ISSN 1799-2591
Theory and Practice in Language Studies, Vol. 7, No. 2, pp. 145-152, February 2017
DOI: http://dx.doi.org/10.17507/tpls.0702.09

The Effects of Input and Output Tasks on the Learning and Retention of EAP Vocabulary

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***Abstract*—Research on the effects of task type and task sequence mode has claimed that these instructions facilitate word learning. However, so far all the research has been carried out on general vocabulary. To help close this research gap, the current study investigates the effect of task type and task sequence modes on EAP vocabulary learning and retention. To this end 45 lower-intermediate EFL learners were selected from a whole population pool of 110 based on an OPT placement test. A pretest, post test, and delayed post test was devised to compare different intervention types for teaching EAP vocabulary. The results showed equal effects for all groups in the post test and delayed post test. It was concluded that all types of instructions were a promising intervention for EAP vocabulary learning and retention.**

***Index Terms*—output tasks, input tasks, EAP vocabulary, lower intermediate learners**

I. Introduction

Vocabulary in ESP is considered essential for several reasons. First of all, Woodward-Kron (2008) found that students' "knowledge of a discipline is closely tied to the specialized language of that discipline" (p. 246). Further, he adds that "understanding and using this EAP vocabulary shows that these learners belong to a particular group" (p. 246). Thirdly, according to Blachowicz, Fisher, and Watts-Taffee (2005), not having enough vocabulary knowledge influences language learners differently: "(a) the development and preservation of social relationships with other students (b) contribution in academic learning routines (c) comprehension as a part of reading instruction, and (d) comprehension as a part of content area instruction" (p.20). Considering the importance of EAP vocabulary and the difficulties learners face because of knowledge insufficiency, the best approach is a successful program for teaching EAP vocabulary to expand learners' knowledge.

The two deep-seated hypotheses which act as the theoretical frame of this study are Krashen's Input Hypothesis (1985) and Swains' Output Hypothesis (1995). Krashen has constantly refused any role for output in language learning and believes that productive vocabulary is the natural result of receptive vocabulary acquisition and argued that natural exposure to the L2 enables learners to master L2 vocabulary (1985, 1987). On the other hand Swain emphasizes the role of output tasks for increasing learners' vocabulary knowledge in SLA. Swain (1995) theorized that "input alone is inadequate to overcome the 'plateau stage' where L2 learners' language development slows down or specific kinds of errors remain in language use". According to Swain output causes learners to be pushed out of fossilization stage and have control over their learning.

Several researchers (Benati, 2005; Benati, 2006; Morgan-Short & Bowden, 2006; Toth, 2006; Tu 2000) have studied and focused the effect of task type (input vs. output), and task sequence (input-first vs. output-first) on vocabulary learning, but the findings are not definite, and are sometimes even contrasting. Some studies have found proof to support the effects of output on language learning (Kim, 2008; Morgan-Short & Bowden, 2006; Toth, 2006), while others found input to be more effective (Benati, 2005; Benati, 2006). Furthermore, while some studies have argued for an input-first presentation (Doughty & Varela, 1998; Long, Inagaki, & Ortega, 1998), others advocate an output-first presentation (Dekeyser, 1997; Izumi & Bigelow, 2000). Finally, some researchers found output more effective while others argued that they did not find output supportive in promoting long-term retention of linguistic items better than the input condition (Dekeyser, 1997; Horibe, 2003; Izumi, Bigelow, Fujiwara and Fearnow, 1999; and Sakai, 2004).Therefore, more research is needed to uncover the mentioned vagueness regarding the effects of input/output tasks, and different presentation modes on EAP vocabulary learning in the short and long term.

Thus, in order to increase our knowledge of the roles of input and output tasks in language learning, compare their effects on EAP vocabulary learning and retention, and to see which presentation sequence is more effective in vocabulary learning, the current research is going to investigate the effects of task type, and task sequence modes on the learning and retention of EAP vocabulary by students of medical sciences.

