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The Effect of Concordance Enriched Instruction on the Vocabulary Learning and Retention of Iranian EFL Learners

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Abstract

This study investigated the effect of enriching the vocabulary instruction with the printouts of concordance lines on learning and retention of Iranian EFL students. 70 students participated in the study. The experimental group received instruction which was enriched with concordance printouts, while the control group received the conventional instruction. Both groups completed a pretest, a posttest, and a delayed vocabulary recall test. For the vocabulary recall test a variation of vocabulary knowledge scale by Paribakht and Wesche (1996) was used. The experimental group outperformed the control group in both the post test and the delayed vocabulary recall test.

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1. Introduction

Vocabulary is central to language and of critical importance to the typical language learner (Zimmerman, 1997); Although, vocabulary teaching and learning constitute a major problem for EFL instructors and students, effective second language vocabulary acquisition is particularly important for English as a foreign language (EFL) learners who frequently acquire impoverished lexicons despite years of formal study (Hunt & Beglar, 2005). Using appropriate presentation methods enables learners to obtain a deeper impression of and richer information about the

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target words to make them enter the long-term memory more easily (Zhang, 2008). But a very influential view of vocabulary acquisition claims that we acquire most words through exposure to language input, particularly reading input, rather than by deliberately committing words to memory (Laufer, 2001).

Corpus-based language teaching represents a new revolution in language teaching (Sinclair, 2004). Over the years, there has been an increasing interest among the language teachers in exploiting corpora for the teaching of second and foreign languages. In the meantime, corpus linguistics is now branching out into applications that are directly relevant to language teaching and second language acquisition research (Barbieri & Eckhardt, 2007).

Corpora can have a direct or indirect effect on the language classroom (Römer, 2010). Indirectly corpora can be used to produce language teaching materials, and can form the basis for new approaches to syllabus design and to methodology. (see Römer, 2010). Corpora are also seen as resources for learners to use directly, inside and outside the classroom (see Gavioli & Aston, 2001, Römer, 2010). One of the most notable contributions of corpus linguistics to language teaching has been studies that describe how language features used (Conrad, 2005). Many have advocated that students themselves study corpora to help them learn about English (Meyers, 2004), a methodology known as data-driven learning (Johns 1994; Hadley 1997). Data-driven learning (DDL) consists in using the tools and techniques of corpus linguistics for pedagogical purposes (Gilquin & Granger, 2010). In DDL instructors can engage the learners in corpus work by giving them direct access to a corpus or concordance explore patterns in the target language. When corpus linguistics is used in classroom, the learners become language researchers (Conrad, 2005). Corpus linguistics presents authentic data to the language learner and helps him/her to assess the hypotheses about language allowing the learner to explore the relevant linguistic structures. With respect to vocabulary instruction, corpus linguistics offers valuable tools which assist teachers in efficient presentation of vocabulary in EFL classrooms. As Kennedy (1991) claims concordancers and corpus linguistics have begun to provide new opportunities for second language teaching methodologies.

However, there still seems to be a gap between what applied corpus linguistics has to offer and what teachers actually do (or don't do) with corpora in their teaching practice (Mukherjee, 2006). In order to help to address this gap this study sets out to investigate the effect of enriching vocabulary instruction with concordances on the retention of Iranian EFL learners. Two questions are raised in this study:

- 1- Is there a difference between the vocabulary learning of EFL students who receive concordance enriched instruction with that of those who receive conventional instruction?
- 2- Is there a difference between the vocabulary retention of these two groups of students?

1.1 Data driven learning

CL has been used in the language classroom since the 1980s via concordancing (Johns, 1986). Drawing on learner-centered approaches to language learning such as Widdowson's (1990) learning as discovery, Johns (1991) introduced data-driven learning (DDL) is the type of discovery- learning that is achieved by concordancing. In Data-driven learning computer-generated concordances are used in the classroom, and activities and exercises are created based on concordances (see also Hadley, 1997). In a variation of DDL activities language learners are given printouts of computer-generated concordances in the classroom in order to explore language patterns. Because concordance lines can provide many examples of patterns of use, they have application to the language classroom and are now being used in ELT materials (O'keefe, McCarty, & Carter, 2007).

Furthermore, the redefined role of the learner as researcher shifts control of learning from teacher to student, causing the classroom to become more student-centered during these activities (Balunda, 2009). Chambers and Kelly (2002) note that the pedagogical context of DDL brings together constructivist theories of learning, the communicative approach to language teaching and developments within the area of learner autonomy. Corpus-based activities are thought to increase learner autonomy "as students are taught how to observe language and make

generalizations rather than depending on a teacher” (Conrad, 2005, p. 402). Corpus linguistics can also be used to increase learners' understanding of word use via analyzing collocations of words, generation of word lists, semantic prosody, disambiguating the uses of related words, etc. (see Conrad, 2005). Finally, the DDL methodology also incorporates an element of discovery which makes learning more motivating and more interesting for the learners (Gilquin & Granger, 2010).

2. Method

2.1. Participants

Participants were 70 freshmen EFL students whose scores ranged between +/-1 standard deviation from the mean in a language proficiency test (PET). The participants were selected from among 200 EFL students, and were assigned to experimental (N=31) and control groups (N=39) randomly.

2.2. Instruments

The PET test and an achievement test were used as pre and post test respectively. For the vocabulary recall test a variation of vocabulary knowledge scale by Wesche and Paribakht (1996) was used. The reliability of the achievement test was estimated using KR20 formula which gave a reliability of .78.

