



Intentional Vocabulary Learning Vs Incidental Vocabulary Learning for Beginner Students: Tishk International University Preparatory School Case

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Abstract

Incidental vocabulary learning takes place during reading texts extensively while intentional learning requires extra studies on words. Although incidental learning is very effective in the long run, it does not help students much to learn different lexical features of the words. Even more, it is mostly not possible to guess the correct pronunciation of the words in English. What is more, the words get different prepositions from the native language of the learners, which causes overgeneralization and goes wrong. In this study, two groups of students were given a story to read, and intentional vocabulary study was done with them. For the next group, they just read the story and took the exam. The result showed that the group which did intentional study gave out better results than the other group although the latter was more successful in general.

Keywords: Incidental Vocabulary Learning, Intentional Vocabulary Learning, Reading

Introduction

The importance of incidental vocabulary learning has been discussed very much in EFL settings. Although its importance is mutually accepted, its effectiveness in short term has remained as a question mark for many researchers. In university settings, the students take preparatory English courses in one year so as to be ready for their academic studies for the next years. For this reason, they need to learn English as quickly as possible, and naturally they do not have time to learn words incidentally in a long term. As for intentional learning, it makes it possible to draw attention to different lexical features and make it easier to learn in relatively short time. This study also focuses on these issues to show different dimensions of the dichotomy of incidental and intentional vocabulary learning.

Literature Review

Vocabulary Learning

In the most general sense vocabulary knowledge can be described as knowledge of a word and its meanings. Vocabulary learning is an indispensable part of a second/foreign language learning. Wilkins (1972) argues that one can achieve a little without grammar knowledge, but they can acquire nothing without vocabulary knowledge.

In order to state that one knows words, they are supposed to acquire two dimensions of the words. One is recognition of the form of the word, and the other is recognition of the meaning of the word (Nation, 2001). There are some other ideas about the acquisition of words, and they stated that for master learning of a word, several things should be acquired during learning words. There are different aspects of the words that should be learnt: meaning, register, association, collocation, grammatical behavior, written form (which means spelling), spoken form (which means pronunciation) and frequency (Schmitt, 2000).

According to another classification, there are six major points to be achieved for lexical knowledge:

1. one should know different meanings of a word.
2. one should know different uses of the word appropriately.
3. one should know the syntactic properties of a word.
4. one should know other forms and derivations off every word
5. one should know the associations of the word with other words, namely, they should know the collocations.
6. one should know the connotations of the word (Gass, 1989).

Word knowledge can be divided into three levels. These three levels can be expressed in this way (Wesche & Paribakht, 1996):

1. initial recognition which means recognizing the words in oral and written form
2. comprehension of common connotations and meanings of the word in the context
3. being able to use the word in different contexts correctly and without hesitation

There is also another distinction between depth and breadth of vocabulary knowledge. With depth, it is meant how well a learner recognises the word, and with breadth, it is meant how many words the learner knows (Wesche & Paribakht, 1996). Vocabulary is very important for successful and meaningful communication. Learning vocabulary is of central importance for foreign language learners. Recent research draws

attention to this issue. Therefore, how to learn the word in a foreign language has been another focus of research. The fact that learning words in the mother tongue and learning words in a foreign language is very different from each other has led to such research (Zimmerman, 1997).

There are different dimensions of learning vocabulary in a language. In particular, a person's learning of words in his native language continues throughout his life as an incremental process (Hiebert & Kamil, 2005). In fact, there are studies that state that learning vocabulary in the language does not reach the peak point. In this context, learning vocabulary in the mother tongue goes on a continuous basis. There is an important difference between learning vocabulary in the mother tongue and EFL contexts. Generally, people learn words in their mother tongue by exposure to that language. That's why vocabulary is usually learned through listening and reading. Learning vocabulary in mother tongue is not based on explicit formal instruction. Instead, incidental learning takes place (Cunningham, 2005).

