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The effects of keeping vocabulary notebooks on productive academic vocabulary growth

Şevki Kömür[a]*, Pelin Özdemir[a]

[a]*Muğla Sıtkı Koçman University, Faculty of Education Department of Foreign Language Education, Muğla 48000, Turkey*

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.

Keywords: Productive academic vocabulary; vocabulary notebook; passive vocabulary knowledge.

* Corresponding author:
E-mail address: coal@mu.edu.tr

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 Arıkan 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

Academic Vocabulary" written by Helen Huntley. Huntley (2002) states in her book that "Activities in the book are based on the "Eleven Principles for Learning Vocabulary" described by N. Schmitt and D. Schmitt.

Schmitt & Schmitt (1995) lists these eleven principles in their article as follows:

- The best way to remember new words is to incorporate them into language that is already known.
- Organized material is easier to learn.
- Words which are very similar should not be taught at the same time.
- Word pairs can be used to learn a great number of words in a short time.
- Knowing a word entails more than just knowing its meaning.
- The deeper the mental processing used when learning a word, the more likely that a student will remember it.
- The act of recalling a word makes it more likely that a learner will be able to recall it again later.
- Learners must pay close attention in order to learn most effectively.
- Words need to be recycled to be learnt.
- An efficient recycling method: the 'expending rehearsal'.
- Learners are individuals and have different learning styles (p. 133 – 136).

Schmitt & Schmitt (1995) states that using a vocabulary notebook which is arranged according to these principles can make vocabulary learning easier. They also supposed that this kind of vocabulary notebooks have advantages over ordinary students' notebooks if their pages can be taken out and moved around. By this way, learners can organize their rehearsals according to their learning pace and styles which is also called as expanding rehearsal (Schmitt & Schmitt 1995). In this study, the effects of keeping vocabulary notebooks on productive academic vocabulary of ELT students have been searched.

2.1. Problem

Knowing a word doesn't only mean knowing its meaning. It also requires knowing how to use it effectively and appropriately. We can understand a word by reading or hearing it but we might be unable to produce it. This is a very common problem among ELT students. They can recognize so many academic words in a listening or reading passage and understand their meanings; on the other hand it has been observed that they generally have difficulty in using the same words effectively and productively. This is due to the fact that receptive vocabulary knowledge and productive vocabulary knowledge are different concepts.

Richards (2000) defines receptive vocabulary knowledge as the ability of understanding the meaning of a word. It is also called passive knowledge and it is much more related to listening and reading. On the other hand, the ability of producing a word in an appropriate way while speaking or writing is called productive, or in another term active, vocabulary knowledge.

In order to overcome the problem of activating their passive vocabulary knowledge, ELT students need to have effective vocabulary strategies. According to Schmitt & Schmitt (1995), keeping vocabulary notebooks is one of the effective ways of helping learners to gain independent vocabulary learning strategies.

This study was carried out in order to investigate solutions to the problem of ELT students' lack of ability to turn their passive vocabulary knowledge into active in their academic writing. In other words, this study tried to explore the effects of keeping vocabulary notebooks on activating vocabulary knowledge of the ELT students in their academic writing.

2.2. Aim

The aim of this study is to contribute to teaching academic vocabulary in ELT cases by investigating the effects of vocabulary notebooks on students' advanced writing skills. It also aims to help ELT students to activate their passive vocabulary knowledge and use it actively in their writings.

The following research questions were addressed:

- What are the effects of keeping vocabulary notebooks on activating ELT students' vocabulary knowledge?

- Are there any differences in the use of academic vocabulary between the students who keep vocabulary notebooks and who do not keep them in terms of productive academic vocabulary?

2.3. Significance

Academic vocabulary knowledge is especially important for the students preparing for academic exams, pre- and in-service English Language Teachers, and academicians. Having a good knowledge of academic vocabulary is a vital key in any academic life.

Effective use of academic vocabulary in a productive way requires careful consideration and practice due to the fact that academic lexical items have lower frequency and that's why students are generally less familiar with them (Worthington & Nation, 1996; Xue & Nation, 1984).

In this challenging process, learners need to be guided to have efficient vocabulary learning strategies. Schmitt & Schmitt (1995) describes "Eleven Principles for Learning Vocabulary" in their article and they suggest that creating a vocabulary notebook by keeping these principles in mind can be really useful for language learners.

2.4. Limitations

This study is limited to the data collected from the first year ELT students in Muğla Sıtkı Koçman University who attended Advanced Reading and Writing II course in the spring term of 2013-2014 Academic Year, which means it was conducted in a limited scope. With a much larger-scale study, more generalizable results would have been obtained.

