

# The Effect of Setting Reading Goals on the Vocabulary Retention of Iranian EFL Learners

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**Abstract**—This study investigates the effects of setting reading goals on the vocabulary retention of Iranian EFL readers. The aim is to find out which type of goals can be more influential on vocabulary retention. The population includes 120 students, 16 to 18 years old, and all female at Iranian junior high schools. Out of them 60 homogenized students were selected through administering one Nelson Proficiency Test (2001). They were divided to four groups of 15 students, three groups with different reading goals and a control group. After the treatment, a vocabulary post test was administered for all groups after two weeks. Then an ANOVA used to analyze the results of the tests. The results revealed that there was a significant difference between the groups with different goals and the control group. The findings suggested that setting reading goals has a positive effect on vocabulary retention of teaching and pleasure groups and negative effect on taking test group.

**Index Terms**—reading goal, reading comprehension, vocabulary learning, retention, L2 text

## I. INTRODUCTION

Skilled adult readers consider reading goals as an important factor on how to read. Setting reading goals affects the pace of reading and influences on the style of reading as the literature indicates (Pressley, Brown, El-Dinary, & Afflerbach, 1995; Pressley & Afflerbach, 1995; Wyatt et al., 1993). A consistent relationship was found between reading goals and reading strategy by Taraban, Rynearson and Kerr (2000). Successfully learning from text depends heavily on reading goals, but no researches have been found worked on whether providing a learner with a specific reading goal will improve learning from text. The purpose of this study is to determine if giving learners explicit reading goals, can improve their learning. Although goal orientation as a motivational characteristic of the learner has been addressed in previous studies, none have considered the effect of setting reading goals on the vocabulary retention.

This research focuses on the following research hypotheses:

- 1- Setting a reading goal before reading has no effect on the vocabulary retention of EFL high school students.
2. Setting different reading goals has no effect on the vocabulary retention of EFL high school students.

In this study three reading goals have been considered: reading for pleasure, reading for taking test, and reading for teaching other students.

## II. METHOD

### A. Participants

To select the participants of the study, a group of 120 students were selected randomly from among the third grade students in a high school in Iran, Najaf-Abad city. Subsequently, a proficiency test was administered to all the participants to make four homogeneous groups in terms of their proficiency level. After scoring the test, 60 students whose score range fell between one standard deviation (SD) above and below the mean were selected to participate in the study. These participants were divided into four homogeneous groups, each consisted of 15 students, based on their proficiency level. They included a control group and three experimental groups.

### B. Materials

Through the various phases of the study, the following materials were used.

### 1. Nelson Proficiency Test

In order to find out the general English proficiency level of the subjects of the study a Nelson proficiency test(2001) was selected (from the lower intermediate section of the Practice test II) and was administered on the whole population to choose the control and experimental groups.

### 2. Vocabulary pre-test

In order to study the amount of vocabulary retention among the third grade students of high school studying English as a foreign language, the control and experimental groups were supposed to read three short stories each containing 15 unfamiliar words in three different sessions. To find out whether the participants in control and experimental groups were familiar with these words, the list of the new words found in the short stories, consisting of 50 items was given to them and they were asked to write the L1 meaning of the words. Most of the words were unfamiliar to the students. Those vocabulary items which were familiar for the participants (5 items) were deleted and those which were unknown to the participants were identified to be considered in the study.

### 3. Short stories

Three short stories suitable for lower intermediate students containing the unfamiliar words were selected and their readability was computed which was reasonable.

### 4. Vocabulary Tests

During the treatment phase of the study, after each session of reading a short story, a vocabulary test was run. The tests were constructed by the researchers and piloted on other students at the same level of knowledge. The reliability of these tests was calculated through KR-21 and they were 0.75, 0.84, and 0.70. The validity of the tests was confirmed by two experts in the field.

### 5. Vocabulary post-test

At the end of the treatment phase (after a two weeks interval), a post-test was administered to students of the experimental and control groups in which they were asked to write the meaning of those vocabulary items which were already unfamiliar with, to evaluate the amount of the retention of the new words.

## C. Procedure

Following the proficiency test (Nelson test II , 2001), four homogeneous groups were identified to participate in the study.

### 1. Pilot study

The prepared vocabulary tests were piloted to another group of third grade students in high school similar in English proficiency level to the experimental and control groups. The reliability of these tests was calculated through KR-21. Two experts in the fields confirmed the validity of the tests.

### 2. Vocabulary pre-test

In this phase of the study, a list of 50 new vocabulary items found in the short stories which were considered to be used in the treatment part of the study was selected and given to participants in four groups. Regarding the knowledge level of students who were studying in third grade of high school and considering the vocabulary items which were covered in their textbooks so far, the items which seemed to be unfamiliar to the participants were selected and they were asked to write their meaning in their native language (Persian). After the process of item analysis, 5 vocabulary items which were familiar to the participants were deleted and 45 words were considered in the next phase of the study.

