

The Effect of Etymology Instruction on Vocabulary Learning of Upper-Intermediate EFL Iranian Learners

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Abstract

Research in cognitive semantics suggests that imagery can have a powerful mnemonic effect and that the dual coding of input strengthens memory traces and facilitates information retrieval. Although research on the effect of etymological elaboration on L2 idiom acquisition has showed that it is a useful mnemonic approach that can help L2 learners retain target idioms (Boers, Demecheleer, Eyckmans, 2000, 2004, 2007), most previous studies were conducted in a pencil and paper based situation and few made use of computer technology and internet as a vehicle to deliver such an instructional approach. The present study endeavors to investigate the impact of visual and etymological treatments on learning idioms among English language learners. Sixty intermediate students at Islamic Azad University in Tonekabon were selected from among a total number of 75 learners based on their performances on the Longman complete course for the TOEFL test to fulfill the purpose of the study. The students were then assigned into an experimental group and a control group. Initially, a pre-test of idiomatic expressions including 48 idiomatic items was administered to the participants in all groups. During the instructional period, the experimental group was taught a group of abnormally decomposable idioms through different treatments elaboration. At the end of the instructional period, the participants in all groups were given a posttest which was the same as the pretest. The design of this study is quasi-experimental. The findings of this study have implications for EFL teachers, students, and materials developers.

Keywords: Cognitive semantic, etymological elaboration, idiomatic expression

Introduction

Failing to remember previously studied words serves as one of the most commonly reported difficulties in vocabulary learning. This article makes an attempt to resolve this issue through a practical lesson, which is based on the etymology of the word *hermetic*. The lesson also goes further to include more aspects of vocabulary learning, such as usage. This sample lesson is examined both theoretically (part by part) and practically through teaching it in an advanced class and gathering the students' opinions about it, using a short questionnaire. These opinions indicate a positive attitude toward the lesson on the part of the students. At the end, some suggestions offered by the students for the improvement of the lesson are included, which could help teachers/materials writers in adapting the proposed lesson as well as developing new teaching materials. Learning vocabulary has always been a major concern for language learners (Nation, 2002), and it is considered by many to be one of the two main components of language teaching, the other one being grammar instruction. The importance of vocabulary learning can be perceived by looking at the body of research done in this regard (e.g. Singleton, 2008), the variety of teaching techniques and materials developed (e.g. Gairns & Redman, 1998), and also the number of word lists offered for different purposes (e.g., West, 1953; Nation, 1990; Laufer, 1992; or Cobb, 2002). One of the main questions in the learning of vocabulary is whether one should go for receiving explicit instruction or try to set the basis for incidental (implicit) learning. Although many studies have investigated the benefits of implicit learning, there is now a relative consensus among researchers that explicit vocabulary instruction needs to be an essential part of second language learning. According to Hunt & Beglar (2002), explicit vocabulary instruction is essential for beginner and intermediate students. Another important issue that we need to bear in mind is that words are more than a set of phonological/morphological forms associated with some entities, and, in the same line, learning words is more than just memorizing them with their meanings. As Montrul maintains, "learning vocabulary in a second language is a complex task that involves much more than learning sound-meaning pairings; it also involves learning how lexical information is morphologically expressed and syntactically constrained." (2001:145).

What is Etymology?

One potential vocabulary learning strategy is the use of etymology. Etymology deals with the origin or derivation of words. In etymological approach, roots, suffixes, and prefixes are the basic elements. In this approach, learner learns about Latin and Greek prefixes, roots, and suffixes and figures out unfamiliar English words by recognizing their etymological structure, the building block from which they are constructed. This kind of knowledge enables learner to construct many English words correctly by learning to put the building blocks (e.g., roots and affixes) together in the proper way and to determine the meanings of thousands of English words that have never seen or heard before (Fekri, 2011). This knowledge enables learners to remember new words much longer than they can remember by just learning unrelated word lists. Etymology knowledge enables learners to both deepen their present word knowledge and to understand unknown words encountered in the future. Etymology approach teaches the students to identify the meanings of word parts, from which the students can then derive the meaning of the word. Since the majority of English words have been created through the combination of morphemic elements, that is, prefixes and suffixes, and word roots, if learners understand how combinatorial process of morphemic elements works, they will have one of the most powerful understandings essential for vocabulary growth. The purpose of the present study is to investigate the effect of etymology instruction on vocabulary learning of Engineering students.

