Chapter 13
The Impact of Corpus–Based Vocabulary Teaching/Learning on Vocabulary Retention across Language Proficiency Levels

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ABSTRACT

In this chapter the impact of corpus-based vocabulary teaching/learning on vocabulary retention among EFL learners with different levels of language proficiency was studied. Four groups of students (two experimental and two control) participated in the study. The experimental groups received vocabulary instruction based on the techniques and procedures of the lexical approach. The control groups were taught with conventional techniques of vocabulary teaching. Vocabulary learning and retention were assessed by two vocabulary tests taken immediately after the treatment and with a 2-month delay respectively. The result showed that the lower proficiency experimental group outperformed other groups in the first vocabulary test, while in the second vocabulary test no significant difference was found between the experimental groups with different language proficiencies.

INTRODUCTION

Vocabulary is considered as one of the central components of language teaching and learning and is of great importance to language learners. Words are the building blocks of a language since they label objects, actions, and ideas without which people cannot convey the meaning or communicate (Thornbury, 2002). The prominent role of vocabulary knowledge in second or foreign language learning has been recognized in the last decade by second language theorists and researchers. Accordingly, numerous types of approaches, techniques, exercises and practices have been introduced into the field to teach vocabulary (Hatch & Brown, 1995).

Although grammar still remains an important part of language acquisition, the lexical memory load, even for an intermediate learner, is enormous (Schmitt, 2000). Vocabulary has been regarded as one of the most important aspects of communication as words of a language convey a great deal of the intended meaning of speakers and writers (Hedge, 2008; Richards & Rodgers, 2001). It is now recognized that the essential difference between intermediate and advanced learners is not the complexity of their grammatical knowledge, but advanced learners' lexical repertoire and the mental lexicon available to them (Lewis, 1997a).

There are lots of techniques to teach and present vocabulary in a course such as physical demonstration, verbal explanation, exemplification, translation, providing the students with synonyms and antonyms, using visual aids, and asking learners to check the meaning of the words in the dictionary (Hedge, 2008; Nash & Snowling, 2006). However, it is evident that some of these proposed techniques cannot bring about a great deal of vocabulary retention since learners are not able to make use of the presented words in performing academic tasks and communicative activities (Hedge, 2008). Thornbury (2002), for instance, elaborated on the limitation of translation as a technique to presenting words. He asserts that in spite of being economical, translation cannot guarantee a great deal of vocabulary retention since learners rely heavily on the first language (L1) equivalent and do not actively engage in guessing the meaning from the context. Moreover, researchers believe that the illustrative sentences used to present the words are not most of the time authentic and are not used by second language (L2) speakers and writers. They are usually produced based on coursebook writers and/or language teachers' intuition, knowledge, and experience.

Research on vocabulary teaching and learning, however, has revealed that one of the most influential techniques of teaching new words and expressions is using chunks. Chunks, or collocations, are simply "the way in which some words are often used together, or a particular combination of words used in this way" (Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English, 2010). Further, what has been postulated and surveyed is the effectiveness of these chunks among pools of real examples, known as corpora on vocabulary learning and retention. The widespread use of corpora in materials development and teaching/learning vocabulary and grammar is reported as a result of the published work on the effectiveness of using corpus-based instructional materials in foreign/second language classes. The use of real examples from the corpora acts as the comprehensible input and exposes language learners, especially in a foreign language learning setting, to unlimited uses of a given key word in a variety of contexts. This is a real treasure for those learners who cannot travel to foreign countries or do not interact with foreigners.

One method of teaching vocabulary that places particular emphasis on presenting words in language chunks and using corpus-based techniques is the lexical approach. In this framework, a distinction is made between vocabulary and lexicon, whereas the former concerns words in isolation and the latter is related to words along with their surrounding context or collocations (Lewis, 2006). Widdowson (1989) in defining the concept of communicative competence stresses the importance of such chunks:

Communicative competence is not a matter of knowing rules for the composition of sentences... it is much more a matter of knowing a stock of partially pre-assembled patterns, formulaic frameworks, and a kit of rules, so to speak, and being able to apply the rules to make whatever adjustments are necessary according to contextual demands. Communicative competence in this view is essentially a matter of adaptation, and rules are not generative, but regulative and subservient (p. 135).

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