

The Interplay between Topic Familiarity and Passage Sight Vocabulary: Focusing on its Impact on EFL Learners' Lexical Inferencing and Recall

Reza Biria

Assistant Professor at English School of post-graduate studies, Department of Foreign Languages, Isfahan (Khorasgan) branch, Islamic Azad University, Isfahan, Iran

Ali Bahadoran Baghbaderani

MA in TEFL, Department of Foreign Languages, Isfahan (Khorasgan) branch, Islamic Azad University, Isfahan, Iran

Abstract

Lexical inferencing is one of cognitive processing mechanism which plays a pivotal role in second language reading. The present study sought to investigate the impact of topic familiarity and passage sight vocabulary on lexical inferencing and recall of Iranian EFL students. For this purpose, by administrating a Quick Oxford Proficiency Test (QOPT), a sample of 60 students with an age range of 23 to 30 were randomly selected from the population of sophomore students studying English. The test results were used to categorize the students into intermediate and advanced groups, 30 each. Several instruments were utilized to operationalize the variables in the study. First, a cloze procedure consisting of two passages with familiar topics and two with unfamiliar topics was given to measure the participants' lexical inferencing ability. Then, a passage sight vocabulary test was applied to assess students' overall knowledge of words employed in the targeted passages. Finally, after a period of two weeks, a lexical recall test was administered to examine the learners' retention of lexical items which they had already seen in the four cloze passages. The results obtained via relevant statistical techniques revealed that topic familiarity and passage sight vocabulary had a direct bearing on EFL learners' lexical inferencing ability and recall.

Keywords: cognitive processing mechanism, lexical inferencing, topic familiarity, passage sight vocabulary, learners' prior knowledge

INTRODUCTION

In the context of L2 learning, reading is the most important skill for academic purposes. Concerned researchers have argued that reading is an interactive process involving a wide range of semantic, syntactic, lexical, and world knowledge (Grabe & Stoller, 2002). Furthermore, reading is a dynamic ability which deals with different linguistic, perceptual, and cognitive processes related not only to the text variables but also to the

reader's variables. For readers to accomplish processing a written discourse, it is crucial to construct meaning through interaction with the text and integrating the information available in it with their prior knowledge structures. As such, comprehension is the result of the interplay between the text and information provided by the readers, i.e., their prior knowledge.

As a consequence, comprehension is a complex cognitive skill involving many levels of processing. One of the main aspects of comprehension is the readers' ability to cope with the meaning of unknown words they face in a text. For this reason, relying on the contextual cues to predict and infer the meaning of unfamiliar words cannot be considered a proper strategy since it may result in the superficial comprehension of the key words (Paynter, Bodrova, & Doty, 2005). To overcome this problem, mature readers should acquire knowledge of how words work and use specific strategies to deal with new words in the text.

Similarly, lexical inferencing is a cognitive process in which learners use explicit information in the text to get implicit meaning out of the text based on their prior knowledge. Inferencing indicates the readers' attempts to discover the appropriate meanings of words comprising a given text. In spite of their attempts to do so, readers may encounter certain problems and fail to get the exact meanings of the words (Paribakht, 2005) or they may ignore the meaning of unfamiliar words in a text and make no attempt to guess their meanings (Paribakht & Wesche, 1999). The first reason for such failure may be inadequate textual cues in the text making inferring of word meaning very difficult (Dubin & Olshtain, 1993). The second reason for failing to infer the appropriate meaning of a word is the clues that are unknown to the learners, so that they cannot find and use appropriate strategies to infer the intended message of the text. Finally, the clues, at times, may mislead the learners.

