

Form-Focused Task-based Instruction: An Integrative Approach to Vocabulary Learning

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Abstract – The present study was conducted in order to investigate the impact of an integrated model of form-focused and task-based instruction on Iranian EFL learners' vocabulary learning and retention. In order to address the purpose of this study, a sample of 60 elementary EFL learners of junior high schools were selected based on their performance on a proficiency test (i.e., Key English Test). Prior to the main study, the instruments of the study (pretest and posttest) were piloted on 20 EFL learners of the similar age and proficiency level in order to check their reliability and validity. The learners' knowledge of vocabulary items were pretested at the beginning of the study. Participants were divided into two groups of control and experimental and the treatments of the study were administered. The experimental group received form-focused task-based vocabulary instruction as treatment and control group received traditional and routine methods of vocabulary instruction. Two posttests (immediate and delayed) were conducted immediately after the end of treatment sessions and one week later to measure learners' vocabulary learning and retention. The results of two samples *t*-tests showed that form-focused task-based instruction had a significant impact on learners' vocabulary learning and retention.

Keywords: form-focused instruction, task-based instruction, vocabulary learning, vocabulary recall and retention

I. INTRODUCTION

Undoubtedly, vocabulary is a fundamental component in learning every language. According to Pikulski and Templeton (2004), perhaps the greatest tools for succeeding not only in education but in life are a large and rich vocabulary and the skills for using those words. Our ability to function in today's complex social and economic world is highly affected by our language skills and word knowledge.

Traditional approaches to language teaching have not paid attention to vocabulary instruction. Allen (1983) enumerated two reasons for their neglect. First, learners thought that all they needed to know was the large number of word lists along their meanings and second, some specialists believed that the meanings of words could not be taught perfectly, so it is better not to teach them. Thus, for the decades grammar was thought as the most important prerequisite for language learning.

The significance for the role of vocabulary instruction stemmed from the findings related to vocabulary knowledge and its relationship with language skills. Certainly, without

profound knowledge of vocabulary, learner's performance on other language skills will be declined.

Gass (1999) confirms the significance of word knowledge and states that “knowing a lexical item means knowing a number of things—most often, meaning. In fact, this is what is commonly intended when one is talking about or measuring vocabulary knowledge” (p. 325). Following the same idea, Richards and Renandya (2002) say “vocabulary is the core component of language proficiency and provides much of the basis for how well learners speak, listen, read, and write. Without an extensive vocabulary and strategies for acquiring new vocabulary, learners often achieve less than their potential” (p. 255). Read (2004) also believes that second language learners are typically conscious of the fact that limitations in their vocabulary knowledge affects their ability to communicate effectively in the target language. This gives vocabulary study a salience for learners that may be lacking in the acquisition of other features of the language system.

The first evidences of using task-based language teaching practices can be traced in vocational training practices of the 1950s where the tasks were designed for military training (Richards & Rodgers, 2001). With regard to the large number of studies and practices in this area, three different features of task-based language teaching can be identified; learner-centered nature of task-based methodology (Nunan, 2004; Richards & Rodgers, 2001), structured syllabus consisting of goal, procedure and outcome (Nunan, 2004; Skehan, 1998); providing opportunities to engage in meaningful and real-life activities (Carless, 2002; Littlewood, 2004).

A broad definition is provided by different researchers to describe what a ‘task’ is and how it differs from other devices used to elicit learner language, for example, an ‘activity’ or an ‘exercise’, or ‘drill’ (Ellis, 2003). The scholars provide some definitions of the term “task”.

Ur (2009) mentions that a task refers to whatever done by the learners that has a clear product but a conventional textbook procedure that learners are assigned to provide correct responses for the list of items involved in it is popularized as an exercise: answering questions, for example, matching corresponding items or filling gaps are some of the exercises. In exercises, correct forms achieve more attention than meaning. On the other hand, an activity is defined as a procedure in which the learner is involved in some kind of task that induces him or her to engage with the target language items in a meaningful and communicative way. According to Nunan (2001), a task has a non-linguistic goal or outcome, unlike an exercise.