Students Etymology Projects

Each year my students are required to produce a list of discipline- specific vocabulary items. From these lists they choose twenty words which they examine in depth, using all the available library resources. The analysis consists of discussing the origin of the words, usually going back to Latin or Greek, which students are required to explain in detail, explaining how these word origins are connected to an academic specialty. This is presented in a written report to the teacher and an oral

report to the class. This activity is favored by undergraduates, who, while not being trained in philology, show a willingness to learn more about the history and origins of English words. What is remarkable about this training is that later these same students quite often use etymology to start off written reports or discussions in their own academic specialty by making reference to the origins of a key word and elaborating on it.

What is an idiom?

The word “idiom” originates from the Greek “idios”, meaning “one’s own, strange”. There is no specific definition for idioms on which all experts in the field unanimously agree. Nonetheless, they are considered to be a subtype of ‘multiword units’ (MWU), which are defined as “a fixed and recurrent pattern of lexical material sanctioned by usage” (Grant and Bauer, 2004).

The Importance of Idioms

Learning idioms has been very difficult for the second language learners; nevertheless, we cannot ignore to acquire them, for the fact that they are useful mediums for conveying our meaning. Furthermore, to improve learners’ receptive skills alongside their productive skills, educators have to teach the most frequently used idioms to the learners. In spite of the evident difficulties associated with learning idioms, learning large idiomatic expressions is necessary for the foreign language learners. Therefore, an important concern in EFL learning is seeking and finding a beneficial method of teaching idioms to improve students’ learning process. The mastery of idiomatic expressions appears to be one of the most difficult tasks in the learning of a foreign language. Even advanced learners often cannot reach a native-like level of this skill. Thus, it seems to be necessary to find more effective ways to help the learners to get mastery over all aspects of the foreign language they are learning.

Idioms permeate English with specific features and give it astonishing variety so that “avoiding the use of idioms gives language a bookish, stilted, unimaginative tone” (Cooper, 1999, p.86). They help language learners understand English culture, which has its roots in the customs and lifestyle of the English people, and provides an insight into English history (Crystal, 1997). In recent years, some researchers started to focus on idioms which have an etymology, a story behind. According to Boers et al., (2007) “etymological association is likely to call up a mental image of a concrete scene which can be stored in memory alongside the verbal form”. According to the Oxford Dictionary of Current Idiomatic English: “Familiarity with a wide range of idiomatic expressions and the ability to use them appropriately in context are among the distinguishing marks of a native like command of English” (Cowie and Mackin 1975). While many second language learners may be satisfied with something less than ‘native-like’ command, idiomatic usage is so common in English that it can be difficult to speak or write without using idioms (Seidl and McMordie, 1987). Tajalli (2008) states that using idioms in speech can have a great effect on listener or reader. So idioms constitute an integral part of vocabulary learning. The importance of teaching and learning idioms has fostered an interest in developing more effective ways of teaching idioms.

Etymological Elaboration

The technique of associating the meaning of idioms with their original, literal usage is referred to as etymological elaboration or EE (Boers, Demecheleer & Eyckmans, 2004). How etymological elaboration helps learners comprehend and retain idioms is not clear yet. As Boers (2004) states: “We cannot be sure about what exactly might be going on in the learners’ brain for etymological elaboration to have this attested mnemonic effect.” One plausible explanation lies in Dual Coding Theory (Clark and Paivio, 1991), as the etymological information is likely to call up a mental image of a concrete scene which then can be stored in memory alongside the verbal form, and which can subsequently provide an extra pathway for recall” (Boers, Eyckmans & Stengers, 2007).

Theoretical Supports for the Use of Etymology

Knowing about the storing of words in brain through the association process is the major theoretical support for the claim mentioned above; it means how words are stored in brain through association. The brain can easier store and retain words with having more associations. Not being able to connect these words to the already existing knowledge causes failing in remembering previously learned

words. For example, Schema Theory has been based on this assumption (Nassaji, 2007). “Schemata serve as a reference store from which a person can retrieve relevant existing knowledge and into which new information is assimilated” (Richards & Schmidt, 2002). Therefore, the etymological elaboration can help learners in associating new information with the relevant existing information being in their cognitive structure. There is also another theoretical support for using etymology as a technique for enhancing retention coming from Dual Coding Theory that is based on the general assumption that cognition has been consisted of two classes being verbal versus non-verbal representations. A verbal form is stored alongside non-verbal image being a mental, in the memory.

