Concordancing vs. Textual Vocabulary Acquisition

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Abstract – The word knowledge has particular importance in language learning. It contributes significantly to achievement in the subjects of the school curriculum, as well as in formal and informal speaking and writing. The present study sought to find the possible differences that may exist between two modes of vocabulary presentation, i.e. sentential vocabulary teaching (or concordancing) and suprasentential (or textual) vocabulary teaching. For this purpose, 120 high school freshmen were selected randomly. In order to have two homogeneous classes, they took the Nelson's [9] pre-test of vocabulary. Then 60 students were selected as homogeneous and were divided into two groups, each containing 30 students. In one group, the researcher used short texts to present and teach new vocabulary items and in the other, the researcher collected numerous sentences in which the new vocabulary items were used. At the end of the study, a vocabulary achievement post-test was administered to both groups at the same time. Results showed that those students who followed a text-based approach toward the vocabulary acquisition outperformed and were more successful regarding the degree of vocabulary acquisition and retrieval than those taught vocabulary through the technique of concordancing. The findings of this research are confirmed by several assumptions and studies in the area of both first and second language vocabulary acquisition in which it is clearly shown that learners can acquire a lot, or most, of the vocabulary through reading and particularly the comprehensible written input.

Keywords – Incidental Learning; Explicit Teaching; Textual Presentation; Concordancing.

1. Introduction

In learning a foreign language, vocabulary may play an important role. It is an element that links the four skills of speaking, listening, reading, and writing all together. In order to communicate in a foreign language effectively, L2 students should acquire an adequate number of words and should know how to use them accurately ([18], p. 1). Not surprisingly, therefore, learning vocabulary might be an obstacle to many non-native learners of English. It is claimed that word learning is a complex task in which some word learning occurs incidentally as a result of context-rich activities like reading. Furthermore, the word knowledge involves a range of skills, and word learning is facilitated by approaches that provide varied experiences (i.e. with reading, writing, speaking, and listening) ([36], p. 122).

Even though students realize the importance of vocabulary when learning a foreign language, they may learn vocabulary passively due to several factors. First, learners consider the teacher's explanations for meaning or definition, pronunciation, spelling, and grammatical functions as boring and complex activities. Cervantes and Yun [6] also supported this idea and claimed that teacher's definition of a given word may contain more unknown words and at the same time, low-frequency uses of a word can confuse students and keep them away from learning more salient meanings. Second, students only think of vocabulary learning as knowing the primary meaning of new vocabularies. Third, students usually acquire new vocabulary items in textbooks or when given by teachers during classroom lessons. Fourth, many learners do not take risks in applying what they have learnt.

Specifically, there are two approaches usually employed in teaching and learning new vocabulary items. Incidental (or implicit) learning, explicit (or deliberate) instruction and independent strategy development [31]. Incidental vocabulary learning is a type of learning that occurs when the mind is focused elsewhere, such as understanding a text or using language for communicative purposes [5]. Explicit (or direct) instruction refers to the formal and conscious teaching of vocabularies and their meanings [22]. Textual vocabulary instruction refers to the teaching of new words through using short texts in which they can be subjected to

grammatical and lexical study and they also provide useful models for student production [35].

2. Concordancing

Concordancing materials are rooted in corpus linguistics. Corpus is a body of language that has been assembled for the purposes of language study and it is typically presented in the form of concordances [35]. Concordances show how particular vocabulary items are used in a sentence. The key words are embedded in the sentences where they occur and each sentence is taken from different texts [14]. This program allows for the study of large bodies of texts called corpora with a computer program, i.e. a concordancer. The concordancer can find a selected word and list sentences or portions of sentences containing that word, called the Key-Word-In Context (KWIC). For example, take a look at the presentation of the item "any" using different sentences ([20], p. 5):

1. This is going to be a test like *any* other test.
2. I did not receive *any* materials for the November meeting.
3. It probably will not make *any* difference.
4. You can do it *any* way you want.
5. Do you want to ask *any* questions?
6. I do not have *any* problem with that.
7. If they make *any* changes, they would be minor changes.
8. I think we ought to use *any* kind of calculator.
9. I see it does not make *any* sense to me.

Certainly vocabulary knowledge can be acquired through reading [25]. But it appears that direct instruction is more effective than incidental learning for the acquisition of a particular vocabulary, and also more efficient [24].

