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The Effect of Keeping Vocabulary Notebooks on Vocabulary Acquisition and Learner Autonomy

Vjosa Vela*, *, Jeta Rushidi*

*South East European University, Ilindensa n.335, 1200 Tetovo, Macedonia

Abstract

Recent vocabulary teaching literature advocate that keeping a vocabulary notebook is an effective tool that promotes vocabulary acquisition as well as learner autonomy. This paper attempts to support to these claims, by analyzing the effect of vocabulary notebooks on EFL students’ vocabulary acquisition and students’ responsibility of their own learning. Teachers have various perspectives and styles when it comes to teaching. Some are more authoritative and tend to control student behavior while others have a more democratic approach and promote autonomy and democracy in the classroom. Sharing power and supporting learner autonomy by using vocabulary notebooks is effective and motivates students to learn. The participants of this study are three groups of Intermediate level students from the South East European University Language Center. Over a four week period students followed the same course material and syllabus. One group acted as the treatment group and kept vocabulary notebooks and the remaining two groups were control groups and didn’t keep vocabulary notebooks. Scores from the vocabulary tests reveal that the treatment group results were significantly more successful than the control groups. These findings led to a conclusion that vocabulary notebooks are an effective tool that can be implemented in an EFL classroom.

Keywords: vocabulary notebooks; learner autonomy; vocabulary acquisition; vocabulary activities

1. Introduction

As EFL teachers we strive a lot to help our students to acquire vocabulary. Different vocabulary learning strategies are employed by students to acquire new vocabulary. As for second language learners, vocabulary
knowledge is considered the most important aspect in terms of academic achievement. Insufficient vocabulary, leads to a lack of comprehension of written and oral input, which are reading and listening, as well as written communication, which are writing and speaking. There is a clear link between vocabulary knowledge and language use, because they complement one-another. Considering that vocabulary knowledge undoubtedly leads to language use, and vice-versa language use leads to vocabulary knowledge (Nation, 2001).

Researchers, instructors and teachers are concerned with effective language learning strategies, as they are of particular interest to them, especially now, when the link between learner autonomy and strategy instruction has been acknowledged.

Students’ lack of knowledge on how to learn and achieve autonomously is a reflection of the current state of Education in our country. Being used to a traditional way of teaching and learning, students always depend on the teacher and the book, there is almost never an initiative to take part in different activities and assignments, especially those that include speaking. Considering that at the university we have students from different knowledge backgrounds, this, unfortunately, is the trend. However, it is the English language teacher’s responsibility to foster learner autonomy, help their learners become independent learners, and later enjoy the huge positive effect it will have on the learning process.

The main focus of this research paper is to analyze the effects of using vocabulary notebooks as a means of increasing the learners’ lexical competence, and how it enhances their autonomous learning skills. The research has taken place at the Language Centre, South East European University, Tetovo, the Republic of Macedonia.

The main idea behind this research paper lies behind the original paper written by Walters, JoDee and Bozkurt, Neval (2009) The effect of keeping vocabulary notebooks on vocabulary acquisition, Language Teaching Research 13,4; pp. 403-423. The initial study involved 90 students, and it aimed to find out the validity and efficiency of vocabulary notebooks as a learning strategy for learners of English as a foreign language (EFL).

2. Vocabulary Notebook Implementation

Students get a list of words each week and they record them on their notebook and regularly review them. The general consensus among language acquisition researchers is that LLs need to meet a new word up to 10 times before it becomes part of the LL’s mental lexicon (Nation, 2001). The target words are separate from the vocabulary items explicitly taught in class. The vocabulary notebook can consist of several different items and can be made more complex or simpler to fit different levels. Norbert Schmitt and Diane Schmitt in (Vocabulary notebooks: theoretical underpinnings and practical suggestions. English Language Teaching Journal, 49(2), 133-43, 1995) emphasize the importance of learning vocabulary: ‘in order for learners to be able to read an academic text, watch a movie or read a newspaper, they need more vocabulary and the use of a vocabulary notebook as a successful strategy to help the students achieve this.’