Research Questions

In order to investigate the effects of the etymology approach for vocabulary learning, the following research question was generated:

Q1. What is the effect of etymology instruction as vocabulary strategy on vocabulary learning of intermediate EFL learners?

Materials and Methods

Participants

The population of the present study included 60 male EFL students at intermediate level of language proficiency who were selected out of 75 learners from Islamic Azad University, Tonekabon branch. After conducting the proficiency test, the participants whose scores were one standard deviation above and below the mean were selected. Due to the existing limitations, no randomization was used in selecting the participants.

Instruments

The following instruments were employed in the present study: a) a standard proficiency test (Longman complete course for the TOEFL test written by Deborah Phillips), b) a researcher-made pre/posttest of idioms, and c) some idiomatic pictorial clues.

TOEFL

A TOEFL test was used to assess the participants' homogeneity. The test included 40 items assessing knowledge of structure and written expressions and 30 items measuring learners' reading comprehension ability. The students had 50 minutes to accomplish the tasks. The result of Cronbach's Alpha indicated a satisfactory level of overall internal consistency reliability of 0.71.

Pre/Posttest of Idioms

The pretest consisted of 48 items assessing knowledge of idioms at the level of comprehension. The students were free to elaborate on the meaning of idioms in Persian or in English. A pilot study was done on 30 students and the reliability analysis of the test was confirmed through test-retest method as .83. The same test was administered to the participants at the time of post testing.

Procedure

In order to ensure the homogeneity of the participants and determine the participants' language proficiency, the researcher administered the Longman complete course for the TOEFL test to 70 students. Sixty students were selected as intermediate level learners. Intact group method was used in selecting the participants. In other words, the students were non-randomly selected and then randomly assigned to three experimental groups. Initially, the researcher provided the participants with some introductory information about the objectives of the course, the importance of learning idioms, the difficulties of learning and memorizing idioms through verbal definitions, and finally different methods of treating idioms along with the other tools. The participants were administered a proficiency test before being exposed to the treatments. A pretest including the target idiomatic expressions was administered to the target population to assess the students' degree of familiarity with the target items in the second instructional session. The participants in the experimental group followed a procedure different from the one pursued in the first group. They were provided with some handouts including the etymology of the idioms. In the thirteenth session, the participants in the three groups had to review the idioms they had learned during the instructional period. Finally, a posttest

was administered to the participants in the ultimate session to assess the students' degree of achievement.

Results & Findings

Results of Pretest

The major question addressed in this study was whether the use of etymology strategy would improve Iranian EFL learners' vocabulary learning at the upper-intermediate level of language proficiency. Before the implementation of treatment (i.e., etymology instruction), the researcher administered a researcher-made vocabulary pretest to experimental and control groups in order to compare the two groups' means obtained from the pretest. To capture the initial differences between the two groups' means on pretest, a t-test was applied. The results appear in Tables 1 and 2. Based on Table 1, the means of experimental group and control group are 39.06, 37.23, respectively. Based on Table 2, the results obtained from t-test revealed that the two groups did not differ significantly in their performance on the pre-test at .05 level of significance. The degree of structural significance .050 is more than $\alpha=.05$. So there is no significant difference between experimental and control groups from their overall performance point of view.

Table1. Descriptive Statistics for Pretest Results on Vocabulary Test for Both Groups

Group	Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Experimental	39.06	30	4.107	.878
Control	37.23	30	3.971	.798

Table2. Independent Sample T-Test

Pretest Difference	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	Confidence interval of difference		T	df	sig(2-tailed)
				Lower	Upper			
Exp and Control	2.13	7.541	1.163	-.12	4.27	1.43	27	0.050*

Results of Posttest for Both Groups

In order to see whether the treatment given to the experimental group had caused any significant change in this group and to see if the participants in this group had performed significantly different on the posttest, another independent t-test was run. The results obtained from this statistical test are presented in Table 3 below. The independent sample t-test demonstrated in Table 4 indicated that the mean difference between the experimental and control groups' scores measured at the time of posttest was significant. There is, in fact, a mean difference of 4.43 points between the means of the two groups. As Table 4 shows, the level of significant .026 is greater than the probability value, $P\text{-value} = 0.026 > \alpha = .05$. This indicates that the experimental group outperformed the control group. In other words, it reveals that the treatment given had affected the experimental group.