3. Research Questions and Hypotheses

In this research, however, the researcher tried to demonstrate the possible differences that may exist between the two types of vocabulary presentation, i.e. concordancing (or sentence-based vocabulary learning in which learners are exposed to numerous sentences including a targeted word) and reading-based vocabulary learning in textual vocabulary instruction**.** More specifically, this study is motivated to answer the following questions:

(1) To what extent are text-based and concordancing-based vocabulary strategies salient in the lexical development at the elementary level? In other words which of these two methods can lead to higher gains in the degree of vocabulary storage and retrieval?

(2) Can second or foreign language learners gain a high level of competence in vocabulary acquisition and usage by adopting a reading-based approach in their word studies?

(3) Can the technique of concordancing (i.e. the presentation of new vocabulary items at the sentential level) promote the level of vocabulary development?

Following the above-mentioned questions are three hypotheses which are as follows:

H0. There is no significant difference between concordancing and textual vocabulary instructions regarding the degree of vocabulary acquisition and storage.

H1. Concordancing vocabulary instructions may prove to be more effective in increasing of the degree of vocabulary knowledge than the textual vocabulary instructions.

H2. Textual vocabulary instructions may prove to be more effective in increasing the degree of vocabulary knowledge than the concordancing vocabulary instructions.

4. Literature Review

Vocabulary development is an important aspect of language learning and the related research that has been conducted in recent years is very abundant. Now it is another large subdivision of applied linguistics, producing more books and papers than anyone can keep up with. And yet, a number of rather basic questions about second language vocabulary acquisition remain unanswered ([8], p. 1). A review of the current literature on vocabulary acquisition reveals a spectrum of theoretical positions ranging from highly cognitive approaches that stress the memorization of decontextualized lists, to highly naturalistic approaches that stress implicit, contextualized learning" [31].

As it was mentioned earlier, vocabulary items can be presented either incidentally or intentionally. These learning modes are not always easy to differentiate and show a considerable overlap ([13], p. 62). Intentional learning through instruction significantly contributes to vocabulary development [36]. According to Celce-Murcia ([4], p. 300), the intentional (or planned) learning can be described as "the vocabulary lesson", since the primary objective of teaching activities is the presentation and practice of the lexical items themselves.

In a study that examined the effects of explicit vocabulary teaching on vocabulary acquisition and on attitude towards reading, it was demonstrated that the students claimed that knowing more words had made them better readers, meanwhile final evaluation of the course showed that their attitude towards reading had greatly improved ([15], p. 2). However, Schmitt [33] did not exclude the importance of the incidental learning. Deliberate vocabulary learning needs to be consolidated and enriched through meaning-focused input (i.e. listening

and reading) and output (i.e. speaking and writing), and fluency development exercises.

It is stated that learning incidentally through listening and reading accounts for most first language vocabulary teaching ([33], p. 39). Incidental learning does not involve a conscious effort to learn words. The issue of vocabulary teaching often arises when adopting reading texts for the classroom study since texts provide valuable opportunities to teach new vocabulary and to practice approaches to vocabulary building ([34], p. 106). Bell [2] claimed that the reading skill can increase the knowledge of vocabulary. Laufer [21] also believed in efficiency of teaching vocabulary through texts by basing his assumption on several grounds such as the noticing assumption, the guessing ability assumption, the guessing-retention link assumption, and the cumulative gain assumption.

A case study of a learner of French was conducted to explore whether an extensive reading program can enhance lexical knowledge. This study assessed a relatively large number of words (e.g., about 133 words), and examined whether one month of extensive reading enhanced knowledge of these target words spelling, meaning, and grammatical characteristics. The results showed that knowledge of 65% of the target words was enhanced. The study indicated that more vocabulary acquisition is possible from extensive reading than previous studies have suggested ([30], p. 1).

Considering the above, it seems that extensive reading should be an indispensable dimension of vocabulary teaching. Research on learning from context shows that incidental learning does occur but that it requires learners to engage in large amounts of reading and listening because the learning is small and cumulative ([1], p. 234). This should not be seen as an argument that learning from context is not worthwhile. It is by far the most important vocabulary learning strategy and an essential part of any vocabulary learning program [27]. However, there are many counter-arguments to the potential benefits discussed so far. First of all, there is still little actual evidence of the supposedly substantial contribution of incidental L2 learning [30]. Moreover, richness of information can sometimes result in learners ignoring the target word, as they do not need to understand its meaning in order to comprehend the text [8].