It is clear that there are several factors influencing readers' attempts to infer correct meanings of the text. Fukkink and de Glopper (1998) divided these factors into text-related and learner-related factors. Paribakht (2005) enumerates contextual factors in terms of the frequency of unknown words, their importance to text comprehension, the density of unknown words, text length, and type of comprehension task, word characteristics, and the existence of clear contextual clues in the text. On the other hand, the learner-related factors influencing lexical inferencing encompass such resources as learners' L2 proficiency and L2 vocabulary knowledge. According to Haastrup (1991), measures of L2 proficiency have a significant part in successful inferencing (Bengeleil & Paribakht, 2004; Cain, Lemmon, & Oakhill, 2004; Paribakht, 2005). Essentially, the level of L2 lexical knowledge is a crucial component of L2 proficiency, and it is believed that, there is a high correlation between L2 vocabulary knowledge and lexical inferencing strategies. Haastrup (1991) came to the conclusion that L2 proficiency is a decisive element in lexical Inferencing. Furthermore, he suggested a threshold level of declarative knowledge that is necessary for readers to obtain in order to activate their inferencing mechanisms. Relevant findings prove that different aspects of L2 proficiency may have a

strong influence on making successful L2 lexical inferencing possible and support the view that lexical inferencing is strongly affected by the learners' pre-existing lexical knowledge (Kieffer & Lesaux, 2012; Shen, 2010).

Although scholars' definitions of background knowledge are often worded differently, they typically underlie the same basic concepts. For instance, Stevens (1980) defines background knowledge quite simply as "... what one already knows about a subject... (p.151)." Biemans and Simons' (1996) definition of background knowledge is slightly more complex. "Background knowledge is all kinds of knowledge learners have when entering a learning environment that is potentially relevant for acquiring new knowledge" (p.6).

It is interesting to note that topic familiarity, as Pulido (2004) states, deals with background knowledge about the topic and content of a text. In this study, topic familiarity and background/prior knowledge are generally used interchangeably. Prior knowledge about the topic and content of a text is a determining factor as far as comprehension is concerned (Daniels & Zemelman, 2004). In fact, familiarity with the text and activating background knowledge may result in improving comprehension regardless of strengths or weaknesses in reading abilities (Recht & Leslie, 1988). Unsurprisingly, research findings indicate that there is a high correlation between prior knowledge and gains in reading comprehension (Long, Winograd, & Bridget, 1989).

Clearly, when readers are familiar with the topics or concepts being read, their inadequacies are decreased. In other words, when poor readers are enriched with prior knowledge, their modes of reasoning and comprehension are improved to the point that their ability to summarize or recall becomes as effective as good readers who use their prior knowledge to make connections and synthesize new information while reading a text.

In addition, studies concerning students' comprehension and recall have provided several interesting results. First, students who read topic-familiar texts had a better recall compared with those studying unfamiliar texts. Research findings about the effect of familiar and unfamiliar cultural aspects on comprehension have revealed that texts with familiar cultural contents help learners not only make correct inferences but also recall more (Kelly & Cool, 2002; Shiri & Revie, 2003). With previous knowledge about a subject, the learners understand a text efficiently and they have fewer errors in recall. As a result, poor readers have a poor memory for what they read; therefore, they can recall very little of what they read. By comparing good and poor readers, researchers found that they have similar levels of short-term recall provided that the text is familiar to them. Previous studies on L2 text comprehension claim that text recall is enhanced when learners possess and utilize appropriate background knowledge (Gebhard, 2000).

As a consequence, among various knowledge sources, prior knowledge is a very important knowledge source which contributes to comprehension of the text as well as successful lexical inferencing. A large number of studies have similarly focused on the

impact of topic familiarity or background knowledge on inferencing (Bensoussan, 1992; Rott, 2000), most of which have shown positive results.

In the same vein, studies comparing experts with novices have made it clear that people with high domain-specific prior knowledge comprehend a text better than those who lack relevant prior knowledge. As a case in point, Alderson and Urquhart (1988) conducted a study to assess comprehension by ESL subjects in terms of subject area of specialization versus areas of non-specialization. The results showed that subjects performed better in their own field of study.