II. Method

The present study aimed at investigating the impact of different task types and task sequence modes on the learning and retention of EAP vocabulary. The goal is to compare the effect of input only, input plus output, and output plus input instructions on learning and retention of EAP vocabulary in lower- intermediate EFL learners. This study, hence, attempts to address the following questions:

1. Is there a significant difference between three modes of vocabulary instructions on the learning of EAP vocabulary items by lower- intermediate medical students?

2. Is there a significant difference between three modes of vocabulary instructions on the retention of EAP vocabulary items by lower- intermediate medical students?

Participants

The participants in this study were chosen from a total of 110 EFL students, of whom 45 were placed in the lower-intermediate level based on their performance in an OPT. They were majoring in different areas of medical sciences at a university in Iran. Later, these homogenized groups were randomly assigned to three experimental groups of 15 who were subsequently exposed to input only (I), input plus output (IO), and output plus input (OI) instructions.

Instrumentation

Oxford Placement Test (OPT)

In order to guarantee the homogeneity of the groups, an Oxford Placement Test was administered. The test is claimed to reliably and validly grade and place students into two appropriate levels. The individual scores on OPT were analyzed to ensure that they were of the same level of language proficiency.

Vocabulary knowledge test (VKS)

VKS was used in order to choose 45 out of 80 words for the intended project. The VKS instrument uses a scale combining self-report and performance items to elicit both self perceived and demonstrated knowledge of specific words in written form. The scale ratings range from complete unfamiliarity, through recognition of the word and some idea of its meaning, to the ability to use the word with grammatical and semantic accuracy in a sentence (Wesche & Paribakht, 1996). The reliability and the validity of the VKS has been established in a number of research studies (Wesche & Paribakht, 1996 and Joe, 1995).

Pre-test, post- test, and delayed post test

On the third week of this study the participants took a paper based pretest before the treatment. The 45 vocabularies chosen based on the VKS test were transformed into a 45 item test. The first part included 14 multiple choice questions, the second part were 10 fill in the blanks items which was followed by 6 sentence making questions, and finally 15 translation items. The pretest was used to measure the participants' knowledge of vocabulary items being taught in the treatment phase. A post test was implemented to determine the effect of the treatment on instructions two days after the treatment. The post test was exactly the same as the pretest in order to prevent the effect of test type. Subsequently a delayed post test was administered two weeks after the treatment had finished. The delayed post test was also similar to the pretest in order to prevent any unwanted test effect.

Procedure

Before the study, a standardized English placement test (OPT) was administered to the 110 students taking general English. The 45 subjects whose scores were one standard deviation below the mean were chosen for the study. They were subsequently divided into three groups of 15 for three different instructions. Once the researcher made certain that the participants formed a homogenous sample, she ran a VKS test to choose the right vocabulary for the treatment. The result of the VKS came to choosing 45 words out of 80. Each week the participants worked on 15 words based on the treatment group they were in. A pre-test then was taken a week before the treatment started by all the participants in the three experimental groups to provide the data for quantitative comparison before and after the treatment.

The treatment was designed for one hour, two sessions a week for three weeks. It comprised of 15 new words each session. The first group in the study was the input only (I) group, the second group was the input plus output group (I-O), and the third group was the output plus input group (O-I). For each group, a 15 minute time was allocated for the demonstration of the learning medium. The researcher introduced different parts and components of the treatment. The participants were informed that they were not allowed to use a dictionary and they could not interact with their classmates.

The immediate post-test served the purpose of assessing the effectiveness of the treatment 2 days after the treatment, and the obtained scores were compared to see which group had more progress in L2 vocabulary learning. Four weeks after the post test a delayed post test was administered to check the long term effect of the treatment, vocabulary retention.

Data Analysis

In order to investigate the first research hypothesis, descriptive statistics of the lower intermediate students' vocabulary scores for the experimental group at pretest and posttest periods were calculated. Next a series of one-way ANOVAs were computed across each testing time to examine between-group differences. Moreover, post-hoc comparison tests were run where necessary. Finally, repeated measures ANOVAs were conducted in order to investigate the improvements from pretest to posttest within-group each group. The minimum alpha for confirmation of the research hypothesis was .05.

