INTENTIONAL vs. INCIDENTAL VOCABULARY LEARNING

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Abstract

This paper explores the distinction between intentional and incidental vocabulary learning and analyses statistically their effects on Saudi ESL learners' ability to understand, retain and use new words actively in different situations. Two types of tests such as Standard Confirmation Test and a Contrastive Extempore Test of intentional & incidental types were given to twenty students at graduate level at JCC, Jeddah, KAU. Standard confirmation test determined a close homogeneity of all selected learners. The final test aimed at striking a contrast between the performance levels of both intentional &incidental vocabulary types. The homogenous learners were divided into two equal groups. Fifty new words were the same for both groups but framed in two different styles: intentional and incidental. The statistical data analysed through tables and figures demonstrated that incidental type performed significantly better than intentional type.

Keywords: Intentional & incidental vocabulary learning, contextual clues, guessing, inferring the meaning, statistical technique, extensive reading, cognitive process of learning

Introduction

Vocabulary learning is an indispensable process for ESL learners to acquire proficiency and competence in target language. Word power facilitates fluent speaking and effective writing. It substantiates both : learners' acquisition of knowledge and production of knowledge. It enriches learners' integrated language skills such as listening, speaking, reading and writing. Among the early studies of vocabulary acquisition in the first language (e.g., Boettcher, 1980; Carey, 1982; Clark, 1973; Dale, O' Rourke, & Bamman, 1971; Deighton, 1959; Eichholz & Barbe, 1961; Gentner, 1975), the study by Nagy et al. (1985) is particularly significant. In the course of their research they developed a methodology for measuring small gains in vocabulary knowledge. They declared that vocabulary learning from context does occur. Hence by the help of contact with a sufficient amount of written language exposure, incidental vocabulary learning in the first language can be substantial.

Incidental learning is the process of learning something without the intention of doing so. It is also learning one thing while intending to learn another (Richards & Schmidt, 2002). In terms of language acquisition, incidental learning is said to be an effective way of learning vocabulary from context (Day, Omura, &Hiramatsu, 1991; Jenkins, Stein, & Wysocki, 1984; Nagy, Herman, & Anderson, 1985; Saragi, Nation, & Meister, 1978).

Incidental Vocabulary Learning motivates learners for extensive reading. It involves learners' ability to guess the meaning of new words from the contextual clues. Incidental learning occurs more particularly through extensive reading in input-rich environments, albeit at a rather slow rate (Coady, J 2001). According to Harmer (2003), Nation (2001), extensive reading is a pleasurable reading situation where a teacher encourages students to choose what they want to read for themselves from reading materials at a level they can understand. Karashen's (2003) *comprehension hypothesis* claimed that comprehensible input is a necessary and sufficient condition for language development and extensive reading programs aim to develop reading fluency, and reading skills in general , while at the same time consolidate knowledge of previously met grammatical structures and

vocabulary. Other studies have emphasized benefits such as increased motivation to learn the new language and renewed confidence in reading (e. g., Brown, 2000; Waring & Takaki, 2003). In a further study conducted by Horst (2005) , a modified *vocabulary knowledge scale*, immediate post-test measure indicated that of 35 new words available for learning in self selected graded reading materials , 18 words were learned: a gain of 51 % . These gains are comparable to those achieved in the *A Clockwork Orange* investigation conducted by Saragi et al. (1978) In their study, learners were able to correctly identify the meanings of 75% of target words, especially the frequently recurring ones, in an unannounced multiple-choice test given immediately after the reading treatment. For a meta-analysis of these oft-cited, learning from context studies of vocabulary growth, see Waring and Nation (2004).

As learners read systematically arranged reading materials they often meet new words in the contexts and learn them faster. O' Harra (2004) claimed that "context is the setting and surrounding of a word. Therefore when we listen to someone's talk, the context of a word is the statement that includes the word". "When we read new words in a written context one or two nearby words may explain the meaning of new words or sometimes the paragraph may tell us what the new words mean".

 Incidental Vocabulary promotes deeper mental processing and better retention. The learners get themselves fully involved in the process of deciphering the meaning through the clues available in the text. They think and rethink about the new words involving cognitive process which helps the learners retain the words for a longer period of time. Cognitive process includes both receptive and productive aspects of vocabulary. Learners understand not only the meanings in the given text but the related grammatical patterns, common lexical sets and typical association of the word with the context. Learning vocabulary through extensive reading also improves learners' fluency. Learners look at group of words rather than each individual word while reading. Hulstijn & Laufer, (2001) were of view that the words that learners encounter in incidental vocabulary learning will be retained in the long term memory and could be used more confidently in different situations.

