies.

Shmidth (1990; cited in Nyiazadeh, 2009), also points out that implicit learning is definitely passive in that it can happen when the focus of attention is on some relevant features of input. However, he believes that since implicit learning is useful in task-based language, pedagogy is still a fruitful area of investigation.

So far, many studies have been carried out in the field concerning vocabulary learning/teaching approaches. For instance, Huckin and Coady (1999) investigated the role of Implicit and explicit vocabulary acquisition. They conclude that implicit vocabulary learning is not entirely incidental in that learners pay at least some attention to individual words.

The use of VLS in association with field sensitivity was investigated by Chiang (2004) who also observed that older students were inclined to employ more strategies in vocabulary learning. The Taiwanese students in his research who pursued English major reported being more positive towards the use of almost all VLS than their non-English peers. Yu (2000) also examined the use of VLS from sociocultural perspectives through a comparative study of Japanese, Korean and Taiwanese EFL learners. The study showed that mediating agents, especially teachers' attitude and teaching methods have a great influence on learners' beliefs and strategy use.

Zhang (2001) attempted to find out the characteristics of vocabulary learning strategies used by the non-English major graduate students and the difference between the stage of "general academic English learning" and "professional English learning". Zhang found that in the stage of "general academic English learning", the graduates use more psycholinguistic and metacognitive strategies and use them more frequently than those in the stage of "professional English learning". Sener (2009) studied the relationship between VLS and vocabulary size of Turkish EFL students. Sener found that Turkish students use more metacognitive strategies efficiently than psycholinguistic strategy though they were often users of strategies. In addition, the study revealed that there is a positive correlation between VLS and vocabulary size of students. The

finding was consistent with the research studies of Cohen & Apek (1981); Cohen (1990); and Ellis (1985).

In sum, studies done by different researchers provided the motivation for more investigations on this area in Iran. So that, the aim of present study was to investigate the effect of *discussing your feelings with someone else* vocabulary learning strategy used by Iranian EFL students for enhancing their reading comprehension.

The purpose of the study

Teachers are constantly faced with introducing new vocabulary to students in all subject areas (Norfleet, 2002). Words that seem common to teachers can be a puzzle to students. Thus, the teacher is faced with the dilemma of how to make new subject matter and vocabulary meaningful to his/her students. What makes the situation even more difficult is teaching new vocabulary of English as a foreign language (EFL). The purpose of this study is to guide instructors to introduce *discussing your feelings with someone else* as an implicit vocabulary learning strategy to learners to improve their vocabulary on language tasks systematically because learners, in EFL contexts, often have problem in comprehending the reading texts because of the weakness of vocabulary knowledge. Vocabulary is generally considered as the basic communication tool, and often labeled as the most problematic area by language teachers (Celik & Toptas, 2010). Therefore, this study was conducted to find out the possible effects of learners' *discussing your feelings with someone else* as an implicit vocabulary learning strategy on reading comprehension of intermediate level Iranian university students in an EFL setting.

Research question

The main question to be examined in this study is as follows:

Do *Discussing Your Feelings with Someone* vocabulary learning strategy has any significant effect on the development of vocabulary knowledge of the Iranian undergraduate intermediate students?

Methodology

Participants

This study involved 130 university students from Islamic Azad University of Omidyeh in Khuzestan in Iran studying non-English majors in the course of general English (mostly in the second and third semester) based on non-random judgment sampling. They participated in a homogeneity test adapted from Objective Placement Test (Lesley, Hanson & Zukowski- Faust, 2005) as a homogeneity test and finally sixty students whose scores were one standard deviation

above and one standard deviation below the mean ($M = 30$) were selected. Then they were randomly divided into two groups; group A (18 female and 12 male) as an experimental group received *Discussing Your Feeling with Someone Else* as an implicit vocabulary learning strategy while group B (8 female and 22 male) considered as a control group with no strategy use. The age of the participants generally ranged from 18 to 24. Seemingly, they were originally from different regions of the country.