Learning vocabulary in a foreign language has some difficulties because learning foreign words means learning with some associations. The words learned in the mother tongue are realized in the real world and in its natural environment, with the constant interaction of the external world in our minds. However, learning a foreign language is a conscious learning and mostly associations that take place in the mother tongue do not occur in the human mind. In this case, there is a process of re-labeling the concepts that people previously used in their mother tongue. In particular, the fact that people have previously developed conceptual and semantic structures in their mother tongue causes them to build a foreign language on this. Foreign language learners experience some difficulties when the two languages are not compatible with each other (McCarthy et al., 2010).

There are many factors that affect vocabulary learning in a foreign language. The first of these is the native language of the person. Then, while learning a foreign language, the rate of exposure to that language, the motivation and culture of the person comes. It is very difficult to develop a comprehensive theory on this subject. Therefore, it is almost impossible to evaluate all of the factors affecting foreign language learning at once (Takac, 2008). One of the most effective ways to learn foreign language vocabulary is to be exposed to very different concepts. The way to learn lexical items is to get comprehensive input. Exposure to a lot of words is important for incidental learning. A person's exposure to the targeted foreign language is directly proportional to their vocabulary learning. Even though he doesn't know some words here, his vocabulary keeps expanding constantly (Krashen & Terrell, 1983).

Incidental Vocabulary Learning

At this point, we come across the incidental vs intentional vocabulary learning

dichotomy. In this dichotomy, which explains the difference of the two-word learning methods, incidental vocabulary learning means learning as long as you are exposed to the target language without intending to learn the words. In this context, some definitions have been made for incidental vocabulary learning that are mostly similar to each other and complement each other at some points. Swanborn and Gloppe (1999) define this concept as follows: “the incidental, as opposed to intentional, derivation and learning of new word meanings by subjects reading under reading circumstances that are familiar to them”.

In the same way, when reading in the target foreign language, it means that the person extracts the meaning of the word from the context it is in, without paying attention to the meaning of the words, and learns the words on this occasion (Swanborn & Gloppe, 1999). Where incidental vocabulary learning takes place, vocabulary learning is not the main goal. Instead, activities such as reading and listening as a purpose brought vocabulary learning as a by-product. In other words, when it is not intended to learn a single word in an activity, it is the case of learning a word or some with other activities (Read, 2004).

Many modern meaning-based approaches support incidental vocabulary learning. According to these approaches, learning a language naturally occurs in this way. Thus, learners continue to learn by subconsciously evaluating the associations of words in the context. The situation where this happens most effectively is in reading and listening environments. However, this requires the learners to be exposed to massive amounts of input (Ellis, 2005).

Frequency, a central concept, comes to the fore in order to learn a word incidentally. In other words, the effective realization of incidental vocabulary learning is closely related to how often the words are repeated in reading and listening environments. According to some approaches, learners need to see unknown words at least 10 times in the context in order to acquire them effectively (Sagari et al., 1978).

Intentional Vocabulary Learning

According to Schmidt (1990), we should make distinction between input and intake in language learning. In accordance with the noticing hypothesis, the well-known concept of input in a language should be changed to intake of the learner which means the learner consciously learns the words. In other words, paying attention to the features of the foreign language is very important for effective learning. As a requirement of this, intentional vocabulary learning has been suggested (Schmidt, 1990).

In its most general definition, the type of learning in which the learner knows what he has learned and is informed about it is referred to as intentional learning. In this case, learners perform task-based learning by selecting target words. It is the type of learning in which learners focus their attention especially on learning vocabulary. While learners in incidental vocabulary learning learn the meaning of words with clues in the context without paying attention to what they mean, in intentional vocabulary learning, learners pay

attention to the use and meaning of words. Here, it is aimed to consciously learn the word together with its many forms (Hulstijn, 2001).