Similarly in another study, Recht and Lesile (1988) investigated high-ability and low-ability students' reading performances on topic familiarity/unfamiliarity, and its role in comprehension. The results indicated that high ability students with higher levels of knowledge performed better than those who lacked an insufficient amount of knowledge on reading comprehension tasks simply because they were already informed about the topic and could recognize key concepts in text and incorporate these concepts into reading summaries or other goal related tasks (Recht & Leslie, 1988).

In another attempt, Adams, Bell, and Perfetti (1995) investigated the relation between reading skill and knowledge of a specific domain (football) among fourth to seventh graders. They concluded that domain knowledge and reading skill contribute not only to the comprehension of a text but also to the reading speed. According to these findings, high-skilled readers who have little domain knowledge rely more on their general reading skills to compensate for such deficiency, whereas low-skilled readers with poorer reading skills rely on their specific domain knowledge to have a better comprehension of a text.

Likewise, Chang and College (2006) also investigated the effects of topic familiarity and linguistic difficulty on reading strategies and mental representations of nonnative readers of Chinese. Four passages characterized by topic familiarity and language difficulty were used. Subjects in four groups performed a think-aloud task to reveal their on-line processing strategies. Alternatively, the mental representations of what they read were reflected in their subsequent written recall of text content. Results showed while monitoring efforts were motivated by both topic familiarity and linguistic difficulty, inferencing events were primarily facilitated by topic familiarity. Moreover, topic familiarity was also found to have a facilitative effect on the mental representations of the readers' reading passages whereas no effects due to linguistic difficulty were found.

In 2003, Salmani-Nodoushan conducted a study on the effects of text familiarity, task type, and language proficiency on university students and task performances. Analysis of variance values indicated that test familiarity, task type, and language proficiency, as well as the interaction between any given pair of these and also among all of them resulted in significant differences in subjects' overall and differential test and task performances.

In a more recent study, in 2006, Al-Shumaimeri explored the effects of content familiarity and language ability (defined as general L2 proficiency) on the comprehension performance of low-and high-ability Saudi EFL students. The results showed that content familiarity and language ability had significant effects on the students' comprehension performance. They indicated that content familiarity facilitated reading comprehension, and that language ability had a significant effect on the comprehension performance of students at different levels. Overall, language ability level may have played a compensatory role in facilitating the comprehension of unfamiliar texts.

In the same vein, several studies have investigated students' inferencing skills, and they have reported that teaching inferencing skills to students is essential for their future educational success. For instance, Paribakht and Wesche (1999) conducted a study on intermediate L2 learners in a university class. The results demonstrated that word category interacts with strategy use. Learners used more inferencing for verbs in question tasks than in summary tasks. In addition, they used prior knowledge and textual cues when they tried to infer the meaning of unfamiliar words. Individual differences in using different knowledge sources depended on individual's previous L2 experience, their L1, and familiarity with the topic of the text.

Notably, proficient readers infer implicit information from the text and infer the meaning by using implicit information in the text. On the other hand, non-proficient readers cannot infer the text meaning and often will have difficulty in comprehension of what they read (Harvey & Goudvis, 2000). Relevant research findings indicate that there is a high correlation between lexical inferencing and vocabulary knowledge. Bengelil and Paribakht (2004) also expressed a supporting perspective on lexical inferencing. They tried to investigate the effect of EFL learners' L2 proficiency on their lexical inferencing ability while reading English expository texts. The results revealed that advanced level readers had a higher percentage of correct and partially correct inferences, but a lower percentage of wrong inferences. In spite of the fact that performance of advanced readers was better, the results showed that there were no vocabulary gains in terms of retention in either group. Therefore, they claimed that successful inferencing of a word does not guarantee acquiring of the word. Nevertheless, the findings attested that "the participants gained some vocabulary knowledge in the context of reading for meaning" (p.241). It means that vocabulary growth takes place through reading.