Table3. Descriptive Statistics for Post-test

Group	Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Experimental	42.93	30	5.247	.860
Control	37.70	30	5.630	1.021

Table4. Independent Sample T-Test

Pretest Difference	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	Confidence interval of difference		T	df	sig(2-tailed)
				Lower	Upper			
Exp and Control	4.43	7.709	1.407	.25	7.11	2.187	27	0.026*

Discussion and Conclusion

Idiomaticity has recently attracted considerable attention in linguistics, psycholinguistics, and psychology (Cacciari & Tabbosi, 1993). In other words, languages contain many formulaic phrases and expressions that every speaker must learn. According to Bobrow & Bell (1973) and Boers et al. (2004), languages contain many phrases and expressions that every speaker should learn. Because language production concentrates on an ability to string multi-word expressions, people don't seem proficient speakers of the foreign language until they master many idioms that are used in every day discourse. The results of the study suggest that reference to the idiom origin in the presentation stage can facilitate the acquisition of both idiom meaning and their linguistic form. Etymological background is likely to have promoted the creation of mental images for the target expressions that were stored alongside their verbal forms, facilitating their retention and recall. However, it is important to remember that the mnemonic effect of etymological input varied depending on the nature of the task (receptive vs. productive knowledge) and the stage of the experiment (immediate vs. delayed post-test). The data from this study indicate that students in experimental group significantly outperformed the students in control group in vocabulary learning through the etymology method. This finding is in line with previous research findings (i.e., Fekri, 2011) concerning the effect of etymology in enhancing vocabulary learning. In other words, the treatment given to the experimental group had affected this group to some extent. Therefore, the first null hypothesis stating that etymology strategy has no effect on vocabulary learning was rejected. The statistical analysis of the second research question depicts that there is significant difference between the performance of male and female participants, therefore the second null hypothesis stating that there is no difference between the performance of male and female participants was rejected. It displays those males, compared to females, scored higher on the vocabulary test. It seems that males took more advantage of the roots and affixes training given to the experimental class. It is worth mentioning that to date no study has been conducted to compare the performance of males and females in learning vocabulary via etymology. Previous studies have been conducted on the interaction between gender and overall strategy use or broad categories of strategies. Gender is obviously seen as one of the major factors that influences language learning (Gu, 2002). Oxford and Ehrman (1995) argue that teachers and researchers should keep trying to understand gender differences and should understand that gender differences may often be a mask for deeper differences of personality type and career choice. They also assert that males and females should be encouraged and allowed to develop the most effective learning approaches they can, and neither should be pushed into a gender-stereotyped set of strategies. One of the interesting results of this study was that, students were able to recognize the meaning of prefixes faster and better than the other affixes. It might be claimed that since prefixes occur at the beginning of the word, they are recognized easily. It was clear that only those words which can be analyzed are learned through the application of this strategy. It seems that not all words can be learned through this approach; however the technical terms and jargons are more prone to be acquired in this way. It could be claimed that etymology strategy is more promising for fields of study such as biology, medicine, botany, psychology, and other specific-content fields. Generally speaking, the findings of the present study indicate that etymology strategy instruction has a positive effect on vocabulary learning of EFL learners. In other words, training in etymology strategy as one of the effective vocabulary learning strategies, allows learners to learn and recall more words. The results of this research also indicate that there is an interaction between gender and learning vocabulary via etymology. The findings confirm Conceptual Metaphor Theory, which suggests that idioms are not mere strings of words with an arbitrary meaning. Instead, their meaning can be traced back to a concrete scene representing the first source from which the idiom was taken. The findings are in conformity with other studies made in the domain of Conceptual Metaphor Theory and idiom learning. The results obtained via this experiment can be a source of motivation for both teachers and learners to take advantage of etymological awareness to deal with this aspect of language. These results reveal that figurative aspect of many idioms is not arbitrary; rather, there is an origin or story behind many of them, and reviving such stories can be a crucial factor in learning idiom. There is a correlation between this study and findings.

Conclusion

When undergraduates embark on the study of a particular discipline in second language acquisition, they must absorb a core English idioms specific to an academic discipline. For this, it is imperative that they become literate in the jargon, the technical terms, and specialized idioms of the field. They must absorb a core English idiom specific to an academic discipline. Each day that students progress in a target discipline, they are encountering this core idiom which conveys the intellectual flow of discipline.

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