Enhancing the Effectiveness of Vocabulary Retention Through Repetition for EFL Students at Abha College of Technology

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Introduction

As an EFL teacher working for about 15 years in Saudi Arabia, I have continually noticed that many students have difficulties learning and maintaining English vocabulary items over time, and therefore, their English proficiency is remarkably low. Among the many reasons that may lay behind this phenomenon, one is the simple fact that many students find learning and memorizing a huge number of English words a challenging task. As a result, negative consequences are twofold: students may score badly on the course, or, most crucially, their English communicative competence may remain poor. To avoid such outcomes, I have designed a technique that I assume will yield positive results in helping students learn and retain new vocabulary items more easily.

In this action research, I will examine a new learning technique that is believed to help EFL students gain more knowledge of English lexis. The application of this technique will include frequent repetition of a list of course vocabulary items by both the teacher and the students, over a long period. No additional instructions will be given to students, e.g., students will not be asked to memorize this list of vocabulary or advised that this list of vocabulary is going to feature in tests, etc. The purpose of this experiment is to discover whether such a technique will effectively help students acquire vocabulary items with ease and without any undue stress.

Background

Both groups, 53 non-English major undergraduate students, maintain almost the same entry-level of English proficiency (based on their performance in class and their scores throughout the course, as well as their GPAs when they were granted college admission (majoring in office management). That said, it can be noted that they also share the same or similar motivation and attitude towards learning English. It is notable that most students in these two groups are demotivated low achievers, and thus they lack proper L2 learning strategies. The number of high-achieving students in these two groups range between three to four students in each group.

Generally, English courses for students in this major are supplementary courses. Students study three courses of English during the diploma level. These are the only three courses in which the medium of instruction is English (sometimes the L1 is used, due to the low L2 proficiency level of students). The other subjects in the diploma program are Arabic, and the medium of instruction is Arabic, too. Upon completing the degree, English competence is not a required skill for many jobs available for the graduates, although it is a preference. This is one of the reasons that some students are not highly motivated to learn English.

Statement of the Problem

The problem of this study is a lack of retention of vocabulary items by EFL students at Abha College Technology. This has resulted in an unsatisfactory vocabulary size for Saudi EFL learners. Al-Masri and Milton (2012) argue that it is "on average, some way short of the kind of level associated with complete fluency in EFL."

Specifically, this action research will answer the following:

- What is the effectiveness of reading vocabulary lists repeatedly to the EFL students at Abha College of Technology (reading to the students and by the students reading to themselves)?
- What is the effectiveness of reading advanced vocabulary lists repeatedly to the EFL students at Abha College of Technology (reading to the students and by the students reading to themselves)?
- What is the effectiveness of reading basic vocabulary lists repeatedly to the EFL students at Abha College of Technology (reading to the students and by the students reading to themselves)?

Hypothesis

The following hypotheses were tested through teachers' observation and evaluation before experimenting:

- There is no significant difference between the post-test mean score of the experimental and control group at 0.05.
- There is no significant difference between the post-test mean score of the advanced vocabulary of the experimental and control group at 0.05.
- There is no significant difference between the post-test mean score of the basic vocabulary of the experimental and control group at 0.05.

Literature review

Learning English as a foreign language (EFL) is for Saudi learners "both a promising endeavor and a challenging undertaking" (Al-Seghayer, 2019). One of the important skills of learning EFL is to increase one's vocabulary size. Effective communicative skills require considerable knowledge of L2 vocabulary. It is worth noting that communication in any language can take place if the user of the target language maintains sufficient vocabulary, enabling them to receive and produce linguistic messages. This can occur in the absence of complex or advanced grammar, or advanced rhetorical skills. Nation (2001) asserts that "Vocabulary learning is not a goal in itself, it is done to help learners listen, speak, read or write more effectively".

Learning vocabulary is a substantial language skill, one that is responsible for the overall development of language skills. Zhan-Xiang (2004) compares the process of learning vocabulary to building a building, little by little, brick by brick. It is a continuous process, even for advanced learners. It is indeed a prolonged learning experience that plays a crucial role for L2 learners.