Additionally, Lo (2004) investigated the effect of lexical inferencing on junior high school students' vocabulary learning and reading comprehension, focusing on the study of types of knowledge sources and contextual clues they used. Participants were 34 junior high school students in the experimental and control groups. The results revealed that there was a significant correlation between vocabulary knowledge and reading comprehension. In other words, higher vocabulary knowledge contributed to better comprehension. Moreover, participants of the experimental group performed better on vocabulary and reading comprehension tests since they had received explicit instruction in lexical inferencing.

Having examined the relationship between ESL learners' depth and breadth of vocabulary knowledge, the lexical inferencing strategy use as well as success in deriving word meanings from context. Nassaji (2006) also found that there is a significant relationship between the depth of vocabulary knowledge and the degree and the type of strategy use and success. The results of this study indicate that the students who have a stronger vocabulary knowledge depth use certain strategies more frequently than those who enjoy a weaker depth of vocabulary knowledge.

In short, although some of the previously mentioned studies (Pulido, 2007; Pulido & Hambrick, 2008) have investigated the role of background knowledge and passage sight vocabulary and have tried to highlight their relationships to lexical inferencing and recall, the review of the existing literature suggests further research is necessary to shed more light on the issue. Therefore, this study aimed to examine whether topic familiarity and passage sight vocabulary have any effect on lexical inferencing and recall of Iranian EFL students.

As such, the following research questions were formulated:

1. Does topic familiarity have any significant impact on lexical inferencing?
2. Does topic familiarity have any influence on recall?
3. Is there any relationship between passage sight vocabulary and lexical inferencing?
4. Is there any relationship between passage sight vocabulary and recall?

METHOD

Design

This study enlisted a repeated measure design in which all tasks are given to participants in different orders. One of the important characteristics of repeated measure design, also known as within group design, is that multiple measurements can be performed for each participant (Mackey & Gass, 2005).

Participants

From the population of 105 sophomore students studying translation at Isfahan (Khorasgan) Islamic Azad University, a sample of sixty was selected by administering a Quick Oxford Placemen Test (QOPT). Based on the results of QOPT, sixty students both male and female with an age range between 23 and 30 were chosen. From the 60 learners selected, thirty students were placed in the intermediate group, and thirty students in the advanced level proficiency group. All participants were Persian speakers who were learning English as a foreign language. They did not have any experience of learning English outside the educational setting. The reason for selecting two groups was to find out whether there was any interaction between lexical inferencing, recall and students' proficiency level.

Materials

A Quick Oxford Placemen Test (QOPT) was administrated to determine participants' level of English proficiency. Since the present research considered only two levels of proficiency, 30 EFL learners whose language proficiency scores fell within the range of 120-149 were chosen as the intermediate subjects and 30 EFL learners whose language proficiency scores fell within the range of 150-200 were selected as advanced subjects respectively.

To collect the data required for finding out whether topic familiarity and passage sight vocabulary had any impact on lexical inferencing and recall of the Iranian EFL university students, the current study employed a questionnaire and three tests. First, a topic familiarity questionnaire comprising fifteen topics was administrated to determine participants' degree of familiarity with the text topics. Second, a lexical inferencing test consisting of four cloze passages were applied to assess participants' inferencing of the lexical items deleted from the passages. Third, a passage sight vocabulary test was employed to determine the amount of participants' familiarity with different words in the passages. Finally, a lexical recognition test was utilized to measure the amount of participants' recall of the target words (TWs) used for completing the blanks in the four cloze passages. It is also interesting to note that a pilot test was administrated before the main phase of the study to see whether the tests served the intended purposes.

Procedures

The experimental procedure employed in this study had a multiple arrangement. First, a sample of sixty Iranian sophomore students studying translation at Isfahan (Khorasgan) Azad University was selected by administering a Quick Oxford Placement Test (QOPT). Based on the results of Quick Oxford Placement Test, sixty students both male and female with an age range of 23 to 30 were chosen and placed into two groups. Thirty students were identified as the intermediate group and the other thirty were labeled as the advanced group. Second, a topic familiarity questionnaire including 15 topics was applied to determine participants' degree of familiarity with the fifteen text topics provided in the questionnaire.

