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A Comparison of the Impact of Intentional and Incidental Learning on Vocabulary and Understanding Comprehension Text

Kelime Öğrenimi ve Metin Anlama Üzerindeki Etkisinin Karşılaştırılması

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Abstract

Nowadays, with the dominance of communicative language teaching, the position of vocabulary and lexis in the field of language became significantly crucial in order to help learners develop communicative competence. To be able to negotiate with the target group of people, it is essential that the pool of vocabulary should be large enough to convey the meaning. In that case, the way how vocabulary is learned is brought into the debate. This study is intended to examine the impact of incidental and intentional vocabulary learning of Turkish learners of English on the vocabulary and comprehension tests. So as to carry out the objective of the comparison of intentional and incidental vocabulary learning, 40 freshmen studying at the Department of English Language Teaching participated in the study. Freshmen were divided into two groups as the intentional learning group and incidental learning group. The participants were presented with a reading text in which they were exposed to some specific words. The intentional learning group was notified earlier that they would be given a vocabulary test about targeted words and a reading comprehension test. However, the incidental learning group had no idea about the vocabulary test and comprehension check, the results indicate that there is no significant difference between intentional group and incidental group in terms of vocabulary learning.

Keywords: Language Learners, Incidental Learning, Intentional Learning.

Özet

Hedef kitle ile iletişim sağlayabilmek ve anlamlı iletişim kurmak adına geniş bir kelime dağarcığına sahip olmak gerekmektedir. Bu açıdan bakıldığında, kelime öğreniminin nasıl yapıldığı tartışma konusu haline gelmiştir. Bu çalışma maksatlı ve tesadüfi öğrenme tekniklerinin İngilizce öğrenen Türk öğrencilerin kelime öğrenme ve metin anlama becerileri üzerindeki etkisini incelemeyi amaçlamaktadır. Söz konusu olan çalışmanın hedeflerine ulaşması için, İngiliz Dili Eğitimi bölümünde okuyan 40 adet birinci sınıf öğrencisi çalışmaya katılmıştır. Öğrenciler maksatlı öğrenme grubu ve tesadüfi öğrenme grubu olarak iki gruba ayrılmıştır. Katılımcılara içlerinde belirli kelimelere maruz kalacakları okuma parçaları verilmiştir. Maksatlı öğrenme grubuna uygulama esnasında kendilerine kelime ve okuduğunu anlama testi verileceği

söylenmiştir. Fakat, tesadüfi öğrenme grubu ise böyle bir uygulama konusunda bilgilendirilmemiştir. Sonuçlar her iki grup arasında kelime öğrenme ve okuduğunu anlama yetisi bakımından bir farklılık olmadığını göstermiştir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Dil Öğrenenler, Tesadüfi Öğrenme, Kasıtlı Öğrenme.

1. INTRODUCTION

Vocabulary learning is assumed to be at the center of language acquisition whether it is the first language you acquire or the second or a foreign language you learn (Murcia, 2001). To be more specific, learning a foreign language encompasses the acquisition of certain aspects such as structure and vocabulary, which is exactly the same for those who try to learn English as a second or foreign language. Therefore, to be competent in the target language, vocabulary knowledge like grammar holds a prominent position in the case of language acquisition (Coady, 1993; Laufer, 1989). Teaching vocabulary, as a fundamental pillar in language learning, has a history of teaching in which it was neglected at first then gained importance. This might have stemmed from the fact that teaching approaches based on the linguistic theories were dominant until 1960s, the time which refers to the era that grammatical and structural part of the language was at peak. Chomsky (1957) claims that languages are presented as speakers' mental grammar, which means a set of abstract rules for generating grammatical sentences. That is to say; the focus on grammar is given priority and lexis is ignored (Carter and McCarthy, 1989). With the new flow of language teaching, Hymes (1972) presents the idea of communicative competence prioritizing the use of language to communicate, including social context and the appropriate use of language rules. The association between communicative competence and lexical competence becomes more apparent, as Huckin and Coady (1999) underpin that lexical competence is at the heart of communicative competence. The importance of teaching and learning vocabulary which is previously assumed to be as a skill to take care of itself becomes a significantly current issue (Schmidt, 2000).

