

The Effect of Teaching Vocabulary Learning Strategies on Collocation Recall in an EFL Context

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Abstract: *This study was an attempt to measure the effects of vocabulary learning strategy instruction (VLSI) on the acquisition of the English collocations by Iranian EFL learners. Based on their scores on the Nelson language proficiency test, a total of 55 freshmen sharing a similar social and educational background participated in the experiment. First, they were randomly assigned to either the control or experimental group. For a period of 4 weeks, the researchers taught the control group with the traditional vocabulary teaching method, while the experimental group was instructed through the VLSI. The two groups were administered a pretest, a posttest, and a delayed posttest containing English collocations. T-tests of dependent and independent samples and one way repeated measure ANOVA were carried out to test for significance within groups and across group differences. The obtained results drawn from both groups showed a significant increase in their learning outcomes from pretest to posttest in which the experimental group's scores were significantly higher than those of the control group. The results also indicated that the VLSI facilitated the participants' collocation acquisition.*

Keywords: *Vocabulary, Vocabulary learning instruction strategy, Collocation, Traditional vocabulary teaching method, EFL learners*

Introduction

The question of differential success in foreign and second language education has long been investigated by numerous researchers in the field. One can list hundreds of variables that might play a role in creating different rates of achievement among learner; however, we can scrutinize only a limited number of these factors at a time. According to Williams & Burden (1997), one of the areas that can shed some light on this issue is an investigation into language learning

strategies. Many researchers have made an attempt to find out some strategies to improve second language teaching. Strategies are tools for developing language competence and achieving language learning, and the use of appropriate strategies result in increasing English proficiency.

Vocabulary learning strategies can be considered a subset of general learning strategies in second language acquisition. Learning new vocabulary items has always been difficult for the learners. In spite of different ways that teachers use such as using notebook, referring to bilingual and monolingual dictionaries to understand the meaning, word list, flash cards, or giving some synonyms and antonyms use, vocabulary learning is such challenging experience. Applying strategies can be the answer to the vocabulary problem.

Focusing learners' attention on strategies can help them to be familiarized with certain tasks, activities, and skills. Therefore, learners can plan their learning and discover what they need to achieve their goals. By means of strategies, learners can be motivated to monitor and check their progress in language learning process, and discover their own errors and the way for eliminating them.

According to Oxford and Scarcella (1994) learners can become independent of teachers or autonomous by means of vocabulary learning strategies, and this useful tool can be used inside or outside of the classroom. Various researches have indicated that different factors may influence the choice of vocabulary strategies such as belief or language proficiency.

Wenden (1991) stated "Learning strategies are the various operations that learners use in order to make sense of their learning" (p.7-8). Also, Williams & Burden (1997) indicated that when students are involved in a learning task, they use different ways to finish or solve the task, so this can be the process of learning strategy.

Training of learners to effectively use vocabulary learning strategies is an essential responsibility of teachers. It must make explicit to students how to organize the learning process, and improve their motivation. Teachers should ask the students to use these strategies for performing the tasks and evaluate their success. This way, they can become more self-confident and better able to learn independently, and they will feel more responsible for their own learning and, as a result, their motivation increases. Learners should be aware of the kind of strategies in

different learning situation for using them. This way they will become successful language learners, and are able to control and consider the appropriate strategy; in addition, they can find solutions to their problems and achieve their language learning goals in each situation.

Language Learning Strategies: The Background

Language Learning Strategies (LLS) have been one of the most popular components on which researchers have focused. Language learning strategies are specific actions or techniques which are used by learners to improve their success in developing language skills. These strategies can facilitate the acquisition of the new language. It is essential for students to be equipped with appropriate skills and strategies because language learning is a life time process, so learners can find out their problems on their own, and they can become independent.

Faerch Claus and Casper (1983) stated that a learning strategy is "an attempt to develop linguistic and sociolinguistic competence in the target language"(page.67). According to Stern (1992), "the concept of learning strategy is dependent on the assumption that learners consciously engage in activities to achieve certain goals and learning strategies can be regarded as broadly conceived intentional directions and learning techniques"(p.261). All language learners use language learning strategies either consciously or subconsciously when processing new information and performing tasks in the language classroom. Since language classroom is like a problem-solving environment in which language learners are likely to face new input and difficult tasks given by their instructors, learners' attempts to find the quickest or the easiest way to do what is required, that is, using language learning strategies is inescapable.