On the contrary, intentional vocabulary learning based on synonyms, antonyms, word substitution, multiple choice, scrambled words and crossword puzzles, regardless of context, is not so effective, because learners are more prone to rote learning .They cram the meaning of the new words without undergoing cognitive process. A very few words learned through this method get transformed into active process. Whereas reading new words and inferring the meaning through context will be more productive because it sharpens the ability for guessing. By practicing guessing the students can infer the general import and begin to understand the meaning gradually. Hence the process of guessing is of prime importance for vocabulary learning. Guessing is useful for both the proficient learners and low proficiency- level learners. While guessing, the learners' focus gets increased, and after guessing when the new words are learned by consulting dictionaries, they could be retained for a longer period of time. Hence the guess should be tried out in the context first, then to see whether it makes sense or not, a dictionary may be consulted. Williams (1986) advises that guessing activity should be demonstrated on chalkboard by circling the unknown words and drawing across from other words that give clues to infer its meaning. The learners should see if the unknown words can be analyzed into parts. They should check if the meaning of the parts matches the meaning of the unknown word. The words made of prefixes and suffixes could easily be understood by learners if they are already taught the important prefixes and suffixes. Learners should also determine the parts of speech by looking up bilingual electronic dictionary. Once they find the words and their derivatives,

they come to know not only so many words and phrases within fraction of second but how to use them correctly in different contexts.

Methods

To find out the impact of direct learning of vocabulary items and guessing the meaning of new words through contextual clues on ESL learners two types of test were conducted. First and foremost *a Standard Confirmation Test* corresponding to the participants' level of efficiency in English was conducted on 20 Saudi ESL learners pursuing professional courses at Jeddah Community College (KAU) Saudi Arabia. Both types of tests such as intentional Vocabulary (synonyms, antonyms, crossword puzzles and word substitutions) and Incidental Vocabulary (reading passages and contextual sentences) were incorporated. In standard confirmation test 50 words were given in the test. The time given was one hour and the correct answer to each item received one point. There was no penalty for false responses. The homogeneity of the group was confirmed through statistical technique. The participants ranged in age from 18-25 were elementary users of English having a little prior exposure to the English language. The students were initially told that they would take part in a vocabulary learning strategies program in which 50 % questions will be incidental type and next 50 % will be intentional type. The aim was to find out how contextual clues facilitate learners to decipher the general import of the paragraph.

Procedure

The procedure taken in this study was based first on the standard confirmation test .This test was based on 20 students and 50 easy words. 20 students were divided into two groups: Group A and Group B. In the standard confirmation test both the group took a set of questions based on both intentional and incidental types. This test was a blend of intentional and incidental types of vocabulary. This test was given on extempore basis without prior preparation. 50 easy words framed in intentional and incidental types were given to both the groups. Each correct response carries one point and there was no minus marking. This was aimed to confirm the homogeneity of the competence level of both the groups. After this step the final test was given to both the groups after a week. The procedure of the final test was unfolded in advance. The final test was again on the extempore basis. No time for prior preparation was given. Group A was assigned to attempt the intentional type questions only and Group B was assigned to attempt the incidental type questions only. 50 new words were the same for both the groups but framed into two different types: intentional and incidental. So in the final test the aim was to evaluate which Group had performed better. The result in both the tests: Standard confirmation test and final test was deduced by tables.

Materials and Design

The standard confirmation test contained words related to kitchen appliances, clothes, fruits and personality traits which are frequently used in day today life. The words were chosen according to the level of the students. This test was based on synonyms, antonyms and multiple choices. The sample of this test based on matching words with meaning only is given below. The final test which was based on contrastive intentional & incidental type contained words from political background, social life and marriage. Easy words which are frequently used in social life were chosen for the test. This test was given after a weak but on extempore basis. This test was based on filling in the blanks and the paragraph followed by questions . The aim was to find out if the students could perform well with clues given in the paragraph. Samples of both types of test are given below:

Sample of standard confirmation test:
Match words with their meaning.

Words	Meaning
(1) Level headed	a garment hanging from the waist; worn mainly by girls and women
(2) Arrogant	container used domestically, especially in a kitchen
(3) micro-wave oven	A device that uses microwave to rapidly cook food
(5) Utensil	Overbearing pride
(6) Skirt	Sensible

Fill in the blanks with appropriate words in the brackets

(1) *My mother prepared a tasty food. She put it in the ------------------------------so that the food could remain fresh the next day   (fridge, table, drawer)*
(2) *Fahad usually drinks ------------------------------ juice in the afternoons (Bread, egg, apple)*
(3) *The girl wearing a blue ----------------is my sister(napkin, quilt, skirt)*
(4) *My father is ----------------------. He becomes easily angry even at little mistakes of mine. Sometimes he starts beating us without reason.(good, level headed, short tempered)*

Sample of final test based on contrastive test of intentional and incidental type
Examples of intentional Items: Match Column A and Column B.

