



Zone of Proximal Development: The Effect of Verbal Scaffolding on Improving Iranian Young EFL Learners' Vocabulary Learning

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Abstract

We make use of spoken and written words every day to converse and also to convey ideas, thoughts, and emotions to those who are around us. Occasionally we- as EFL users- communicate fruitfully but sometimes we're not fairly so successful. The term scaffolding, it was introduced by Wood, Bruner and Ross (1976) in their attempts to provide an operational definition to the concept of teaching in the zone of proximal development (ZPD) (cited in Wells, 1999). Thus, the current study aimed at investigating the effect of verbal scaffolding on improvement of vocabulary learning of Iranian EFL learners. For the sake of solving the issues related to the homogeneousness of the level of the subjects, before starting the program a language proficiency test was administered to 120 learners. Afterwards a pre-test on the participants word knowledge was taken and after the program there was a post-test for both groups in order to measure the effectiveness of the self-regulation strategies. According to the results of the quasi- experimental study self-regulation strategies are of great importance for learners, since they learn to be autonomous learners, they learn how to take control their learning, they feel they are doing something valuable, and all of these yield in a very relaxed environment for learning and using the language.

Keywords: context acquaintance, vocabulary learning, zone of proximal development

INTRODUCTION

Psychologists, linguists and language tutors have been concerned with vocabulary learning strategies for long time. Vocabulary knowledge has indispensable role in learning and using a language. It is more challenging when it comes to foreign language learners with very limited exposure to language and not having enough opportunity to use learnt words in real life. As a result, they have deep problems, for example in reading skill, there is no doubt that reading is one of the most important parts of

experiencing a foreign language. Educators, linguists, and language teachers tried to study vocabulary learning strategies. There are so many studies about the retention of words that are results of using different vocabulary strategies, this shows the effects of various strategies in how of teaching (Yongqi Gu, 2003). Self-regulation is not a mental aptitude or an educational performance skill; it is somewhat the self-directive process by which learners alter their mental abilities into educational skills.

REVIEW OF THE RELATED LITERATURE

Vocabulary

The meaning of "vocabulary" generally allocates the total of the words that are recognized by a person and employed by him. Actually, knowledge of terms cannot be uttered in such a straightforward way. Knowledge of words has several facets and these more aptly define vocabulary. Vocabulary also stands for a "body of words" that is utilized in a particular language. The definition of vocabulary moreover comprises words that are untried or hard along with their meanings seen concerning a particular foreign language text or particular text. Vocabulary is generally broken up into reading, listening, speaking, and writing types. Reading vocabulary contains the words that a person knows during reading. This shapes the largest type of the four, as readers get more familiar with words by reading. A listening vocabulary, as the name utters comprises of all the words recognized by listening. This is assisted by the tone and situation in which the words are spoken. The words used in speech come under speaking vocabulary and it is a sort of subset to listening vocabulary. Writing vocabulary comprises words that appear in papers or other formal writings and these do not in general find their way in speech (Sokmen, 1997).

According to Pikulski and Templeton (2004) words are vital part of life; they changed the knowledge of the world and will continue to do so. Vocabulary is the major way for learning a language. Words are foundations of language. Vocabulary is a central constituent of language use. The noteworthy effect of vocabulary knowledge in second or foreign language learning has been highlighted recently (Zahedi & Abdi, 2012). Early on 1930s, it was found that there is close link between English word knowledge and achievement in life. Success in earning and management was correlated with vocabulary scores. When the vocabulary knowledge is not enough, people have difficulty in expressing their thoughts and ideas and this usually results in physical aggressiveness. It can be said that low vocabulary is a kind of imperfection (Word smart knowledge, 2013). For understanding what someone hears and reads and also in order to communicate effectively with other people vocabulary size is so critical (Shoebottom, 2013). Wilkins (1972) on the significance of vocabulary knowledge in communication states "'without grammar very little can be conveyed, without vocabulary nothing can be conveyed" (as cited in Schmitt, 2010, p.3). On the importance of vocabulary, Krashen (1989) stated that "a large vocabulary is of course, essential for mastery language" (as cited in Schmitt 2010, p.4). Rubin and Thompson (1994) point on the role of vocabulary in communication: "One cannot speak, read or write a foreign language without knowing a lot of words. Vocabulary is at the heart of mastering a foreign language".

Nguyen and Khuat (2003) also believed in the importance of vocabulary in foreign language learning (as cited in Thuy, 2007). According to Schmitt a large vocabulary is required for someone to use language in desired way, as it was mentioned people use language for communicating, conveying thought and sharing beliefs. So there is an important point here, the size of vocabulary that would be suitable for a language user to use language successfully and without breakdowns, is of great importance. In English vocabulary size results in limiting the types of texts someone can read, in other words there is close relationship between numbers of words you know, and how well you are in different language skills (Nation & Meara, 2002, p. 46).