Research on intentional vocabulary learning has shown the effectiveness of this method (Elgort & Nation, 2010). Intentional learning is required to learn many lexical features, especially in vocabulary learning. These lexical features require explicit attention to be learned. As stated above, learning a word is not just about learning its meaning. Many related lexical features are associated with the word. All these are very difficult to learn in incidental learning. At least in learning words of a language that does not show consistency in pronunciation, such as English, this issue should also be noted. Otherwise, it is not possible to know the correct pronunciation of the word during the reading process, and the pronunciation of the words is ignored in the listening process. Therefore, intentional learning is required to learn other lexical features (Schmitt, 2000).

Incidental vs Intentional

Incidental and intentional vocabulary learning are also referred to as implicit and explicit learning respectively. The incidental form is indirect learning and contextualized vocabulary, which is learned through the context and its meaning in relation to the other words. On the other hand, explicit or intentional method is known to be direct learning of vocabulary in decontextualized manner. Words are not studied in the context but learned through targeted exercises for sheer learning of the vocabulary (Nation, 1990).

The concepts of incidental and intentional learning were firstly introduced to the world of science by American behaviorist psychologists after the second half of the twentieth century. They did not notify the incidental learners of the upcoming test and informed the intentional learners of the test, so they did an experiment and gained this dichotomy in social sciences (Postman & Keppel, 1969).

As we compare these two, we can see that intentional vocabulary acquisition is to be primary concern. In foreign language learning, incidental vocabulary does not increase in a short time; it requires reading and listening for a long time. Even more, some believe that there is a threshold for effective incidental learning. This problem is referred to as "beginner's paradox", and it was revealed that if people do not reach a certain level of vocabulary in foreign language learning, they cannot learn vocabulary just by reading in the first stages of learning (Coady, 1997).

There are also similar cases for intentional learning even with advanced learners. If the words come with low frequency in the texts, the learners cannot learn these effectively even in an explicit manner. In other words, if the vocabulary items are very rarely used in the language and in the texts that the learners are exposed to, their intentional learning does not even help them learn the words. For effective learning, the words should be frequently used in related setting, and thus learners may be able to achieve master learning (Nation, 1990).

Methodology

Research Model

In order to test the efficiency of incidental and intentional vocabulary, we applied this survey on preparatory school students of Tishk International University. We distributed them a reading text and asked to read it in one week. The story was “The Adventures of Tom Sawyer” by Mark Twain published by Penguin Readers. This is a beginner level book with 300 headwords. The students were also at beginner level of English. They had very little background from English, and at the end of some proficiency tests, they were put in preparatory classes. After reading this story, we studied with one class on the chosen vocabulary. We chose the words with some lexical components like verb and its preposition, adjective and its preposition, collocations, pronunciation of some words and finding words in a meaningful context. Qualitative and quantitative methods are used in this study.

Sampling

Preparatory school students of Tishk International University were used in this research. They were beginner level students that had very little English background, so they started to learn English at very beginner level. For this study, two different classes were chosen. The experiment group that studied the words later in explicit manner were 15 students, and the other group that only read the story and answered the test in the end was made up of 17 students.

Data Collection

For data collection, we firstly asked the two classes to read the story “The Adventures of Tom Sawyer” by Mark Twain. After reading, we did extra vocabulary study on the words chosen from the text. We studied pronunciation, collocation, word combinations with preposition and meaning of the words. The other group, control group, just read the story and took the exam. The results were evaluated in descriptive statistics.

Findings

Before the test, we studied together with the experiment group under different headings.

- a. We studied the meaning of 15 words from the story.

Table 1: List of the 155 words that we studied the meanings

1	angry with
2	across
3	surprised
4	waited
5	tore
6	dig
7	made noise
8	aunt
9	medicine
10	get well
11	vacation
12	trial
13	treasure
14	adventure
15	graveyard

The students compared these words with the explanations and used them in meaningful sentences. When they made any mistakes, we corrected them right away.

- b. We studied some collocations: make noise / get well

We especially underlined these words and their collocations and explained that these words are used together, and it is not possible to use them with any other words in this meaning.