### 3. Treatment

In this phase of the study, the experimental and the control groups were given three short stories, each story in one session, and they were asked to read each short story with special goal like pleasure, taking test, and teaching other students except the control group with no pre-set goal. The students' questions in understanding short stories were answered. They read the texts during a period of 15 minutes of the class time. After reading, each group was required to do a specific activity. One group was required to take a test, the other group was asked to teach to the other students and the pleasure group was required to tell the gist of the story. Then all the groups were asked to answer ten multiple choice questions related to the short stories without informing them before. The reliability of these tests was calculated through KR-21 and they were 0.75, 0.84, and 0.70. The validity of the tests was confirmed by two experts.

### 4. Vocabulary post-test

In order to measure the amount of the vocabulary retention by the experimental groups and to compare it with the control group, a vocabulary post-test was administered to four groups, similar in form to the pre-test, in which they were asked to write the meaning of 45 vocabulary items in their L1 for thirty minutes, two weeks later. It included the same words in the pretest and the new words in the short stories. The post-test was administered without informing the participants in advance.

## D. Scoring of the Tests and Data Analysis

The pre-test contained 50 vocabulary items and students were supposed to write their L1 meanings based on the instruction. The post-test contained 45 vocabulary items with the same instruction. In order to score these tests, one mark was considered for each correct L1 meaning and no mark for those vocabulary items which were left blank or answered wrongly by the participants.

### E. Data Analyses

After the collection of the required data, the scores of the participants on all tests were processed using the statistical package for the social sciences (SPSS, version 9). Specifically, the following analyses were conducted: descriptive statistics, ANOVA and post hoc test. The obtained data of the study will be displayed in the following tables.

TABLE 1.  
DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS OF THE THREE TREATMENTS

		N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error	95% Confidence Interval for Mean	
						Lower Bound	Upper Bound
treatment1	teaching_group	15	18.4000	1.29835	.33523	17.6810	19.1190
	taking_test	15	15.8667	1.84649	.47676	14.8441	16.8892
	pleasure_reading	15	17.8000	1.42428	.36775	17.0113	18.5887
	control_group	15	17.2000	2.17781	.56231	15.9940	18.4060
	Total	60	17.3167	1.92655	.24872	16.8190	17.8143
	Model			1.72240	.22236	16.8712	17.7621
	Fixed Effects						
	Random Effects				.54186	15.5922	19.0411
treatment2	teaching_group	15	18.9333	1.03280	.26667	18.3614	19.5053
	taking_test	15	16.2000	1.74028	.44934	15.2363	17.1637
	pleasure_reading	15	17.6667	1.67616	.43278	16.7384	18.5949
	control_group	15	16.6667	1.83874	.47476	15.6484	17.6849
	Total	60	17.3667	1.88632	.24352	16.8794	17.8540
	Model			1.60357	.20702	16.9520	17.7814
	Fixed Effects				.60522	15.4406	19.2928
	Random Effects						
treatment3	teaching_group	15	18.9333	.88372	.22817	18.4439	19.4227
	taking_test	15	16.4667	1.92230	.49634	15.4021	17.5312
	pleasure_reading	15	17.8000	1.42428	.36775	17.0113	18.5887
	control_group	15	15.1333	1.92230	.49634	14.0688	16.1979
	Total	60	17.0833	2.11766	.27339	16.5363	17.6304
	Model			1.59687	.20616	16.6704	17.4963
	Fixed Effects				.82254	14.4656	19.7010
	Random Effects						
post_test	teaching_group	15	18.1333	1.55226	.40079	17.2737	18.9929
	taking_test	15	12.6000	2.29285	.59201	11.3303	13.8697
	pleasure_reading	15	17.1333	1.55226	.40079	16.2737	17.9929
	control_group	15	13.2000	3.48876	.90079	11.2680	15.1320
	Total	60	15.2667	3.33887	.43105	14.4041	16.1292
	Model			2.35837	.30446	14.6568	15.8766
	Fixed Effects				1.38698	10.8527	19.6806
	Random Effects						

Considering the mean scores of four groups in each treatment (table 1), the teaching group gained the highest means. It is considerable that the mean of taking test group is lower than control group in treatment 1, 2 and in delayed post-test.

TABLE 2.  
ANOVA

		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
treatment1	Between Groups	52.850	3	17.617	5.938	.001
	Within Groups	166.133	56	2.967		
	Total	218.983	59			
treatment2	Between Groups	65.933	3	21.978	8.547	.000
	Within Groups	144.000	56	2.571		
	Total	209.933	59			
treatment3	Between Groups	121.783	3	40.594	15.919	.000
	Within Groups	142.800	56	2.550		
	Total	264.583	59			
post_test	Between Groups	346.267	3	115.422	20.752	.000
	Within Groups	311.467	56	5.562		
	Total	657.733	59			

Table 2 shows that since the statistics referring to significant difference between the groups is smaller than 0.05 in all treatments, there is a significant difference in the performance of the four groups on vocabulary retention. Therefore the

first hypothesis of the research (Setting a reading goal before reading has no effect on the vocabulary retention of EFL high school students) is rejected. This implies the fact that setting different reading goals affects the subjects' retention ability.

