

The Effects of Vocabulary Enhancement Activities on EFL Learners

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ABSTRACT

This study compared the effects of vocabulary enhancement activities on first-year English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners' reading comprehension and vocabulary improvement. In the activities, these learners were assigned to study a list of fifty to one hundred words a week. The learners studied word functions and had to find words' definition and sample sentences from a dictionary by themselves. Both formative and summative tests were conducted to test the learners' vocabulary knowledge and reading comprehension ability. This study compared the learners' performance between those who studied fifty and one hundred words a week. The objectives were to investigate (1) whether the learners' performance was affected by the number of words assigned each week, and (2) how vocabulary enhancement activities affected learners' reading comprehension skills and vocabulary knowledge. The findings demonstrated that (1) the learners who studied one hundred words per week did not outperform the students who studied fifty words a week, and (2) this vocabulary enhancement activity did not provide enough support for the learners to acquire vocabulary knowledge. The findings suggested that it was essential for learners to study words in context rather than from a given list of words.

Keywords: Vocabulary Acquisition, Vocabulary Enhancement Activities, Reading Comprehension.

1. INTRODUCTION

Vocabulary knowledge is essential for successful language learning. For learners to effectively develop their language acquisition, they need to have an adequate vocabulary (Harmon, Wood & Keser, 2009). Schmitt (2000) added that learners need lexical knowledge for their communicative competence. As Nation (2001) suggested, learners need both vocabulary knowledge and language use. While knowledge of vocabulary enables learners to effectively use the language, the ability to use the language can lead to an increase in learners' vocabulary knowledge.

Therefore, it is no doubt that effective teaching of vocabulary knowledge is vital in all English classrooms. There are many vocabulary teaching techniques which are found effective. Here are some suggested techniques for teaching vocabulary.

1.1 Using Objects

Since objects and pictures act as cues for remembering words, they encourage learners to better remember the words. As Takac and Singleton (2008) suggested, visual aids and demonstration can be used for this technique.

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1.2 Drilling, Spelling and Active Involvement

Learners can be taught to get accustomed to the words by drilling, which should be done clearly and naturally (Thorbury, 2002). Ellis and Beaton (1993) suggested that drilling is essential because learners need to correctly pronounce the words to be able to recall them from their memory.

1.3 Guessing Words From Context

According to Alqahtani (2015), there are two types of context. First, the context within the text. This includes morphological, semantic, and syntactic information in a specific text. The second context is the general context or non-textual context. This refers to as the background knowledge the reader has when they read a text. Nation (2001) suggested that learning from context can be done via reading, taking part in a conversation or learning from listening to stories, films, or radio. There are four elements for the activation of guessing: the reader, the text, unknown words, and clues in the text including some knowledge about guessing. Walters (2004) added that teachers can provide clues for learners by using illustrations and encouraging the learners to use their previous knowledge.

In addition to the techniques mentioned above, it is essential to encourage learners to be more responsible for their language learning. In this study, the learners were given a list of words and their functions. Then, the learners had to find out words' definitions and study sample sentences on how each word was used in a sentence by themselves. However, the main question was how many words should be given to the learners in order to encourage them to be able to apply the vocabulary knowledge for their actual use of the language, such as in reading comprehension skills. The learners were then divided into two groups: Those who study 50 words per week and those who studied 100 words per week. This study compared the learners' performance between those who practice with fifty words and those who practised with one hundred words per week.

2. OBJECTIVES

The objectives of this study are to investigate:

- i. whether the learners' performance was affected by the number of words assigned each week.
- ii. how vocabulary enhancement activities affected learners' reading comprehension skills and vocabulary knowledge.

3. METHODS

3.1 Subjects

There were two groups of first-year undergraduate students in this study where the first group involves those who practised with 50 words a week while the second group consists of those who practised with 100 words a week.

3.2 Instruments

For the period of ten weeks, the learners were assigned to study a list of (1) fifty words and (2) one hundred words a week. They had to study word functions and find words' definitions and

sample sentences by themselves. Each week, the online vocabulary testing program was conducted to help the learners review and weekly tested the learners' knowledge of these words. After ten weeks, these two groups of learners were tested again for the overall knowledge of vocabulary and how they applied the knowledge in reading comprehension skills. The results between these two groups were compared to see whether the number of words studied affected the test results between these two groups of learners.

3.2.1 Selection of Word List

Since the learners are in their first year of university study, the majority of these 50 and 100 words is at the A1 and A2 proficiency levels according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR). Since the learners are in their first year of university study, most of the words in the list belong to A1 and A2 levels. Tables 1 and 2 summarize the percentages of the words used in this study according to their proficiency levels.

Table 1 Percentages of 50 words for each proficiency level according to CEFR

Word level	Percentage
A1	69%
A2	48%
B1	4%
B2	1%
C1	0 %
C2	0 %

(Source: <http://vocabkitchen.com/profiler/cefr>)

Table 2 Percentages of 100 words for each proficiency level according to CEFR

Word level	Percentage
A1	43%
A2	22%
B1	8%
B2	5%
C1	1 %
C2	1 %

(Source: <http://vocabkitchen.com/profiler/cefr>)

3.2.2 Vocabulary and Reading Comprehension Tests

3.2.2.1 Vocabulary Test

The vocabulary test consists of 20 items. The construction of test items comprises (1) synonym/antonym, (2) sentence completion, (3) definition, and (4) parts of speech 4.