Numerous studies support the fact that learning vocabulary is prioritized over learning grammar or other language skills. This is consistent with Thornbury's (2002) study, while Aldreson (2005) argues that "the scope of a person's vocabulary has an immense bearing on their language skills". In the same study, Alderson (2005) found that there is a strong correlation between vocabulary and language skills.

Frequent contact with a particular vocabulary item or items, incidental or intentional, ensures the development of vocabulary knowledge (Nation, 2001; Oxford and Scarecella, 1994). In the same vein, teachers and language experts note that there are certain vocabulary items learned easily by low-achieving students, without being directly taught to them and that are not part of the targeted vocabulary items in the course. For example, redundant words like

exam, *test*, *final test*, *homework*, *assignment*, *quiz*, etc. The knowledge of these words is assumed to have been acquired by students through frequent encounters with them.

Methodology

The present study uses a quantitative research method. It will also implement a quasi-experimental design. The subject of this study consists of 53 non-English major students in their first year at Abha College of Technology. The researcher selected a purposive sample of participants, distributed into two groups: 27 students in the control group and 28 students in the experimental group. The experimental group received extra training on reading the same list of vocabulary (50 vocabulary items) twice every week, in addition to the normal lessons of the week. The control group was taught in a normal way with no extra training.

Participants in both groups were aged between 19-22 years old. They are all males. Both groups are homogenous. They maintain a very low level of English proficiency.

The tools used in this study are a set of vocabulary items, frequent teaching of these particular words, and a vocabulary test. The list of vocabulary items contains 50 words, read out twice a week by the teacher as well as the students. No additional instructions were given to students, e.g., they were not required to memorize this list of words, nor were they asked to study it as part of test preparation. The study was conducted online, via blackboard sessions.

The possible effect of this experiment was measured through a vocabulary test administered after 53 days (7 weeks). The application of this experiment started on 10 February 2021 and concluded with a vocabulary test on 3 April 2021. The final measurement test (the vocabulary test, which consisted of 30 questions) was administered via Blackboard (online).

Procedure

The procedure followed in this experimental study begins with collecting some vocabulary items from every lesson delivered in the class (currently through online blackboard sessions). The selected vocabulary items are mostly key or new words from the lesson. This list of words is given to students in the experimental group, along with the translation in the Arabic language. The role of the teacher is only to read out the words to students and to elicit the meaning of some words, as necessary. Towards the end of the session, all students in the class were asked to read the words out loud. This process was repeated during every class, two classes every week, except the classes in which the midterm tests were given.

The experiment was not introduced to the control group. Both groups, the experimental group and the control group, were taught all lessons as normal, except the fact that the experimental group was given extra time (about 15 minutes) towards the end of every class to review and read the list of words. The same lesson content, teaching approach, exercises, quizzes, and midterm tests were given to both groups. No group was given more or less than the other, to ensure the validity of the experiment introduced in this research. The list of words included in the study included words from the textbook, *Business Goals 1* (Cambridge University Press, first published 2004, fifth printing 2009).

After conducting the experiment for 7 weeks, a vocabulary test was designed to measure the performance of students at this stage. The test consisted of 30 vocabulary questions; each question asked about one vocabulary item. The items were taken from the weekly vocabulary list (50 words) used in the experiment. It is important to note that the group of words selected for the test was divided into two categories: category 1 included *advanced vocabulary* items (relatively advanced compared to the low English level of the participants); category 2 included *basic vocabulary* items (relatively simple but new vocabulary). Test items were given to students in English, along with four different responses, in Arabic, for each item. Giving the choices in Arabic was due to the nature of the training itself, which incorporated the use of L1 in giving the definitions of words, to facilitate and accelerate learning. Besides, the L2 level of participants was remarkably low, and therefore the measurements may not yield accurate and precise results if the choices were provided in English. This test was administered on the 3rd of April 2021, 7 weeks since this experiment commenced.