Concordancing materials are rooted in the Corpus Linguistics whose only concern is the usage patterns of the language and what that reveals to the teachers and learners about the language behavior ([20], p. 1). Concordances reveal fascinating patterns in language and enables researchers to explore the contexts in which particular vocabulary items occur and also the other words with which they co-occur or collocate ([29], p. 104). Along the same line, it is pointed out that concordances help learners deepen their knowledge of words and phrases, understand

not just the main meaning or most common meanings of a word, but understand a range of meanings and perceive how context in terms of discourse and genre provides clues to the appropriate meaning [23]. For example, to present a new vocabulary item such as the word "diet", teacher can embed it in numerous sentences from different sources:

1. I went on a very drastic *diet* last year, but it didn't work.
2. Heart disease which results from unhealthy *diet* is widespread nowadays.
3. The annual *diet* guidelines are aimed at healthy people.
4. They direct their *diet* advice to overweight people.
5. Your initial concept of a *diet* is more commonly known as starvation.
6. The *diet* of vegetables is good for you.
7. Every new *diet* starts with hope and promise.
8. You have to go on a salt-free *diet*.
9. Jon has decided to go on a low-fat *diet*.
10. Children today are brought up on a *diet* of television cartoons and soap operas.

Students can view many examples of usage and compare them to their own writing by using concordancing materials [3]. Concordances are a convenient way of presenting learners with data for analysis, from which they can work out the regularities and patterns associated with the selected vocabulary items [35]. Language learners in countries where the target language is not widely spoken often lack opportunities for the rich language exposure that is essential for developing the ability to recognize patterns and for this reason the use of concordances become inevitable since they can offer condensed exposure to language patterns" ([10], p. 11). Much linguistic evidence suggests that meaning is the product of context. If this proposition is taken seriously, then concordancing is the appropriate tool for teaching meaning through context [19].

Cobb [7] conducted an experiment that attempted to identify a specific learning effect that can be unambiguously attributed to the use of concordancing by language learners. A base-level hypothesis for learning from concordances showed that concordancing might simulate and potentially rationalize vocabulary acquisition by presenting new words in several contexts. To test this idea, an experimental lexical tutor was developed to introduce new words to subjects, either through concordances or through other sources of lexical information. In a series of tests involving transfer of word knowledge to novel contexts, a small but consistent gain was found for words introduced through concordances.

However, the use of concordances in the area of second language teaching is not without its own drawbacks. As Thornbury ([35], p. 71) put it "the minimal contexts, truncated sentences, and sometimes ungraded accompanying vocabulary are some of the shortcomings associated with them". Although corpora can and will continue to contribute greatly to language teaching in a

multitude of ways, it has its own shortcomings as mentioned. It would be misguided to treat concordances as a panacea to teach vocabulary and corpus use is not meant to replace existing teaching methodologies, but to enrich and enhance them and the use of corpora should not be treated as an alternative to, or rival of, existing teaching approaches, but as a welcome addition ([10], p. 22).

5. Methodology

5.1. Participants

The research population included 120 male students who were in the first grade at high school. They were selected through non-random judgment sampling. The students were elementary in terms of their language proficiency. They were given a vocabulary achievement Nelson's test of vocabulary [9] as a pre-test to make sure of their homogeneity. Sixty participants whose scores revolved around the midpoint were selected. Then, they were coded 1 to 60. Odd numbers constituted the reading-based group and even numbers the concordancing-based group.

5.2. Instrumentation

In order to test the research hypotheses, two testing instruments and four types of teaching materials were developed and used by the researchers in this study:

1. The Nelson's test of English language vocabulary [9] was given to the participants to determine their levels of proficiency. This test comprised 40 items, and its reliability was estimated to be 0.75 using KR-21 formula.

2. Having received fifteen weeks of instructions on vocabulary with specific treatment for each group, a vocabulary achievement test based on the lessons which had been covered was administered as the post-test in order to determine the impact of specific instructions the participants received. This test also contains 40 items, and its reliability was estimated to be 0.72.

3. The material used in both reading and concordancing groups was their own textbook, English book 1. In the concordancing group, this book only determined which words to be taught.

4. For the reading group, additional selected reading books i.e. *Steps to understanding*, the elementary and pre-intermediate levels [17] and *English comprehension: step by step* [12] were also used accompanying their own textbook.

5. For the group receiving concordancing-based instruction, the main textbook just served as a basis for selection of the targeted words. The sentences in which those words were included were extracted from COBUILD

Bank of English on CD ROM. This software functions as a concordancer that contains current corpus, known as the Bank of English (part of the Collins Word Web) which runs to five millions of words of English from British, US, Australian and Canadian sources. This CD-ROM contains a wordbank which is actually a collection of sentences from English-language books, articles, and conversations.

5.3. Procedure

After dividing the students into two homogeneous groups based on their scores on the pre-test, the study actually began by adopting two different techniques in presenting the new vocabulary items. In order to avoid biasing subjects, information concerning the nature and purpose of the study was not supplied. Treatment in both groups was incorporated as a part of the regular course curriculum and participation was therefore mandatory.

