

Language Proficiency through Vocabulary Development: A Framework

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Abstract

The global aim of the present research paper is an attempt to reach a threshold level of the learning of a foreign language (English) through the development of vocabulary. Observing the very limited rate of use of English in the Algerian community, English as Foreign Language (EFL) students, actually, need to progress in the mastery of that language by reading and/or listening to texts or messages intensively. To achieve this goal, subsequent procedures should take place by giving the foreign language a rather more appreciable position in the community such as the one held by a second language. To be down-to-earth, a brief survey on the linguistic situation in Algeria is exposed where neat clarification of second-foreign language status in the community is laid out to show that the more a (foreign) language is explicitly exposed in its manifold forms, the more are learners, in that community, likely to acquire it as a second language. However, the assumption of presenting the receptive skills (reading and listening) as the most appropriate means for the growth of foreign language vocabulary is supported by Krashen's input theory where any input to be understood, should come at EFL learners' capacity to read/listen and decode easily the meaning. In due course, First year EFL students have been subject to a language proficiency test-'a pre-test then a post-test'. This typical experimental design is an intervention study which contains two groups: 'the treatment or experimental' group which receives the treatment, or which is exposed to some special conditions of intensifying vocabulary learning through a varied, comprehensible input; and a second group of EFL learners- the control group- whose role is to provide a baseline. The findings showed better scores among the experimental group compared to the other group. Actually, the results proved the adequacy of the adopted theory.

Keywords: Comprehensible input, discourse comprehension, language proficiency receptive skills, vocabulary development

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Introduction

The importance of vocabulary in language acquisition goes uncontested. It is evident that vocabulary is indispensable for successful communication in any language. However, the encroachment towards recognizing the importance of lexical competence within second and /or foreign language learning has gained sound interest. In this research study, a distinction between second and foreign language acquisition is made and, unmistakably, we will not go into that particular terminology discussion. Therefore, in due occasion, the discrepancy will be displayed to refer to the status of each term according to the target community as shown in (2.3.). Thus, gradually, Foreign Language Acquisition (henceforth, FLA) researchers have come to attest the central, or even, pre-conditional role of the lexical dimension for fluent language use and usage. In the same line of thought, Ellis (1997) has exposed the idea that vocabulary knowledge is indispensable to acquire grammar. That is to say, knowing the words in a text allows learners to understand the discourse, which in turn allows the grammatical patterning to become more transparent. In this sense too, Nation (2001) underlines the critical importance of developing an adequate lexical approach since learners' skills in using the language are heavily dependent on the number of words they know, particularly in the early stages of learning a foreign language. He states that a systematic, principled approach to vocabulary development results in better language learning. It is *de facto* that developing lexical competence in the target language is now seen as the crucial factor in language acquisition and there is general agreement that there is a threshold vocabulary level below which learners are likely to struggle to decode the input they receive (Alderson & Banerjee 2002).

Principles of the Research

Many language specialists, such as: Krashen (1993) and Nation (2001) have analyzed, almost exclusively, productive language, where both ends of communication channels are studied as emitters rather than as recipients. Recent research, however, recognize that the mastery of a particular language involves mastery of a receptive as well as a productive repertoire. This trend acknowledges the fact that the two repertoires should, therefore, be established through respectively receptive, then productive adequate methods. Conversely, teachers' view about learners' attitudes towards English learning in our (middle and secondary) schools has changed greatly. The teachers' view was based on the evidence of pupils' repeated unsatisfactory results in written and spoken form of the English language. Recently, however, EFL learners, themselves, have had positive attitudes towards the learning of English since in their eyes English is an important subject matter in the curriculum accentuated by many facts. Firstly, English has been assigned a coefficient of two (2), three (3) and five (5) respectively for '*scientific streams*', '*literature and philosophy stream*' and '*foreign languages stream*' in the secondary school education. Consequently, some improvements in the '*Baccalaureate exam*' have been noticed showing in a way the impact of high coefficient assignment. Secondly, the new coefficient assignment created more motivation in the learners who are, now, paying for private courses to improve their level for better grades in the '*baccalaureate exam*'. This new impetus has, naturally, generated more academic interest for English.

