Does Extensive Reading Combined with Form-focused or Meaning-focused Activities Affect Lexical Collocational Knowledge of Iranian Learners?

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Abstract—This study attempted to investigate the effect of an ER program -coupled with form versus meaning-focused activities- on the development of lexical collocations among Iranian Intermediate EFL learners. To this end, 41 students of English language and literature studying at the department of English at the University of Mazandaran participated in this study. A reading comprehension test taken from TOEFL was used to measure candidates' reading ability to homogenize them in terms of their entry behaviour. Moreover, a modified Word Associates Test (WAT) developed by Read (1993, 1998) was administered to examine the participants' lexical collocation knowledge. Participants were divided into two experimental groups: Both groups were assigned to read extensively and do some after reading activities; the first group was given a form-focused activity (FFA) while the second group worked on a meaning-focused activity (MFA). The results of paired and independent sample t-tests revealed the fact that both FFA and MFA groups progressed in the interval between the pre- and post-test, but, there was not a significant difference between the effects of form-focused and meaning-focused activities.

Index Terms—extensive reading, depth of knowledge, incidental learning, intentional learning, lexical collocational knowledge

I. INTRODUCTION

A. Background

Extensive reading (ER) as one of the approaches to teaching reading has received increasing attention from L2 educators as an effective form of L2 reading instruction (Yamashita, 2008). Research has emphasized the important role of ER in helping learners gain fluency in the areas of word recognition, vocabulary acquisition and developing reading comprehension skills (Grabe and Stoller, 1997; Horst, 2005; Hudson, 2007; Pigada and Schmitt, 2006; Yamashita, 2008). Over the past two decades, numerous studies in this area have underscored the fact that ER can promote language proficiency in general, and can lead to vocabulary development in particular. Some researchers such as Coady (1997), Grabe (1991), Shin &Kyu-Cheol (2003), Nassaji (2003), and Horst (2005) have reported the usefulness of this approach in vocabulary development. Zimmerman (1997) and Nuttall (1982), too, have highlighted the usefulness of ER in vocabulary learning through a broad exposure to the target language.

As to the concepts of intentional versus incidental vocabulary learning, research has shown that vocabulary forms, collocation, and parts of speech are better learnt through incidental learning, while for getting the sense of a word and the innuendo intentional learning will be more effective (Nation, 1990). There has been a reasonable amount of research on incidental vocabulary learning from Extensive Reading (e.g.,Grabe&Stoller, 1997; Horst, 2005; Kweon& Kim, 2008; Paribakht&Wesche, 1999; Pigada& Schmitt, 2006;Yali, 2010). These studies argue that incidental learning occurs more particularly through extensive reading in input-rich environments, although at a rather slow rate. Extensive reading has also led to improvement in learners' fluency because they try to read group of words while reading and do not read every individual word they encounter.

However, although the employment of extensive reading as a means of implicit learning has been shown to facilitate the learning of the formal features of language (Day &Bamford 1998,Green 2005); for fast vocabulary expansion, research indicates that just using incidental vocabulary instruction is not adequate and that there is a need for integrating it with intentional learning (Hulstijn, 2011; Mirzaii, 2012; Yali, 2010).These studies have found that extensive reading alone doesn't lead to vocabulary acquisition. Yali (2010) argued that for language acquisition to occur, students need to notice the form, understand the meaning and create the form-meaning connection. Other studies have also demonstrated that extensive reading alone is not sufficient for developing language skills and a more focused approach (intensive

reading), including explicit instruction is also needed. Additionally, although extensive reading has been found to be an effective means of developing vocabulary, and learners' knowledge of the target language (Renandya& Jacobs, 1997 as cited in Tran, 2006), in developing English language skills, especially the vocabulary, explicit approaches to instruction have also proved to be successful (Coady, 1997 as cited in Tran, 2006). All this illustrate the fact that acquisition of vocabulary does not occur automatically simply through extensive reading for meaning and the success in doing so relies as much on the context around each word, the amount and type of the learner's attention, the demands of the task , and other factors. For example, as Nation and Coady (1988) point out: "the very redundancy or richness of information in a given context which enables a reader to guess an unknown word successfully could also predict that the same reader is less likely to learn the word because he or she was able to comprehend the text without knowing the word. (p. 101)". Green (2005) also contends that extensive reading is truly an important means of language acquisition, yet this does not mean that it is the most effective medium for acquiring English vocabulary.

