The Effect of Using Listening Strategies on EFL Learners’ Vocabulary Retention

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Abstract — This study was designed to investigate the effects of listening strategies on vocabulary retention of Iranian EFL learners. To this end, 60 female students between the ages of 15 to 16, who were studying at a high school in Tehran were selected from the total number of 90 participants based on their performance on the OPT test (Allen, 1992) and a piloted teacher-made vocabulary recognition test. The participants were randomly assigned to an experimental and a control group. Each group consisted of 30 participants. The same content (three lessons of the second grade high school English textbook) was taught to both groups throughout the 20-session treatment. The only difference was that the students in the experimental group were taught by using listening strategies and by listening to the audio files of the reading texts; however, the students in the control group were taught through the ordinary ways of teaching English in Iranian high schools (like repetition and drills). Having a two week interval at the end of the course, a piloted vocabulary retention post-test, parallel to the vocabulary pre-test, was administered to the participants of both groups. Eventually, the mean scores of both groups on the post-test were compared through an independent sample T-test which led to the rejection of the null hypothesis. The results of the study revealed that, listening strategies have a significant effect on Iranian EFL learners’ vocabulary retention.

Index Terms— Listening comprehension, Listening strategies, Vocabulary retention

I. INTRODUCTION

It would be impossible to learn language without vocabulary- without words. Vocabulary cannot be taught. It can be presented, explained, and included in all kinds of activities, but it must be learned by the individuals (Rivers, 1981). Vocabulary learning is a process that takes a great deal of time and effort from EFL learners and according to Schmitt (2000, p.137) “it is a slow process”. Yet vocabulary is so vital for EFL learners that Wilkins (1972) claimed that, “without grammar very little can be conveyed, without vocabulary nothing can be conveyed” (p.111). As language teachers, we must arouse interest in words and a certain excitement in personal development in this area. We can help our students by giving them ideas on how to learn vocabulary and some guidance on what to learn. Students need to learn how to commit vocabulary to long term memory. This does not necessarily mean “memorizing”, although some students may find this activity suits their learning style. First, we must arouse a desire to store and remember by constantly reentering vocabulary in class work and by providing activities through which students can demonstrate what they know and learn from each other. Storage is one process; retrieval is another, so constant use of what has been stored makes it much more available for retrieval when appropriate situations arise for its use. Research has shown that the more modalities are involved in associations, the more readily items will become available in varying situations. Items should therefore be presented in association with visual representations (pictures, objects), aurally, and in association with activity of all kinds to be recalled easier (Rivers, 1981). The rapidly growing interest in the role of vocabulary in second or foreign language learning (e.g. Knight, 1994; Wesche & Paribakht, 1996; Zimmerman, 1997) demonstrates the foundational role vocabulary learning plays in acquiring a new language. For this reason, some researchers (e.g. Hatch & Brown, 1995; Hulstijn, 1993) have emphasized the need for a systematic and principled approach to the teaching and learning of vocabulary. Hulstijn (1993) suggests that teaching vocabulary should not only consist of teaching specific words but also aim at equipping learners with strategies necessary to expand their vocabulary knowledge. Many learners keep complaining that not long after they have memorized a word, it evades and based on what Allen (1983) says, even where teachers devote much time to vocabulary teaching, the results are often disappointing. Therefore, having to absorb and retain many unfamiliar words in a limited time without sufficient opportunity to internalize what have been learned requires vocabulary learning to be performed through elaborate and effective approaches. Thus, strategies should be learnt before they can be used to enhance learning and in this situation using listening
strategies can have a strong impact on vocabulary learning. Considering the global importance of listening that has obtained recently and its wide range usage in many exams such as TOFEL and IELTS, it is the most vital skill for language learning for the reason that it’s the most broadly applied language skill in ordinary life (Morely, 2001).

The aim of the present study is to provide simple and clear listening strategies to help students actively comprehend spoken messages, work out implied meaning, and develop organized points of views in class. The relevant activities are designed for high school EFL students which can encourage them to “listen actively” and “think out loud” as they work to organize their ideas within the listening process.

II. REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

A. Listening Comprehension

Listening is defined as a complex cognitive process that gives a person the opportunity to understand spoken language (Rost, 2002). Listening is a skill in a sense that it’s a related but distinct process than hearing which involves merely perceiving sound in a passive way while listening occupies an active and immediate analysis of streams of sounds. Tomatis’ (2007) view is, while listening; the desire to listen, as well as the capability to listen (comprehension) must be present with the listener for the successful recognition and analysis of the sound. What listening really means is listening and understanding what we hear at the same time. No doubt listening is the most common communicative activity in daily life. According to Morely (1991, p.82), “we can expect to listen twice as much as we speak, four times more than we read and five times more than we write”. Therefore, listening, as a skill, is assuming more and more weight in SL or FL classrooms than ever before. Rost (1994, p. 141-142) points out “listening is vital in language classroom because it provides input for the learner. Without understanding input at the right level, any learning simply cannot begin. Listening is thus fundamental to speaking.” However, the skill of listening had been neglected in the L2 literature until recently. A profound research into the history of language learning emphasizes this absence of attention to the skill of listening (Mendelsohn, 1998).

B. Listening Strategies

Listening strategies are techniques or activities that contribute directly to the comprehension and recall of listening input. Listening strategies can be classified by how the listener processes the input.

Top-down strategies are listener based; the listener taps into background knowledge of the topic, the situation or context, the type of text, and the language. This background knowledge activates a set of expectations that help the listener to interpret what is heard and anticipate what will come next. Top-down strategies include: listening for the main idea, predicting, drawing, inferences, and summarizing.

Bottom-up strategies are text based; the listener relies on the language in the message, that is, the combination of sounds, words, and grammar that creates meaning. Bottom-up strategies include: listening for specific details, recognizing cognates, and recognizing word-order patterns.

Metacognitive strategies are used by strategic listeners to plan, monitor, and evaluate their listening. They plan by deciding which listening strategies will serve best in a particular situation also, they monitor their comprehension and the effectiveness of the selected strategies or evaluate by determining whether they have achieved their listening comprehension goals and whether the combination of listening strategies selected was an effective one.

C. Vocabulary Retention

The definition of vocabulary retention is “the ability to recall or remember things after an interval of time. In language teaching, retention of what has been taught (e.g. grammar rules and vocabulary) may depend on the quality of teaching, the interest of the learners, or the meaningfulness of the materials” (Richards& Schmidt, 2002, p. 457). As it is obvious in the domain of vocabulary learning, the problem is not just in learning second language words; rather in remembering them. Bahrik (1984) states that how well people remember something depends on how deeply they process it. Therefore, various procedures have been recommended to facilitate vocabulary retention (Pakzad, 2012). It has been suggested (Hedge, 2000) that retention is related to the condition in which the meaning is inferred and the more analysis is involved, the better the retention. In other words, vocabulary retention can be enhanced by increasing the amount of mental and emotional energy used in processing a word through listeners having developed certain strategies that could assist emotional and mental processing such as metacognitive strategies.

In this article, the researcher tried to show how using listening strategies help EFL learners develop their vocabulary retention and also, help teachers to know the techniques for motivating students to be successful in achieving this goal. Building up this aim, the researcher intended to answer the following research question:

Does using listening strategies have any significant effect on EFL learner’s vocabulary retention?

In addressing the research question, the researcher stated the following null hypothesis:

H: Using listening strategies does not have any significant effect on EFL learners’ vocabulary retention.
III. METHOD

A. Participants

The participants of this study were 90 female second grade Iranian students at a high school in Tehran. These female pupils were between the ages of fifteen to sixteen. However, since some of the subjects were not accepted in the language proficiency test which was held at the beginning of the period, 30 students were excluded from the study and the total number of subjects came out to be 60, with each group containing 30 students. Then, they were randomly divided into two groups of 30 students and were assigned to two experimental and control groups.

B. Instructional Material

The material that was used in this study for the purpose of instruction was:

The English textbook of the second grade high school is the main instructional material. Three reading passages and the related new vocabularies are selected for this study.

Besides, the instructional CD that was related to the planned reading passages and the related vocabularies of the assigned book are included too.