III. Results

Descriptive Results of Three Groups' Pre-test

Table 1 shows that input only and output- input group had the same mean score (M = 3.33). The mean score of the pretest in the input- output group (M = 3.93) was marginally higher than the pretest of the other two groups. Concerning the posttests, the mean score of the output- input group (M = 25.33) was lower than the other two groups. Additionally, this table shows that the scores improved from pretest to posttest in all of the three groups. To establish whether the differences were statistically significant a series of one-way ANOVAs were carried.

TABLE 1
DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS OF THE LOWER INTERMEDIATE STUDENTS' SCORES (LEARNING)

					95% Confidence Interval for Mean			
		N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error	Lower Bound	Upper Bound	Minimum	Maximum
Pretest	Input only	15	3.33	2.380	.615	2.02	4.65	0	8
	Input- Output	15	3.93	1.870	.483	2.90	4.97	1	7
	Output- Input	15	3.33	2.193	.566	2.12	4.55	0	7
	Total	45	3.53	2.128	.317	2.89	4.17	0	8
Posttest	Input only	15	26.13	5.579	1.440	23.04	29.22	18	38
	Input- Output	15	26.20	5.158	1.332	23.34	29.06	18	38
	Output- Input	15	25.33	4.203	1.085	23.01	27.66	17	32
	Total	45	25.89	4.914	.733	24.41	27.37	17	38

The results of the ANOVAs, revealed that there were no statistically significant differences between the three groups at the pretests, F (2, 42) = .387, p >.05,and posttests, F(2, 42) = 3.489, p >.05. The results indicated that the performance of lower intermediate students were not significantly different among the three groups.

TABLE 2
ONE-WAY ANOVAS OF THE LOWER INTERMEDIATE STUDENTS' SCORES (LEARNING)

		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Pretest	Between Groups	3.600	2	1.800	.387	.682
	Within Groups	195.600	42	4.657		
	Total	199.200	44			
Posttest	Between Groups	6.978	2	3.489	.139	.871
	Within Groups	1055.467	42	25.130		
	Total	1062.444	44			

Yet, within-group differences should also be examined before jumping to any conclusions. Subsequently, paired samples t-tests were calculated to investigate the development of the scores form pretest to posttest within each group.

TABLE 3
PAIRED SAMPLES T-TESTS OF THE LOWER INTERMEDIATE STUDENTS' SCORES (LEARNING)

		Paired Differences						
					95% Confidence Interval of the Difference			
Group		Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	Lower	Upper	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
Input only	Pretest - Posttest	-22.800	5.130	1.324	-25.641	-19.959	-17.214	14	.000
Input-Output	Pretest - Posttest	-22.267	5.035	1.300	-25.055	-19.478	-17.127	14	.000
Output-Input	Pretest - Posttest	-22.000	4.175	1.078	-24.312	-19.688	-20.410	14	.000

Paired samples t-tests in Table 3 revealed that the vocabulary scores of lower intermediate students significantly improved form pretest to posttest in all of the three groups (p = .000). These results suggested that all of the three Input-first, Output-first and Input-Only instructions had significant effects on the development of the of lower intermediate learners' vocabulary scores in the immediate posttests.

In sum, the obtained results with regard to learning of EAP vocabulary items by lower intermediate students revealed that there were no statistically significant differences between the three groups at immediate posttests. However, within-group analyses showed that all of the three instruction types led to the significant developments from pretest to immediate posttest scores.

The second research question sought to examine the difference between Input-first, Output-first and Input-only

instruction on the retention of technical vocabulary items by lower intermediate students. As shown in this table, the delayed posttests mean score of the Output- Input group (M = 21.60) was smaller than that of the other two groups. Also, the delayed posttest mean of the Input- Output group (M = 23.73) was smaller than the Input only group (M = 24.87). In addition, there was a general reduction in the mean scores from immediate to delayed posttests in all of the three groups.

