

INCIDENTAL VOCABULARY LEARNING BY USING CULTURAL AND TRADITIONAL BASED TEXTS FOR READING

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Abstract

The acquisition of vocabulary is an integral part of language learning. Vocabulary learning can be broadly classified into intentional vocabulary learning and incidental vocabulary learning. While there are numerous strategies to enhance intentional vocabulary learning as they form a crucial part of the desired outcome of the curriculum, less emphasis has been rendered on the yield of incidental vocabulary learning, which, in fact is a continuous process occurring in the course of intentional vocabulary learning, through reading different texts. Culturally and traditionally relevant texts have aided students in vocabulary learning in a significant way as the texts draw the students to environments which have already been experienced by them, thus forming a rich association between the texts and the pre-existing schema of the learners. This study aims to explore the impact of culturally relevant texts in incidental vocabulary acquisition by Arab ESL learners. The experimental group was a batch of General Foundation Programme students (level 3), who were exposed to three tests in different stages of the course. The data examined have shown a minimal drive in incidental vocabulary acquisition, with respect to the factual knowledge gained, with culturally relevant texts.

Keywords : Intentional Vocabulary Learning, Incidental Vocabulary Learning, Cultural texts

1 Introduction

Vocabulary acquisition is a key element in the shaping of our language. The richness and variety of words in a text could, in fact, augment the ideas and facts, supplemented by grammatical accuracy. A profound knowledge in vocabulary ensures sublime heights in written and oral communication and can be defined as the measure of learning in an individual. Vocabulary learning can be broadly classified into two types- intentional vocabulary learning and incidental vocabulary learning. Intentional vocabulary learning refers to “any activity aiming at committing lexical information to memory” (Robinson, 2001, p.271). It involves “invest[ing] the necessary mental effort and memoriz[ing] the words until [learners] know their meanings” (Koren, 1999, p. 2). A rigorous procedure which requires the teacher to bring out the desired outcome (in this case, the accurate recognition and production of the vocabulary) through varied assessments, is clearly visible in intentional vocabulary learning. On the other hand, incidental vocabulary learning is “a byproduct of something else” (Gass & Selinker, 2001, p. 379) such as reading texts for comprehension, listening to conversations or attending workshops. Incidental vocabulary awareness occurs during these processes, but the extent to which they can be acquired in the same way as intentional vocabulary is gained, is a matter to be subjected for further research. The word ‘incidental’ can be ambiguous at times since “careful attention can be paid to the properties of a certain word during intentional learning just as well as during incidental learning” (Hulstijn & Laufer, 2001, p. 542). During the process where minute attention is paid to the incidental vocabulary, in order to comprehend the context, a transition can occur in the status of the word from incidental to semi-intentional.

Reading, being a cognitive process, is very complex and it involves the building up and integration of the information by the reader. Background knowledge is a key factor, aiding in the processing of a passage or a text. Background knowledge is in a continuous stage of expansion and restructuring, with subject to exposure to more reading material in any form, resulting in the creation of schema, which is a network of related knowledge that forms a mental structure to understand complex systems. The facts, related to tradition and culture in societies where both tradition and culture play a significant role, may occupy larger chunks of background knowledge of the learners, enabling in efficient recall when the students are exposed to texts based on them, resulting in sound analyses of the texts.

The close affinity to the milieu and the importance attached to the customs in tradition and culture create a strong schema, deeply embedded in the long-term memory. Various studies have been done regarding the effects of background knowledge on reading texts (Diakidoy, 1998; Nagy, Anderson, & Herman, 1987). Vocabulary learning on a highly positive note occurred initially when students were exposed to familiar texts in contrast to less familiar texts (Pulido 2000, 2003).

Culture and tradition play a pivotal role in the Arab world. The profound influence of both on the individual and the society are clearly noticeable. Hence it could be assumed that texts related to culture and tradition will be comprehended in a better manner compared to general texts. This experimental paper tends to extrapolate whether familiarity to culture and tradition aids in enhancing incidental vocabulary learning in L2 when learners (in this case, foundation students) come across culturally and traditionally rich reading texts in the Arab context. Regardless of the nature of the texts, intentional vocabulary learning will be the primary focus of the learner, owing to the importance of it in the assessments, and the fact that higher marks in reading ensure a safe passage for the students to the next level. The assessments suffice to gauge the level of progress in acquisition of intentional vocabulary throughout the course.

But there is no measure to realize the extent to which incidental vocabulary is learnt during the term. Taking this aspect into consideration, the paper raises the following research questions:

- 1) Do cultural and traditional texts impact incidental vocabulary learning?
- 2) Does incidental vocabulary awareness gradually give way to learning and retention when students are being subjected to cultural and traditional texts frequently?

2 Methodology

2.1 Participants

The General Foundation Programme (GFP) in the institution is divided into 3 levels. The students who have just completed their school education, begin their long journey in collegiate education with GFP as the first lap. The level of English is quite low when they enter college and the three levels of GFP aim to build a strong foundation in the language for the Arab learners. The experimental study was done in Level 3 of GFP as it was the highest level in the Programme and based on the assumption that students might have attained a sizable knowledge in vocabulary in the previous levels. The number of students were 26 (5 males and 21 females).

A survey was conducted among the learners to measure the awareness and usage of English in their daily lives.

2.2 Texts

The texts used for the research were three informative passages, with two of them related to the students' culture/tradition and one, a general text. The texts titled 'Shuwa' (a food eaten during Eid) and 'Muslim inventions that shaped the modern world' were culturally familiar to the students in their native language. The text 'Shuwa' has a Flesch-Kincaid Readability Score (FKRS)* of 11.1 while 'Muslim inventions that shaped the modern world' possess a FKRS* of 12.8. The learners were also acquainted with the content of the general text titled 'Online Learning' (FKRS of 12.8)* as it is a significant concept nowadays.