Tsubaki (2012) believes the three elements of vocabulary knowledge: (a) partial and precise knowledge, (b) depth of knowledge, and (c) receptive and productive knowledge. Precise knowledge concerns itself with knowing correctly, while partial knowledge can be imprecise and incomplete. Richards (1976) and Nation (1990) describe depth of knowledge as how well items are learned. The receptive-productive dimension is related to the receptive skills of reading and listening and the productive skills of writing and speaking. Language researchers and language teaching professionals should consider what knowing a word means, and determine what type of knowledge learners are to gain through particular class activities (as cited in Tsubaki, 2012). Alderson (1984) on the importance of vocabulary knowledge in language use states: "what would appear to show is that the size of one's vocabulary is relevant to one's performance on any language tests, in other words, that language ability is to quite a large extent a function of vocabulary size" (as cited in Schmitt, 2010, p.5). In the procedure of communication MWUs (multi-word units) are of great importance for native speakers and surely for second / foreign language learners. Pawley and Syder (1983) state that; native speakers are fluent because of having the knowledge of MWUs (or pre-formulated / Formulas / Lexical phrases) (as cited in Nation & Meara, 2002, p. 36). According to Laufer (1997): "The most important aspects of word knowledge are

1. Form (spoken & written, i.e. spelling & pronunciation)
2. Word structure (common derivations, inflections)
3. Syntactic pattern of the word in a phrase and a sentence
4. Meaning
 - Referential (what non-linguistic entity in the outside world the word refer to)
 - Affective (connotation of a word, e.g. spinster, which unlike single woman is associated with old age, isolation, or sadness)
 - Pragmatic (suitability of the word in a particular situation, e.g. 'I have three offspring' would be unsuitable in an everyday conversation)
5. Lexical relations of the word with other words:
 - Synonymy (e.g. bide / conceal)
 - Antonym (e.g. single / married)
 - Hyponymy (e.g. flower / rose)
6. Common collocations (e.g. *a high probability*, but *a good chance*)" (as cited in Laufer, 1997, p.1).

According to Blachowicz (2007) there are principles for an effective vocabulary instruction, one of which is that: “vocabulary learning takes place when students are impressed in words”, students learn words more effectively when they are read to and when teacher involves them in discussions (p.1). Secondly “vocabulary learning takes place when students are active in discovering ways in which words are related to experiences and to one another”, research shows that when learner can make a network of meaning for a new word in her/his own way, she/he would learn better, that is, when they are active in learning process they are so successful (p.2). Third one is that “vocabulary learning takes place when students personalize word learning”. When learners use their past experiences for learning new words, they learn more successfully (p.3). The fourth principle is “vocabulary learning builds on multiple source of information”, when students should learn specific words, they need to use various sources of information (p.4). Fifth principle is that “vocabulary learning takes place when students gain control over their own learning”, research shows that when students select vocabulary themselves, they may learn better (p.4). The sixth one is that “vocabulary learning takes place when students are aided in developing independent strategies”, by independent strategies she means using context and using dictionary, it can be said that when learners read the words in context, their general vocabulary is also developed (p.4). The last principle was said by Blachowicz (2007) as “vocabulary learning is long lasting when students use words in meaningful ways”, when learners are exposed to new words with different types of instruction, different depths and types of learning may have been resulted (p.5). There is no doubt that there are some factors that affect vocabulary learning, and surely individual differences are so important in vocabulary learning.

As said by Carlo and August (2005), ELLs who are slow in vocabulary improvement are not able to understand texts that are in advance levels. They state that these students are of poor performance and as a result are at risk of being diagnosed as learning disabled students (August, 2005). Accordingly in teaching vocabulary the nature of instruction is of great importance. Teachers should use effective strategies for teaching vocabulary. Psychologists, linguists, and language teachers have tried to find out the most well-organized vocabulary learning strategies (Yongi Gu, 2003). There is a clear distinction between explicit and incidental learning in second language research (Yule, 2006, p.163). In vocabulary learning these two different types give rise to different outcomes. The term incidental is used to, referring to learning something without the intention to learn it. For example, learning vocabulary while learning to read, it can be contrasted with deliberate learning or explicit learning. Research on comparing these two types of vocabulary learning shows that, “deliberate” or “direct” vocabulary learning is so effective. There should be no surprise because according to noticing hypothesis when there is attention learning is more likely to occur (Nation & Meara, 2002, p. 40-41). Thus, successful vocabulary development ensures that students would develop the meta-cognitive skills of which will result in comprehension. When learners, learn to read in meaningful manner, they would learn strongly (Nosal, 2012). Words should be taught effectively before reading in text (CAST, 2006). Lin states that teachers need to teach students how to infer the meaning of words effectively (Lin, 1997). There