TABLE 4
DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS OF LOWER INTERMEDIATE STUDENTS' SCORES (RETENTION)

						95% Confidence Interval for Mean			
		N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error	Lower Bound	Upper Bound	Minimum	Maximum
Pretest	Input only	15	3.33	2.380	.615	2.02	4.65	0	8
	Input- Output	15	3.93	1.870	.483	2.90	4.97	1	7
	Output- Input	15	3.33	2.193	.566	2.12	4.55	0	7
	Total	45	3.53	2.128	.317	2.89	4.17	0	8
Posttest	Input only	15	26.13	5.579	1.440	23.04	29.22	18	38
	Input- Output	15	26.20	5.158	1.332	23.34	29.06	18	38
	Output- Input	15	25.33	4.203	1.085	23.01	27.66	17	32
	Total	45	25.89	4.914	.733	24.41	27.37	17	38
Delayed Posttest	Input only	15	24.87	4.565	1.179	22.34	27.39	18	35
	Input- Output	15	23.73	4.511	1.165	21.24	26.23	15	30
	Output- Input	15	21.60	2.798	.722	20.05	23.15	17	26
	Total	45	23.40	4.180	.623	22.14	24.66	15	35

To examine the difference between the three groups regarding the retention of technical vocabulary items by lower intermediate students, the delayed posttest scores were subjected to a one-way ANOVA. This was followed by three separate repeated measures ANOVAs within each group in order to investigate the development of the vocabulary scores through time.

TABLE 5
ONE-WAY ANOVA OF THE LOWER INTERMEDIATE STUDENTS' DELAYED POSTTEST SCORES (RETENTION)

		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Delayed- Posttest	Between Groups	82.533	2	41.267	2.526	.092
	Within Groups	686.267	42	16.340		
	Total	768.800	44			

Comparing the scores of the groups on the delayed posttests via the one-way ANOVA in table 5, no significant differences were observed between the groups at the second post test $F(2, 42) = 2.526$, $p > .05$. That is, there was no significant difference between Input-first, Output-first and Input-only instruction on the retention of EAP vocabulary items by lower intermediate students.

In the second phase of analysis, within-group differences were investigated. Thus, to examine the development of lower intermediate students' vocabulary scores through the three testing periods, a series of repeated measures ANOVAs were run within each group.

TABLE 6
REPEATED MEASURES ANOVAS OF THE LOWER INTERMEDIATE STUDENTS' SCORES (RETENTION)

Group	Effect		Value	F	Hypothesis df	Error df	Sig.	Partial Eta Squared
Input only	Time	Pillai's Trace	.971	214.960[b]	2.000	13.000	.000	.971
		Wilks' Lambda	.029	214.960[b]	2.000	13.000	.000	.971
		Hotelling's Trace	33.071	214.960[b]	2.000	13.000	.000	.971
		Roy's Largest Root	33.071	214.960[b]	2.000	13.000	.000	.971
Input- Output	Time	Pillai's Trace	.957	142.949[b]	2.000	13.000	.000	.957
		Wilks' Lambda	.043	142.949[b]	2.000	13.000	.000	.957
		Hotelling's Trace	21.992	142.949[b]	2.000	13.000	.000	.957
		Roy's Largest Root	21.992	142.949[b]	2.000	13.000	.000	.957
Output- Input	Time	Pillai's Trace	.974	244.761[b]	2.000	13.000	.000	.974
		Wilks' Lambda	.026	244.761[b]	2.000	13.000	.000	.974
		Hotelling's Trace	37.656	244.761[b]	2.000	13.000	.000	.974
		Roy's Largest Root	37.656	244.761[b]	2.000	13.000	.000	.974

As reported in table 6, repeated measures ANOVAs revealed significant effects for time in all of the three groups of, Wilks' Lambda = .029, $F = 214.960$, $p < .05$, Input+ Output, Wilks' Lambda = .043, $F = 142.949$, $p < .05$, Output+ Input, Wilks' Lambda = .026, $F = 244.761$, $p < .05$. Consequently, In order to pinpoint the exact point in time where differences occurred in the input-based group, post-hoc within-group comparisons were run with Bonferroni adjustment.