Research in Language Learning Strategy and Vocabulary Learning

Research into language learning strategies began in the 1960s. In most of the research on language learning strategies, the primary concern has been on "identifying what good language learners report they do to learn a second or foreign language, or, in some cases, are observed doing while learning a second or foreign language" (Rubin & Wenden, 1987, p.19).

Different researchers have studied factors related to choice of language learning strategies (Oxford & Nyikos, 1989; Ehrman & Oxford, 1989). These factors include degree of metacognitive awareness, gender, level of language learning, language being learned, affective

variables (e.g., attitudes, motivation and language learning goals), personality type, learning style, career choice, aptitude, number of years of language study, and language teaching methods.

Some researchers tend to distinguish successful learners from less successful learners based on the use of metacognitive strategies (Oxford, 1993). Chamot, O'Malley, Küpper and Impink-Hernandez (1987) found that cognitive strategy use decreased and metacognitive strategy use rose as the foreign language course level increased, but social affective strategy use remained very low across all course levels.

Rubin (1975) was one of the earliest researchers whose attention was toward learner-centered aspects. Rubin suggested some strategies that successful learners tend to operate in their learning process and pointed out that the good language learner: (1) is a willing and accurate guesser; (2) has a strong drive to communicate; (3) is uninhibited and willing to make mistakes; (4) focuses on form by looking at patterns and using analysis; (5) takes advantage of all practice opportunities; (6) monitors his or her own speech and that of others; (7) pays attention to meaning. (cited in Oxford 2001, p.169)

Oxford (1990) asserts that "learning strategies are steps taken by students to enhance their own learning" (p. 1). It is important to point out that there are tens of different language learning strategies. One of the models for the teaching of language learning strategies is a direct teaching model, and another one is an indirect model.

Generally, in direct or explicit training, learner's attention is directed towards the strategy being taught. According to William and Burden (1997), "this model is preferred to indirect teaching where learners are not told the purpose of the tasks (p.162)".

What Oxford (1990) strongly believes in is that indirect strategy training reinforces the direct ones. The result is that learners using vocabulary learning strategies will recall information better than those who do not use. According to Hall (2004), learners make use of the knowledge of their memory system.

Many researchers such as Cohen (1994) and Rhoder & Huerster (2002), who attempted to explore the source of difficulties in reading comprehension for language learners, found out that

the main obstruction to reading comprehension for ESL/EFL students is the lack of English vocabulary. Furthermore, from the experience of the researchers as English EFL teachers in this study, most of our EFL students in Iran hardly carry out successful English conversation with foreigners, and most English teachers are still applying the traditional vocabulary teaching instead of using many strategies of vocabulary learning which are available. The traditional vocabulary teaching method is the grammar translation method which was defined by Richards and Rodgers (1986), "as an experience of memorizing endless lists of unusable grammar rules and vocabulary and attempting to produce perfect translations of stilted or literary prose" (p. 4).

Vocabulary is central to language and language learning. Collocations, as a subcategory of vocabulary are very important part of knowledge of second language acquisition and they are essential to non-native speakers of English in order to speak or write fluently and accurately (Jaén, 2007). Collocations are one of the areas that produce problems for learners of English as a foreign language. Most of EFL learners, even at more advanced level have various problems in their oral or written productions. These problems arise partly from the lack of knowledge about collocations. It is argued that the problem for advanced learners is not so much with encountering vast numbers of new words as with working with already half-known words and exploring their collocation fields (Hill, 1999). According to Hill (1999), "Students with good ideas often lose marks because they don't know the four or five most important collocations of a key word that is central to what they are writing about." (p. 5).

It is very essential to consider collocations as a needed part for acquiring language, because the use of collocation may result in natural conversation. There is surely need for an understanding of and a concern with collocation by teachers and students (Carter & McCarthy, 1988). The development of reliable and valid measures of this construct (i.e. collocation) is a first step towards a better understanding of its importance in L2 acquisition. Nowadays it is really important to help learners become better more than focus on teachers and what they teach and how they do it in order to have more efficient learners. This new trend can be achieved through different means such as language learning strategy training.

This study is an attempt to take into account the relationship between the vocabulary language learning strategies choice and its effect on collocations, and clarifies the importance of

teaching collocation in classrooms. It also considers the effectiveness of Vocabulary Learning Strategy Instruction on vocabulary learning difficulties of EFL learners.