In the reading-based group, the teacher read aloud the text and asked for the students' attention. Whenever it was necessary, the teacher explained the new grammatical structures to make the meaning more organized and lucid. The texts were treated extensively in a way that students were asked to skim the text to get a gist of it. Whenever they encountered the unfamiliar vocabulary items, they were supposed to work out the meanings from the context and then they could consult dictionaries to see whether their guesses were correct. Before reaching this point, the students were taught how to guess the meaning of a specific word from its context.

Whenever the meanings of some lexical items could not be inferred from the text, the teacher would write them on the board and used the techniques of mime and illustrations for the concrete words and for the abstract and complex words, he gave the students synonyms and simpler definitions. Students were asked to find other words or terms that matched with them (i.e. collocations) in the given passages. Finally in order to evaluate the students, the teacher provided them with the same texts, but with the targeted items blanked out. Sometimes, the learners were given a list of the vocabulary items including several extras to re-insert in the text.

In the concordancing-based group, students encountered the vocabulary at the sentence level. Care was exercised to limit the examples to only one area of the meaning of a particular word. From the cumulative effects of the sentences (extracted from concordancing software) the students were supposed to be able to hypothesize the meaning of the targeted word by using the mental process of induction. The learners were introduced to a large amount of concordance material which was selected in advance by the teacher. These sentences were either written on the board or delivered in sheets to students. Students were allowed to choose several examples that were meaningful to them and keep those examples in their

learning logs. The purpose was to engage learners in exploring and noticing the language contexts during the process of writing down those examples. Learners were required to repeat and use them in their own speaking and writing activities. The learners were allowed to hear and see many of these sentences before they became confident enough to venture a meaning of a given word. At different intervals, the teacher provided the foreign language learners with almost the same sentences on the board with the targeted words blanked out to check their understanding of the words' meanings. Sometimes this kind of evaluation was done orally in which the teacher prepared some other sentences using vocabulary words. He read the sentences, leaving out the vocabulary words and had volunteers fill in the blanks.

The learners were called on to identify any regularity in the data, and discuss the meaning of the sentences with the teacher or other students. They then attempted to manipulate the materials in a number of simple writing tasks such as hunting the main verb through several guesses, finding the words that go together (i.e. collocation, for example, *making* a *mistake*), and writing the preceding or following words. At the end of each session, the students were required to make their own sentences, using the vocabulary items which were taught in the preceding sessions.

Finally, a vocabulary achievement test as a post-test was administered to the two groups to determine any possible variations resulting from applying two different modes of vocabulary presentation. The students' abilities in the retention and use of the vocabulary were compared and evaluated through the statistical method of t-test.

6. Results

Initially, the descriptive statistics (i.e. mean and standard deviation scores) were calculated for the two groups. Table 1. presents the mean and standard deviation scores of both reading- and concordancing-based groups in both pre-test and post-test.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics pertaining to the data

	Variables	Mean	Std. Deviation
Pre-test	Reading	10.63	4.97
	Concordancing	10.51	5.11
Post-Test	Reading	15.20	3.11
	Concordancing	13.10	2.98

As indicated in table 1, the groups' difference was minimal alluding to the fact that the two groups were homogeneous. However, the difference between the two groups was greater in the post-test, and the increase in mean score was greater in the reading-based group. Through a two-tailed t-test, the researcher was able to see

which group outperformed the other and also to determine whether the observed difference between the groups was significant. Table 2 presents the data needed to calculate the statistical t-test.

Table 2. Post-test results and the computation of t-test

Groups	N	Mean	Std.
Deviation	T-Test		
Reading	30	15.20	3.11
2.69			
Concordancing	30	13.10	2.98

According to table 2, the t-observed value was 2.69. The t-value (2.69) was greater than the t-critical value (2.00) with 58 degrees of freedom at .05 level of significance (p<.05). The researcher was thus quite safe in rejecting the null hypothesis. Therefore, results showed that those vocabulary teaching strategies used for the reading-based group were more effective than those for the concordancing-based group.