Findings

To answer the first sub-question (1.1.), which concerns the retention of the advanced vocabulary items (relatively advanced, compared to the overall level of the students in the study, through frequent reading of a set of vocabulary items), T-Test was used to explore the differences between the students' scores in each of the experimental and control groups, in the post-application, to define the extent of their retention of the English language *advanced* vocabulary, as shown in Table (1):

Table 1: Differences between the mean scores of the experimental and control groups in the post-application of the English language advanced vocabulary retention test

Skills	Group	N	Mean	SD	t	df	Sig.
Advanced vocabulary	Control	27	8.6	4.309	5.113	53	0.000
	Experimenta	28	13.1	1.873			

(T) value at 53 df and 0.05 level = 1.671

Table (1) indicates the following:

There are statistically significant differences at the level of 0.05 between the mean scores of the students of the control and experimental groups, in favor of the experimental group, in the post-application of the advanced vocabulary test in the English language, where the average score of the control group students was 8.6 out of 15, while the average score of students in the experimental group was 13.1 out of 15.

There are statistically significant differences at the level of 0.05 between the mean scores of the students of the control and experimental groups, in favor of the experimental group, in the post-application of the advanced vocabulary test in the English language, where the value of calculated (t) is 5.113, which is greater than its tabular value (1.671). Also, the level of its significance reached 0.000, which is less than 0.05. This indicates that there are statistically significant differences in the post-application of the advanced vocabulary test in the English language in favor of the experimental group.

It is evident from Table 1 that the value of the standard deviation is high with respect to the control group scores (4.309), which indicates the great variation in the answers of the students of this group, while the standard deviation of the experimental group is noted to be low (1.873), which means that the dispersion or variation of the answers of students in this group is low.

To answer the second sub-question (1.2.), T-Test was used to explore the differences between the students' scores in each of the experimental and control groups, in the post-application, to define the extent of their retention of the English language *basic* vocabulary, as shown in Table (2):

Table 2: Differences between the mean scores of the experimental and control groups in the post-application of the English language basic vocabulary retention test

Skills	Group	No	Mean	SD	T	df	Sig.
Basic vocabulary	Control	27	8.7	5.035	4.280	53	0.000
	Experimental	28	13.2	2.144			

(T) value at 53 df and 0.05 level = 1.671

Table (2) indicates the following:

There are statistically significant differences at the level of 0.05 between the mean scores of the students of the control and experimental groups, in favor of the experimental group, in the post-application of the basic vocabulary test in the English language, where the average score of the control group students was 8.7 out of 15, while the average score of students in the experimental group was 13.2 out of 15.

There are statistically significant differences at the level of 0.05 between the mean scores of the students of the control and experimental groups, in favor of the experimental group, in the post-application of the basic vocabulary test in the English language, where the value of calculated (t) is 4.280, which is greater than its tabular value (1.671). Also, the level of its significance reached 0.000, which is less than 0.05. This indicates that there are statistically significant differences in the post-application of the basic vocabulary test in the English language in favor of the experimental group.

It is evident from Table 2 that the value of the standard deviation is high with respect to the control group scores (5.035), which indicates the great variation in the answers of the students in this group, while the standard deviation of the experimental group is noted to be low (2.144), which means that the dispersion or variation of the answers of students in this group is low.

To answer the main question of the research (1.), T-Test was used to explore the differences between overall students' scores in both the experimental and control groups, in the post-application, to define the extent of their acquisition of the English language vocabulary, as shown in Table (3):

Table 3: Differences between the mean scores of the experimental and control groups in the post-application of the English language vocabulary retention test

Skills	Group	No	Mean	SD	t	df	Sig.
Total vocabulary	Control	27	17.30	8.783	5.014	53	0.000
	Experimental	28	26.29	3.526			

(T) value at 53 df and 0.05 level = 1.671

Table (2) indicates the following:

There are statistically significant differences at the level of 0.05 between the mean scores of the students of the control and experimental groups, in favor of the experimental group, in the post-application of the English vocabulary acquisition test, where the average score of the control group students was 17.30 out of 30, while the average score of students in the experimental group was 26.29 out of 30.

There are statistically significant differences at the level of 0.05 between the mean scores of the students of the control and experimental groups, in favor of the experimental group, in the post-application of the English vocabulary acquisition test, where the value of calculated (t) is 5.014, which is greater than its tabular value (1.671). Also, the level of its significance reached (0.000) is less than (0.05). This indicates that there are statistically significant differences in the post-application of the overall vocabulary test in the English language in favor of the experimental group.