It proposes to develop a reliable and valid test which can tap and measure the EFL learners' usage of vocabulary strategies and its effect on collocations. Further, it discusses some ways teachers can help students in learning collocations. Based upon the afore-mentioned discussions, the following research hypothesis will be tested statistically:

There is no significant difference in short term and delayed recall between Vocabulary Learning Strategy Instruction (VLSI) and traditional vocabulary teaching method for the acquisition of English collocations by Iranian university students.

Method

Participants

Overall, 55 students ranging from 18 to 22 participated in this study. All the participants possessed similar background knowledge of English in general and the target vocabulary items – English collocations – in particular. Participants from the two groups possessed a similar competency-level of English and the target structure as a result of the proficiency test and the pretest, respectively.

Instrumentation

Three instruments were used in this study as follows:

Background Questionnaire

In order to elicit subjective information of participants, a background questionnaire was developed by the investigators. It covered issues such as the participants' age, gender, first language status, their parents' socio-educational background and occupation.

Proficiency Test

In order to be assured of the homogeneity of the control and experimental groups in terms of English language proficiency, a test of NELSON, series 400B, after being piloted on a similar

group of 20 students, was administered before the pretest. It proved to have a reliability of 0.79. It consisted of 50 multiple-choice items in four parts of cloze tests, grammar, vocabulary and pronunciation. The time allotted was 40 minutes.

Collocation Test (CT)

A test of collocation, consisting of 40 multiple-choice type items, based on *English Collocation in Use* by Michael McCarthy & Felicity O'Dell (2005) was prepared by the researchers and was used both as the pretest and posttest and delayed post test. After revision by the researchers and two qualified English teachers, the test was administered to participants as the pre and posttest and delayed post test. The test was used to ensure that the participants were not familiar with the collocation items prior to the study and after the treatment, and to measure the effect of the treatment. The items of the test were 40 multiple-choice type items of collocation. It was piloted on 20 students of the same level, in order to (a) improve the questions, and (b) determine the time that was needed for participants to finish each test and found to be highly reliable. Their reliabilities were 0.84, 0.76 and 0.82, respectively.

Procedure

A proficiency test was used to make sure the two groups were homogenous at the outset by selecting scores between one standard deviation below and above the mean. In this study, the treatment group comprised 27 students, and received Vocabulary Learning Strategy Instruction (VLSI) about the target vocabulary – English collocations. The treatment consisted of four lessons in eight sessions lasting for 60 minutes and was extended to twice a week over a period of four weeks. All treatment sessions were conducted by one of the researchers, and all sessions were observed by a university instructor who had been briefed on the type of the treatment. Vocabulary learning strategy instruction used as a treatment for experimental group such as guessing, analyzing vocabulary, making associations, visual mnemonics, and grouping.

On the other hand, the control group comprised 28 students who were studying EFL at Golestan University, Iran, and were taught through the traditional vocabulary teaching method (Synonym, Antonym, Definition explanation, English to Persian translation about the target point) prior to each lesson. Both groups received an equal amount of instructional treatments.

Three similar but not identical tests including a pretest, a posttest, and a delayed posttest were given to the learners in both experimental and control groups. The pretest was conducted one day prior to the treatment, including both the planned, written sentence-level production and judgment question items about the target vocabulary – English collocations. The test consisted of 40 items. Like the pretest, one posttest was also taken with the same number of items which was administered right after all lessons to both the experimental group and control groups. Similarly, to investigate which instructional method – VLSI or traditional vocabulary teaching method – would be more effective for real acquisition or long-term retention as a result of the treatment of the target point, one delayed posttest was conducted one month after the posttest to both groups.

Results

In order to probe the null hypothesis of the study which states that there is no significant difference in short term and delayed recall between VLSI and traditional vocabulary teaching method for the acquisition of English collocations by Iranian university students, the two groups participated in the collocation test. The same test was used as the pretest, posttest, and the delayed posttest. The results of the descriptive and inferential statistics calculated from the mean scores of the collocation test in the experimental and control groups are reported in Table 1.