Third, two familiar cloze passages were administrated. The participants were required to study and provide a suitable L1 translation or definition for each blank. There was a passage sight vocabulary test below each cloze passage and the students were asked to provide a translation for each word suitable to the context under investigation. Forth, two unfamiliar cloze passages and related passage sight vocabulary tests were also taken by the participants. Next, participants were provided with an opportunity to see the four passages with the correct answers given for each blank in both L1 and L2. This verification task was a prerequisite for the subsequent phase because the students could confirm or correct their guesses about the blanks and become ready for the next test.

Finally, a week later, a lexical recognition test was administrated. This test included 92 words, 32 target words (TWs) and 60 non-target words (NTWs) from either the four passages or other distracters related to the text topics. To check the lexical retention and recall of the participants, they were asked to recognize the 32 TWs which they had used to fill in the blanks in the cloze passages.

Data Analysis

To investigate the significance of the results, the data obtained were analyzed by appropriate statistical procedures using the SPSS software. Both descriptive and inferential statistics were employed to analyze the data. To verify the second research question, Spearman Brown Correlation Formula was used for the scores obtained from both passage sight vocabulary and lexical inferencing tests (with familiar and unfamiliar passages) to see if there was a correlation between passage sight vocabulary and lexical inferencing for the intermediate and advanced groups. The correlation was calculated for both familiar and unfamiliar passages separately. For the third research question, which dealt with the relationship between topic familiarity and recall, descriptive statistics was used. Then, a t-test was applied to determine whether or not topic familiarity had any impact on recall. Next, the relationship between passage sight vocabulary and recall was investigated through applying Spearman Brown Correlation Formula. In the last step, the performance of two groups was compared to see which group was more successful in lexical recall. To compare the two groups' performance, descriptive statistics and independent t-test were applied. The results will be discussed in the next section.

RESULTS

To answer the first research question of the study, at first, descriptive statistics for mean and standard deviation values were calculated to compare participants' inferencing scores on lexical inferencing test containing both familiar and unfamiliar passages to determine whether the two sets of scores were interdependent or not. Then, the correlation between these sets of scores was calculated. Table 1 illustrates the results of the descriptive statistics initially run to calculate the mean and standard deviation values related to participants' performance on lexical inferencing test:

Table 1. Descriptive statistics showing participants' performance profile on lexical inferencing test

Group	N	Mean	Std.	Std. Error Mean
Intermediate	30	8.4000	1.44973	.26468
Advanced	30	11.6750	1.97195	.36003

It is clearly observed from Table 1 that the advanced group's average mean value on lexical inferencing test is higher than that of the intermediate group. To examine whether the difference was significant, Leven's test for equality of variances was applied. Table 2 demonstrates that the higher gains of advanced participants on lexical inferencing test are meaningful.

Table2. Results of the independent samples test

	Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
	F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2- tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
								Lower	Upper
Equal variances assumed	8.071	.006	-7.329	58	.000	-3.27500	.44685	4.16947	2.38053
Equal variances not assumed			-7.329	53.2	1	-3.27500	.44685	4.17117	2.37883

As can be seen, the Leven's Test conducted indicates that the equality of variances for the two groups cannot be assumed, which means the two groups' performance on the lexical inferencing test is by no means equal. Alternatively, to determine the correlation between familiar and unfamiliar passage sight vocabulary items for the intermediate group, Spearman correlation was utilized. Tables 3 and 4 depict the magnitudes of the relationship between topic familiarity/unfamiliarity and lexical inferencing respectively.

Table 3. Correlation between familiar passage sight vocabulary (PSV) and inferencing for intermediate group

		Inferencing 2	PSV2
Inferencing 2	Spearman's Correlation	1	.783**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.007
	N	30	30
PSV2	Spearman's Correlation	.783**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.007	
	N	30	30

As Table 3 illustrates, the correlation coefficient of 0.78 attests that familiar passage sight vocabulary is appreciably correlated with participant's L2 lexical inferencing for the intermediate group. Similarly, Table 4 depicts the correlation when unfamiliar topics are used.