should be methods that can help learners to learn words meaningfully not in isolation. Learners should be engaged in learning. Actually in the process of vocabulary learning knowledge of context is of critical role, sometimes learners even couldn't find the meaning of words of which they already know, this is because of the role of context of which they meet the words. In these cases they need to be assisted to get familiar with those words in some way. This aid is supported by ZPD. The zone of proximal development, frequently abbreviated as ZPD, is the difference between what a learner can do without help and what he or she can do with help. It is a notion introduced, yet not completely developed, by Soviet psychologist Lev Vygotsky (1896–1934) during the last ten years of his life. In the suggested manner learners even would learn how to guess the meaning of words based on the context of use.

The zone of proximal development and Scaffolding

Lev Vygotsky, a Russian psychologist, commenced the concept of a zone of proximal development (ZPD), which is the notional gap between a.) The learner's existing developmental level as determined by independent problem-solving ability and b.) the learner's potential level of development as verified by the ability to solve problems under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers. The term 'zone of proximal development' is perhaps one of the broadest and renowned ideas associated with Vygotsky's scientific production. The term nowadays appears in most developmental and educational psychology textbooks, as well as some universal psychology textbooks. Inside educational research, the notion is now utilized broadly in studies about teaching and learning in many subject-matter parts, including reading, writing, mathematics, science, second-language learning (e.g., Dunn & Lantolf, 1998).

Stephen Krashen, a researcher into second language acquisition, devised a similar notion for the kind of input that an ESL student needs in order to make progress in acquiring English. He called this gap $i+1$, where i is the current level of proficiency. Undoubtedly an ESL student cannot tackle or learn from language input that is at $i+7$ or $i+14$. The input must be got comprehensible. Indeed, Krashen (2003), affirms that comprehensible input is an adequate condition for language acquisition. However, Krashen (2003) further asserts that no language will be acquired in the presence of the affective filter. This purely means that an ESL student who is nervous or bored in class will learn neither subject content nor new language, even if the input is comprehensible. Thus according to the current study it can be concluded that it is supported by input hypothesis, this is so because providing learners with information on the topic and the content, facilitates the process of inferencing and meaning making and connecting the new words to the already existing ones. The word familiarity is somehow a broad term which includes different factors in, topic, culture, content. But actually it seems the most important one is the familiarity of the context of situation which enables the users in their way to making sense of the messages. In the task of reading, relevant knowledge that the reader possesses can determine the extent to which a text can be understood (Spilich, Vesonder, Chiesi, & Voss, 1979).

A variety of research studies have shown the contributions of higher levels of background knowledge to efficiency of attentional distribution to input during reading (Nassaji, 2002). Higher levels of background knowledge can provide richer textual interpretations which can result in better remembering what has been read, and consequently, in advanced memory performance. Diakidoy (1998) proposed that pertinent knowledge in a field means that at least some of the significant concepts of the field are known. The ways in which these enabling concepts are or can be related are recognized to some extent, and they are thought to facilitate the learning of unknown concepts. Considering enabling concept knowledge and general topic knowledge, it can be assumed that a rich knowledge base can help generate and force initial hypotheses about any unfamiliar words by providing the reader with the position and function of the concept underlying the word in a network (Diakidoy, 1998, p. 135).

Furthermore, the same knowledge can assist inferencing when necessary information or relations are missing. As Grabe (2004) asserts, background knowledge overlays the way for demystifying lexical meanings and syntactic uncertainties, and is thus necessary for all types of inferencing and text model creation. Vygotsky (1978) through verbal scaffolding when mediation is appropriated and internalized, the individual gets autonomy or self-regulation and is then able to re-contextualize the ability. The internalization and re-contextualization of mediation is what yields in development (cited in Lantolf & Thorne, 2006).

RESEARCH QUESTION AND HYPOTHESIS

Q: Does verbal scaffolding result in improving Iranian EFL learners' vocabulary learning?

H: There are no significant differences in the effect of verbal scaffolding on Iranian EFL learners' vocabulary learning

METHODOLOGY

Design of the study

The design of the study is quasi-experimental. The Independent variable of the study is verbal scaffolding and dependent variable is vocabulary learning.