In research on vocabulary learning, a distinction is often drawn between depth of knowledge and breadth of knowledge (Qian, 1999; Paribakht&Wesche, 1996).Breadth of vocabulary knowledge refers to the quantity or number of words learners know at a particular level of language proficiency (Nation, 2001). Depth of vocabulary knowledge, on the other hand, refers to the quality of a learner's lexical knowledge, or the degree of a learner's familiarity with a word (Read, 1993).Qian (1999) proposed that depth of vocabulary knowledge contains components such as pronunciation, spelling, meaning, register, frequency, and morphological, syntactic, and collocational properties. He demonstrated that depth as well as size of learners' vocabulary knowledge contributed to reading proficiency. Waring (2002, cited in Lau Man-yee, 2004) pointed out that vocabulary exercises for the purpose of enhancing depth of vocabulary knowledge should focus on deepening and internalising knowledge of words and not merely focus on the form-meaning level. This means that simple matching of meaning of words would not be sufficient to deepen students' knowledge of words. He suggests that focus should be on the collocates of the target words, on how the words fit into the normal context in which it appears by looking at the word relationships and not just keeping words in isolation. Over the last few years, research into collocations in the area of acquisition of a second language has become increasingly important (Fernández et al, 2009; Martyńska, 2004; Ramos, 2006). A collocation consists of two or more words that convey how things should be conventionally said and the meaning of the words together is different from the sum of their parts (Fernández, 2009). It was argued (Lin, 1998) that meanings of words are determined to a large extent by their collocational patterns and perhaps that is why collocational knowledge is given prominence in second language acquisition. The idiosyncratic nature of collocations can explain the many errors that are observed in second language learners performance (Leed and Nakhimovsky, 1979). Shin and Nation (2007) consider learning collocations as an efficient way of improving the learners' language fluency and native-like selection of language use. The chunked expressions make learners fluent by enabling them to reduce cognitive effort, to save processing time, and to have language available for immediate use. Learners' may produce grammatically correct sentences, but many of them may not sound native-like. Pawley and Syder (1983) believe that there are different ways of saying something in a language but not all of them are what native-speakers of the language use naturally. Collocational knowledge is one thing that can help learners to have a natural language use which allows them to choose the right lexical items and generate collocationally correct sentences (Smadja, 1993).Although nowadays the applied linguistics community accepts the need for teaching collocations, we consider that there have been few attempts to systematically study how the development of collocational knowledge could be achieved through performing tasks (either intentionally or incidentally) after an extensive reading done by the learners.

To sum up, although several studies have demonstrated a relationship between learners' vocabulary knowledge and their subsequent learning of vocabulary through reading (Grabe & Stoller, 1997; Horst, 2005; Kweon& Kim, 2008; Pigada & Schmitt, 2006; Rashidi & Piran, 2011; Yali, 2010), some studies have found that extensive reading alone doesn't lead to vocabulary acquisition (Paran,2003; Coady, 1997; Green, 2005; Paribakht & Wesche, 1997; Hulstijn & Laufer, 2001).Studies have suggested that the acquisition of vocabulary is an incremental process and that it is only after repeated exposures to words that these can be required (Nation, 2001). Unlike native speakers who are exposed to the language daily, students in Iran mostly come into contact with English during English lessons. For these students, repeated exposure to the same items may mean several months or longer. Studies have found that vocabulary acquisition can be achieved through vocabulary-focused tasks (form-oriented and message-oriented) given to students while reading (Paribakht & Wesche 1997, Hulstijn & Laufer 2001). The tasks may leed to deeper word processing which then results in better word retention and retrieval. Therefore, this experiment is carried out to investigate if teachers can help deepen the students' vocabulary knowledge by means of a vocabulary-focused task. The aims of the present research are to explore the differential effects of form-oriented and meaning-oriented tasks added to an ER program on improving the depth of vocabulary knowledge of students and to further examine their effects on the learning of the lexical collocations.

B. Research Questions

The present study sought to answer the following research questions:

Q1. Does extensive reading coupled with form-focused/meaning-focused activities affect EFL learners' depth of vocabulary knowledge?

Q2. Is there a significant difference between the effects of form-focused and meaning-focused activities on learners' lexical knowledge?

II. METHODOLOGY

1. Research Design

The study employed a quasi-experimental design which used a pre-test-treatment-posttest procedure to collect   data. The present study had two experimental groups with no control group. Participants of this study were selected from one class to reduce the teacher effect.