It is evident from Table 3 that the value of the standard deviation is high with respect to the control group scores (8.783), which indicates the great variation in the answers of the students in this group, while the standard deviation of the experimental group is noted to be low (3.526), which means that the dispersion or variation of the answers of students in this group is low.

Discussion

On all counts, and based on the results of the experiment conducted in this study, it can be observed that the null hypothesis (hypothesis 1) is rejected, which assumed that there is no significant difference between the post-test mean score of the experimental and control group at 0.05. The findings clearly show that there is a significant difference between the students' performance in the experimental group and the control group, in favor of the

experimental group. As a result, the researcher must accept that the experiment, in general, has contributed substantially to the effectiveness of vocabulary retention at both levels (short-term and long-term retention). Also, the second and third sub-hypotheses follow the same pattern, which consequently show that there is a significant difference between the two groups with regards to the effectiveness of vocabulary retention at both levels (short-term and long-term retention).

The null hypotheses in 1.1. and 1.2. can also be rejected for the same reason mentioned in the discussion of the main hypothesis (1) above, which showed a significant difference between the performance of the experimental group and the control group, in favor of the experimental group, with regards to the retention of advanced vocabulary items as well as the basic vocabulary items.

Conclusion

It is evident that the vocabulary size for Saudi EFL learners is "on average, some way short of the kind of level associated with complete fluency in EFL" (Al-Masri and Milton, 2012). Therefore, this action research attempted to solve the problem that many low-achieving students suffer from in relation to vocabulary retention strategies utilized by learners. This has, consequently, and I am afraid negatively, too, affected the vocabulary size they have acquired.

This experimental study examined a technique proposed by the researcher, an EFL teacher, which he claimed would foster vocabulary retention for Saudi EFL students. Specifically, this technique entails that student will be given a set of vocabulary items, derived from the textbook being taught to them, and they only need to read the words. It is important to note that the researcher did not require students in the experimental group to memorize this list of words or pay any particular importance to it. Towards the end of the training period, 7 weeks, a vocabulary test was administered to the experimental group as well as to the control group. According to the findings of this measurement, merely reading the set of words, repeatedly and over a considerably long time, yielded positive results, and showed a significant improvement in the effectiveness of vocabulary retention strategies used by the students.

Implications

Based on the experiment conducted in this study, the technique involved has several implications, for 1) EFL teachers, 2) EFL students and 3) EFL textbook designers. Others like language experts, linguists, CALL experts, may find the applications of the technique

introduced in this study of use and relevant to the projects they are working on, which are within the area of EFL/ESL vocabulary acquisition and retention.

To help students improve their vocabulary knowledge, as well as to help them use effective retention strategies, EFL teachers are recommended to introduce this technique to their students, i.e., using the same method, but expanding list of words. Students may not be required to memorize these words (rote learning). Through the repetition of the vocabulary items, students will, intentionally or unintentionally, gain more vocabulary items without being compelled to do so. EFL teachers can modify this technique in the way that best suits their classes.

Besides, EFL teachers can train their students to make a list of new and important words and keep reading them 2 to 3 times a week, depending on the situation and their interest in learning.

Students can also use this technique independently. If they want to improve their knowledge of vocabulary, they are recommended to collect new or important words in a file, notebook, phone app, etc., and constantly read them, 2 to 3 times a week, depending on the situation and their interest in learning. This is assumed to help them retain vocabulary items more easily, and for a longer time.

To conclude, textbook designers can effectively implement such a strategy when designing EFL textbooks. At times, a particular unit in the textbook may introduce a set of targeted vocabulary to be acquired by the students. Once students complete this unit, the targeted words therein may not appear in the following parts of the textbook. As a result, the retention of these words may not be effective, as they only appeared once or in a relatively limited number of classes. Thus, students may only recall these words before the midterm or final tests. To avoid this issue, EFL textbook designers can create a list of targeted vocabulary items based on the textbook. This list of vocabulary items can be emphasized and incorporated into different parts of the syllabus. For example, the targeted vocabulary items can be re-introduced in several units throughout the textbook, either directly, by setting them out towards the end of every unit, or indirectly, through different exercises or sections of the syllabus. The frequent appearance of the targeted vocabulary items throughout the textbook is assumed to enhance students' effective retention of the targeted vocabulary items.