Instruments

Initially, the subjects in two groups took the Objective Placement Test of Interchange (Lesley, Hanson & Zukowski- Faust, 2005), which used as a standardized measurement to check the homogeneity level of the subjects in terms of language proficiency. The test contained 40 multiple-choice of vocabulary items. In order to verify the reliability of the pre-test and post-test, the researchers selected 40 students from different departments in Omidiyeh Islamic Azad University to participate in the pilot study in two phases, one for the pre-test and the other one for post-test. That is, 20 students for pre-test and 20 for post-test. Calculating the reliability coefficient of the test through KR-21 formula, the researcher found the reliability of the homogeneity test at ($r = .78$).

A post- test including also 40 items was administered to both groups at the end of treatment period after ten sessions. It takes eight lessons and was designed as a summative test. This test indicated 40 multiple-choice items of vocabulary achievement test which was developed by the researcher based on the materials taught in the classrooms. The vocabulary items in the test selected mainly from the new lexical items of reading comprehension texts. The reliability of the post- test was ($r = .88$) based on KR-21 formula.

Another instrument was the reading tasks and activities as the course materials which the researcher afforded to both the experimental and control group. These reading tasks and activities were extracted from the Select Readings (intermediate level) written by Lee and Gunderson (2002).

Procedure

In this study, 130 Iranian university students who study in a course other than English as their major were selected. To make sure of the homogeneity of the learners, the researcher used an Objective Placement Test as language proficiency test (Lesley, Hanson & Zukowski- Faust, 2005). Having obtained the scores and the average mean ($M = 30$) of the scores calculated. Sixty learners whose scores were around the mean were selected. Therefore the thirty homogeneous intermediate students were selected to utilize *discussing your feelings with someone else* strategy for developing their vocabulary storage in reading comprehension and other thirty students in

group B were assigned as a control group with no strategy use in teaching and the treatment in this class was as usual as before, the teacher read the text one time and gives the students equivalent or synonym of new words. In this study, the treatment period lasted for ten sessions. On the first session, the students in A Group received introduction on *discussing your feelings with someone else* vocabulary learning strategy. The procedure was implied by the corresponding researcher (teacher) for both classes. The next section will introduce the treatment period of *discussing your feelings with someone else* strategy.

Discussing your feelings with someone else strategy

According to Oxford (1990), language learning is difficult, and learners most of the times need to discuss this process with other people. So learners like to speak and negotiate their daily events with other people. Also, discussing new items of vocabulary in an authentic context used by students with each other is essential and necessary for them for the sake of development of their vocabulary knowledge (Carlo, August, & Snow, 2005). In this study, students used diaries to understand and kept track of their thoughts, attitudes, and vocabulary learning strategies, and if they felt at ease enough, they shared their diary entries during group discussion by dividing learners in several groups in class once or twice a week. Discussions of feelings could also take place outside of class and continued it with a friend, a family, and so on (Oxford, 1990).

Findings and Discussion

After the treatment, to find out the effectiveness of *Discussing your feelings with someone else vocabulary learning strategy on reading comprehension* of experimental group and compare the improvement in two groups, both groups took part in a post-test of the vocabulary and reading comprehension test after completing the course. In this study the data was collected and a number of descriptive (mean + Standard Deviation, SD) were conducted on the data.

The researchers dealt with comparing vocabulary learning strategy regarding, a parametric technique for analyzing the descriptive data. In this way, the study investigated the role of the *Discussing your feelings with someone else* vocabulary learning strategy through independent samples *t*-test analysis, in order to find out, whether these strategy influence students' vocabulary knowledge of Iranian EFL university students at the intermediate level of English reading proficiency or not.

To begin with, an independent sample *t*-test analysis was run on the mean score of the two groups. The results of *t*-test analysis for the effect of this strategy in reading comprehension as an independent variable statistically indicated mean differences are shown in Table 4.1. The data obtained through post-test (Table 1) were analyzed by using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS 11.5 software) in different steps.