Column A		*Column B*
(1) Landslide victory	-------	*(a) party to celebrate new house*
(2) House warming	--------	*(b) to win with wide margin*
(3) Reception	-- -----	*(c) to sleep*
(4) Nods off	----------	*(d) to say someone is fit*
(5) recommend	-----------	*(e) Party after marriage*

Examples of Incidental vocabulary: Fill in the blanks with appropriate words. Given below: *House warming, reception, recommend, and Landslide victory, , nods off*

(1) Congress Party in India 'will form the government. It has got -------------------Victory. It has won the election with wide margin. (2) He has bought a new house. He wants to celebrate it. So he will invite all his friends for ---------------------------- (3) He is qualified. Please ------------ ------------------------ his name for the managerial post. (4)My friend got married last week. This week he is giving --------------------- to all his friends. (5)This teacher is not good. He always --------------------- in the class. The students wake him up.

The above mentioned questions in final test were based on Intentional and incidental vocabulary items. The same new words were selected but they were given different treatments. The intentional vocabulary items were focused on word –meaning (synonyms) only. The incidental vocabulary items were based on contextual clues. It was easier for the learners to guess the meanings of the new words through the context. **The contextual clues in the incidental vocabulary items are as follows:**

(1) **House warming**: The contextual clues occurred after the phrase are *house, invite, Celebrate.*
(2) **Recommend**: the contextual clues occurred after the word is *his name and managerial post*. The word (recommend) itself is self-explanatory. It is a verb which requires an object (his name).
(3) **Reception**: the contextual clues occurred before and after the word are *got married and friends.*
(4) **Nods off**: the contextual clues occurred after the word is *wake him up.*

Result and Discussion

Table:01, Standard Confirmation Test

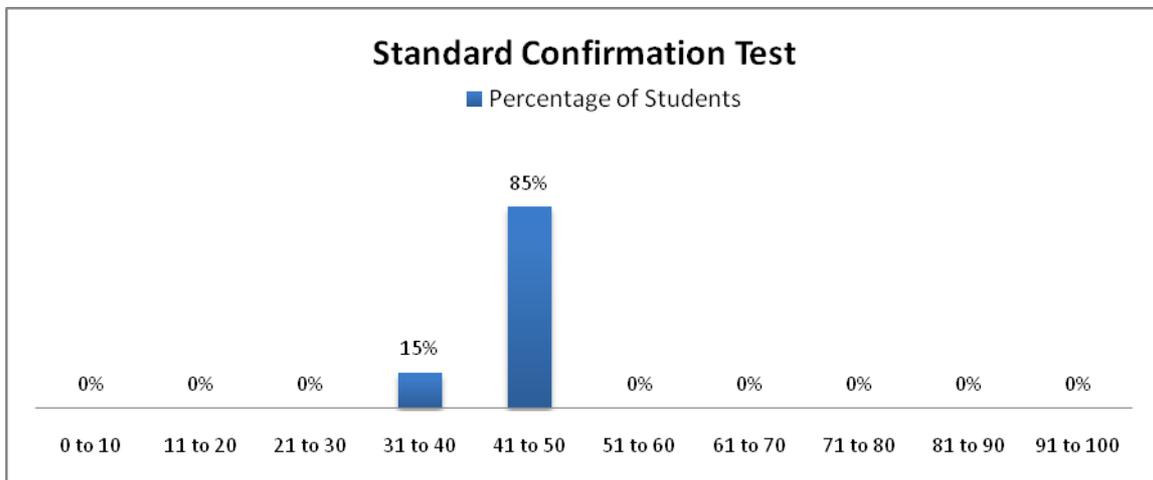| Percentage of marks	Percentage of Students
0 to 10	0%
11 to 20	0%
21 to 30	0%
31 to 40	15%
41 to 50	85%
51 to 60	0%
61 to 70	0%
71 to 80	0%
81 to 90	0%
91 to 100	0%

Figure: 1

The table 1 (Standard Confirmation Table) confirmed that the participants were purportedly homogenous in terms of their perceived level at the **Interchange Course book**. They were almost of the same standard. 85 % of the total students obtained 41-50% 0f marks. Only 15% of the total students obtained 40 % marks. Thus their close homogeneity was confirmed.

After the Standard Confirmation Test, the same twenty students were divided into two equal groups. Group A took Intentional Vocabulary items to which 50 new words were presented through synonyms, substitution of words, definition of words and crossword puzzles. Group B took Incidental Vocabulary test to which the same vocabulary items were presented through paragraph and the contextual clues. The students were supposed to infer the meaning of new words through contextual clues.