For this purpose, the motivated generation of EFL learners needs to be oriented towards developing further sessions of reading and listening as an essential source of input. Therefore, a structured, rich and comprehensible input from the beginning of first-year university level should

be directed to EFL learners so as to help them develop enough rich vocabulary to reach comprehension of both written and oral scripts. Linguistically speaking, it is crystal clear that difficult texts do not encourage students to listen and read and may, even, develop frustration and demotivation. Therefore, in order to develop learners' motivation and interest, it is essential for the contents (topics), structure (layout) and basic vocabulary (meaning) to be at the reach of listeners and readers. In like manner, vocabulary acquisition constitutes a key component to successfully develop comprehension, communication and literacy skills. Nevertheless, developing vocabulary is a top priority and an on-going challenge. Actually, once at the university setting, students are exposed to a great amount of vocabulary in a myriad of subject areas. Yet, due to the intense focus on content, two (2) types of vocabulary are dealt with in the different modules within the set programme. These are, first, a general vocabulary used mainly for communicative purposes and representing basic language skills, such as: reading and listening comprehension, oral and written production. Second, a special vocabulary representing a linguistic jargon related to the modules of phonetics, linguistics, literature and civilization. The interaction of EFL learners with diverse and huge amounts of vocabulary is rendered difficult if not impossible facing new contents with unfamiliar vocabulary. The difficulty is felt in the lack of receptive vocabulary which hinders comprehension. Consequently, what is needed, in fact, is to develop students' receptive vocabulary to enable them understand when listening to oral language or when reading texts.

The experimental design of the second tool of research- the proficiency language test- is portrayed through an original methodological idea based on comparing results of two groups of EFL learners. One group will receive a special treatment: '*the treatment variable*' (Johnson & Christensen, 2004). Accordingly, this typical experimental design is an intervention study containing two groups: 'the treatment or experimental' group which receives the treatment or which is exposed to some special conditions of intensifying vocabulary learning through a varied, comprehensible input; and a second group of EFL learners- the control group- whose role is to provide a baseline. In due course, the two groups are seemingly comparable to each other before the treatment is applied. The undertaken procedure is as follows:

- First, Krashen's Input Hypothesis (1993) is put on the check-scale to supply the main attribute of the treatment during the treatment period. Some elements are then depicted to provide evidence for the usefulness and validity of the adopted theory.
- Second, the aim of the study is clearly showing the rationale behind such endeavour to gain proficiency in the foreign language by acquiring sufficient vocabulary for comprehension first. The objective is represented through a set of methodological procedures, and mainly a triangulation use of tools of research procedure.
- Then, language proficiency tests represent the major analytic measurement of comprehension among the two groups of learners.

Aim of the Study

Having presented Krashen's theory (1993), and, given that the English language enrolls the status of a foreign language, the researcher wants to make clear evidence that the intended goals behind the teaching of English at University level in Algeria may or could reach a threshold level of proficiency only if sufficient, varied and comprehensible input is administered to our EFL learners so as they could keep up with without frustration. In the same vein, Krashen's Input Hypothesis

stipulates that it is possible to acquire a language and develop its vocabulary learning when there is enough comprehensible and varied input available regardless to the amount of output that may come out lately. The study is designed to achieve this purpose.

The testees (exclusively, the experimental group) received intense, varied and comprehensible input. That special treatment is meant to make a diagnosis about whether that procedure would lead to any progress in the EFL students' proficiency in the foreign language being acquired.

The established decision about the learners' progress is set over a period of study approximating six weeks using several criteria for decoding the message of a text, be it written or spoken. These criteria are related to vocabulary learning strategies (VLS) taught to EFL learners in the '*Meanwhile period*' to overcome the burden of comprehending the lexis contained in those texts supposed to bring a degree of difficulty at the reach of first year EFL learners' level of comprehension. To get a more plastic picture of the situation, learners are allowed to make use of different sources helping them analyse, decode and understand the difficult and unfamiliar lexical items. Referencing, inferencing, using contextual clues, making use of their linguistic and world knowledge and guessing are all criteria at the hand of learners (readers and listeners) to achieve an overall understanding of the whole text regardless to tiny and small unrelated vocabulary that may hinder their process of understanding. This included a set of tasks they were able to accomplish successfully at the end of the study but that had been somehow problematic issues at the beginning. A major factor was also their perceptions about what they could actually do using the language and their confidence to approach new tasks with unknown lexis. Self-reports were used and established how they understood the texts and if they felt there was any progress in their comprehension of the works. Finally, a more objective tool was employed: comparing the scores EFL learners achieved in the pre-test (preliminary English language Proficiency Test) and the scores obtained, in the course of this study, in the post-test.