Participants

A total of 60 language learners (all female) with an age range of 7-12 took part in this study. The contributors were from Persian and Turkish background. The participants were chosen from 5 classes. Previous to the program, a language proficiency test of listening, speaking, reading, and writing was conducted in order for assuring their proficiency levels. A pre-test of vocabulary knowledge was carried out to the both groups for their comparability. After that the program was begun.

Context of the Study

The participants of the study were selected from one of the institutes of *Tabriz, Iran*. In this institution a course consists of 15 sessions which meet three times a week. In that center the course consists of teaching new topics and active interaction. Communication is one of the most important points of L2 teaching in this organization. Materials are utilized to activate listening comprehension and accordingly communication.

Instruments and Materials

For the sake of gathering quantifiable data to get the results of the study, the researcher utilized the following instruments and materials: In order to assuring the homogeneity of proficiency level of the participants, a language proficiency test was performed. The *Flyers* listening test consists of five sections with 25 questions. The reading and writing has 6 parts, and there are 40 questions and *Flyers* speaking is of four parts. A pre-test was carried out in order to guarantee the comparability of both groups, on their word knowledge. After finishing the sessions, the researcher administered a post-test for measuring the effectiveness of the treatment.

Procedure

At the start of the study in order to reassure the proficiency level of the participants one language proficiency test was administered, and 60 subjects- who were just about at the same level- have been picked for the study. After that one pre-test on learners' word knowledge was performed then the program was established. In the experimental group the researcher provided learners with verbal scaffoldings in the process of the making sense of new words. The researchers explained them in the particular context of which they appeared, thus the context of situation and even the context of culture have been clarified for them. While in the control group the participants were taught the same words through traditional instruction. At the end of the program one post-test was administered to both groups. The collected data has been analyzed by SPSS; since there were two groups the researcher applied t-test.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Let's answer the question of the investigation. It should be noted that both groups were roughly at the same level of the word knowledge at the beginning of the study it can be inferred from the means of both groups in pre-test for experimental group 12.20 and for control group it was 12.13 while in post-test that of experimental group enhanced to 17.07 with SD of 0.75, while in control group it remained approximately the same e.g. 12.33 with SD of .94.

Table 1. Paired Samples Statistics-Experimental Group

		Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Pair 1	Posttest	17.0744	30	.750511	.14500
	Pretest	12.2022	30	1.15622	.21466

Table 2. Paired Samples Statistics-Control Group

		Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Pair 2	Posttest	12.3322	30	.944287	.16633
	Pretest	12.1133	30	1.06420	.19488

In the following table it is quite evident that the experimental group unlike control group, high scored in the post-test.

Table 3. Paired Samples Test-Experimental Group

Paired Differences					t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference				
			Lower	Upper			
4.76654	1.00540	.18254	4.12071	4.74243	26.452	29	.000

Table 2 represents that the mean increase in Vocabulary scores was 4.76 with a 95% confidence interval ranging from 4.12 to 4.74. It is also specified that the mean enhancement in the vocabulary posttest was statistically significant ($t = (29) = 26.45$, $P = .000$). Therefore, the Null Hypothesis is rejected and the research hypothesis is supported. It can be said that based on the findings of the current research the group receiving verbal scaffolding outperformed in the post-test. The results of the study are in agreement with the view of Vygotsky (1978) a child's performance in acting on a task with the aid of others would exceed what she or he might do without aid. He believes that this potential performance is just possible within the zone of proximal development- ZPD (cited in Sidek, 2011). The results are in agreement with Stocking (2010) who examined ways that assisted conceptual understanding and retention of vocabulary. The result of the study illustrated that social interaction yields in word manipulation, and contextual analysis had significant effect upon vocabulary development.

The current study also supports the views of Olson and Prath (2000) who believe that that instructional scaffolding assists learners and mentors to attain the goal of any educator, which is to aid students expand skills that will make them self- directed and self- regulated learners. It also lets them to reach levels of mastery that might be impossible for them to attain without it (cited in Raymond, 2000). As said by Lempert-Shepell (1995) "the teacher is not only expected to be a cultural mediator but also a teacher-researcher; consequently, the teaching candidate should experience investigative learning during their professional preparation" (p. 438).

Thus teachers are to help learners to learn in deep manner through interacting with others. It would be helpful to teach learners how to learn by themselves and also with others. If these can be done in effective way learners would be autonomous and self-directed. Instead of relying on someone else learners will learn how to help themselves and how to internalize it. Like any other work this also faced with some limitations of which put restriction on the generalizing of the results. The first one surely was required time for working on the words of each lesson. The second issue undoubtedly

was the number of the subjects, since sixty is not adequate for generalizing of the outcomes to larger populations. The last but not the least was the gender of the participants which as female. Further studies on males are also required to increase the generalizability of the results.

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