2. Participants and Setting

The first year students, both male and female majoring in English language and literature at the department of foreign languages of University of Mazandaran participated in this study. They were taking the reading comprehension (∏) course. Their ages ranged from 19 to 21. All of the candidates took a reading comprehension test at the beginning of the course. This was done to homogenize the participants of the study with regard to their reading proficiency and make sure that their entry behaviour was not varied. All the students of the class participated in the class activities but the focus of this study was on the activities of intermediate students, not advanced, pre-intermediate or elementary ones. At the beginning, the number of subjects for this experiment was 41, but a number of students had to be excluded from the analysis due to the reason explained above. The students were then divided into two experimental groups: Both groups were assigned to read extensively and complete a number of task after their reading; the first group (n=11) was given a form-focused task while the second group (n=14) worked on a meaning-focused task. The class met twice a week for 90 minutes and the students were engaged in both intensive and extensive reading approaches.

3. Instruments

Four instruments were used to collect the data needed for this study: TOEFL Test: the students were given a reading comprehension test of TOEFL. The rationale behind such a test was to homogenize the subjects and select the participants with the same level of reading proficiency. The reading comprehension tests were chosen from TOEFL Reading Flash (2002) and included 23 items; Word Associates Test (WAT) developed by Read (1993, 1998) was modified to fit the purpose of the study.

The WAT consists of 40 items, each item having one stimulus word (an adjective) and two boxes. One of the boxes contains 4 adjectives which are either synonyms or polysems of the stimulus word and the other box contains nouns which can collocate with the stimulus word. Each item always has 4 correct choices. The reliability of the test, is reported by Read to be 0.93 and by Qian (1998, 2002) and Nassaji (2004) above 0.90 (as cited in Marzban & Hadipour, 2012).

4. Procedure

All the participants (n==25) of this study were assigned to read a book each week i.e. students should have read ten books after finishing the program. This study used a modified version of WAT as a validated standardized test of vocabulary depth, and utilized it both as the pre-test and the post-test. The test was modified to increase its content validity and to make sure that the content of the test is relevant to the participants' covered texts. It was administered once prior to the treatment (the pre-test) and once following the treatment (the post-test). During the first class, students were given the WAT. The test took approximately 30 minutes to complete Based on Nassaji (2004) and Qian's study (1999), the time allotted to the depth of vocabulary knowledge test was 30 minutes, and another 15 minutes was considered for handing out papers, giving directions, and collecting them. Immediately following the treatment, students were given the post-test vocabulary quiz, which took approximately 30 minutes to complete (plus another 10 minutes for handing out papers, giving directions, and collecting them). They read books with different genres because each genre opens different world of words to students and in this way students could encounter variety of lexical collocations. Then, they were given two types of tasks to accompany their extensive reading. The students were divided into two experimental groups: the first group engaged in a Form-focused activity (n=11) in which the subjects were required to read a book every week outside of the class and keep a vocabulary notebook in which they wrote down the unfamiliar words, their dictionary definition, the sentence they locate the word in, the right collocations for the words, and an example of the word given in the dictionary. The other group (n=14) did a Meaning-focused activity which required learners to orally present their books to the class after each reading and they were also asked to fill in a book report form. In their presentation which took about ten to fifteen minutes, at first each student started with a summary of the book accompanied by a discussion of his or her own ideas regarding the story including whether the story was good or bad, whether they liked the book or not, if yes, which parts did they enjoyed the most and why. In this task students' attention was directed toward meaning as they attempted to talk about the story and share what they have read with their classmates.

5. Data Analysis

In this study, there were two experimental groups (MFA & FFA); therefore, paired t-tests were used to compare students' progress from the first test to the second. At the same time, an independent sample t-test was conducted to compare the performance of the two groups and examine which group has outperformed the other. The collected data was analyzed through SPSS software. The results revealed the fact that both FFA and MFA groups progressed in the

interval between the pre- and post-test; but, there was not a significant difference between the effects of form-focused and meaning-focused activities on learners' lexical knowledge.

III. RESULTS

Before analyzing the results, it seemed necessary to compare the mean scores of FFA and MFA groups on the pre-test to determine whether the groups were homogeneous in their entry behaviour regarding the depth of vocabulary knowledge.

TABLE 1

Paired Samples Test

		Paired Differences						
					95% Confidence Interval of the Difference				
		Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	Lower	Upper	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
Pair 1	pre - post	-13.909	14.45998	4.35985	-23.623	-4.19475	-3.190	10	.010

As can be seen in table 1, at the 0.05 level of significance, there was no statistically significant difference between the mean scores of the two groups before the study began and the two groups started with quite the same knowledge of vocabulary.

In order to answer the first research question and investigate whether task-based extensive reading affected learners' depth of vocabulary knowledge, the test of WAT was used as a pre- and post-test. Thus to determine how much progress each group has made in the interval between the pre- and post-test, two paired sample t-tests were run, using SPSS software. Table 2 and 3show descriptive statistics for the results of the pre-test and the post-test for the FFA and MFA groups. As the tables indicate, the mean score of the pre-test for the FFT was 73.1818, and that of the post–test was 87.0909.Paired differences of means showed that mean scores of second stage (posttest) of form-focused task group had an increase (13.9 points). The sig=0.010 and since it was less than 0.05, it showed that there was a meaningful difference between mean scores of pre- and post-test for FFT group.