Research Tools (Triangulation)

A range of methods are used for collecting data in the present study. It is meant to make use of a combination of dissimilar methods to study the same unit. The reason behind this strategy is as follows:

The flaws of one method are often strengths of another, and by combining methods, observers can achieve the best of each, while overcoming their unique deficiencies (Denzin, 1970, as quoted in Merriam 1988, p. 69)

Interviews

The first instrument for gathering information was conducted with the teachers in charge of the receptive skills teaching: reading and listening. This is intended to elicit the ways, techniques and procedures undertaken in the process of providing input in the form of written scripts (reading) or oral/verbal messages (listening) be it a text or a dialogue of authentic or sometimes concocted English.

Interviews are one of the most important sources of case study information (Dorney, 2007). Unlike surveys, interviews are guided conversations rather than structured queries (Yin, 2003, p.

89). For the researcher, it is inescapable to both acts: following the line of enquiry and asking the actual questions in a biased manner. What is more crucial for the tool validity is not forcing the interviewees to adopt a particular position and most importantly maintain a friendly and non-threatening environment. The type of questions used was mainly open-ended questions rather than those requiring straight forward yes/no answers. The interviews have had a conversational format and the questions were aimed at reaching both objective facts and teacher's subjective opinions.

Primarily, the interviews were used to elicit teachers' views and reactions to the situations of the teaching and learning of the receptive skills. This offered subjective insights as far as their perceptions and practices are concerned. The interviews were recorded with the assent of the interviewees. The recording could help go back to a particular piece of information that emerged in the interview to reconsider it for its relevance to a peculiar analysis. The recording technique could only help to restore any piece of information needed though interviews are known to be verbal and subject to bias and attrition. In fact, this was not a major problem since it was not the only method used and other data were supplemented from other sources as well.

T-tests or Language Proficiency Tests

The second tool of investigation was rather more pertinent since it analyzed the teaching situation before and after the provision of the proposed strategy. The latter provided alternatives to the usual and habitual way of exposing input through reading texts and listening to passages. Thus, a Pre-test in language proficiency and vocabulary retrieval was set to evaluate both control and experimental groups. This preliminary language test was administered to 1st year EFL learners which constituted a random sample of learners so as to avoid selection and biased interpretation of the results. The test was set to reveal learners aptitudes to understand input contained in reading and listening passages via a potential control and mastery of lexical items. The method of testing was driven through simple texts where the main instruction versed into vocabulary retrieval to reach comprehension. Equal and similar questions and tasks were directed to both groups in terms of length, degree of difficulty and input diversity. Besides, the second T-test was still a language proficiency test piloted after 6 weeks of interval. During that (interval) period, the experimental group was, in a way, privileged, i.e., learners of that group were exposed to a multiple set of texts representing a variety of contexts and following the proposed framework. The principle of the treatment is stressed by the fact that language is understood only when it is comprehensible and that we may be able to overcome language quandary about certain structures and vocabulary that we have not acquired before only through rich contexts. Logically, contexts should be varied so as to reach proficiency in language which can lead easily learners to move from their current level of competence to more complicated tasks. In other terms, if the input is comprehensible, varied and sufficient, learners will progress automatically and go beyond their initial level of understanding. This could be reached if only they are sufficiently exposed to a variety of contexts representing input a little bit beyond their initial level of understanding where they can use contextual clues, linguistic knowledge, extra-linguistic and world knowledge information. To concretise the proposed hypothesis, the experimental group was instructed, during the 6 week-period, to deal with a great deal of comprehensible input via free voluntary, guided readings and listening. It was purposefully conducted to provide the experimental group of learners with enough input, still in respect to comprehensibility first. Indisputably, according to Krashen (1993), these learners will amplify their literacy and language proficiency. They may, accordingly, reach a level beyond the

level they attained before being sufficiently exposed to such rich, varied and comprehensible input. Then, the Pre-test results should, convincingly, prove the attested ability of the experimental group to deal better with text comprehension if compared to the other control group. For assertion, a questionnaire is administered to those learners receiving more attention in that particular experiment to certify their progress or simply negate.

Questionnaire /Self-reports

A Third tool of investigation was set at the end of the investigation to confirm or infirm the utility of adopting Krashen's Input Hypothesis (1993) with our EFL learners. Knowing that English embodies the status of a foreign language in Algeria, the rationale behind implementing the proposed hypothesis is to generate instances of exposure to the target language through a rich input which is comprehensible or at least a little bit beyond our learners' capacity of understanding; and properly advised, it should be varied so as different occasions of meeting lexical items are repeatedly given to the learners. According to Dorney (2007), a period of six weeks was acclaimed to fulfill and adopt the proposed programme of language exposure. The questionnaire stipulated from the experimental group of EFL learners to report their own experience with the new injected programme they went through and to reveal possible changes in their language proficiency compared to a 6 week- period before. The types of questions were semi-guided ones where sometimes just a yes/no answer could suffice. Other times, respondents were given an MCQ alternative to choose between different proposed answers. In sum, the objective behind is methodologically significant. It serves as a measurement tool to diagnose the efficiency of the approach carried out during the period of treatment.