Table 1: Descriptive and Inferential Statistics on the Mean Scores of the Collocation Test for the Experimental and Control Groups

Tests	Experimental Group (n = 27)		Control Group (n = 28)		MD	Difference	
	M	SD	M	SD		t	p
Pretest	3.48	1.826	3.78	2.299	0.304	0.542	.590
Posttest	28.25	3.459	12.32	4.627	15.937	14.425	.000*
Delayed Posttest	28.07	3.950	11.96	4.392	16.109	14.283	.000*

*p<.001

The findings show that both groups significantly increased their learning outcomes as a result of the treatments, but that the experimental group had higher overall learning outcomes on the collocation test than the control group. In addition, both groups improved significantly from the

pretest to the posttest, while there was not a significant increase or decrease from the posttest to the delayed posttest. Therefore, the learning that was acquired as a result of the treatment was maintained over time as explicit knowledge for both groups. These findings indicate that the VLSI treated in the experimental class was more effective than the TVTM administered to the control class.

To examine the overall learning outcomes of the collocation test in the experimental group, the raw scores and percentages of correct answers on the collocation test in the experimental group were calculated. Subsequently, paired t-tests of dependent samples were conducted to test significant differences between the pretest and posttest, the pretest and delayed posttest, and the posttest and delayed posttest on the scores of the collocation test in the experimental group. Table 2 reports the summary of the measures and significance of the collocation test (n=1080) in the experimental group.

Table 2: Descriptive and Inferential Statistics on Overall Scores of the Collocation Test for the Experimental Group

Comparing Tests		Experimental Group (n = 27)			Difference	
		Mean	SD	MD	t	p
Pretest vs. Posttest	Pretest	3.48	1.826	24.77	39.904	.000*
	Posttest	28.25	3.459			
Pretest vs. Delayed Posttest	Pretest	3.48	1.826	24.59	33.316	.000*
	Delayed Posttest	28.07	3.950			
Posttest vs. Delayed Posttest	Posttest	28.25	3.459	0.185	0.961	.345
	Delayed Posttest	28.07	3.950			

Note: Collocation Test (n=1080) = Experimental Group (n=27) x CT (n=40). *p<.001

The major findings indicate that the experimental group significantly increased the learning outcomes from the pretest to the posttest and the delayed posttest involving the collocation test

after all treatments. More specifically, the findings show that there was an improvement in the learning outcomes of English collocations between the pretest and posttest in the experimental group, who improved from 3.48 to 28.25. On the other hand, the findings display that while there was an increase between the pretest and posttest, and the pretest and delayed posttest, there was a slight decrease in the scores of the collocation between the posttest and delayed posttest from 28.25 to 28.07 on the CT.

To investigate the learning outcomes on the collocation test (n=1120) in the control group (n=28), the raw scores and percentages for the scores of the Collocation Test and the correct answers on the pretest, posttest, and delayed posttest are presented. In addition, paired t-tests of dependent samples were conducted to test significant differences of the mean scores of the CT on three tests in the control group. Table 3 summarizes the raw scores and percentages for the CT, and the descriptive and inferential statistics conducted between the pretest and posttest, the pretest and delayed posttest, and the posttest and delayed posttest on the CT for the control group.

Table 3: Descriptive and Inferential Statistics on Overall Scores of the Collocation Test for the Control Group

Comparing Tests		Experimental Group(n = 28)			Difference	
		Mean	SD	MD	t	p
Pretest vs. Posttest	Pretest	3.78	2.299	8.53	10.815	.000*
	Posttest	12.32	4.627			
Pretest vs. Delayed Posttest	Pretest	3.78	2.299	8.17	12.087	.000*
	Delayed Posttest	11.48	4.392			
Posttest vs. Delayed Posttest	Posttest	12.32	4.627	0.35	1.243	.000*
	Delayed Posttest	11.48	4.392			

Note: CT (n=1120) = Control Group (n=28) x CT (n=40). *p<.001

The results indicate that the control group significantly increased the overall learning outcomes on the CT after the treatment in the three tests.

Table 4 summarizes the descriptive and inferential statistics conducted to test significant differences on the combined gain scores of the collocation test in the posttest subtracted by the pretest (posttest-pretest), the delayed posttest subtracted by the pretest (the delayed posttest-pretest), and the delayed posttest subtracted by the posttest (the delayed posttest-posttest) between the experimental and control groups.

