

The Effect of Second language Equivalent Vocabulary Tests on Students' Overall English Proficiency Test of Pre-university Students

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Abstract – This study was designed to determine whether L2 equivalent vocabulary tests could improve pre-university students' overall English language proficiency test considering two different contexts of proficiency. Accidental sampling was used because two female classes (N=57) with different English proficiency were easily available in one of high schools in Shiraz, Iran. An independent-samples t-test proved this difference. The data were collected using two proficiency tests. Having taught the first three lessons, the teacher gave the first proficiency test to both groups. The next three lessons were taught but before teaching subsequent new lesson an equivalent vocabulary test in English was administered. The second proficiency test was administered too. Two paired t-tests for the two groups revealed that there was no significant difference between the first and second tests and also between the groups with different proficiency in English after treatment. Consequently, the null hypotheses of no difference between both proficiency tests and both groups were adopted.

Keywords: proficiency test, L2 equivalent vocabulary tests, paired t-tests

1. INTRODUCTION

Most language teachers believe that the more words students know, the better their exams will be, they and try to devote a large proportion of class time to this issue and encourage their students to boost the number of their vocabulary. Chomsky (1995) describes lexical learning is critical for learning a language since vocabulary is the key to comprehension (cited in Rezayat, 2014). Donalson-Evans (1981) suggests two factors can hinder comprehension: one of them is the lack of enough numbers of vocabulary and the other is a shortage of sufficient amount of shared cultural knowledge. When listeners recognize enough words, they are able to establish a context for making rational feasible guesses (cited in Chastain, 1988, p. 204). Morra and Camba (2009) declare that vocabulary learning is an essential element of acquisition of first and learning a second language (cited in Zoghi & Asadzadeh., 2015). Nation (2001) mentions the importance of vocabulary in life and concludes that it can lead to not only academic success but also success in life, because the greater vocabulary knowledge learners know the better they can think (cited in Mousavi et al., 2014). Folse (2004), and Hunt and Beglar (2005) argue that little research has been done in the field of vocabulary learning and de Groot (2006) highlights a beneficial procedure of vocabulary learning should be introduced but until now there is a shortage of this procedure (cited in Zarei& Esmaili, 2015). Starch (1916) designed the first Modern tests of vocabulary when psychometrics was going to be

established gradually. Starch had the learners match a list of foreign words to their English translations. In 1930, standardized objectives tests became the norm in the USA and vocabulary was one of the most crucial component of these tests. In 1964 using of TOEFL was very prevalent and vocabulary section has become a separate essential part (Bagheridoust & Karagahi, 2013). Spolsky (1995, cited in Schmitt, 2000) explains the stages that testing vocabulary has gone through and "believes that language testing has evolved through three main phases: the first phase is pre-scientific through utilizing examinations subjectively marked by a single examiner; a second phase focusing on objectivity and reliability, and a third phase emphasizing on validity along with other aspects of the second phase. In the case of vocabulary testing, unfortunately this last phase is still in its infancy. The evolution seems to have stopped at the second phase and due to the importance of appropriacy of difficulty, reliability and speediness, construct validity has been ignored"(cited in Bagheridoust & Karagahi, 013). A host of research studies have investigated to reveal the methods that assist learners in learning vocabulary. Lewis (2000) argues that collocations create contexts in which the process of learning a language can happen. They are words which occur with other words that result in developing successful understanding of language and communication. Nation (1990) discusses that knowing a word means knowing its spelling, pronunciation, meaning, grammatical pattern, collocations, association, the frequency as well as register. Laufer (1997) maintains that learning a new word includes learning its form, that is, pronunciation and spelling, its structure, multiple meanings, affective and pragmatic meaning, its relations with other words such as synonyms and its common collocations. As mentioned before, vocabulary knowledge is vital in learning a language but why learners cannot make progress in this area of language although they have a wide range of vocabulary because they should be trained to notice which words can go together. Allen (1983) draws our attention to this point that experienced teachers are always concerned with ways of teaching vocabulary because they know vocabulary learning is at the heart of language learning and language use. Spada (1997) claims that there are some methods for teaching vocabulary "form focused instruction" that learners are forced to focus on form within a meaning-based and integrated approach. Another way is focusing on form proposed by Long (1996) that means learners have an exclusive attention to form when using the language. Above procedures differ from "focus on forms" because they provide attention to form and meaning but in different ways. File and Adams (2010) maintain that in an isolated approach learners focus on features of words in isolation, whereas in an integrated approach learners' attention is drawn to understanding the meaning in texts. Although both kinds make an attempt to concentrate on meaning they differ in terms of *When attention* to form. In integrated form teacher tries to get learners to focus on form within communicative activities while in isolated form learners' attention is always drawn to form separately from communicative activities (cited in Zarei & Esmaeili, 2015). Zarei and Esmaeili (2015) studied the effect of three methods for teaching vocabulary: integrated vocabulary instruction that focuses on linguistic form within the context of communication. Isolated vocabulary instruction captures learners' attention to form which is separate from communicative language practice and synonym generation vocabulary instruction that encourages learners to utilize dictionaries, context clues, synonyms or antonyms. They concluded that the learners who received the first method, that is, integrated vocabulary instruction outperformed the other two groups in the immediate and delayed posttests and