- c. Prepositions: angry with / wait for

We highlighted these words and their prepositions and expressed that these prepositions are special to these words, and it is not possible to use any other preposition with them, so they memorized the words with their prepositions.

- d. Pronunciation: It is really very difficult or sometimes impossible to guess the correct pronunciation of words from written forms, so we studied pronunciation of certain words in the list. The words whose pronunciation we studied were as follows: vacation, trial, treasure, adventure, graveyard.

Then we applied the same test to the two classes at the same time and evaluated the results. The result of the test is evaluated below under different headings.

Meanings of the Words

There are 15 different words and related sentences. There were blanks in the sentences, and the students were asked to fill in the blanks with given words. At the end of

the test, the results came out as follows:

Table 2: The test results of the experiment group

Experiment group	Out of 15
Student 1	15
Student 2	15
Student 3	14
Student 4	14
Student 5	14
Student 6	13
Student 7	13
Student 8	13
Student 9	13
Student 10	12
Student 11	12
Student 12	12
Student 13	12
Student 14	9
Student 15	9
Average	12.66667

Table 3: The results of the control group

Control group	Out of 15
Student 1	15
Student 2	14
Student 3	14
Student 4	13
Student 5	13
Student 6	13
Student 7	12
Student 8	11
Student 9	11
Student 10	10
Student 11	10
Student 12	10
Student 13	10
Student 14	9
Student 15	9
Student 16	8
Student 17	8
Average	11.17647

The results of the experiment group are slightly better than the control group. The average of the experiment group is 12.66, and the average of the control group is 11.17. These results may not give out significant differences, but when we check the history of these two classes, we will see the difference more clearly. The exam averages of both classes in the last three quizzes that we administered in the prep school will give clearer idea.

Table 4: The averages of last three exam results

	Experiment group	Control group
exam 1	67	74
exam 2	63	72
exam 3	69	76

Seemingly, control group achieves much better than experiment group in the exams, and their general results are higher. In relation to these data, the success of the

experiment group in the vocabulary test we did is quite high, and they are better than the other group only in this test.

Collocations

We asked two collocations in the test and compared two classes with their answers to these questions. These two collocations were as follows:

- a-) make noise
- 2-) get well

The correct answers for the two collocations for the two groups are as follows:

Table 5: Results of the collocations

	make noise	get well
experiment group	13	13
control group	11	10

The experiment group is doing better than the other group with collocations, and it seems the first group mastered learning them. As we focused much on them, the students were able to memorize the collocations better. The three students that could not answer were already very careless, not only about this class but also in general.

Prepositions

Some adjectives and verbs get certain prepositions and are used with them, which is an important lexical item that the students should learn during their studies. But in general, this issue goes unattended. This issue needs much attention to be paid, otherwise, students do not care about it. We also underlined this in our vocabulary studies and had them repeat these prepositions several times. In the test, the result of prepositions with adjective and verb is as follows:

Table 6: Results of the questions with prepositions

	Angry with	Wait for
experiment group	14	12
control group	8	6

These prepositions are quite unpredictable and do not make any sense for the students, so the majority of control group made mistakes about them. The adjective angry is used adding the preposition “with”, it repeated several times in the story, but the students skipped them mostly unattended. As for experiment group, they did well because we explained them this topic with much stress on it and told them that these prepositions do not fit meaningfully after the adjectives. In fact, what does not make sense for the students is that they do not use these prepositions in their own mother tongue. Since the prepositions are totally different in their language, they are exposed to first language interference and apply the rules of their mother tongue to these settings. However, we studied them seriously with the students highlighting these points, so the first group got quite high results.

As for the control group, they made mistakes with the preposition after the word “angry”, and even more, majority of them were mistaken about the correct preposition of the verb “wait”. Those who answered this question wrongly put no preposition after the verb “wait”. Although this word and its preposition were repeated several times in the text, many students were totally unaware of them in the text.

