LINELT 2013

The Impact of Task-based Extensive Reading on Lexical Collocation Knowledge of Intermediate EFL Learners

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Abstract

This study attempted to investigate the effect of form versus meaning-focused tasks added to an ER program on the development of lexical collocations among Iranian Intermediate EFL learners. To this end, 41 students of English language and literature studying at the department of foreign languages in Mazandaran University participated in this study. A reading comprehension test taken from TOEFL was used to measure candidates’ reading ability to homogenize them in terms of their entry behaviour. Moreover, Word Associates Test (WAT) developed by Read (1993, 1998) was administered to examine the participants’ depth of vocabulary knowledge. Participants were divided into two experimental groups: Both groups were assigned to read extensively and do some after reading tasks; the first group was given a form-focused task (FFT) while the second group worked on a meaning-focused task (MFT). The results of paired and independent sample t-tests revealed the fact that both FFT and MFT groups progressed in the interval between the pre- and post-test, but, there was not a significant difference between the effects of form-focused and meaning-focused task.

Keywords: Extensive Reading, Depth of Knowledge, Incidental Learning, Intentional Learning, Lexical Collocational Knowledge;

1. Introduction

1.1. Overview

Extensive reading (ER) as one of the approaches to teaching reading has received increasing attention from L2 educators as an effective form of L2 reading instruction (Yamashita, 2008). Research has emphasized the important

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role of ER in helping learners gain fluency in the areas of word recognition, vocabulary acquisition and developing reading comprehension skills (Grabe and Stoller, 1997; Horst, 2005; Hudson, 2007; Pigada and Schmitt, 2006; Yamashita, 2008). Over the past two decades, numerous studies in this area have underscored the fact that ER leads to language proficiency in general, and vocabulary development in particular. Some researchers such as Coady (1997), Grabe (1991), Shin & Kyu-Cheol (2003), Nassaji (2003), and Horst (2005) all have found the effect of this approach on vocabulary development. Zimmerman (1997) and Nuttall (1982), too, have highlighted the usefulness of ER in vocabulary learning through a broad exposure to the target language.

There has been a reasonable amount of research on incidental vocabulary learning from Extensive Reading (e.g., Grabe & Stoller, 1997; Horst, 2005; Kweon & Kim, 2008; Paribakht & Wesche, 1999; Pigada & Schmitt, 2006; Yali, 2010). These studies argue that incidental learning occurs more particularly through extensive reading in input-rich environments, although at a rather slow rate. Learning vocabulary through extensive reading also improves learners’ fluency since learners look at group of words rather than each individual word while reading.

However, although the employment of extensive reading as a means of implicit learning has been shown to facilitate the learning of the formal features of language (Day & Bamford, 1998; Green, 2005); for fast vocabulary expansion, more and more research points to the ineffectiveness of just using incidental vocabulary instruction and the need to accompany it with intentional learning (Hulstijn, 2011; Mirzaii, 2012; Yali, 2010). These studies have found that extensive reading alone doesn’t lead to vocabulary acquisition. Yali (2010) argued that language acquisition couldn’t be expected to occur unless students notice the form, understand the meaning and establish the form meaning mapping between them. Other studies have also demonstrated that extensive reading alone is not sufficient for developing language skills. Additionally, although extensive reading has been found to help develop sight vocabulary, general vocabulary, and the knowledge of the target language (Renandya & Jacobs, 1997 as cited in Tran, 2006), explicit instruction has also helped in developing English language skills, especially the vocabulary (Coady, 1997 as cited in Tran, 2006). There is reason to believe, however, that extensive reading for meaning does not lead automatically to the acquisition of vocabulary and the success in doing so depends on the context surrounding each word, the nature of the learner’s attention, the task demands, and other factors.

In research on vocabulary learning, a distinction has often been made between two dimensions of vocabulary knowledge: depth of knowledge and breadth of knowledge (Qian, 1999; Paribakht & Wesche, 1996). Waring (2002, cited in Lau Man-yee, 2004) pointed out that vocabulary exercises for the purpose of enhancing depth of vocabulary knowledge should focus on deepening and internalising knowledge of words and not merely focus on the form-meaning level. This means that simple matching of meaning of words would not be sufficient to deepen students’ knowledge of words. He suggests that focus should be on the collocates of the target words, on how the words fit into the normal context in which it appears by looking at the word relationships and not just keeping words in isolation.