C. Instrumentation

The assessment materials that were used in the present study included a test of general English proficiency, a vocabulary recognition pre-test, and a vocabulary retention post-test. An OPT (Oxford Placement Test) (Allen, 1992) was administered for homogenizing the sample population, 90 second grade students at an Iranian high school. The test included 100 multiple choice items.

At the end of the term, two weeks after the completion of the treatment, the post-test was administered to both groups. The interval of two weeks was chosen because having a shorter interval may let the students use their short-term memory to answer the questions and longer interval than two weeks may cause further learning to occur (Pishgaman, Khodadady, & Khoshsabk, 2012).

V. RESULTS

The vocabulary test that was used in the present study was administered in a pilot study with 25 EFL learners who were almost similar in characteristics with the main
participants of this study. The piloting results in Table 1 indicate that the reliability of the Vocabulary Test consisting of 80 items was estimated .83 using Cronbach’s Alpha.

### Table 1. Reliability Statistics of the Vocabulary Test

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source</th>
<th>No. of Participants</th>
<th>No. of items</th>
<th>Reliability Index</th>
<th>Reliability Method</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Vocabulary Test</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>.83</td>
<td>Cronbach's Alpha</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2 displays the results of normality test. The table shows that the $p$ value was .53 and .09 for the experimental and the control groups respectively on the pretest of writing. The results also indicated that the $p$ value was .36 and .52 on the posttest of vocabulary for the experimental and the control groups respectively. Since the $p$ value for all sets of scores are greater than the selected significant level, .05, their normal distribution was proved. As a result, parametric Independent Samples Test was used to test the null hypothesis of this study.

### Table 2. One-Sample Kolmogorov-Smirnov Test of Normality for Pretest and Posttest of Vocabulary in the Target and Control Groups

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Test</th>
<th>Group</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Kolmogorov-Smirnov Z</th>
<th>Sig.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Vocabulary Pretest</td>
<td>Target</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>22.57</td>
<td>.804</td>
<td>.538</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Control</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>19.80</td>
<td>1.223</td>
<td>.095</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vocabulary Posttest</td>
<td>Target</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>35.47</td>
<td>.922</td>
<td>.363</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Control</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>27.63</td>
<td>.363</td>
<td>.521</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The null hypothesis of the present study predicted that the experimental group scored higher than those in the control group. The related descriptive statistics of the participants’ scores in the two groups on the pretest of vocabulary are set forth in Table 3. As obvious in the table, the participants in the experimental group with the mean of 22.57 and standard deviation of 11.04 did not perform drastically different from the participants in the control group with the mean of 19.80 and the standard deviation of 11.52.

### Table 3. Descriptive Statistics of Two Groups’ Scores on the Pretest of Vocabulary

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Range</th>
<th>Min.</th>
<th>Max.</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Mode</th>
<th>Median</th>
<th>SD</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Target</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>22.57</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>20.00</td>
<td>11.04</td>
<td>11.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Control</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>19.80</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>18.00</td>
<td>11.52</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The related descriptive statistics of the participants’ scores in the two groups on the vocabulary posttest was computed and represented in Table 4. As clear from the table, the participants in experimental group ($M = 35.47$, $SD = 8.81$) performed considerably better than those in the control group ($M = 27.63$, $SD = 10.59$).

### Table 4. Descriptive Statistics of Two Groups’ Scores on the Posttest of Vocabulary

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Range</th>
<th>Min.</th>
<th>Max.</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Mode</th>
<th>Median</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Mode</th>
<th>Median</th>
<th>SD</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Target</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>88</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>35.47</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>37.50</td>
<td>8.81</td>
<td></td>
<td>27.63</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>27.50</td>
<td>10.59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Control</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>22.57</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>27.63</td>
<td>10.59</td>
<td></td>
<td>27.50</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>27.50</td>
<td>10.59</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The $t$-test results (Table 5) showed that there was no significant difference in vocabulary scores between the two experimental and control groups on the posttest of vocabulary ($t_{(58)} = .94$, $p = .34$, $p > .05$) in which the $t$ value (.94) was below the $t$ critical (2.00). We can conclude that the two groups have almost similar vocabulary knowledge before receiving the treatment of this study.