Form-focused instruction (FFI) has attracted considerable attention over the last decades. Initially, it was conceptualized in relation to method, a little later as a type of exposure distinct from natural exposure, a little later still as a set of classroom processes, and, increasingly, as a set of psycholinguistically motivated pedagogic options (Ellis, 2001). Long (1988, cited in Ellis, 2001) holds the idea that there is nothing to be gained by attempting to systematically teach isolated linguistic forms in accordance with a structure syllabus—an approach he characterizes as ‘focus on forms’. In contrast, Ellis (2001) used FFI as a cover term to refer to any planned or incidental instructional activity that is intended to direct

language learners to linguistic form. It, thus, includes both traditional approaches to teaching forms based on structural syllabus and more communicative approaches, where attention to form arises out of activities that are primarily meaning-focused.

Laufer (2006), in a two-phase study, compared the effectiveness of focus on form and focus on forms tasks on L2 vocabulary learning. The results showed that the isolated focus-on-forms group that received the word list and focused tasks, significantly outperformed the group that had completed the reading and used a dictionary as they did so. Similar results were found in the present study.

Jahangard (2010), in seeking to find a model to predict Iranian EFL learners' performance on the end of the course achievement test, found that form-focused second language vocabulary instruction has a significant effect on EFL learners' the end of the course achievement test.

Rashtchi and Keyvanfar (2012) investigated the applicability of task-based and form-focused instruction in the Iranian EFL setting. In so doing, a 15-item questionnaire with two versions for EFL learners and teachers was developed in Farsi by the researchers based on the one used by Schulz (2001). It was administered to 145 learners and 36 teachers in a language school in Tehran, Iran. Based on the findings it could be concluded that English language teaching (ELT) in Iran is not fully compatible with task-based and form-focused instruction which includes both focus on form as well as focus on forms is more promising in the EFL setting of Iran.

Tajeddin and Daraee (2013) recently investigated the effect of form-focused and non-form-focused tasks on EFL learners' vocabulary learning through written input. Results of this, in line with the findings of the present study, showed that the retention of unfamiliar words was higher in form-focused groups.

In Iran, English is taught as a foreign language, so there is no exposure to language out of classroom. The review of literature in form and meaning-focused task studies shows that the majority of studies have been done in English as a Second Language (ESL) contexts. Regarding the interactive nature of task-based language teaching, it seems that it is necessary to conduct a study in an English as a Foreign Language (EFL) context to find whether such instruction is adaptable to the system of language education in Iran or not.

Very few number of studies investigated integrated form-focused tasks. File and Adams (2010) measured vocabulary learning in isolated and integrated form-focused conditions. They found that both methods were equally efficient in vocabulary learning. Harley and White (2000, as cited in Ellis, 2003, p. 2009) argued that "learners can achieve clear gains in accuracy as a result of being taught a structure, especially if the type of form-focused instruction is planned in accordance with what is known about acquisitional processes. Swain (1998) and Lyster (1998) found that second language learners could not achieve high levels of grammatical competence from entirely meaning-centered instruction. In addition, the insufficiency of focus on meaning can be found in researches related to fossilization. Brown (2000) mentioned that in some learners, despite high level of language knowledge, certain erroneous features could still be seen in their inter language.

The significant role of vocabulary in communicative proficiency of language learners is undeniable. Therefore, regarding the recent developments in the vocabulary learning experimentations, and a considerable amount of studies on task-based instruction, the present study is going to make up the deficiency of previous studies in the area of form-focused instruction.

In order to fill the above-mentioned gaps, the present study aimed to find some empirical evidence for elementary EFL learners in examining the effectiveness of task-based form-focused techniques on vocabulary learning. In order to carry out the present study, the following research question was posed:

1. Is there any significant difference between Iranian EFL learners' vocabulary recall and retention regarding the effect of form-focused task-based instruction?

II. METHODOLOGY

A. Participants

The participants of this study were 60 female EFL guidance school learners in the city of Zahedan. Their age ranged from 14 to 15. They were native speakers of Persian and their level of English language proficiency was elementary. Also, 20 EFL learners of the similar age and proficiency level participated in pilot study. The participants were selected from two intact classes of experimental and control in order to run the study.