To sum up, although several studies have demonstrated a relationship between learners’ vocabulary knowledge and their subsequent learning of vocabulary through reading (Grabe & Stoller, 1997; Horst, 2005; Kweon & Kim, 2008; Pigada & Schmitt, 2006; Rashidi & Piran, 2011; Yali, 2010), some studies have found that extensive reading alone doesn’t lead to vocabulary acquisition (Paran, 2003; Coady, 1997; Green, 2005; Paribakht & Wesche, 1997; Hulstijn & Laufer, 2001). Studies have suggested that the acquisition of vocabulary is an incremental process and that it is only after repeated exposures to words that these can be required (Nation, 2001). Studies have found that vocabulary acquisition can be achieved through vocabulary-focused tasks (form-oriented and message-oriented) given to students while reading (Paribakht & Wesche 1997, Hulstijn & Laufer 2001). The tasks may lead to deeper word processing, which then results in better word retention and retrieval. Therefore, this experiment is carried out to investigate if teachers can help deepen the students’ vocabulary knowledge by means of a vocabulary-focused task. The aims of the present research are to explore the differential effects of form-oriented and meaning-oriented tasks added to an ER program on improving the depth of vocabulary knowledge of students and to further examine their effects on the learning of the lexical collocations.

2. Research Questions

Q1. Does task-based extensive reading affect EFL learners’ depth of vocabulary knowledge?
Q2. Is there a significant difference between the effects of form-focused and meaning-focused tasks on learners’
3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

The study employed a quasi-experimental design, which used a pre-test-treatment-post-test procedure to collect data. The present study had two experimental groups with no control group. Participants of this study were selected from one class to reduce the teacher effect.

3.2 Participants and Setting

The first year students, both male and female majoring in English language and literature at the department of foreign languages of University of Mazandaran participated in this study. They were taking the reading comprehension (rö) course. Their ages ranged from 19 to 21. All of the candidates took a reading comprehension test at the beginning of the course to homogenize the participants of the study with regard to their reading proficiency and make sure that their entry behaviour was not varied. The students were then divided into two experimental groups: Both groups were assigned to read extensively and complete a number of tasks after their reading; the first group (n=11) was given a form-focused task while the second group (n=14) worked on a meaning-focused task. The class met twice a week for 90 minutes and the students were engaged in both intensive and extensive reading approaches.

3.3 Instruments

The reading comprehension tests were chosen from TOEFL Reading Flash (2002) and included 23 items; Word Associates Test (WAT) developed by Read (1993, 1998) was used to measure the intermediate learners’ depth of vocabulary knowledge through word associations, which was based on 3 relationships among words in the mental lexicon: paradigmatic (meaning), syntagmatic (collocation), and polysemy. The test has been found to be closely correlated with L2 reading comprehension ability and has also been shown to have a high degree of internal reliability (Qian, 1999). The reliability of the test, as reported by Read, is 0.93 and by Qian (1998, 2002) and Nassaji (2004) above 0.90.

3.4 Procedure

All the participants (n==25) of this study were assigned to read a book each week i.e. students should have read ten books after finishing the programme. This study used WAT as a validated standardised test of vocabulary depth, and utilized it both as the pre-test and the post-test. The test took approximately 30 minutes to complete plus another 15 minutes for handing out papers, giving directions, and collecting them. Immediately following the treatment, students were given the post-test. They read books with different genres because each genre opens different world of words to students and in this way students could encounter variety of lexical collocations. Then, they were given two types of tasks to accompany their extensive reading. The students were divided into two experimental groups: the first group did a Form-focused task (n=11) in which the subjects were required to read a book every week outside of the class and keep a vocabulary notebook in which they wrote down the unfamiliar words, their dictionary definition, the sentence they located the word in, the right collocations for the words, and an example of the word given in the dictionary. They were also required to write a sentence of their own. The other group (n=14) did a Meaning-focused task, which required learners to orally present their books to the class after each reading, and they were also asked to fill in a book report form. In their presentation which took about ten to fifteen minutes, at first each student started with a summary of the book accompanied by a discussion of his or her own ideas about the story.

3.5 Data Analysis

In this study, there were two experimental groups (MFTG & FFTG); therefore, paired t-tests were used to compare students’ progress from the first test to the second. At the same time, an independent sample t-test was conducted to compare the performance of the two groups and examine which group has outperformed the other. The collected data was analysed through SPSS software.