synonym generation vocabulary instruction took the second place. A research done by Bagheridoust and Karagahi (2013) compare the performance of learners on two tests of vocabulary, that is, context- dependent and context- independent test format (matching test). They announce that the learners performed better on the matching or context-independent tests and conclude that the learners treat the words as individual items although the words are included in a context dependent test. In order to improve pre-university students' proficiency tests, and consequently their vocabulary, some second language equivalent vocabulary tests are given to the students before the proficiency test, this study is done to examine the effect of the vocabulary tests on their proficiency test. Two levels of proficiency are considered, students with high and low proficiency in English.

1.1. Statement of the Problem

The current study focuses on the challenge that many teachers in Iran face, that is, which method is more effective for L2 vocabulary learning. The article tries to assess isolated technique of vocabulary instruction on English foreign language learners' vocabulary comprehension and production.

1.2. Research Questions

1. Can using L2 equivalent vocabulary tests make a difference in improving pre-university students' overall English proficiency test?
2. Do these tests act differently in different learning conditions?
3. Do the groups differ in their proficiency test?

1.3. Research Hypotheses

1. Using L2 equivalent vocabulary tests can make no difference in improving pre-university students' overall English proficiency test.
2. These tests do not act differently in different learning conditions.
3. The groups do not differ in their overall English proficiency test.

2. METHODOLOGY

2.1. Participants

Two classes comprised of 57 Iranian female pre-university students between the ages of 18 and 19 studying in one of the public high schools in Shiraz were chosen through accidental sampling because they were easily available. The students of each class were at the same level of proficiency based on the results of their last year final exam that was a National exam. Their proficiency level was not an issue since the aim was to assess if they could use the vocabulary knowledge of the translation tests in English in their future proficiency test.

2.2. Materials

Two types of tests were utilized in this study, proficiency and translation tests. Brown (2005) considers 3 kinds of tests: adopting, adapting and developing ones. The proficiency tests were adopting language tests, that is, they were bought from commercial publishing centers. After calculating item facility, item discrimination and reliability, we had to develop, omit, or replace some items so these adopting tests were changed into developing tests. IF and ID were done on some problematic parts. These two tests were administered to a class of pre-university student (N=33) of the same school and we calculated item facility and item discrimination. Based on Brown's criterion, ideal items that have item facility between .30 and .70 are acceptable and also item discrimination of about .40 and up. The best items were chosen. Kuder-Richardson formula 21 was used to calculate the reliability because of being quick and easy to calculate. The values of reliability for the two proficiency tests were .60 and .70 respectively. This kind of test had different parts such as: fill in the blanks, multiple choice items, scrambled words, cloze test, puzzles, and reading comprehension. The second type was three L2 equivalent vocabulary tests consisted of 50 words selected from their lessons in Persian that the teacher had the students translate them into English before the second proficiency test.

3. PROCEDURE AND RESULTS

The first three lessons were taught separately, four sessions for every lesson, and then the first proficiency test was administered to the two classes based on the questions of these three lessons. As mentioned before, these two classes were not the same in English proficiency. The teacher had noticed this difference based on some quizzes and their class activities. We wanted to prove this difference. After calculating the means for the two groups based on the first test, we faced two different measures, the mean for the first group was 10.85 and for the second one was 12.31. The mean difference by itself could not reveal anything unless it was proved that the difference was not due to chance, or the difference was significant. To solve this problem, the raw data were analyzed by SPSS software version 20 (SPSS Inc., Released 2011). An independent-sample T-test was applied to compare the significant difference between the two groups. Here are the results:

Table 1: Group Statistics

	groups	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
scores	group 1	29	10.8590	2.56765	.47680
	group 2	28	12.3125	2.57087	.48585

Table 2: Independent Samples T-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
scores	Equal variances assumed	.260	.612	-2.135	55	.037	-1.45353	.68071	-2.81771	-.08936
	Equal variances not assumed			-2.135	54.925	.037	-1.45353	.68073	-2.81778	-.08929

As can be seen the value of Sig is .037 that is less than .05 (level of Sig), so the third null hypothesis is rejected and the results indicate there is difference between the two groups in their English proficiency.