Further, the researcher conducted another analysis of Independent Sample Test to compare two groups’ vocabulary scores on the vocabulary post test, and the related results are provided in Table 6. According to the table, the Sig. of .88 in Levene’s Test, which was lower than .05, revealed that the assumption of equality of variances was met (Sig. > .05).

### Table 5. Independent Samples Test to Compare Two Groups’ Scores on the Pretest of Vocabulary

| Group   | N  | Range | Min. | Max. | Mean | Mode | Median | SD | Mean | Mode | Median | SD | F  | Sig. | t  | df | Sig. (2-tailed) | Mean | Diff. |
|---------|----|-------|------|------|------|------|--------|----|------|------|--------|----|    |      |    |    |                  |      |      |
| Target  | 30 | 88    | 10   | 35.47| 28   | 37.50| 8.81   |    | 27.63| 19   | 27.50  | 10.59|    | .001 | .979| 58 | .346             | -2.767|
| Control | 30 | 39    | 10   | 22.57| 49   | 27.63| 10.59  |    | 27.50| 19   | 27.50  | 10.59|    | .001 | .979| 58 | .346             | -2.767|

Independent Samples Test (see Table 6) detected a statistically significant difference in vocabulary scores between the two experimental and control groups on the vocabulary post test ($t_{(58)} = 3.11$, $p = .003$, $p < .05$). Actually, the $t$ value (3.11) was higher than the $t$ critical (2.00) that we can say the null hypothesis of this study is rejected. The $T$-test supported our claim that using listening strategies has significant impacts on Iranian EFL learners’ vocabulary retention. Our two groups have scored differently on the final test of vocabulary retention. The difference (7.83) was statistically significant.

### Table 6. Independent Samples Test to Compare Two Groups’ Scores on the Posttest of Vocabulary

| Group   | N  | Range | Min. | Max. | Mean | Mode | Median | SD | Mean | Mode | Median | SD | F  | Sig. | t  | df | Sig. (2-tailed) | Mean | Diff. |
|---------|----|-------|------|------|------|------|--------|----|------|------|--------|----|    |      |    |    |                  |      |      |
| Target  | 30 | 47    | 50   | 22.57| 18   | 20.00| 11.04  |    | 27.63| 19   | 27.50  | 10.59|    | .020 | .889| 58 | .003             | -7.833|
| Control | 30 | 46    | 1    | 47   | 19.80| 18   | 18.00  |    | 27.50| 19   | 27.50  | 10.59|    | .020 | .889| 58 | .003             | -7.833|
VI. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Although listening strategies are extremely powerful learning tools, they are usually ignored in Iranian high school English classes. As stated by Oxford (2003), students are not always aware of power of consciously using learning strategies to make learning quicker and more effective. Thus, it is necessary that language teachers become familiar with the students’ needs and deficiencies. The results of the present study indicated the need for using some listening strategies to motivate EFL learners. The main point examined was the rate of improvement in the control and the experimental groups in long term vocabulary tests. The findings indicated that the experimental group outscored its parallel control group in long-term vocabulary retention tests. This meant that teaching through listening strategies was an effective and better way of learning and remembering the vocabulary items. Consequently, using audio files and other listening strategies may be effective as tools for enhancing the learning process by actively involving the EFL learners, making the learning enjoyable for students and thus, motivating them. One reason for obtaining a better result of the experimental group might have been that listening activities made it easier and more fun for the students to retain the target vocabularies due to the fact that they listened to those vocabularies several times and with native accent. This could have triggered a sense of involvement and enjoyment of class activities. Moreover, these students spent a long time dealing with each text, because listening involves a wide range of effortful cognitive process. Therefore, the longer time spent on listening to the text might have resulted in providing opportunities for the students to comprehend the text deeper and to develop semantic networks and other kinds of associative links that ultimately enhanced learning and retention of new vocabularies. Hence, the results of this study maybe suitable, in particular, for teachers who are teaching English to EFL learners at schools, and want to reconsider their teaching by implementing new ways and means, as it is only through examining different tasks and means that teachers can realize what an amazing capacity students have for learning and how many different abilities they possess which can be drawn on in the classroom.

REFERENCES