Nowadays, the question of debate centers on the notion whether it is needed to teach vocabulary or not. In brief, teaching and learning vocabulary should be regarded unneglectable given that the recognition of average 9,000 English word families is essential for written texts (Brown, 2001) and around 7,000 for the comprehension of spoken language (Nation, 2006). What is more, a larger pool of vocabulary range is required in order to use language in different contexts compromising communication with others. After the imminence of vocabulary is proven, another current issue of debate emerges from the teaching perspective of vocabulary. Generally speaking, there are a large number of teaching and learning approaches serving in order to improve EFL learners' vocabulary competence. As Doughty (1991) underlines, two fundamental approaches usually emerge out of all, these are incidental and intentional learning. When it comes to vocabulary learning, incidental learning refers to "as the by-product of any activity not explicitly geared to vocabulary learning" whereas intentional vocabulary learning refers to "any activity aiming at committing lexical information to memory" (Hulstijn, 2001, p. 267).

Gass (1999) recommends the incidental learning as the learning of some specific structures without being exposed to any examples of it. This definition seems to be a more extended one in comparison with others. However; in a broader perspective there are three descriptions that we can derive from Schmidt (1994);

- The most general meaning is couched in negative terms as learning without intent to learn (Schmidt, 1994, p.16),
- It refers to the learning of one stimulus while paying attention to another stimulus aspect,
- It is the learning of formal features through a focus of attention on semantic features (Hulstijn, 1997)

The common view of vocabulary teaching is that we have not been elaborately taught all vocabulary we have fostered and we have learned them when our mind focus is elsewhere such as comprehension or communication. As much as we have enough exposure, as it happens in intentional learning, learning of a structure or a word becomes automatized in the mindset of the learners (Murcia, 2001). In the field of vocabulary learning, intentional learning is usually granted a cognitive description as the memorization and practice techniques are stimulated by the learners when they have an intention to learn something explicitly (Schmidt, 1997). In intentional vocabulary learning, students are expected to engage in activities which focus on attention and conscious process for learning vocabulary. Sökmen (1997) highlights some key principles of intentional learning of vocabulary. These principles are summarized as;

1. building a large recognition of vocabulary,
2. integrating newly learned words with the old ones,
3. providing a number of encounters with a word to facilitate imaging,
4. encouraging interdependent learning strategies
5. fostering a deep level of processing.

Doughty (1991) and Gass (1999) assert that making a clear cut distinction between intentional and incidental learning is intriguing somehow two concepts overlap with each other. However; Paradis (1994) distinguishes incidental from intentional learning that “is acquired incidentally (by not focusing attention on the meaning), stored implicitly (i.e., not available to conscious awareness and used automatically (i.e., without control)” (p. 394). This distinction can be maintained that intentional learning may require awareness at the moment of learning with a deliberate attempt to learn.

Researchers such as Harmer (2003) and Nation (2001) focus their interest on learning vocabulary incidentally in connection with vocabulary through reading. Krashen (1989) claims that a large proportion of vocabulary is gained through extensive reading given that the learners learn all vocabulary they need while reading intensively. Reading has been found to benefit more than structure and meaning association. Therefore; exposure to novel words can lead to the development of multiple aspects of word knowledge. For instance, in a study on incidental vocabulary acquisition, Rott (1999) focused on the association between the impact of exposure frequency and vocabulary retention. In this study, ninety- five English learners of German were given a reading passage that they were aimed to be exposed to the targeted words at least two times (maybe four or six) depending on the group they participate. The results indicated that subjects who were exposed to the target words six times outperformed others in terms of vocabulary retention. In a similar study, Webb (2007) underpinned that learners need to be exposed to a new word at least eight times before it is stored in the memory. In another study on the role of frequency of occurrence

in incidental acquisition of vocabulary through reading, Zahar et al. (2001) similarly concluded that frequency seems to be three to four times more important for beginners compared to more advanced students.