B. Instruments

The instruments employed for data collection consisted of a language proficiency test, form-focused vocabulary tasks, pretest and posttest. The detailed description of materials is as follows.

Language proficiency test. Key English test (KET) examines the general basic ability in English. Regarding the purpose of the study that is to test learner's vocabulary knowledge through the tasks, the researcher selected 40 items out of 80, to test reading and spelling knowledge of participants.

Form-focused vocabulary tasks. The key instruments of the researcher to run the research procedure were the tasks. In form-focused tasks, the vocabulary items were taught by attracting learners' attention to different forms of language use, such as sentences or bilingual dictionary look-up. The target lexical items were instructed through word-list learning (decontextualized lexical items with their Persian equivalents), which is clearly considered as the focus on forms approach, and also reading translation (providing linguistic information to the meaning of the sentences in the passage) which is a case of form-focused instruction. The tasks were adopted from Javanbakht (2011).

Pretest and Posttest. A 20-item vocabulary test was given to the learners before and after the treatments of study as pretest and posttest. This test was syllabus-based and was used to measure the learners' vocabulary knowledge. In order to check the reliability of the

vocabulary pretest, which was designed by the researcher, the test was piloted on 20 learners of the same age and proficiency level. The content validity of the test was checked and confirmed by three language teaching and testing experts consisting of one Ph.D. holder of teaching English language field and two English language teachers of junior high schools.

The posttest was the same version of the pretest that was administered twice, immediate posttest, immediately after implementing the tasks to test learners' vocabulary recall, and the other, delayed posttest, administered one week later, to test the learners' vocabulary retention.

C. Procedure

The data collection procedure was conducted carefully in five steps. At the beginning of study, a pilot study was performed on 20 EFL learners of the same age and proficiency level in order to ensure the reliability of the pretest, posttest and questionnaire of the study. The result of Cronbach alpha for the pretest and posttest was .82 and for the questionnaire was .78 that were a satisfactory level of test reliability.

Then, KET was administered to ensure the homogeneity of the participants. A total of 80 EFL learners in their intact classes participated in proficiency test. Twenty of the participants with low frequent scores were eliminated from the whole sample. The homogenized participants ($n = 60$) took pretest, in order to measure their pre-knowledge of vocabulary. Regardless of their performance on the pretest, the participants were randomly assigned to two groups of control and experimental.

The main study was conducted in 10 sessions in the following manner. The experimental group received the vocabulary items through form-focused task-based instruction. In every session, the researcher/teacher vocalized the new words in the word list of each task clearly and the learners were asked to repeat them loudly. The teacher provided tasks consisting of a text along with new words and glosses to students. The learners were allowed to use gloss to find the meaning of new words. The teacher provided necessary information and the students were required to answer true-false and multiple-choice comprehension questions.

In the control group, vocabulary instruction was presented by means of routine and traditional techniques in junior high school. The lesson began with presenting the new words in the word list of each lesson of the English textbook and the learners repeated them after the teacher. Then, the meanings of the words in the vocabulary list were presented and the students wrote them for further practice.

At the end of the treatment sessions, all the participants of the study took posttest that covered all of the vocabulary items they studied throughout the sessions in order to assess their vocabulary recall. One week later, the same version of posttest was administered in order to measure the learners' retention of lexical items.

III. RESULTS

Descriptive statistics of pilot test on pretest and posttest, such as mean, standard deviation (SD), standard error of measurement (SEM) and the item facility (IF) index of the test items are provided in Table 1. The items with facility index above 0.63 were too easy and below 0.33 were too difficult. Three items (two easy and one difficult) were revised.

Table 1: Descriptive statistics of the pilot study on pretest and posttest

	Mean	SD	SEM	IF < 0.33	0.33 ≤ IF ≤ 0.63	IF > 0.63
Pretest - Posttest	13.8	6.71	3.44	2	17	1

In order to test the reliability of the tests, Cronbach's alpha analysis was performed, the results ($r = 0.82$), as is shown in Table 2, indicated that the pretest (and posttest) had a satisfactory level of reliability.