Table 4: Descriptive and Inferential Statistics of Gain Scores of the Collocation Test for the Experimental and Control Groups

Tests	Experimental Group (n = 27)		Control Group (n = 28)		MD	Difference	
	M	SD	M	SD		t	p
Posttest-Pretest	24.77	3.226	8.53	4.176	16.24	16.098	.000*
Delayed Posttest-Pretest	24.59	3.835	8.17	3.580	16.41	16.413	.000*
Delayed Posttest-Posttest	-0.18	1.520	-0.35	1.001	0.171	0.493	.624

*p<.001

The findings show that there was a highly significant difference between the experimental and control groups in the posttest-pretest total gain scores ($t=16.098$, $p<.001$), and the delayed posttest-pretest total gain scores ($t=16.413$, $p<.001$) on the CT gain scores, but that there was no significant difference between the experimental and control groups in the combined gain scores of the delayed posttest-posttest of the SCT ($t=0.493$, $p>.05$). These results indicate that from the pretest to the posttest and delayed posttest, the improvement in learning occurred more significantly in the experimental group than in the control group. In addition, the experimental group performed significantly better than the control group by showing significantly higher gain scores from the pretest to the posttest and delayed posttest on the total gain scores of the CT. Therefore, these results not only imply a greater rate of learning in the experimental class, but also demonstrate that the treatment conducted in the experimental group – VLSI – was more significantly effective on the CT than a TVTM.

Discussion

The findings of the present study provide further confirmation for the results of the previous studies which conclude that language learning strategies, in general, and vocabulary learning strategies, in particular, have significant effects on retention and recall of words and idioms (Cohen & Apeh, 1980; Laufer & Shmueli, 1997; Marefat & AhmadiShirazi, 2003; Atai, Akbari, & AfzaliShahri, 2004). The findings of the study conducted by Atai, et al. (2004), for instance, showed that sentence writing, as a word-focus vocabulary learning strategy had a significant effect on both immediate recall of the idioms and their delayed recall.

Marefat and Shirazi (2003) also examined the effect of teaching direct learning strategies (memory, cognitive, and compensation) and their subcategories on vocabulary retention – short term and long term – of EFL learners. Their results showed that strategy instruction in short term retention far outweighs than in long term retention.

Moreover, Mardani & Moinzadeh (2011) investigated the effect of explicit metacognitive vocabulary learning strategy training on the extent of retention and recall of idioms. The results indicated that treatment was effective for both short term and long term recall of idioms.

Further, Laufer and Shmueli (1997) examined the relationship between different teaching techniques and memorization of new words in terms of both short-term and long-term. In the same line of research, findings of the present study also investigated the effect of two types of vocabulary learning strategy, VLSI and traditional vocabulary teaching method, on the recall of collocations. The results showed that vocabulary learning strategy instruction had significant effect on both types of recall (short term and delayed). Strategy instruction not only had significant effect on short term and delayed recall, but also as the instruction proceeded, the effect became more and more significant. This latter effect was shown by the results of the t-test. This means that strategy instruction is a business that requires long term investment from all participants including teachers, students, course designer, and so forth.

Conclusion

The general conclusion that can be drawn from the results of the present study is that vocabulary is an important ingredient of language and vocabulary learning is an essential part of

foreign language learning. Language learners need a wide array of target language words to be able to successfully tackle both production and comprehension activities in the second or foreign language. One way to help learners to enhance their knowledge of L2 vocabulary is through equipping learners with a variety of vocabulary learning strategies. Different taxonomies have thus been proposed, and some of which were discussed in the present paper.

Furthermore, learning collocation is considered to be an important part of acquiring English. However, teachers and students have not paid much attention to the notion of English collocation in Iranian EFL classrooms, and when Iranian students try to use English, collocation becomes a great problem.

Moreover, although many techniques and approaches could be employed in teaching collocations, teachers should make decision about which technique is more appropriate than the others. It is also necessary to consider what kind of research is most likely to lead to interdependence. Surprisingly, very little research has explored how teachers arrive at decisions about what collocations of words to teach, and when, and especially how to teach it. Studies such as the present one can also illuminate in what ways teachers interpret and personalize research findings in their finding. As indicated by Eraut (1994), teachers not only act on technical knowledge, but also transfer it through action. Very little is known about how this takes place in the classroom.

But it should be kept in mind that sheer presentation of these strategies is not enough. What is needed, in addition to instruction, is that teachers should routinely conduct research in their own classroom to better understand the nature of these learning strategies.

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