On the other side, that Schmitt (2008) underlined the significance of intentional learning as “virtually anything that leads to more exposure, attention, manipulation, or time spent on lexical items adds to their learning” (p. 339). This is supported by Carlo (2004) that students who were taught vocabulary by using explicitly vocabulary teaching strategies outperformed those who were taught without intention. Likewise, similar results were gathered in the study of Tian and Macaro (2012) who wanted to measure the effects of codeswitching while teaching vocabulary for EFL learners. The group of participants who received teacher code switching for vocabulary explanations outperformed those who were taught only in target language. The significance of explicit instruction while teaching target language vocabulary reveals the necessity of teaching explicitly.

Hence, the current study is carried out in order to investigate the acquisition of English vocabulary and reading comprehension by adult Turkish EFL learners. The study was intended to identify the possible differences between intentional and incidental vocabulary learning and comprehension of a passage through a reading text. The following research questions guided this study:

1. Do the learners learn vocabulary better through intentional learning?
2. Do the learners comprehend a reading passage better through intentional learning?
3. Do the learners learn vocabulary better through incidental learning?
4. Do the learners comprehend a reading passage better through incidental learning?
5. Is there a significant difference between the intentionally and incidentally learned vocabulary?

2. METHODOLOGY

2.1. Research Design

An experimental design is adopted in this study as experiments are one of the best ways of gathering information from participants about a specific topic. According to Campbell and Stanley (2015), experimental designs are the procedure of figuring out the relationship between variables and reveal if one affects the other. Additionally, Creswell (2002) defines experiments as procedures to be applied to reveal the reason and result association between two variables. As a research design, an experimental study is selected and decided on the reasons mentioned above.

2.2. Participants

The data is collected from 40 freshmen studying at the Department of English Language Teaching at a western state university. Convenience sampling method is used for selecting the participants. The rationale behind the decision of the participants is that they are conveniently available during the period of gathering data for the study and they are considered as good examples of the research questions (Creswell, 2002). The study group consists of 40 freshmen at the Faculty of Education (19 females and 21 males) whose ages ranged between 18 and 19.

2.3. Instrument

In order to conduct the study, an advanced reading passage whose appropriateness was negotiated with colleagues was chosen and the reading test on vocabulary and comprehension was designed as an instrument. The rationale behind the choice of advance reading text was the appropriateness in terms of the language level of the participants of the study. The selected reading test consisted of two main parts. In the first part, there are 12 vocabulary questions for students to find out the meaning of the targeted words. In the second part of the text, there are 10 comprehension check questions as true/false. Students are expected to find out the false one and correct them. Additionally, the reliability of the reading test conducted in the study is calculated as 0.74

2.4. Procedure

In order to conduct the study, the participants were divided into two groups as intentional and incidental group. After the consent forms were taken, the participants were presented with a reading passage and they were given twenty minutes to read it. With the intentional group, the teacher analyzed the passage together and helped students clarify the ambiguous parts. Afterwards, students were given a vocabulary and a comprehension test after reading the passage extensively. On the other hand, for the incidental group, the teacher did not actively participate and did not notify students to pay attention to the words and meaning of the reading text. Additionally, students had no idea that they were going to be tested on vocabulary and comprehension after the activity. Both groups were given the vocabulary and

3. RESULTS

In order to evaluate students' performances on incidental and intentional learning, the statistical measurements, means and standard deviations are demonstrated below. The tables of the analysis which help to consolidate the results are also presented. The results are categorized into two main parts; vocabulary learning results and the comprehension test results.

As cited before, so as to demonstrate the performance of the participants in both intentional and incidental learning groups, a reading text consisting of 12 vocabulary questions and 10 comprehension questions is given to the participants. According to the results in terms of vocabulary learning, the t-test indicates that there is no significant difference between the intentional learning group (M: 9.90) and the incidental learning group (M: 9.57) as shown in Table 1 below.