Table: 2 Intentional & Incidental Score of the Students

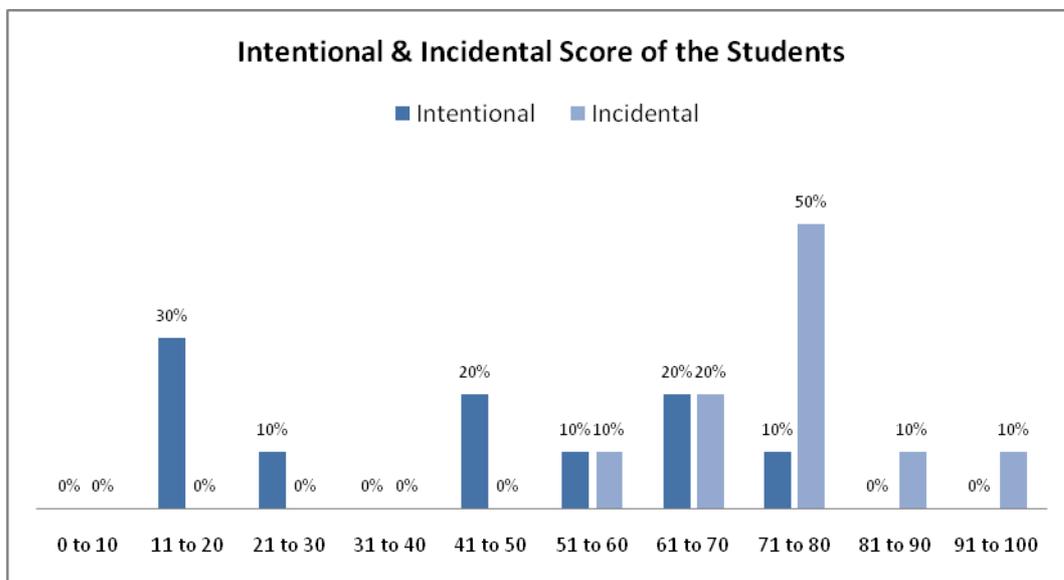| Percentage of Marks	Intentional	Incidental
0 to 10	0 %	0 %
11 to 20	30 %	0 %
21 to 30	10 %	0 %
31 to 40	0 %	0 %
41 to 50	20 %	0 %
51 to 60	10 %	10%
61 to 70	20 %	20 %
71 to 80	10 %	50 %
81 to 90	0 %	10 %
91 to 100	0 %	10 %

Figure: 2

The table 2 was used to demonstrate whether the performance levels of learners of both the contrastive experimental groups: Intentional &Incidental vocabulary learning was found homogenous or there was any significant difference between them. As the table shows that there was a significant difference between the performances of the two groups. Group B of incidental vocabulary learning performed better than group A of intentional vocabulary. The score of group B was found higher than that of group A. 50% learners of group B scored 80% marks where as in group A only 10 % students obtained 80% of marks. It implied that the maximum number of the students of group B scored 80% marks. The second remarkable finding was that the score of the students of group B began from 60% of marks onwards whereas the score of the group A began from 20% of marks onwards. It could also be claimed that a large number of students of group A scored very poorly that was between 11% - 50% of marks only whereas none of the students of group B scored so poorly because their scores started from 60% onwards and it went up to 100%.

Conclusion

As per the scores of both the groups It could be hence deduced that the two groups scored differently in intentional and incidental types of tests and the differences were statistically significant. Group B performed significantly better in the incidental types of vocabulary test. Therefore it could be stated that the Incidental Vocabulary technique would be a good

method in teaching and learning vocabulary items for the students. As Nation (2001) pointed out, " inferring vocabulary meaning from context … is an essential strategy for developing reading comprehension and promoting lexical acquisition" (p. 240) Thus, if learners do a lot of reading , there will be considerable cumulative enrichment of partially known words as well as the establishment of certain new words in their lexicons. Inferring the meanings of unknown words from context is therefore important both for coping with and learning unfamiliar words. Incidental vocabulary learning would be more suitable strategy for vocabulary learning than Intentional vocabulary technique because intentional vocabulary items were found more prone to cramming rather than involving learners' cognitive process of learning.

 This is undeniably true that the vast majority of words in L 1 are learned through extensive reading rather than synonyms and antonyms. Nagy &Anderson (1987) suggested that children learn a large portion of their L1 vocabulary incidentally rather than intentionally. Pitt, White, and Krashen (1989) asked their ESL learners to read the novel for meaning only. A similar study was done by Ferris (1988) in which 30 adult ESL students were asked to read George Orwell' novel Animal Farm to improve vocabulary. Bensoussan& Laufer (1984) also carried out their research on this. The findings of these researches show that the performance of learners in incidental vocabulary is better than that of intentional vocabulary learning. Indeed, it could be deduced that a considerable amount of vocabulary knowledge was gained from the exposure to the context. It is probably here that the true benefit of reading words in the context really occurs.

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