7. Discussion

The findings of this study are similar to some studies carried out in this area. For example, Helgesen ([16], p. 2) claimed that vocabulary acquisition can be improved efficiently through using reading skill. He noted that students need to meet vocabulary in context many times to acquire it and reading passages seems to be a good way to achieve this because of its increased exposure to English vocabulary and discourse. Nation's [26] study is in line with the results of the research as well in this way that the process of vocabulary acquisition can be enhanced by using short texts and this achievement is related to several factors including the high intrinsic motivation inherent in reading short stories, the cumulative nature of incidental learning, the integration of oral and written activity, and focusing on meaning rather than form. He further noted that in spite of some inherent shortcomings in this method, there is no reason to doubt the findings that learners incidentally and cumulatively gain small amounts of vocabulary knowledge from each meaning-focused reading of an appropriate text. Furthermore, Nation [28] mentioned that deliberately teaching vocabulary is one of the least efficient ways of developing learners' vocabulary knowledge and therefore it is much easier to arrange for large amounts of independent reading than it is to arrange for large amounts of direct teaching.

However, there are some other studies whose results contradict or differ from this study. For example, Cobb [7] believed that concordancing is a powerful learning technology, since it can be adapted to learners' needs and results in rapid vocabulary expansion by meeting new words in multiple contexts. He based his assumption on this ground that in learning a second language, there is not sufficient time, as there is in first language acquisition, for rich, natural, multi-contextual lexical acquisition to take

place (p. 314). To overcome this problem, it is usually suggested that language learners should read more but it seems doubtful that the necessary time actually exists for lexical growth through reading to occur to any useful extent.

Ghadirian [11] expressed the need for devising several alternatives to reading-based incidental vocabulary learning by drawing upon the assumption that is not necessarily suitable for ESP purposes. As Ghadirian [11] argued, a concordance-based method has three advantages over incidental reading-based and traditional word list learning strategies:

1. Concordancing conserves the efficiency of list targeting while allowing for exposure to the new word in multiple contexts.

2. It allows for a way to ensure that each word is encountered a minimum of five times.

3. The learner can choose among the example sentences generated by the concordancer for one that makes sense to him or her.

Rott and Williams ([32], p. 46) are in favor of both of these methods (i.e. using either texts or concordances in vocabulary presentation) drawing on findings from cognitive psychology that nearly every word is focused on and processed when being exposed to numerous sentences for comprehension. Gabrielatos [10] shares nearly the same belief regarding the nature of concordances by asserting that this technique has the characteristics of both intensive and extensive reading and this is exactly what he referred to as "condensed reading". He elaborated that the reading of sample sentences is intensive in the sense that learners focus on the behavior of specific language features. At the same time, it is extensive in the sense that learners examine language features in a larger number of sentences than in conventional techniques.

8. Conclusion

Throughout this study, it became obvious that there are various ways in which words can be approached in the classroom. An approach which combines frequent and contextualized exposure to work on awareness raising may work best. One way of making the process of vocabulary learning more communicative is to set students the task of constructing sentences about themselves in an attempt to make the meaning real for them. It also became obvious that some words were remembered better than others. This could be due to word length, strength of mnemonic (or visual presentation), meaning, or how it relates to students ability and understanding of the L2. The range of vocabulary lists to be covered should be constructed using related words and topics that relate directly to the current course of study. It has been also found that if learners are given the opportunity to read extensively for pleasure, they can become more eager to learn the necessary reading skills and vocabulary.

Repetition and multiple exposures to vocabulary items are important. Students should be given items that will be likely to appear in many contexts. The teacher should incorporate the four language skill areas by having learners write, read, say, and hear the same word. Being brief and relevant while defining the new words contributes greatly to the vocabulary acquisition too. Students' comprehension should also be checked by eliciting examples or explanations of the word. It is also found better to teach vocabulary in separated, spaced sessions than to teach it all at once. In other words, words will be learnt better if, for example, they are taught briefly at the beginning of a lesson, reviewed later in the same lesson, and again in the next than if the same total amount of time is used for learning the words all at once.

9. Implications

This study is beneficial to EFL/ESL learners in several ways. The findings of the experiment may shed light on the importance of incidental vocabulary teaching. The idea that learners can develop their language knowledge through reading is attractive for several reasons. First, reading is essentially an individual activity; therefore, learners of different proficiency levels could be learning at their own level without being locked into an inflexible class program. Second, it allows learners to follow their interests in choosing what to read and thus increase their motivation for learning.

Concordances can be of significance in helping learners take over the properties of the language. Students can regard the concordances as a real model of language usage and compare them with their own productions to see how their expressed sentences and utterances differ from them. Through using concordances, the learners become truly autonomous and responsible for their own learning. With concordances, the learner's own discovery of grammar and vocabulary based on evidence from authentic language use becomes central to the learning process. By introducing concordances, learners can easily make inferences and generalization regarding the features of the language. Generalizations can be made by focusing on several occurrences of a given item. Concordancing data enhance students' sense of discovery learning and problem-solving activities. The students draw their own conclusions about the use of the given words by focusing on certain points in the context in which these words appear.

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Vitae

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