2.3 Target Words (TW)

Intentional vocabulary learning involves a conscious approach in the learning and assimilation of words; certain tasks and exercises are provided to the learner in his/her mission to achieve proficiency in a certain set of words. In sharp contrast to this, incidental vocabulary learning can occur at any time to the learner. With respect to classroom learning, specifically, in reading classes, the learner comes across vocabulary which may aid them in comprehending the context. The student can also learn a word, which comes across incidentally, owing to sheer curiosity or passion. Unlike intentional vocabulary learning, to obtain a set of words for incidental vocabulary learning research is a difficult exercise as each student tends to acquire a different set of vocabulary incidentally. Hence a group of words (n=10) were chosen as target words on account of the frequency of their occurrence in the course and their salience in the texts in providing rich contextual cues.

3 Procedure

3.1 Questionnaire

A simple questionnaire was distributed among the learners to gauge their awareness and knowledge about the English language. The questionnaire primarily focused on : participant`s passion in learning English; reading English materials other than academic texts; comprehension of a word from context or dictionary; and looking for a word`s meaning in Arabic or English.

3.2 Incidental Vocabulary Tests

The first incidental vocabulary test (IVLT 1), based on the general theme was conducted in the third week of the semester, ensuring that ample time was given to the students to acclimatize with the corpus of vocabulary, in Level 3 of General Foundation Programme.

The general text was chosen first, to check the measure of incidental vocabulary acquisition in the learning process. There were two exercises in the test; the first one was to match the TW to their definitions and the second one was to fill in the TW in appropriate sentences. The objective was to assess the students` awareness of incidental vocabulary (in this case, the TW) in the text as they were vital components in finding out the answers to questions based on textual reading.

The second test (IVLT 2), based on cultural familiarity, ``Shuwa``, was done after two weeks of IVLT 1. The exercises were the same as in IVLT 1. The test aimed to assess whether cultural familiarity aided in the inference of the TW from the context.

Incidental Vocabulary Test 3 (IVLT 3) was conducted after two weeks of IVLT 2, with the same kind of exercises followed in the first two tests. The text was culturally familiar, with a difficulty level higher than the one used in IVLT 2.

4 Results

4.1 Analysis of questionnaire results

18 participants confirmed that they had a genuine passion towards learning English while the remaining eight replied negatively. 19 learners admitted that they did not read anything in English other than their academic books in contrast to 7 who replied positively. 20 participants used the dictionary to comprehend a new word whereas only 6 adhered to the context to derive a word`s meaning. 67% of the participants went for the Arabic meaning of a new word in comparison to 33% who looked for the meaning in English.

Although 18 participants were passionate in acquiring the language, the passion is not converted into fruitful practice which is evident from the fact that 19 learners have no reading exposure apart from the limits of their textbooks. Majority of the participants relying on the dictionary for the understanding of a new word implies the lack of inferring or guessing skills. Adequate training in Level 1 and Level 2 is provided to the learners which implies that the students don`t implement the strategies learnt appropriately.

4.2 Analysis of Incidental Vocabulary Learning Tests

From the incidental scores shown in Table 1, no gains can be realized on the learners` performances with respect to the proximity of cultural or traditional bearings on the text. A slightly modest gain occurs in IVLT2 which can be accounted for two reasons: the difficulty scale of the text being lower compared to the other two and a strong feeling of attachment associated with the subject (Shuwa).

An interesting aspect to be noted here is the fact that the contextual comprehension of facts in the cultural texts was relatively much higher when compared to the isolated recognition and production of incidental vocabulary words. This was evident when majority of the participants answered factual questions accurately.

Table 1 : Incidental Vocabulary Learning Scores

% of marks	IVLT1	IVLT2	IVLT3
0-25	12	11	13
25-50	13	12	12
50-75	1	1	1
75-100		2	

5 Conclusion

The experimental study revealed no specific impact on incidental vocabulary learning from cultural and traditional texts on the targeted audience. Incidental vocabulary awareness, leading to retention was also not realized, when the participants were subjected to cultural and traditional texts frequently.

The findings, not robust, definitely calls for deeper and richer research in the concerned topic. No gain in the tests might be attributed to some factors. The focus of the experimental group on intentional vocabulary acquisition in reading lessons, as intentional vocabulary possessed sufficient weightage in the assessment, would have been a factor to the mute response in the comprehension of incidental vocabulary. Lack of reading exposure outside the classroom can be another cause, evident from the questionnaire, which greatly affects the reading skill of the learner as there is no scope of learning by inference or guessing from a context. Beck, Mckeown and McCaslin (1983) argue that ``.....contexts occurring in texts selections do not reliably assist readers in discovering the meaning of an unknown word....Children most in need of vocabulary development, less-skilled readers who are unlikely to add to their vocabulary from outside sources, will receive little benefit from such indirect opportunities.`` This statement may validate the findings of the experimental study. Nevertheless students, whether they are competent or not, should undergo the process of assessing the meaning of a word from the context; it aids in the comprehension of a word as well as a better grasp of the context and this is vital for the learner`s growth in terms of reading skills. Hence the study corroborates the emphasis of developing inferring or guessing skills in the comprehension of words, irrespective of the subject matter of the reading texts. Appropriate strategies to develop the skill assume great significance in the natural acquisition of vocabulary, intentional or incidental. The learners should be buttressed by frequent exposure to the same vocabulary which could pave the way to better vocabulary retention. Both of the above mentioned could lead to a better reader, and eventually a better writer of the English language.

Notes

* The **Flesch/Flesch–Kincaid readability test** is a readability test to indicate comprehension difficulty when reading a passage of contemporary academic English.

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