Table 4. Passage sight vocabulary and inferencing with unfamiliar topics for intermediate group

		Inferencing 1	PSV1
Inferencing 1	Spearman's Correlation	1	.617**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.022
	N	30	30
PSV1	Spearman's Correlation	.617**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.022	
	N	30	30

The results in Table 4 reveal that there is a relatively high correlation between passages sight vocabulary and lexical inferencing for unfamiliar topics. Again, the correlation index is 0.61 proving that there is a moderately high relationship between knowledge of vocabulary and lexical inferencing when unfamiliar passages are used. This correlation, however, was slightly less than that of passage sight vocabulary test with familiar topics.

The same statistical procedure was used for the advanced group. The results of the correlations between passage sight vocabulary and lexical inferencing scores for both familiar and unfamiliar topics are indicated in Tables 5 and 6 respectively.

Table 5. Correlation between passage sight vocabulary and inferencing for unfamiliar passages for advanced group

		Inferencing 2	PSV2
Inferencing 1	Spearman's Correlation	1	.875**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
	N	30	30
PSV 1	Spearman's Correlation	.875**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	
	N	30	30

Table 5 illustrates the results of applying Spearman for measuring the correlation between passage sight vocabulary and lexical inferencing variables, when unfamiliar topics are used. As can be seen, the correlation coefficient is equal to 0.87 reflecting that there exists a positive relationship between passage sight vocabulary and lexical inferencing for the advanced group learners.

Table 6. Correlation between passage sight vocabulary and inferencing for familiar passages for advanced group

		Inferencing 1	PSV1
Inferencing 2	Spearman's Correlation	1	.884**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
	N	30	30
PSV 2	Spearman's Correlation	.884**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	
	N	30	30

In Table 6, the results obtained after applying Spearman Brown Correlation indicate a positive correlation between passage sight vocabulary and lexical inferencing for familiar passages (correlation coefficient = 0.88). Essentially, the correlation index for familiar topics is slightly higher than that of unfamiliar topics.

To gauge the relationship between L2 lexical inferencing and recall, related t-tests were run. In fact, Tables 7 and 9 reflect the results obtained from running such statistical analyses.

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Recall 1 (unf) *	30	6.6167	1.85548	.33876
Recall 2 (f) **	30	10.6667	1.21296	.22145

*unfamiliar ** familiar

	Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
	F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2- tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
								Lower	Upper
Equal variances assumed	5.610	.021	-10.007	58	.000	-4.05000	.40473	-4.860	-3.239
Equal variances not assumed			-10.007	49.95	.000	-4.05000	.40473	-4.862	-3.237

Table 9. Descriptive statistics related to topic familiarity and lexical recall for advanced group

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Recall 1	30	9.0000	1.41421	.25820
Recall 2	30	12.8000	1.21485	.22180

	Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
	F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
								Lower	Upper
(Intercept)	0.780 ^a	.478	-0.000	10	.999	0.000	.000	-.000	.000
Age	1.000 ^b	.323	0.000	10	.999	0.000	.000	-.000	.000
Gender	1.000 ^c	.323	0.000	10	.999	0.000	.000	-.000	.000
Marital Status	1.000 ^d	.323	0.000	10	.999	0.000	.000	-.000	.000
Religion	1.000 ^e	.323	0.000	10	.999	0.000	.000	-.000	.000
Ethnicity	1.000 ^f	.323	0.000	10	.999	0.000	.000	-.000	.000
Education	1.000 ^g	.323	0.000	10	.999	0.000	.000	-.000	.000
Income	1.000 ^h	.323	0.000	10	.999	0.000	.000	-.000	.000
Health Insurance	1.000 ⁱ	.323	0.000	10	.999	0.000	.000	-.000	.000
Employment Status	1.000 ^j	.323	0.000	10	.999	0.000	.000	-.000	.000
Political Affiliation	1.000 ^k	.323	0.000	10	.999	0.000	.000	-.000	.000
Volunteering Hours	1.000 ^l	.323	0.000	10	.999	0.000	.000	-.000	.000
Charitable Donations	1.000 ^m	.323	0.000	10	.999	0.000	.000	-.000	.000
Community Involvement	1.000 ⁿ	.323	0.000	10	.999	0.000	.000	-.000	.000
Neighborhood Satisfaction	1.000 ^o	.323	0.000	10	.999	0.000	.000	-.000	.000
Local Government Trust	1.000 ^p	.323	0.000	10	.999	0.000	.000	-.000	.000
Environmental Awareness	1.000 ^q	.323	0.000	10	.999	0.000	.000	-.000	.000
Civic Participation	1.000 ^r	.323	0.000	10	.999	0.000	.000	-.000	.000
Trust in Neighbors	1.000 ^s	.323	0.000	10	.999	0.000	.000	-.000	.000
Perceived Safety	1.000 ^t	.323	0.000	10	.999	0.000	.000	-.000	.000
Quality of Life	1.000 ^u	.323	0.000	10	.999	0.000	.000	-.000	.000
Overall Well-being	1.000 ^v	.323	0.000	10	.999	0.000	.000	-.000	.000

Equal variances assumed	0.65	.021	11.164	56	.000	-3.80000	.34039	-4.481	-3.118
Equal variances not assumed		.021	11.164	58	.000	-3.80000	.34039	-4.481	-3.118

According to Table 9, advanced participants' recall of familiar passages with regard to the mean and standard deviation values ($M=12.80$, $SD=1.21$) is higher than their recall of unfamiliar passages ($M=9.00$, $SD=1.41$). Once again, the results produced by the Leven's Test show that learners' familiarity with topic of the text positively influences lexical recall at 95% confidence level for the advanced group (Table 10). Finally, to compare the intermediate and advanced groups with regard to their ability in recalling target words, the scores on the recall test were statistically analyzed. The data from Tables 11 and 12 show there is a meaningful difference between the two groups.

Table 11. Descriptive statistics concerning comparison between lexical recall of advanced and intermediate groups

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Intermediate	30	8.6417	1.21358	.22157
Advanced	30	10.9000	1.09387	.19971

Table 12. Results of the independent samples test

	Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
	F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
Equal variances assumed	.925	.034	-7.571	58	.000	-2.25833	.29829	Lower	Upper
Equal variances not assumed			-7.571	57.3	.000	-2.25833	.29829	Lower	Upper

Clearly, the advanced participants more successfully recalled target words compared with the intermediate group.

DISCUSSION

The present study was designed to elucidate the impact of passage sight vocabulary and topic familiarity on L2 lexical inferencing and recall of Iranian university students.

Notably, Learners' familiarity with the theme and topic of the text was believed to be an important source for inferring the meanings of unknown words. It was found out that the targeted samples obtained higher scores on cloze passages with familiar target words (TWs) compared with those including unfamiliar target words.

In other words, all participants could effectively utilized lexical inferencing strategies to guess the meaning of target words in passages with familiar cue words twice as many as those with unfamiliar ones. Another interesting finding was that learners' proficiency level was a significant variable in both lexical inferencing and recall. The comparison of intermediate and advanced proficiency students on the related tests demonstrated that the advanced group inferred a higher number of TWs from both familiar and unfamiliar passages in comparison with the intermediate group.

This study produced results which corroborate the findings of a great deal of the previous work in the field. In fact, the findings are in agreement with Paribakht and Wesche (1999) who conducted a study on intermediate L2 learners in a university class. The obtained results demonstrated that the students relied on their prior knowledge and used textual cues when they tried to infer the meaning of unfamiliar words.

