EFL Vocabulary Acquisition and Retention: Reading Plus Vocabulary Enhancement Activities and Narrow Reading
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Language Learning, 58 (1), 73-115. (2008)

Vocabulary knowledge has long been deemed a major determinant influencing ESL/EFL reading comprehension. Given the close relationship between ESL/EFL learners’ vocabulary command and their ability to understand English readings, researchers have been searching for ways to effectively enhance students’ acquisition and retention of new vocabulary knowledge. Many techniques of direct vocabulary instruction have been examined through such attempts, including glosses, mnemonic devices, morphological and syntactic analysis, just to name a few. Despite scholarly interests, direct vocabulary instruction appears to be inadequate to prepare learners in ESL/EFL classrooms for the basic vocabulary size (3000-5000 word families) demanded by most English textbooks used at EFL secondary high schools in Taiwan.

A more feasible solution, suggested by L1 studies on vocabulary growth, is to cultivate ESL/EFL students to become independent word learners through extensive reading. The premise of this strand of research is drawn on input-oriented language acquisition theory, arguing that learners will make meaning-form connections while processing meaningful and contextualized input. Despite the general consensus among researchers that reading is one important source for the acquiring vocabulary, the effectiveness (whether learners can correctly infer the meaning of an unknown word during reading and retain it afterwards) and efficiency (how many exposures are required to ensure successful vocabulary acquisition and retention) of this approach has been seriously challenged, especially when it is compared with reading plus supplementary word-focused activities and applied in instructed foreign language context. As succinctly pointed out by Rott (1999), a pedagogically-sound vocabulary instruction should involve ESL/EFL learners in two circumstances: “reading for meaning under an enhanced condition, to ensure a basic lexicon, as well as under a normal condition, to advance beyond the basic requirement” (p. 593).

The enhanced condition refers to reading plus word-focused activities, and the normal condition to extensive reading. Drawing on this argument, it appears that EFL secondary school students who are in the process of learning the basic lexicon (3000-5000 family words) should learn the required vocabulary in an enhanced condition. In the current study, the researcher wished to add to the extant database on
the superior effectiveness of reading with focused vocabulary activities over reading only activities by providing more empirical evidence from EFL secondary school students' vocabulary knowledge acquisition and retention in instructed foreign language contexts.

The purpose of this quasi-experimental study was to compare the effectiveness of reading plus vocabulary-enhancement activities (RV) and narrow reading (NR)--repeated reading thematically related articles--on vocabulary acquisition and retention among EFL secondary school students. Twenty-five third-year male students with intermediate-level English proficiency participated in each instructional treatment two hours per week for five weeks. The RV group read selected texts and practiced various vocabulary exercises. The NR group read thematically-related supplemental materials besides the selected texts. A Chinese version of modified Vocabulary Knowledge Scale was employed to assess students’ knowledge of 50 vocabulary items. The results show that the RV group demonstrated significantly more knowledge about the target vocabulary than the NR group on the acquisition and retention tests. The researcher concludes that reading plus focused vocabulary exercises are more effective and efficient than the narrow reading approach in enhancing target vocabulary acquisition and retention among EFL secondary students.

The significance of the present study lies in the fact that it was able to compare the effectiveness of narrow reading and reading plus vocabulary enhancement activities on types of lexical knowledge acquisition and retention in a single study by using a more careful control and stringent assessment standard. Notwithstanding its more stringent assessment criteria, the current study did not confine itself to reporting only score gains but also attempted to present a multiple-dimensional picture of learners’ vocabulary acquisition, namely the formal, meaning, and use. It used an unprompted question format, which could reduce guessing more effectively than prompted questions such as multiple-choice used in previous research. The other significance of this study is that it simulated a more “natural” setup for the narrow reading group than previous research given that the researcher eliminated the request on students to complete reading comprehension questions after finishing supplemental readings.

Reference