#### 1. Post Hoc test

TABLE 3.  
MULTIPLE COMPARISONS OF THE LEARNERS' MEANS WITH DIFFERENT READING GOALS

Scheffe		Mean Difference (I-J)	Std. Error	Sig.	95% Confidence Interval	
(I) group	(J) group				Lower Bound	Upper Bound
teaching group	test group	3.32*	.429	.000	2.08	4.55
	pleasure group	1.00	.429	.155	-.24	2.24
	control group	3.05*	.429	.000	1.81	4.29
test group	teaching group	-3.32*	.429	.000	-4.55	-2.08
	pleasure group	-2.32*	.429	.000	-3.55	-1.08
	control group	-.27	.429	.943	-1.50	.97
pleasure group	teaching group	-1.00	.429	.155	-2.24	.24
	test group	2.32*	.429	.000	1.08	3.55
	control group	2.05*	.429	.000	.81	3.29
control group	teaching group	-3.05*	.429	.000	-4.29	-1.81
	test group	.27	.429	.943	-.97	1.50
	pleasure group	-2.05*	.429	.000	-3.29	-.81

Based on observed means.

\*. The mean difference is significant at the .05 level.

The second hypothesis was concerned with the question of whether there is any relationship between the different reading goals and EFL learners' retention. Considering table 3 and by comparing the control group and the other groups, the mean difference of control and teaching group is 3.05 and this is significant (0.00 is smaller than 0.05). This shows that there is a significant difference between the means of the group with teaching goal and the control group.

The mean difference of control and pleasure groups is -2.05 and it is significant (0.00 < 0.05). But the mean difference of control and test group is 0.27 and it is not significance (0.943 > .05). This shows that there is not a significant difference between the means of the test group and the control group. These results indicate that setting different goals have different effects on the means of each group. Although, teaching and pleasure goals have significant positive effects on the means of the students, testing goal has no significant effect on mean (even based on the descriptive statistics of table 1 the means of the test groups in treatments and post test are lower than the control and of course other groups). Therefore, the mean difference between groups shows that the mean of control group is lower than teaching and pleasure groups and the means of control and testing groups has no significant difference.

### III. DISCUSSION, CONCLUSION, AND IMPLICATION

The post-test results of the teaching and pleasure groups, as indicated by the descriptive statistics were higher than the results obtained by the control group. Therefore, it can be claimed that the subjects who participated in the reading activity with setting reading goals (for teaching and pleasure) seemed to have learned the meaning of more words than those in the control group. The results of the study indicate the importance of setting reading goals before reading. As Rivers (1981) notes, vocabulary cannot be taught although it can be explained, presented, demonstrated along with other techniques and activities, and must be learned by individuals.

As stated before, this study investigated two hypotheses: 1. Setting a reading goal before reading has no effect on the vocabulary retention of EFL high school students. The findings of this study rejected this hypothesis. In other words, by comparing the results obtained by experimental groups, it is clear that there are significant differences between the retention of these groups and the control group. It shows that setting reading goal before reading has a significant effect on vocabulary retention of students; of course, positive effect for those with teaching and pleasure reading goals and negative effect for those with taking test goal. The results show that taking test goal not only does not increase the students capacity to recall the words better but also decrease the level of their performance. It can be because of the students' stress of taking test.

The second hypothesis stated: Setting different reading goals has no effect on the vocabulary retention of EFL high school students. Referring back to table 3 and considering the results of descriptive statistics and one way ANOVA of the post-test in table 2 this hypothesis is rejected. The amount of retention of vocabulary in the participants possessing teaching goals and pleasure goals is higher than control group. Unlike teaching group and pleasure group there is a lower retention of vocabulary in taking test group comparing with control group.

There were some limitations in this study. The first problem dealt with the reluctance of a few less-enthusiastic and less-motivated students to participate in the study, i.e. to read short stories for taking test, teaching the other students and for pleasure. The reason behind this unwillingness may be due to the current situation of educational evaluation in Iran. Students have gradually been accustomed to the procedure of “read for score” and in most cases, the only criteria for passing the course, here in Iran, are the score, which is often obtained from the written examinations regardless of other capabilities of the learners.

These findings have clear implications for the future studies.

1- The participants of this study were the third graders in high school in Iran. This study can be replicated with TEFL students at the university and the results can be compared with this study and other studies.

2- In this study, one-word units were mostly tested. Similar research with multi-word units also needs to be done.

3- The number of vocabulary considered in this study was 45 words. This study may be replicated with either fewer or more words at different levels and the results can be compared.

4- In this study, “vocabulary retention” in the experimental and control groups was studied by only one post-test. More retention tests with different elapse of finite times can be addressed in future studies and the retention of vocabulary can be compared to see whether the results are stable or not.

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