Pronunciation

We also checked the pronunciation of these words because pronunciation is an inevitable lexical component. In the exam we asked the right pronunciation of 5 words in the list. The correct answers are as follows:

Table 7: Results of pronunciation

	Experiment group	Control group
vacation	11	6
trial	10	6
treasure	12	8
adventure	13	13
graveyard	15	17

The students had difficulties especially with the first two words. Although we studied in deep with the experiment group, they still made mistakes with pronunciation of these two words. The pronunciation of the word “vacation” seems to be settled in their tongue, and all of the students who mispronounced this word pronounced is like the word “vocation” /vəʊ'keɪ.ʃən/. But still, the group that we studied together got much better results. It is apparent that these students got much better results in pronunciation than in the other headings. Their mistakes in pronunciation of the other words were also typical such that they pronounced trial not as /aɪ/ but as /ɪ/, treasure not with /z/ but /ʃ/. They made different mistakes with the pronunciation of adventure, so their mistakes were not

consistent with the pronunciation of this word. All of the students pronounced the word “graveyard” correctly, most probably because of the reason that there is no extraordinary pronunciation pattern for this word.

Discussion

If reading activities are adjusted according to the level of the students, it makes significant contributions to their foreign language learning. However, it is a controversial issue how much these activities contribute to students' learning new words. As Tekmen and Daloğlu (2006) concluded, although frequently repeated words are learned effectively, the number of words students need to learn remains well below what they should learn in a specified period. Learning English words is possible by learning their very different lexical components. One of the main things that makes English a more difficult language is that there is no specific pronunciation rule. Besides other lexical features, this issue also draws attention. In this study, we did not only focus on the meanings of the words, but other lexical features were also discussed. It was also seen in this sample that vocabulary exercises contributed a lot to the students. In addition, prepositions, which are other features of words, do not attract the attention of the students during reading. In fact, students posed the problem of overgeneralization by using them directly as in their mother tongue. The students learned the words and their prepositions well when they were drawn close attention. The other class went unattended to this feature of the words and could mostly not learn as effectively.

Collocations are also one of the lexical features of the words that require close attention. As we highlighted these word combinations to one class, they learned them better than the other class. For the control group, some of them did not notice these combinations during reading. The students made consistent mistakes with the pronunciation of some words. They all mispronounced some words in the same way. It means these pronunciation patterns were already settled and they could not correct it by sheer reading. These forms should also be drawn attention for better learning.

Conclusion

Although incidental vocabulary learning is very effective in the long term, it is not as effective in the short term. Even more, it is not effectively applicable to lower-level students because they need to learn the words from every aspect, and when their attention is not drawn to these features, they almost never notice them. For this reason, the place of intentional learning is inevitable, especially for these levels. Moreover, intentional learning makes it easier and faster for the students. The low-achiever class did much better than the other class which is normally much better than the other class when their previous exams were compared. Through intentional learning, it is possible to underline all lexical features so that students learn the words from every aspect. It is even very helpful to the students to

unlearn some mistaken points and get better results. It seems intentional vocabulary learning is irreplaceable, especially for lower levels.

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Appendix- Vocabulary Test

Fill in the blanks with the given words.

With / across / surprised/ waited / tore / dig / made / aunt / medicine / well / vacation / trial / treasure

1. My mom was angry _____ me when I came home late.
2. The boys went _____ the river in the small boat.
3. I was very _____ when I saw an old friend in front of me.
4. She _____ for me for a while and then left.
5. She closed the book quickly and it _____.
6. He started to _____ under the floor.
7. He was afraid and _____ a noise.
8. She is my _____. She is my father's sister.
9. When you are sick, you should take some _____.
10. 10-) Stay in bed for some time and you will get _____ quickly.
11. They went on a _____ in summer.
12. You should be ready during the _____ in court.
13. He found a _____ and became rich.
14. She likes _____, so she went on a long trip.
15. It is very scaring to walk through a _____ at night.