Table 1. Independent Sample Statistics for the Vocabulary Test

| G | N | Means | Std. Deviation | Std. Error Mean | T | DF | P |
|--------|----|-------|----------------|-----------------|-----|----|-----|
| Inten. | 21 | 9.90 | 1.09 | .23 | .87 | 38 | .38 |
| Incid. | 19 | 9.57 | 1.26 | .28 | | | |

As the second part, a comprehension check section consisting of 10 (ten) true/false questions is administered to students to see their performances. The independent samples T- test results exhibit that there is no significant difference between the intentional learning group (M: 7.09) and the incidental learning group (M: 5.21) in terms of comprehension. There seems to be a difference between the means of both groups (7.09 versus 5.21), p test shows that comprehension is statistically significant as in Table 2 below.

Table 2. Independent Sample Statistics For The Comprehension Test

| G | N | Means | Std. Deviation | Std. Mean | t | df | p |
|-------------|----|-------|----------------|-----------|------|----|-----|
| Intentional | 21 | 7.09 | 1.44 | .31 | 3.04 | 38 | .00 |
| Incidental | 19 | 5.21 | 2.39 | .54 | | | |

4. CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

This current study is carried out in order to investigate the acquisition of L2 vocabulary and comprehension of a reading text by Turkish EFL learners. In order to fulfill the before mentioned objectives, some research questions are proposed. To illustrate, the first and third research questions are concerned with the acquisition of lexis through intentional and incidental learning. It seems obvious that intentional learning and incidental learning both have proven themselves useful in learning vocabulary for Turkish EFL learners and there is no priority of one over another. This might stem from the fact that students get familiar with the words during the reading session. Students can pick either of these approaches while learning and acquiring vocabulary in a given reading context. This finding shows differences with the study of Carlo (2004) in whose study intentional learning group outperformed the incidental learning group. As Nation (2001) pointed out, "inferring vocabulary meaning from context is an essential strategy for developing reading comprehension and promoting lexical acquisition" (p. 240). As a result, when learners read a lot, they will be able to enrich vocabulary range by being exposed to and as Rott (1999) underlines, there is a strong relation between frequency of words and incidental learning. In that case, learners will have the chance of leaning new words via being exposure to them regularly so that they will have the chance of associating the new words with the old ones in their lexis pool. As an alternative, learner may prefer to learn and acquire vocabulary intentionally as well. As Schmidt (2008) points out, so as to learn vocabulary in a context, some special attempts such as paying attention, repetition, picturing, and association are needed. This will ease the learning process for the students and help them gain more words easily. As a second issue, in the field of comprehension test, a significant difference is found between intentional learning and incidental learning, which answers the second and fourth research questions. Students seem to be motivated to answer the comprehension questions in both groups. Consequently, on one side, the intentional learning has proven itself effective and as Paradis (1994) underlined a conscious awareness and attention are required in order to comprehend anything in the target language. However; on the other, it should not be forgotten that that incidental learning is also useful for students to comprehend a reading passage.

As one of the pillars of learning a second or foreign language, reading texts are abundant fields of vocabulary so that they assist learners to gain and retain new words. One of the benefits of reading texts lies under the fact that learner may adopt new words and lexis in an incidental way in which they may be exposed to the same words frequently. This may help learners become more proficient without intending to learn them. On the other side, there is another important thing that needs to be considered in making the reading fruitful for vocabulary acquisition to occur; intentional learning. In essence, the consideration of whether instruction is intentional or incidental is important when integrating content with literacy practices that are essential for all students. Therefore, it is the decision of the teachers and instructors to decide which strategy to apply depending on the complexity of the reading text. Being aware that reading promotes both incidental and intentional learning may help to enhance positive approach in reading.

Several implications can be elicited for teachers, material designers and researchers through this study. To commence with, teachers should realize the importance of teaching vocabulary. They should take notice of appropriate strategies for their students' needs. If they expect their students to retain the words that they learn during a reading activity, they should prepare and enrich it with explicit examples and activities. On the other hand, when the teachers think that their students need to take responsibility on their own without being explicitly guided by teachers, they need to plan the lessons accordingly. While developing materials, the applicability of intentional and incidental teaching and learning strategies should be taken into consideration as well.

In conclusion, the study not only sheds light on to comprehension of how vocabulary may be most effectively acquired through a reading text, it provides new insights into the impact of such strategies on vocabulary acquisition as well. Last but not the least, the study fosters the understanding of intentional and incidental learning and contributes with important implications for classroom practice.

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