Imagine that while reading a text, students come across the following sentence:

“… Because of a declining market, the company will be forced to make at least 10% of its staff redundant …”

Here is an example of what an entry in a vocabulary notebook might look like:

- **Word**: redundant
- **Type**: adjective
- **Definitions**: 1) out of a job 2) not necessary because someone else does the same thing
- **Translation**: Native Language
- **Example sentence**: “When editing, remove redundant information from your text”
- **Synonym**: unnecessary
- **Collocations**: make someone redundant, become redundant, redundant word
- **Antonym**: employed
3. Methodology

In order to accomplish the aforementioned purposes, this study explored the effect keeping vocabulary notebooks at SEEU Language Centre by addressing the following four research questions:

1. Do vocabulary notebooks promote more learning and retention of previously unknown words?
2. What are students’ attitudes towards the use of vocabulary notebooks?

3.1. Participants

The study includes 90 participants who are non-English major and are students who are currently enrolled at SEEU Language Centre taking English classes in different levels due to the fact that English classes are a compulsory part of their syllabus. At the SEEU Language Centre there are four levels of General English Classes. Level 1 are Beginners, Level 2 are Lower Intermediate, Level 3 are Intermediate and Level 4 are Upper Intermediate students regarding their proficiency level. This means they are students of Basic English courses levels A1, A2, B1, B2 (Common European Framework). The students that took part in this study were students of Level 3, so they with an intermediate proficiency level of English. The age of the students varied from 19 to 24 years old, both male and female. The students were from different ethnic backgrounds (Albanians, Macedonians and Turkish). The reason of the equal number of participants is to divide them all into equal groups and to make the calculations of the results manageable and most important to have a clear picture of the results at the end when they are compared.

3.2. Instruments

Instruments used in this study include a pre vocabulary test, a post vocabulary test and a questionnaire. Each instrument is described in detail below:

3.2.1. Pre-Test

The participants were given a pre-test before the assignment in order to investigate the effectiveness of the use of vocabulary notebooks. The test contained 90 target words that would be used in the study and in the post-tests (recall tests) and some distracters (similar words). The reason for these distracter vocabulary items was to prevent the participants from paying too much attention to the target words in the reading text of the main study. Using these distracter items increased the probability that the participants would not be able to recall any of the target words from the vocabulary pre-test.

3.2.2. Post-test

The participants were involved in a post test to measure weather students recall the vocabulary items from the vocabulary notebook conducted during the semester. The participants were not told in advance that they will take a test.

3.2.3. Questionnaire

After the post test the participants received a questionnaire about their attitude towards using vocabulary notebooks. The questions were in Albanian, Macedonian or English. The questionnaire addressed questions about the participants’ opinion on using vocabulary notebooks during the semester. It investigated whether vocabulary notebooks were helpful to the participants to remember the target vocabulary words. They were also asked what they liked or disliked about using the notebooks, and if they would continue keeping vocabulary notebooks even if it wasn’t graded by their teacher. Only the participants in the experimental groups responded to the questionnaire because the control group of both levels did not receive any treatment with glosses.
3.3. Procedures

At our university, one semester lasts for 12 weeks and the students are expected to finish their level for this period of time. The vocabulary pre-test were given to all three groups during a regular class session the on the first week of the semester. Two weeks later, the implementation of the vocabulary notebooks began in the treatment group. The vocabulary notebook program was used as supplementary material in the experimental group and the teaching was conducted the same way as in the control groups. However 10 minutes of each class time was used for various activities challenging the students to use the words in speaking and writing that they had written down. Apart from this, during the 10 weeks of the implementation all three groups followed the same syllabus and were exposed the same lessons from their course book.

4. Results

4.1. Results from the vocabulary pre-test and post-test

Table 1. The number of students and results from the pre and post vocabulary tests

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Number of Students</th>
<th>Pre-test</th>
<th>Post-test</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Treatment Group</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>19 Words</td>
<td>68 Words</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Control Group A</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>18 Words</td>
<td>39 Words</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Control Group B</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>21 Words</td>
<td>42 Words</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*100 Words in total

4.2. Results of the vocabulary tests

It is clear from the results that the treatment group that used vocabulary notebooks for ten weeks outperformed both control groups that didn’t use vocabulary notebooks as part of their graded assignment. Vocabulary notebooks prove to be a useful tool that promotes more learning and retention of previously unknown words. This finding is consistent with results of previous studies such as Walters, JoDee and BozkurtNeval, (2009) and Centenario(2013) Therefore, this study confirms the usefulness of using vocabulary notebooks for vocabulary acquisition.