Table 2: Reliability statistics of the pretest and posttest

	Cronbach's Alpha	N of Items
Pretest and Posttest	.82	20

Concerning proficiency test, the participants whose scores fell within the range of one standard deviation below and above the mean were held in the study, and those who did not were excluded from the study. Regarding this, 20 learners were excluded from the main analysis. The descriptive statistics of selected scores are shown in Table 3.

Table 3: Descriptive statistics of homogenized participants

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation	Skewness
Proficiency test	80	1.00	21.00	10.1375	4.09614	.108

The descriptive statistics of the control and experimental groups' performance on pretest is shown in Table 4.

Table 4: Descriptive statistics of participants' scores on pretest

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Pretest (Control Group)	30	4	12	7.57	2.542
Pretest (Experimental Group)	30	3	13	7.70	2.891

The descriptive statistics of both groups on immediate posttest are compared with each other in Table 5.

Table 5: Descriptive statistics of participants' performance on immediate posttest

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Immediate Posttest (Experimental Group)	30	10	18	14.33	2.368
Immediate Posttest (Control Group)	30	7	15	10.30	2.168

The mean of experimental and control group scores on immediate posttest were 14.33 and 10.30 respectively. Generally, the performance of the control group learners on the immediate posttest was weaker than experimental group.

One week after the immediate posttest, the same version of the posttest was administered unexpectedly in order to measure EFL learners' vocabulary recall and retention. In order to verify the research question of the study in finding whether there was a significant difference between learners' vocabulary recall and retention in experimental group, a paired samples *t*-test were performed. Table 6 presents the descriptive statistics of immediate and delayed posttest of experimental group.

Table 6: Descriptive statistics of immediate and delayed posttest of experimental group

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Immediate Posttest	30	10	18	14.33	2.368
Delayed Posttest	30	4	11	8.37	1.810

Table 7: Paired samples t-test between immediate and delayed posttest

		Paired Differences					<i>t</i>	df	Sig.
		Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference				
					Lower	Upper			
Pair 1	Immediate Posttest - Delayed Posttest	1.933	1.202	.219	1.485	2.382	8.813	29	.000

Table 7 presents the results of paired-samples *t*-test. It was found that there is a significant difference between the scores of experimental group ($t = 8.81$, $p < .05$) on immediate and delayed posttest in such a way that they retained more vocabulary on

immediate posttest. In other words, form-focused task-based instruction was more effective in vocabulary learning. Therefore, the research question of the study was answered.

IV. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This study provided an empirical evidence for learners of lower levels of language proficiency to investigate the potential role of form-focused task-based instruction in vocabulary learning and retention. The results of this study support Jahangard's (2010) findings. Jahangard (2010) in seeking to find a model to predict Iranian EFL learners' performance on the end of the course achievement test found that form-focused second language vocabulary instruction has a significant effect on EFL learners' the end of the course achievement test.

The findings of the present study were in line with Park (2000) and Tajeddin and Daraee (2013) who showed that the retention of unfamiliar words was higher in form-focused groups.

However, the results of this study did not support those of Mason and Krashen (2004) who found that additional focus on form on traditional vocabulary exercises did not lead to vocabulary gain.

The findings of the study provided an empirical support for the effectiveness of form-focused task-based instruction on Iranian elementary EFL learners' vocabulary learning and retention. It was found that form-focused tasks significantly improved Iranian EFL learners' vocabulary learning. In addition, EFL learners' vocabulary learning was proved to be better than their vocabulary retention as a result of the form-focused task-based instruction.

This study presented a model of foreign language vocabulary instruction that integrated task-based and forms-focused instruction. Form-focused task-based instruction involves a wide variety of instructional techniques and strategies, which is in line with second language learning theories that highlight the role of attention and consciousness in language learning. In this framework, the instruction is based on attracting the attention of learners to specific forms, within meaningful and interactive context that is provided by the use of the tasks. The interactive nature of the tasks as well as the attention to language forms provide a balance in language learning and it was proved to be a confident way of keeping vocabulary in long-term memory. The combination of form-focused and task-based instruction is characterized as an effective way of vocabulary learning for elementary learners since it is contextualized, provides deep senses of word's use and learner-based as the vocabulary learning is the result of learner's efforts.

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