TABLE 2

DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS FOR THE RESULTS OF THE PRE-TEST AND THE POST-TEST

Paired Samples Test

		Paired Differences						
					95% Confidence Interval of the Difference				
		Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	Lower	Upper	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
Pair 1	pre - post	-13.909	14.45998	4.35985	-23.623	-4.19475	-3.190	10	.010

The mean score of the pre-test for the MFA was 79.14, and that of the post–test was 89.35.Paired differences of means showed that mean scores of second stage (posttest) of meaning-focused activity group also increased (10.214 points). The sig=0.001 and since it was less than 0.05, it showed that there was a meaningful difference between mean scores of both stages of pre- and post-test for MFA group.

TABLE 3

Paired Samples Test

		Paired Differences						
					95% Confidence Interval of the Difference				
		Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	Lower	Upper	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
Pair 1	pre - post	-10.214	8.82460	2.35847	-15.309	-5.1191	-4.331	13	.001

As displayed, results (gain scores) showed that the change was meaningful according to t-test for both groups. Thus, both groups showed progress from pre-test to post-test which means that task-based extensive reading improved participants' depth of vocabulary knowledge.

To address the second question and examine whether there is a significant difference between the effects of form-focused and meaning-focused activities on learners' lexical knowledge, an independent sample t-test was run. Table 4 shows that the pre-test's sig=0.342 and post-test's sig=720 both of which are more than 0.05. As a result, there was no statistically significant difference between the mean scores of the two FFA and MFA groups. It means that both groups performed the same at least regarding their collocational knowledge and both form-focused and meaning-focused activities can affect learners' lexical knowledge.

TABLE 4
Independent Samples Test

		Levene's Test for Equality of Varianc		t-test for Equality of Means						
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
									Lower	Upper
pre	Equal variances assumed	1.456	.240	-.970	23	.342	-5.96104	6.14464	-18.672	6.75011
	Equal variances not assumed			-.931	17.391	.365	-5.96104	6.40424	-19.450	7.52760
post	Equal variances assumed	.025	.875	-.363	23	.720	-2.26623	6.24647	-15.188	10.6556
	Equal variances not assumed			-.357	19.999	.725	-2.26623	6.35531	-15.523	10.9908

IV. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This study investigated whether combining extensive reading with two different types of tasks would make a significance difference in the development of collocations, and if yes which type of task would contribute to better learning of collocations. The results revealed that task-based extensive reading improved participants' depth of vocabulary knowledge based on both groups progress from pre-test to post-test. But, there were not any significant differences between the effects of form-focused and meaning-focused tasks on learners' lexical knowledge. The gains made by the experimental groups are quite consistent with previous reports of the positive effect of extensive reading on second language learners. The results of the present study, in fact, corroborated previous findings in the field which had demonstrated the effects of this approach on improving different linguistic elements. In other words, this study added to the evidence in the literature that ER could be fully incorporated into the EFL language programs in which exposure to the target language can be provided to the learners through their engagement in extensive reading. This as Nuttall (1982) stated would be the second best way to help EFL learners to see the target language in context as it is truly used by the native speakers. Moreover, the results also indicated that both groups demonstrated some degree of achievement regarding their collocational knowledge and that both form-focused and meaning-focused task can affect learners' lexical knowledge. This can be discussed in two ways: firstly, this may mean that ER alone can account for learners' lexical improvement and that it is purely due to the effect of this extensive exposure to the way language parts are put together that learners have progressed (Hafiz & Tudor, 1990). Secondly, it is also possible to claim that the addition of tasks in general, no matter if they are form-oriented or meaning-oriented in nature would add up to the effectiveness of the extensive reading. In other words, it may mean that ER alone, as other studies have shown, may not suffice in helping learners to develop their lexical knowledge. More specifically, this may be true with regard to the depth knowledge which deals with how well learners know a word and for improving this knowledge, learners need to either see how the words are used in context (incidental learning) or to try their hands in putting the words together through actually writing them or at least recognizing their patterns in context (intentional learning).

However, the results of this study are, at best, suggestive due to some limitations that could not be controlled.

There appears to be a limit on just how far the results could be generalized since an absence of a control group have made it impossible to make conclusive remarks. With the presence of a control group in which only ER was introduced to the learners, it would have been possible to accredit some of the claims made above.

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