Having taught the subsequent three lessons separately, the teacher gave the second proficiency test. But the new and important words of every lesson were listed in Persian and the teacher got the students to translate them into English before the second proficiency test. They had to know the correct spellings and English meanings of the words. They got high scores in these translation tests. Two paired t-tests were run to compare the mean scores of two proficiency tests for the groups. Tables 3 and 4 present the result of paired t-test for group one.

Table 3: Paired Samples Statistics for Group one

		Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Pair 1	test1	11.5128	29	3.03369	.56334
	test2	10.8590	29	2.56765	.47680

Table 4: Paired Samples T Test for Group One

		Paired Differences				t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	
		Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference				
					Lower				Upper
Pair 1	test1 - test2	.65379	2.69866	.50113	-.37272	1.68031	1.305	.203	

Table 5: Paired Samples Statistics for Group Two

	Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Pair 1 test1	12.8393	28	3.48755	.65909
test2	12.3125	28	2.57087	.48585

Table 6: Paired Samples T Test for Group Two

	Paired Differences					t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference				
				Lower	Upper			
Pair 1 test1 - test2	.52679	3.76899	.71227	-.93468	1.98825	.740	27	.466

As can be seen from the tables (above) the levels of Sig. for the groups are more than .05, .203 and .466 respectively, so the first null hypothesis is retained and we can conclude using L2 equivalent vocabulary tests makes no difference in improving pre-university students' overall English proficiency test. They could not transfer their vocabulary knowledge gained in L2 equivalent tests to new contexts. The second null hypothesis is accepted too, since these tests do not act differently in different learning conditions. Knowing a large number of words does not guarantee that learners can communicate in spoken or written form or even gain an acceptable score in their proficiency tests. These subjects knew the meanings of Persian words in English and even their spellings but they had problems and difficulties when the words occurred with other words (Cameron, 2001). Another reason is that after a short time they forgot the vocabulary lists. In order to prevent this issue, Cameron (2001) suggests that children should learn vocabulary while participating in discourse and classroom activities and language teachers should not teach grammar and vocabulary separately. Vocabulary can aid teachers to teach grammar, a students' favorite area. Based on my own personal experience the most difficult area of English as a foreign language is teaching and learning vocabulary not only in Iranian educational system but also in other countries'. That is the reason why students prefer grammar to vocabulary and learning vocabulary is a challenge to L2 learners because they hear or see these lists only in class and after a short while they forget them. Researchers always concentrate on teaching skills and this area of language has been neglected and obviously it plays a critical role in acquiring a language since recently this area has captured their attention, for example Carter and McCarthy (1988), Nation (1990), Arnaud and Bejoint (1992), Huckin, Haynes and Coady (1995), Coady and Huckin (1997), Read (1997) and Schmitt (1997, 2000) (cited in Alqahtani, 2015). As mentioned earlier, Zarei & Esmaili (2013) suggest that this problem can be overcome by using two beneficial methods, integrated vocabulary instruction and synonym generation technique of vocabulary instruction. I myself

have noticed that the second technique works well and the students can remember them easily because the students learn words in English as synonyms or antonyms. Stanlnaker and Kura (1995) administered two types of tests to the students studying German at the University of Chicago to assess knowledge of German vocabulary test in two different contexts. The first test was a kind of multiple choice items or discrete ones (context- independent), that is, each word was tested in the form of an isolated form independent of other items. And the second test was context dependent, a reading comprehension that contained 100 words of the same targeted words was given to the students and they had to supply the English equivalent of each underlined word. The result showed that the context did not have any effective role for the elementary language proficiency students (cited in Bagheridoust & Karagahi, 2013). We can conclude that the second test was context dependent one but why the result was not favorable, maybe the most important point was that the words should have been learnt in context too, therefore not only tests but also instructions should be context dependent.

4. CONCLUSION

As Schmitt (2000) states learning vocabulary plays a crucial role in acquiring a foreign or second language and communicative competence (cited in Alqahtani, 2015) so this article intends to throw some light on one of the ways of learning L2 vocabulary and its impact on overall proficiency test, that is , translation lists of Persian words in English. Since the learners have got high scores in these translation tests we expect they will be able use these English learnt words in the new contexts, proficiency tests, but the results provide that they cannot transfer their knowledge in the new contexts so the null hypothesis is accepted, that is, using L2 equivalent vocabulary tests can make no difference in improving pre-university students' overall English proficiency test because they have not learnt the words in context even if these words are included in a context test like a proficiency test. There is an assumption that these equivalent tests may have better effect on the second group with higher proficiency in English but their performance presents students' proficiency does not influence their recall in new contexts. It is supposed that students' mother tongue can benefit learning the second language but they should learn English words in English activities and Cameron (2001) concludes " use as much of the target language as possible , and ensure that the use of first language supports the children's language learning." So a wide range of assessment and activities are needed in order that students learn vocabulary, in other words they should see and use them in different contexts as much as possible because learning happens when learners can experience and use the new meanings in new context.

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