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The effects of keeping vocabulary notebooks on productive academic vocabulary growth

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Abstract

This study is an experimental study aiming to explore the effects of keeping vocabulary notebooks on productive academic vocabulary growth. The participants are composed of the first year ELT students at Muğla Sıtkı Koçman University. The participants got the treatment during their “Advanced Reading and Writing Skills II” course. The study consists of two groups, one of which is the control and the other one is the experimental group. The groups were selected randomly between two classes in the spring term of 2013-2014 Academic Year. The data were obtained in two sections: before and after the treatment. Before the treatment, the participants of both groups had a pre-test on vocabulary composing of three sections as true-false, word formation and multiple choice questions so as to define their current level of academic vocabulary knowledge. Both groups used the same materials whereas only the participants of the experimental group were asked to keep vocabulary notebooks. The treatment lasted eight weeks at the end of which post-tests were applied to both groups to detect any differences. The findings showed that the experimental group made more progress than the control group especially in terms of word formation section which requires productive vocabulary knowledge.

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1. Background

1.1. Introduction

Vocabulary is a vital element for being an effective language user both orally and in a written form. If the learner knows the necessary vocabulary, it is much easier to say or write what he/she intends to express. Even in our native languages, it is really difficult to express our thoughts or feelings in such a kind of situation when we forget the key word which is vital to that context.

1.2. Literature review

About the importance of vocabulary in language acquisition, Thornbury (2002) states that learning our first languages starts as words and any following languages are also learned in this way. A learner first learns phrases or words in the target language either implicitly or explicitly before starting to use that language.

Wilkins (1972) suggests that “Without grammar, very little can be conveyed. Without vocabulary, nothing can be conveyed” (p.111). That’s why; vocabulary learning and teaching is seen very important from the very early stages of language acquisition.

According to Proposed Model of Celce-Murcia, Dörnyei and Thurrell, communicative competence is composed of five different but related competences as linguistic competence, strategic competence, sociocultural competence, actional competence and discourse competence (Celce-Murcia, Dörnyei &Thurrell, 1995). Among these five competences vocabulary is more relevant to linguistic competence which requires knowing how to use grammar, syntax and vocabulary of a language. For being linguistically competent, a person should have the necessary vocabulary knowledge of the target language.

According to Arkan and Alemdari (2012), complete vocabulary knowledge requires knowing the spelling, pronunciation, word category, antonyms, synonym, contextual use, connotative and denotative meanings and register.

Despite its importance in communicative competence, Zimmerman (1997) states that vocabulary has been undervalued in second or foreign language acquisition field. On the other hand, Thornbury (2002) points out that interest in vocabulary teaching has been increased in recent years partly due to the recent availability of computerized databases of words and partly due to the development of new approaches which are more ‘word-centered’, such as lexical approach. The lexical approach which was described by Lewis (1994) supports the idea that an important part of learning a language consists of being able to understand and produce lexical phrases as chunks. In this approach, instruction focuses on fixed expressions that occur frequently in dialogues, and vocabulary is given much more importance than grammar.

2. The study

Vocabulary knowledge is an indispensable part of language learning and plays an important role in the development of language skills. In this study, its importance on productive academic vocabulary use was specifically studied.

Pre-service English Language teachers need to be master at writing in order to become effective English teachers and it requires them to have necessary and active vocabulary knowledge for expressing their thoughts without having difficulties. On the other hand, knowing a word does not mean that it is used effectively by the learner. In Turkey, students have to pass an academic exam called YDS in order to be accepted to ELT departments of universities, thus they have already had some academic vocabulary knowledge to some degree. However, it has been observed that many of them do not know how to use this vocabulary actively and effectively. In Turkey, in the first and second academic terms of their first year, ELT students must take Advanced Writing and Reading I and II courses.

In this study, the first year students in ELT department of Muğla Sıtkı Koçman University who took Advanced Writing and Reading II course in the spring term of 2013-2014 Academic Year were the participants of the study. In this course, they were expected to acquire frequently used academic vocabulary by using the book named “Essential

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