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## Second Language Vocabulary Learning Through Visual and Textual Representation

Farzad Mashhadi<sup>a\*</sup>, Golnaz Jamalifar<sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Faculty of foreign Languages, Islamic Azad University Isfahan (Khorasgan) Branch, University Bolvard, Arqavanieh, Jey S harqi street, Isfahan, 81551-39998, Iran

<sup>b</sup> Young Researchers' and Elite Club, Islamic Azad University Isfahan (Khorasgan) Branch, University Bolvard, Arqavanieh, Jey S harqi street, Isfahan, 81551-

39998, Iran

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### Abstract

Vocabulary functions as an existential foundation for language. Furthermore, vocabulary learning is one of the most problematic fields in second language learning. It has attracted cynosure of a wealth of studies in recent years. However, the fact that majority of Iranian second language (L2) learners have learnt English through traditional methods has compounded the problem. To arrive at a better understanding of this problem, this study compared the effect of visual cues versus textual input-enhancement on vocabulary learning of Iranian intermediate EFL learners. A predominantly quantitative approach, along with a quasi-experimental design, was used. 90 EFL learners were selected and, following a pre-test, were randomly assigned to two experimental groups (visual cues and textual input-enhancement) and a control group. After the treatment, a post-test was administered for all groups. Thorough analysis of the data obtained using paired *t*-test and one-way ANOVA, it was indicated that visual cues have a significant impact on vocabulary learning of Iranian intermediate EFL learners.

**Keywords:** Textual Input-Enhancement, Visual Cues, Quantitative Approach, Experimental Research

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### 1. Introduction

Language learning, whether first or second, starts with learning of words (Thornbury, 2002). As Wilkins (1972) posits, without grammar very little can be communicated, but without vocabulary *nothing* can be communicated. Vocabulary, as Brown (2001) states, forms the building block of any language. That is, vocabulary is “a core component of the language proficiency and provides much of the basis for how well learners speak, listen and write” (Richards & Renandya, 2002, p. 255).

In the past, vocabulary teaching and learning were often given scarce attention in language programs. In more recent times, however, we have witnessed a renewed surge of interest in the nature of vocabulary and the role it plays in learning and teaching a language (Richards & Renandya, 2002). This can be attributed to the fact that traditionally it was believed that vocabulary knowledge can be gained incidentally in an automatic manner, so specification was made to other aspects of language such as grammar, reading or speaking (Brown, 2001). But nowadays, the status of vocabulary seems to be changing (Richards & Renandya, 2002).

Vocabulary is obviously a very important element in a language as the majority of meaning is carried out lexically (Hunt & Beglar, cited in Richards & Renandya, 2002). While learning a language cannot be reduced to only learning vocabulary, but it is also true that no matter how well the student learns grammar, no matter how successfully the sounds of L2 are mastered, without words to express a wide range of meanings, communication in an L2 just cannot happen in any meaningful way (Brown, 2007). Different things, however, can go wrong in learning vocabulary. Probably the most basic problem is the inability to retrieve vocabulary that has been taught. In this situation either communication breaks down altogether or the student has to convey the message in a different way by drawing on his strategic competence (Decarrico, cited in Celce Murcia, 2001).

Given this, teaching and learning vocabulary have gained increasing attention in the related course syllabi where developing efficient techniques and strategies which facilitate these processes are extremely significant in the second language pedagogy (Nation & Chung, 2009).

Among the host of techniques proposed by pedagogists, the question of the nature of textual-input enhancement versus visual-input enhancement approaches has not been fully explored (Hasshemi & Pourgharib, 2013). Input enhancement aims at drawing learners' attention to linguistic form by modifying the appearance of target structure (Farahani & Sarkhosh, 2012). It is believed that external manipulation of input can influence intake and learning (Rashtchi & Gharanli, 2010).

Therefore, textual-input enhancement makes a particular linguistic item more visible by adopting typographical cues such as bolding, italicizing, capitalizing and so on (Farhani & Sarkhosh, 2012). Visual cues serve the same purpose by employing a variety of visual aids such as flashcards, videos and pictures. In the ESL/EFL classroom, using visual aids can help students to strengthen and reinforce what they have learned. The reason may be that they allow students to absorb the information through an additional sensory perception (Sadeghi & Farzizadeh, 2013).

It is not only the inherent complexity of vocabulary learning which has hampered language learners to achieve higher degree of vocabulary knowledge, but also a predominantly traditional view to teaching vocabulary which has been more harmful (Nation, 1997). In the traditional approach to teaching vocabulary which is still dominant in teaching contexts, vocabulary is often taught unsystematically in class and teachers tend to leave their students to learn vocabulary on their own without much instruction or guidance (Oxford & Scarcella, 1994).

## **2. Purpose and Significance of the Study**

The more words you have at your disposal, the more flexible you will be in thinking (Thornbury, 2002). It is generally accepted that lexical competence reserves a very special place in communicative competence (Coady & Huckin, 1997, cited in Celece Murcia, 2001). Hence, vocabulary acquisition has come to receive increasing attention in language teaching and learning.

Vocabulary is a major component of language proficiency and provides a solid foundation for how well learners speak, listen, read, and write. Without a thorough knowledge of vocabulary and sufficient strategies for acquiring new vocabularies, L2 learners often face tremendous difficulties using the language.

(Fan, 2003) indicates that vocabulary is generally given scant attention in the university curriculum in the Asian countries. The situation is quite similar in Iran – also an Asian country. Generally, the emphasis on English teaching in universities in most Asian countries is on reading and grammar (Catalan, 2003). Vocabulary teaching in

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