The subjects were pedagogically observed on a number of occasions to be able to judge their level of proficiency in English before and after the experiment. These self-reports were especially important for revealing information about EFL learners' past experience with English, and at the end, they were asked to self-evaluate the progress they made in comprehending English texts afterwards.

The subjects' self-reports were friendly conducted to retrieve some retrospective accounts of what kind of experience they had with English prior to the beginning of this study. Finally, the achieved results in language tests were analyzed to get objective, comparable data on the progress they made.

As for motivation to learn English, it seems that the instrumental motivation played a prominent part as they wanted to improve their English mainly in order to be able to read academic books related to the areas of their interest and be able to communicate orally in English once confronted to such situations.

It is also important to include information about the subjects 'experience with English before they arrived to University, as it provides useful insights into their level of proficiency prior to the study. The formal English instruction that they received as part of their education within the state system (Middle and Secondary school education) constitute the main attribute influencing their proficiency in English. Adding to that, contact with English outside the formal classes, though very limited, also helps increasing interest, motivation and learning engagement through different

means of communication as TV shows, documentaries, movies, Radio Broadcast (BBC and the like) and the ICT's diverse uses, such as: facebook, twitter, YouTube and others.

Concerning formal instruction, the majority of 1st year EFL learners stated the fact of learning English at the age of 12 years old as part of compulsory language classes in the first grade of Middle school education. Generally, the English language classes were held three times a week in the form of one-hour session. What was really missing, however, is training in the listening skill beyond and within the official exams. Moreover, there was not enough variety of comprehensible input, in the form of graded reading materials or simple listening passages. At university level, the new students, for the first time, were exposed to a rather consistent programme, along with a focus on more advanced aspects of grammar, linguistics, phonetics and additional elements of the language related to literature and civilization.

Respondents' feedback is a strategy where learners themselves are involved in commenting on the conclusion of the study. Here, they can express their views in what is called a 'validation interview' (Holliday, 2004). Therefore, if there is agreement between the researcher and the participants, the study's validity is indeed reinforced. Also, respondents' validation can also enhance generalizability.

The task of applying such a framework is not easy doing. However, time and efforts should be deployed by teachers collaboratively to initiate their learners into an ongoing process of readership and interest in the language in all its manifestations.

Conclusion

A battery of objective tests has been administered to first-year EFL learners so as to reach the desired results of progress in vocabulary acquisition and understanding. Though a large number of students have quite a limited proficiency in English, they enclose a considerable control of the main grammatical structures of English and they know more or less a great deal of vocabulary. But as they embark on courses and texts designed for native speakers (original input), they are bound to come across many words that are new to them; both the specialized terms of particular academic fields and the enormous number of non-specialized words that characterize English academic prose.

The results of the tests can be used to help diagnose areas of weakness, set learning goals and plan vocabulary programme, measure vocabulary growth and assign graded reading and listening.

The tests have tried to answer this question: *Is the learners' poor performance in reading and listening a result of insufficient vocabulary knowledge?*

Some learners have more difficulty understanding spoken English. This could be because they do not know enough vocabulary or simply because they have, by large, learned English mainly through reading. Likely, they have not had enough contact with the spoken language in former stages of education, unless their teachers' talk in the classroom. Given that the written test itself was a real tool of measurement, it was right interesting to give the first form of the test

through reading. If confidence is set, then the oral type of testing can be set for further comprehension degree.

Similarly, learners who had a lot of contact with various input of the target language in and out the language classroom, revealed to be making progress in vocabulary knowledge. Subsequently, English word-knowledge is essential for all learners who wish to gain proficiency in the language. It is, thus, important that teachers know what vocabulary knowledge their learners have and aware of how they can systematically help them to increase this proficiency. Ways of doing so include substantial graded reading, indirect vocabulary teaching and providing a vocabulary focus in different language activities. Actually, the post-test has allowed checking how much learners' vocabulary has developed over the six-week- treatment period.

Indeed, careful attention should be paid in the run of developing vocabulary through the two receptive skills since the environment does not provide spontaneous input delivery in the target language. However, the context of getting along with the input is carried out voluntarily by teachers and learners in direct teaching (teacher inquiry and peer-teaching), active learning (self-engagement and peer-learning), through natural, incidental learning contexts (exposure and involvement in the language); and within planned encounters (graded reading, use of audio-video sources and complete involvement).

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