3.2.2.2 Reading Comprehension Test

There are also 20 items for the reading comprehension test. The test includes both short and long passages. The test items include checking for the main idea and detailed understanding of the passages.

3.3 Data Collection and Analysis

Test results from (1) Vocabulary knowledge and (2) Reading comprehension between the learners who practised with 50 words per week were compared with the results from the group of learners who studied 100 words per week.

4. RESULTS

Table 3 and Figure 1 show the comparison of vocabulary and reading comprehension test results between the two groups of learners who practised with 50 and 100 words, respectively.

Table 3 Comparison of Vocabulary and Reading Comprehension Test Results between Learners who studied 50 and 100 words per week

	Vocabulary Test	Reading comprehension Test
50-word practice	28.54	34.14
100-word practice	25.67	38.50

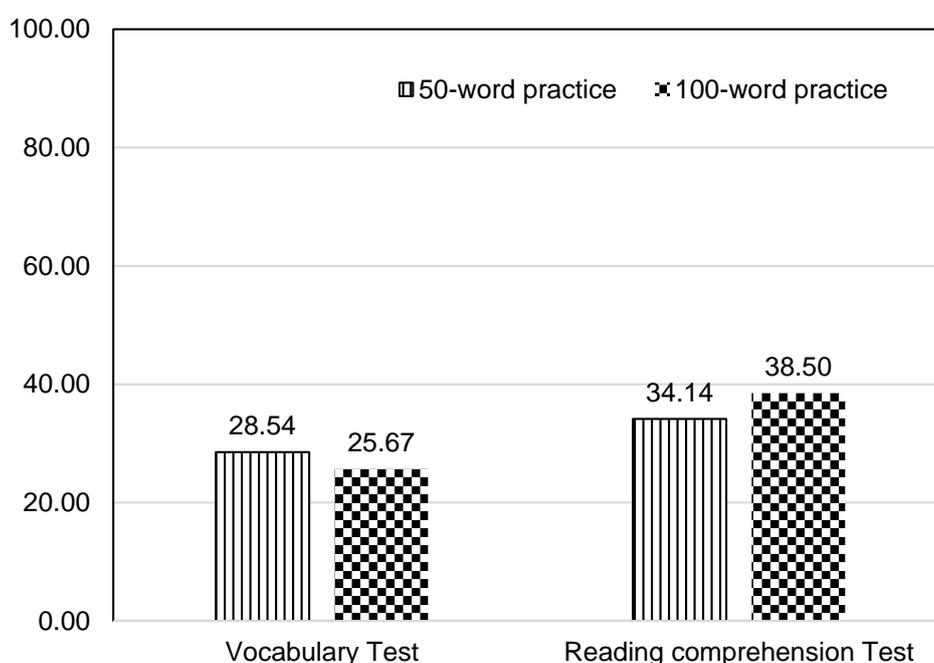


Figure 1. Comparison of vocabulary and reading comprehension test results between learners who studied 50 and 100 words per week.

As shown in Table 3 and Figure 1, the learners who practised 100 words per week did not outperform the learners who practised 50 words per week. The findings also showed that all the learners were less than 50% correct for their answers. They were 28.54% and 25.67% correct for the vocabulary test for the 50-words and 100-words groups, respectively. For the reading comprehension test, the 50-words and 100-words groups were 34.14% and 38.50% correct for their answers, respectively.

5. DISCUSSION

There are two main findings from this study:

- i. First, both groups of learners did not perform well in both the vocabulary and reading comprehension tests.
- ii. Second, the learners who studied 100 words per week did not outperform the students who studied 50 words a week.

Although the learners who were assigned to practice with 100 words had more exposure to a higher number of words than the group that was assigned 50 words, these words were practised separately from classroom materials. Since the acquisition of vocabulary knowledge is possible when learners study words from context, providing a list of words for them to study does not give adequate support for words to be acquired. The findings from this study suggest that the number of words is not an indicator for learners to acquire vocabulary knowledge and be able to apply the knowledge in their actual use.

The results support the ideas that words should be learned in context rather than given as a list to learners. Although the learners were given a chance to find out the definitions by themselves and assigned to study sample sentences from a dictionary, these teaching techniques do not provide enough tools for the learners to be able to acquire the vocabulary knowledge.

6. SUGGESTION

In teaching vocabulary to learners who study English as a Foreign Language, it is essential to provide the learners with the opportunity to study words from context. The attempt to enhance vocabulary learning by giving them a list of word to study on their own does not lend enough support for words to be acquired. As shown in this study, although the learners were required to study from a list of 100 words per week for a period of ten weeks (1,000 words), they were not able to perform well in both vocabulary and reading comprehension tests. In addition, those who studied a list of 100 words per week did not perform better than those who studied 50 words per week.

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