4. Results
Before analysing the results, it seemed necessary to compare the mean scores of FFT and MFT groups on the pre-test to determine whether the groups were homogeneous in their entry behaviour regarding the depth of vocabulary knowledge. The results indicated that there was no statistically significant difference between the mean scores of the two groups before the study began and the two groups started with quite the same knowledge of vocabulary.

In order to answer the first research question and investigate whether task-based extensive reading affected learners’ depth of vocabulary knowledge, the test of WAT was used as a pre- and post-test. Thus to determine how much progress each group has made in the interval between the pre- and post-test, two paired sample t-tests were run, using SPSS software. Table 1 and 2 show descriptive statistics for the results of the pre-test and the post-test for the FFT and MFT groups. The sig=0.010 and since it was less than 0.05, it showed that there was a meaningful difference between mean scores of pre- and post-test for FFT group.

Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Paired Samples Test</th>
<th>Paired Differences</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Std. Deviation</th>
<th>Std. Error Mean</th>
<th>95% Confidence Interval of the Difference</th>
<th>t</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>Sig. (2-tailed)</th>
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</table>

Paired differences of means for MFT showed that mean scores of second stage (post-test) of meaning-focused task group also increased (10.214 points). The sig=0.001 and since it was less than 0.05, it showed that there was a meaningful difference between mean scores of both stages of pre- and post-test for MFT group.

Table 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Paired Samples Test</th>
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<th>Mean</th>
<th>Std. Deviation</th>
<th>Std. Error Mean</th>
<th>95% Confidence Interval of the Difference</th>
<th>t</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>Sig. (2-tailed)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pair 1 pre - post</td>
<td></td>
<td>-10.214</td>
<td>8.82460</td>
<td>2.35847</td>
<td>-15.305 -5.11911</td>
<td>-4.331</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>.001</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Results (gain scores) showed that the change was meaningful according to t-test for both groups. Thus, both groups showed progress from pre-test to post-test which means that task-based extensive reading improved participants’ depth of vocabulary knowledge.

To address the second question and examine whether there is a significant difference between the effects of form-focused and meaning-focused tasks on learners’ lexical knowledge, an independent sample t-test was run. Table 3 shows that the pre-test’s sig=0.342 and post-test’s sig=720 both of which are more than 0.05. As a result and as can be seen in table3, there was no statistically significant difference between the mean scores of the two FFT and MFT groups. It means that both groups performed the same at least regarding their collocation knowledge and both form-focused and meaning-focused tasks can affect learners’ lexical knowledge.
Table 3

<table>
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<th>Independent Samples Test</th>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Equal variances assumed</td>
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<td>t</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

5. Discussions and Conclusion

This study investigated whether combining extensive reading with two different types of tasks would make a significance difference in the development of collocations, and if yes which type of task would contribute to better learning of collocations. The results revealed that task-based extensive reading improved participants’ depth of vocabulary knowledge based on both groups’ progress from pre-test to post-test. But, there were not any significant differences between the effects of form-focused and meaning-focused tasks on learners’ lexical knowledge. The clear gains made by the experimental groups are quite consistent with previous reports of the positive effect of extensive reading on second language learners. The results of the present study, in fact, corroborated previous findings in the field, which had demonstrated the effects of this approach on improving different linguistic elements. In other words, this study added to the evidence in the literature that ER could be fully incorporated into the EFL language programs in which exposure to the target language can be provided to the learners through their engagement in extensive reading. This as Nuttall (1982) stated would be the second best way to help EFL learners to see the target language in context as it is truly used by the native speakers. Moreover, the results also indicated that both groups demonstrated some degree of achievement regarding their collocation knowledge and that both form-focused and meaning-focused task could affect learners’ lexical knowledge. This can be discussed in two ways: firstly, this may mean that ER alone can account for learners’ lexical improvement and that it is purely due to the effect of this extensive exposure to the way language parts are put together that learners have progressed (Hafiz & Tudor, 1990). Secondly, it is also possible to claim that the addition of tasks in general, no matter if they are form-oriented or meaning-oriented in nature would add up to the effectiveness of the extensive reading. In other words, it may mean that ER alone, as other studies have shown, may not suffice in helping learners to develop their lexical knowledge.

However, the results of this study are, at best, suggestive due to some limitations that could not be controlled. There appears to be a limit on just how far the results could be generalized since an absence of a control group have made it impossible to make conclusive remarks. With the presence of a control group in which only ER was introduced to the learners, it would have been possible to accredit some of the claims made above.

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