TABLE 7
POST-HOC WITHIN-GROUP COMPARISONS OF LOWER LEVEL STUDENTS' SCORES (RETENTION)

							95% Confidence Interval for Difference[b]	
Level	Group	(I) Time	(J) Time	Mean Difference (I-J)	Std. Error	Sig.[b]	Lower Bound	Upper Bound
Low	Input only	1	2	-22.800*	1.324	.000	-26.400	-19.200
			3	-21.533*	1.028	.000	-24.326	-18.741
		2	1	22.800*	1.324	.000	19.200	26.400
			3	1.267	.565	.125	-.268	2.801
		3	1	21.533*	1.028	.000	18.741	24.326
			2	-1.267	.565	.125	-2.801	.268
	Input- Output	1	2	-22.267*	1.300	.000	-25.800	-18.733
			3	-19.800*	1.204	.000	-23.072	-16.528
		2	1	22.267*	1.300	.000	18.733	25.800
			3	2.467*	.716	.012	.520	4.413
		3	1	19.800*	1.204	.000	16.528	23.072
			2	-2.467*	.716	.012	-4.413	-.520
	Output- Input	1	2	-22.000*	1.078	.000	-24.930	-19.070
			3	-18.267*	.796	.000	-20.429	-16.104
		2	1	22.000*	1.078	.000	19.070	24.930
			3	3.733*	.511	.000	2.343	5.123
		3	1	18.267*	.796	.000	16.104	20.429
			2	-3.733*	.511	.000	-5.123	-2.343

According to table 7, within-group comparisons with Bonferroni adjustments manifested significant gains from pretest to posttest and also from pretest to delayed posttest in all of the three groups. Besides, no significant gains were reported from immediate to delayed tests in the input only group. However, the post-hoc test revealed that the slight reductions from immediate to delayed posttests in the Input- Output and Output- Input were proved to be statistically significant (p>.05). Overall, these results indicated that all three groups could develop significantly from pretest to the immediate posttest and could also retain that improvement in the delayed posttest as the developments form pretest to delayed posttests were statistically significant.

All in all, based on the obtained results deductions could be made that there was no significant difference between the three groups regarding the retention of technical vocabulary items by lower intermediate students. Additionally, learners in the three groups could significantly improve their scores from pretest to posttest and also from pretest to delayed posttest. That is, the three instruction methods were successful in improving the retention of technical vocabulary by lower intermediate students. Consequently, the third null hypothesis stating that there is not any significant difference between Input-first, Output-first and Input-Only vocabulary instruction on the retention of technical vocabulary items by lower intermediate students of medical sciences was confirmed.

IV. DISCUSSION

Our finding in terms of different possible orders to present input and output is not consistent with several other studies. Some studies have argued for an input-first presentation (i.e., Doughty & Varela, 1998; Long, Inagaki, & Ortega, 1998), and others for an output-first presentation (Dekeyser, 1997; Izumi & Bigelow, 2000). These claims are based on which of these conditions researchers believe that learners focus more on target features. Theoretically, producing language enables learners to become more sensitive to what they can and cannot say in the target language, and therefore the output first presentation may further enhance the learners' awareness of target forms or meanings, in comparison with the input first and then output presentation. However the results of the current study have only produced minimal empirical support for whether output indeed alters learners' subsequent input processing, and if it promotes the acquisition of target forms.

However, the results with regard to the first research question in this study are similar to findings from some other studies: for instance, Izumi and Bigelow (2000) and Sakai (2004) yielded similar non-significant findings. Izumi and Bigelow (2000) compared one group that was given output practice and subsequent exposure to relevant input with a second group that received the same input for comprehension only.