It is interesting to note that learners are able to direct their attention to test points when they are routed in their background knowledge. Differently stated, topic familiarity plays a pivotal role in inferencing the meaning of words in the reading process. The issue is further supported by Nagy and Scott (2000) claiming that a greater knowledge of the text results in better recognition of important ideas and provides a richer source of contextual clues simply because the use of lexical inferencing strategies, the ability to make effective use of contextual information to retrieve the meaning of words, is remarkably influential. Consequently, students with high reading ability but low textual knowledge are not capable of inferencing and summarization than are students with low reading ability and low knowledge of the text.

The reason behind the better performance of the targeted samples on cloze tests are similarly observed by Kelly and Cool (2002) who reported an increase in the efficiency of the students, speed reading from a cognitive perspectivization, as Shiri and Revie (2003) maintain, topic familiarity appreciably enhances the number of cognitive search moves. In the same vain, Gebhard (2000), focusing on listening comprehension skill, reports that familiarity with the topic makes the task of listening comprehension easier for the listeners because they can relate the content to their listening background knowledge.

Alternatively, Pulido (2007) as well as Pulido and Hambrick (2008) have further explained the significance of prior knowledge in deciphering the meanings of lexical items. Pointing to passage sight vocabulary_ the knowledge of forms and common meanings associated with vocabulary items can be recognized regardless of contextual information. Unquestionably, additional control is significantly reduced because adequate passage sight vocabulary can facilitate a ray of processing mechanism which are activated during the reading process (Pulido, 2004).

With regard to lexical inferencing, the findings of the study are also confirmed by the findings of Cain, Lemmon, and Oakhill (2004). In performing to different studies focusing on the individual differences in reading comprehension skill vocabulary knowledge and memory capacity in making lexical inferences, they found that inference generation is a cognitive ability which is dependent upon different variables in fact readers who are deficient in terms of background knowledge in general and comprehension skills in particular failed to enlist lexical inferences effectively (see also Kieffer & Lesaux, 2012; Shen, 2010).

Additional study of pieces of research in the review of literature did not show significantly counter evidence against the positive correlation between topic familiarity, passage sight vocabulary, and L2 lexical inferencing as well as retention through performance on cloze tests. Evidently, the findings of the current study do not take side with Pulido's (2007) argument stating that the study of vocabulary gain and retention in terms of topic familiarity and or topic unfamiliarity are not consistently supported.

CONCLUSION

The current study aimed to investigate whether learners' familiarity with topic of the text and their knowledge of the passage sight vocabulary have any effect on their lexical inferencing and recall. Regarding the research questions of the study, three tests; namely, lexical inferencing test, passage sight vocabulary test, and lexical recall test were administered and the results gained were processed using appropriate statistical techniques. Finally, the research questions were answered on the basis of the students' performance on the three tests. In addition, the study aimed to compare performance of intermediate and advanced participants on lexical inferencing and recall tests. In order to achieve the aims, intermediate group's lexical inferencing scores on familiar and unfamiliar passages were compared.

The same scenario was followed for the advanced group. The participants' scores on passage sight vocabulary test were compared with their scores on the inferencing test. Subsequently, their scores from the recall test were compared with those from lexical inferencing and passage sight vocabulary tests. Ultimately, the intermediate and advanced participants' scores obtained from different tests were compared. The results revealed that effects of topic familiarity and passage sight vocabulary on lexical inferencing abilities are considerably significant.

The findings of this study may have a number of important implications for future practice. First, instructors need to take advantage of the significant effects of topic or content familiarity on learners' comprehension. They should consider if topic and content of the texts are familiar to the learners when assuming reading comprehension or inferencing tasks since familiar contents help students make use of their suitable skills and strategies to comprehend the text.

Second, to benefit from lexical inferencing, L2 learners must have a sufficient lexical knowledge base. One way for teachers to help learners to enrich their word power would be to establish vocabulary learning programs in which learning vocabulary from context, and systematic vocabulary instruction especially for weak students are emphasized. Instructors should also consider different forms of assessment which may provide the learners with greater opportunities to demonstrate their L2 inferencing skills strategies for better retention and recall of target language words.

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