Table 4.1 Result of the *t*-test (post-test of both groups)

	N	Range	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Experimental G	30	8.00	32.00	40.00	38.7667	1.86717
Control G	30	14.00	24.00	36.00	31.4833	3.47880

The results of the post-test in the two groups were compared using independent samples *t*-test statistical procedure, whose result showed that the mean scores of the experimental group ($M = 38.76$, $SD = 1.86$) was significantly different from the control group ($M = 31.48$, $SD = 3.47$). Also the minimum and maximum scores in experimental group are 32 and 40 while in control group the minimum and maximum scores are 24 and 36. In other words, the experimental group outperformed the control group on the post-test.

Also, critical t ($t = 2.000$) was less than observed t ($t = 5.45$) based on $df = 48$. In this case, there was a significant difference between experimental and control group in developing learning vocabulary at intermediate level. In other words, *Discussing your feelings with someone else* strategy was effective in improvement of vocabulary of Iranian EFL learners at intermediate level.

The major concern of the present study was to explore the effectiveness of *Discussing your feelings with someone else* on reading comprehension of the EFL students. The results of *t*-tests indicated statistically significant difference between the experimental group (A) and control group (B) in reading comprehension achievement post-test. It indicated that the *Discussing your feelings with someone else* is effective in improving EFL vocabulary storage on reading comprehension achievement of university students at the intermediate level of English. This result can be more approved and confirmed by this evidence that there was a significant difference between experimental group (A) who received this implicit strategy and control group (B). Moreover, the mean of experimental group was higher than control group based on the post-test scores. The findings of this research indicated that using *Discussing your feelings with someone else* vocabulary learning strategy has positive impact on enhancing vocabulary on reading comprehension of EFL students at intermediate level.

Conclusion and implications

In this work which examined the effect of *Discussing your feelings with someone else* strategy of vocabulary learning, the findings revealed that there is a great difference between the subjects in the learners who were instructed using *Discussing your feelings with someone else* and the subjects in the control group. The findings of this study indicated that this kind of implicit vocabulary learning strategy had a positive impact on reading comprehension of EFL students. The findings revealed that auditory learners are very good at learning new L2 words through cooperation or practicing unknown words by asking others for help. Also, such learners try to consolidate the new words through *discussing your feelings with someone else* strategy. According to the results, the learners in experimental group, learn new words best through *Discussing your feels with someone else* strategy, and this is something that is completely suitable to their vocabulary improvement since a group learner is the one who “learns more effectively through working with others” (Reid, 1995).

The findings of this research suggested that it is very important to investigate the VLS, because Strategies may help students, teachers, and administrators to become aware of the effect of VLS, vocabulary knowledge, and competency in order to design and deliver vocabulary instruction and training accordingly. Nation (2001) notes that strategy training has been proved to be very useful in broadening students' strategic knowledge. It should be the curriculum developers' responsibility to allocate enough time in the curriculum for teachers to conduct strategies research in their classes. There is no doubt that teachers have an important role to play in the strategy training of students. They are the ones to offer opportunities for students to learn about and practice the strategies.

With respect to material producers, they should produce materials that teachers will use throughout their class research. That is, the materials they produce should be congruent with students' learning strategies and they should be appealing to students' needs and interests. This process requires continuous evaluation of every single stage or material used. For this reason, curriculum developers and material producers should collect feedback from teachers and students in order to identify the weaknesses and strengths of their products. This will enable them not only to produce better materials but also to develop them. All in all, curriculum developers and material producers should work cooperatively with teachers and students so that they can design a better program, appropriate materials and tasks that will promote a more efficient and a more effective language learning atmosphere. Since students may find it difficult to improve their strategic competence and sometimes resist strategy training (Brown, 2002), it is, therefore, essential to help learners to become aware of their own styles, preferences and habits, for practicing their effective strategies, get them to practice good strategies, and take charge of their own learning.

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