This finding might seem in direct contrast with the tenets of output hypothesis and many of the studies conducted on the issue (Izumi, 2002; Izumi et al., 1999; Song & Suh, 2008; Swain 1993, 1995; Swain & Lapkin, 1995), yet it is in line with other studies (Izumi & Bigelow, 2000; Izumi & Izumi, 2004; Shintani, 2011) which have specifically compared the input vs. output-based treatments in language acquisition and came up with the finding that output-based teaching could not be deemed any superior to the input-based equivalent. These studies point to the non-significance of differences between learning gains of participants involved in output tasks in comparison with those engaged in non-output tasks. We assume that the possible explanations for the non-significant findings for the retention of technical vocabulary items by lower intermediate students are the same as the explanations given for the non significant findings for the learning of technical vocabulary items by lower intermediate students. Therefore, one explanation might be that

the output tasks were too demanding for learners with relatively low L2 production skills which hindered word learning and retention. Another explanation might be that, contrary to the assumption proposed in previous studies, output itself might be not as effective a tool to help lower level learners remember the vocabulary items. Besides, the tasks used in the current study provided repeated opportunities but did not require that students search for meaning. At this proficiency level, learners might have completed the vocabulary tests with a minimalist approach – by simply skipping unfamiliar words without any attempt to fund the meaning of the vocabulary items.

In addition, according to the Hulstijn and Laufer (2001, p.552) "the involvement load hypothesis does not predict that any output task will lead to better results than any input task. It predicts that higher involvement induced by the task will result in better retention, regardless of whether it is an input or output task." Therefore, another justification might be that lower level students had similar rates of involvement loads irrespective of the task type and task sequence under investigation.

Furthermore, as indicated earlier, studies (e.g., Kim, 2008; Keating, 2008) had already shown that input and output tasks will lead to similar results irrespective of proficiency level. However, our results do not support Kim (2008) and Keating (2008) in terms of the neutral role of proficiency level; since, in the current study, the results were different for learners with higher and lower proficiency levels.

Another finding of the current study was that lower level learners in the three groups could significantly improve their scores from pretest to post test and also from pretest to delayed posttest. One explanation is related to the act of production itself. According to Swain (2000), output tasks demand deeper cognitive effort, which might have contributed more to word retention. In other words, what contributes to word retention is not merely a product of deliberate manipulation of variables in task, irrespective of its type; rather other elements such as task type may be equally important.

Another explanation for the result might be related to the materials and procedures used for this study. Unlike previous studies, Tasks in this study were more elaborate in that this study utilized four input tasks and two output tasks. Input Task 1 was a reading text containing the target vocabulary items followed by some multiple choice questions. Input Task 2 was a list of 10 sentences in which the target vocabularies were underlined and in front of the sentence a synonym was provided for the underlined word. Input Task 3 contained ten sentences, each of which contained one of the target words underlined. The students had to read the sentences and provide the Persian translation for the underlined part. Input Task 4 was another reading text containing the same vocabulary items, similar to task one in topic but with different wordings. Like Input Task 1, this text will also be followed by some multiple choice questions. Output task 1 was a list of sentences, each of which contained a synonym of the target word that was underlined; the students had to provide the target word for the underlined synonym. In addition, Output task was the list of the target words, and the students were asked to make a sentence using that word.

The previous studies only included a list of words with which the participants were to write original sentences. Hence it seems to be a plausible explanation to suggest that in this study vocabulary retention in all of the three groups was a product of repeated exposure.

All in all, though the account advanced here implies an ineffective role of providing output opportunities through different production tasks, this does not negate the suitability of such practices for different learners with different proficiency levels, social and psychological backgrounds. In fact, the findings with regard to higher intermediate learners advocated for the effectiveness of the output-input and input-output tasks over input only task. This discrepancy motivates further examination of the effects of different sequences of input and output tasks on vocabulary acquisition.

V. Conclusion

It was concluded in the current study that lower intermediate learners could take advantage of any type of instruction. At this level of language proficiency instruction in any sequence can be beneficial to learning and retention of EAP vocabulary. This study supports both input and output hypothesis indicating that at this level exposure to new language is more important than the type and sequence of presentation. Further studies can focus on different levels of language proficiency

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