2.3 Procedure

The experiment took place during the regular class periods at the Islamic Azad University of Andimeshk. The material used in the classes was taken from the text covered during the semester (Concepts & Comments: Reading and Vocabulary Development (Ackert & Lee, 2005)). The concordances were taken from the Collins COBUILD Dictionary on CD-ROM (2006) and Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English as well as online corpora such as British national corpus and Corpus of contemporary American English. Because the study focused on teaching vocabulary to learners who had never engaged in corpus-based work prior to the study, in line with Leech (1997) and Chambers (2007), printouts of the concordances were used in the study. To compare the achievement of the two groups, an achievement test which included 50 multiple choice items was administered. An independent-samples t-test was conducted to compare the performance of the two groups on the achievement test. To assess the vocabulary retention of both group a delayed vocabulary test was administered (after a one month delay) which was a variation of the vocabulary knowledge scale by Wesche and Paribakht (1996). A list of 20 vocabularies taken from the vocabulary taught during the experiment was used to assess the student's retention. An independent-samples t-test was conducted to compare the performance of the two groups on the vocabulary recall test, too.

3. Results and discussion

In this study, the researchers investigated the effect of enriching vocabulary instruction with printouts of concordance lines on the achievement and retention of EFL learners. For the achievement test, the t-test showed a significant difference between the performance of the group that received concordance enriched instruction ($M=29.87$; $SD=7.25$) and the group with the conventional instruction ($M=24.94$, $SD=6.18$), $t(68)=3.06$, $p=.003$, $\alpha=.05$. For the vocabulary knowledge scale, too, a significant difference was observed between the group that received concordance enriched instruction ($M=46.16$; $SD=9.86$) and the group with the conventional instruction ($M=37.82$, $SD=11.58$), $t(68)=3.19$, $p=.002$, $\alpha=.05$.

The results indicate that enriching vocabulary instruction with concordance lines improves students' achievement and retention of EFL vocabulary. The findings are consistent with Cobb (1997) who found that concordance lines caused small but consistent gains in his students' vocabulary knowledge. Cobb (1997) argued that “multi-textual

learning appears to facilitate the acquisition of transferrable word knowledge” (p.313). Findings are also in line with Thurstun and Candlin (1998) and Schmitt (2000) who explored the use of concordances in vocabulary learning, and found it advantageous. Findings also support Binkai (2012) who argues that the corpus-driven approach is helpful in vocabulary learning and can contribute to autonomous learning at the same time.

Findings also support Cobb and Horst (1999) who attribute the advantages of a concordance-based tutor over incidental reading-based and traditional word list learning strategies to the facts that : a) computer concordancing conserves the efficiency of list targeting while allowing for exposure to the new word in multiple contexts, b) it allows for a way to ensure that each word is encountered a minimum of five times, and c) the learner can choose among the example sentences generated by the concordancer for one that makes sense to him or her. Gilquin and Granger (2010), too, acknowledge several advantages for DDL in addition to the authenticity brought to the classroom, one of which is the corrective function, in which learners can find the help they need to correct their own interlanguage features and thus improves their writing.

Findings of the present study seem to offer some support to the claim that concordance enriched instruction contributes to the efficient learning and retention of vocabulary. In the literature concordance enriched instruction(i.e. DDL) is viewed as being consistent with a variety of principles and learning goals within the CLT paradigm, which currently dominate the English language teaching (Blaunda, 2009). First, concordance output exposes learners to linguistic phenomena in authentic contexts (Cobb,1997).Concordances not only make accessible an enormous amount of authentic language input but also creates various inductive and deductive language learning opportunities not available in the past (Dilin& Jiang, 2009). On the other hand, as language learners are usually advised to read more to facilitate multi-contextual lexical acquisition (O'keefee, McCarty, & Carter, 2007), DDL may have a role in rationalizing and shortening the learning process by providing a rich source of embodiments and contexts new vocabularies (O'keefee, et.al, 2007).This method of teaching has students investigate a corpus of native-speaker speech or writing with a concordancing program to give them real examples of language usage rather than the contrived examples often found in grammar books (Meyer, 2004).

4. Conclusion and implications

Johns (1991) coined the term Data-driven learning (DDL) to denote activities in which language learners are given computer-generated concordances or printouts of computer-generated concordances in the classroom in order to explore language patterns. Being aware of the significance that DDL has to offer to the language pedagogy, and recognizing its advantages like authenticity and active student-centered learning, this study investigated the effect of enriching the vocabulary instruction with the printouts of concordance lines on vocabulary learning and retention of Iranian EFL students. Findings suggest that enriching the instruction with concordance lines has positive impact on vocabulary learning and also helps subjects recall new words more efficiently.

The advantages of the concordance enriched instruction on the traditional vocabulary instruction can be attributed to several inherent qualities of the data driven learning. Data-driven learning provides the students with a large quantity of authentic and contextualized data. This type of input promotes the inductive learning and entails a change in the teacher's role in the classroom, making the classroom more student-centered. Moreover, concordance printouts can be used to raise learners' language awareness. According to Gilquin & Granger (2010), it is a promising technique which brings learners into contact with (potentially) authentic language, motivates them by introducing an element of discovery, develops important cognitive skills and, more generally, provides benefits which go well beyond the knowledge of the item under study (p. 367).

It appears to be of paramount importance that many more teachers get actively involved in working with – and thus disseminating knowledge about – corpora (Mukherjee, 2006). As Gilquin & Granger (2010) acknowledge one reason for not doing DDL might simply be that the teacher does not know enough about corpora and the possibility of using corpora in the classroom (p. 366). Mukherjee (2006) calls for a need for 'in-service teacher training

programmers' (p. 10). Finally, the contribution of corpus linguistics is not seen as replacing other pedagogical considerations, but as adding to them with considerations about language use (Conrad, 2005).

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