4.3. Results from the questionnaire

The results from the questionnaire about students’ attitudes towards the vocabulary notebook were very positive. All twenty students from the group replied that they enjoyed creating a vocabulary notebook and they found it very helpful. They were also asked about their attitudes for the classroom activities, and the majority of students said that they appreciated these activities because repetition helped them remember the words and they thought that the activities were fun. As for the final question if they would continue to keep vocabulary notebooks in the future even though it is not a compulsory part of the course, 15% of the students stated that they would. They said that they would only if it was checked and graded by the teacher.

5. Discussion

The results support that vocabulary notebooks were successful in helping students acquire the target vocabulary words. Although the treatment group and the control groups both used the same textbook and syllabus, the difference that the students from the treatment group kept a vocabulary notebooks and had short revision activities in class results with a significant increase of vocabulary acquisition of the treatment group. In a study conducted to test the Involvement Load Hypothesis, Hulstijn and Laufer (2001) compared the vocabulary retention of
EFL learners exposed to tasks with different involvement loads; they found that the tasks for which the involvement load was higher resulted in better retention of vocabulary words encountered in the tasks. While the involvement load of the tasks in which students were involved in the present study cannot be calculated, it would seem logical to assume that the involvement load of vocabulary notebook tasks was higher than that of the more traditional vocabulary instruction activities. Simply writing the words on their vocabulary notebooks won’t be very beneficial for the students in long term so the activities that reviewed the vocabulary items helped them activate their vocabulary by being challenged to use the new words in reading and writing.

The second question about the attitudes of the students is similar to the findings of Fowle (2002) and Tezgiden (2006), in whose studies both teachers and students were positive about vocabulary notebooks. Majority of students enjoyed keeping the notebooks and they found the classroom activities very beneficial. Unfortunately in the context of this study learner autonomy was not observed, the student’s weren’t willing to use this strategy in the future unless it was graded and checked by their teacher. This study has shown that vocabulary notebooks themselves may not be enough to promote learner autonomy, in the absence of appropriate motivation for language learning. However, it seems safe to say that, in the right setting, vocabulary notebooks can enhance vocabulary acquisition. Incorporating a vocabulary notebooks into the syllabus right from the start of the semester, would give students the chance to develop a useful vocabulary learning habit. Vocabulary notebooks could be included as a graded part of the syllabus as they are not depended on high technology or expensive resources, thus accessible to all language teachers.

6. Suggestions for future research

One recommendation for future studies is to use larger groups and above all more test items since the smaller the number of participants, the less likely are conclusions that can be generalized. Apart from the use of vocabulary notebooks there are many other techniques that can be used to enhance learner autonomy. The effects of encouraging students to become autonomous learners increase gradually and may be visible only in the long run. That is why more longitudinal studies are needed in order to investigate the long-term effects of keeping vocabulary notebooks.
Appendix A. Sample short vocabulary notebook review activities

**Vocabulary Bag**

To revise vocabulary, keep a vocabulary bag in the classroom during the semester. Write the words on strips or cards and put them in the vocabulary bag. Use it for various revision activities and games.

**Guess the Word**

Divide the class into two groups. A student from the first group selects one of the words from the bag. You turn the timer on as soon as he/she pulls the word out of the bag. The student describes this word to his teammates. Only his team mates may guess.

**Pictionary**

Students pick a word from the vocabulary bag and draw it on the board. They can draw but they can’t write any words. Sitting students have one minute to guess the word. Award points for correct guesses.

**5 minute Review**

Hangman
Crossword puzzles
Word search
Use words in a story

Let’s say students were given verbs beginning with the letter E
Earn, eat, end, enjoy and estimate

They can write a short story such as this:

Andy was eating dinner and enjoying a quiet evening when he started thinking about his future. He estimated the amount of money he must earn. This ended his enjoyment.

Role – Play

Invite two confident students up to the front of the class. Ask them to imagine they are the host and interviewee on a talk show. Put some vocabulary words in front of them. Tell the listening students that every time they want a change, the call out “new word “ Whoever is speaking then has to pick up a slip of paper and use the word of phrase in their next sentence
References

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