Another limitation of the study is retention level of the students. As it was conducted in a limited time, a delayed post-test wasn't applied to the participants. Therefore, a delayed post-test is required to decide whether the participants retained their productive academic vocabulary knowledge over time.

2.5. Definitions

According to Çelik (2007) "vocabulary is the complete stock of lexemes a language or a speaker has at its/his disposal" (p. 213).

Çelik (2007) defines active vocabulary with these words "active vocabulary is that vocabulary that can both be understood and produced by a speaker in the four skills: listening, reading, speaking and writing (p. 201)"

Schmitt (2000) defines passive vocabulary as the ability to understand a word when it is read or heard. (p.4)

"Linguistic Competence is the ability to use the forms of the language (sounds, words, and sentence structure)" (Çelik, 2007. p. 206).

Vocabulary notebooks are cards or notebooks that are kept by writing frequencies, collocations, antonyms and synonyms, different usages and definitions of the words in order to acquire them in a more effective and active way.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research design

This study is an experimental research. This study design has been chosen due to the necessity for investigating the differences of productive vocabulary usage between two groups of participants who were taught the needed vocabulary by keeping vocabulary notebooks on the basis of the "Eleven Principles for Learning Vocabulary" described by N. Schmitt and D. Schmitt and who were taught the same vocabulary without keeping vocabulary notebooks. Both groups used the same book named Essential Academic Vocabulary by Helen Huntley (2002).

3.2. Participants

The participants were composed of two learner groups of students who were in their first year at English Language Teaching Department in Muğla Sıtkı Koçman University in the spring term of 2013-2014 Academic Year. The first group was the control group whereas the second group was the experimental group. The participants were chosen as first year students because they took "Advanced Reading and Writing Skills II" course which requires learning academic vocabulary. The control and experimental groups were selected according to their pre-test results. The group whose arithmetic mean was lower was decided as the experimental group. The control group was composed of 8 males and 10 females and there were 6 males and 14 females in the experimental group.

3.3. 3.3. Data collection

The data were obtained in three ways: before the treatment, during the treatment and after the treatment. Before the treatment, the participants of both experimental and control groups had a pre-test on vocabulary in order to define their current level of academic vocabulary knowledge. Then, the participants of the experimental group were introduced the book "Essential Academic Vocabulary" by Helen Huntley. These participants were taught the academic vocabulary in the book by keeping vocabulary notebooks and using the activities which have been designed on the basis of "Eleven Principles for Learning Vocabulary" described by N. Schmitt and D. Schmitt. The participants in the control group were taught the same vocabulary only by using the activities in the book without being introduced vocabulary notebooks. The treatment started on March, 2014 and it lasted 8 weeks. The lessons of both experimental and control groups were observed by the researcher during the data collection process. In this phase, the researcher kept a journal in which she took notes on the improvement of the students and their attitudes towards the process. At the end of the treatment process, post-tests were applied to both groups in order to see if there were any significant differences between the groups.

The tests consists of three different parts as true-false, word formation and multiple-choice. There are 30 questions in the true false part, 30 questions in the word formation part and 40 questions in the multiple choice part. The test is revised from the questions existing on the National Geographic Learning Website on which the original vocabulary exercises of the course book used in the implementation take place. The questions consisting of the words in the related four units were chosen from the website and they were revised to prepare the tests.

3.4. Data analysis

The data obtained from the pre- and post-tests of experimental and control groups were analyzed by SPSS software program. On the other hand, the observation notes were analyzed in a qualitative way by the researcher.

4. Results

Table 1. T-Test results of Pre-tests / Part I

	n	$\bar{x}$	s	t	p
Experimental Group	20	19,10	4,49	-,951	p>0,05
Control Group	18	20,22	2,32		

T-test results of both experimental and control groups for the first part of the pre-tests can be seen in Table I. The experimental group did less than the control group.

Table 2. T-Test results of Pre-tests / Part II

	n	$\bar{x}$	s	t	p
Experimental Group	20	8,70	5,29	-,054	p>0.05
Control Group	18	8,61	4,89		

In terms of the results in the second part of the test, it is seen that there is no significant difference between the groups.

Table 3. T-Test results of Pre-tests / Part III

	n	$\bar{x}$	s	t	p
Experimental Group	20	20,80	4,40	-,941	p>0.05
Control Group	18	21,94	2,84		

In the third part of the test, it is seen that, again, the experimental group did less.

Table 4. T-Test results of Pre-tests / Total Score

	n	$\bar{x}$	s	t	p
Experimental Group	20	48,60	11,67	-,659	p>0.05
Control Group	18	50,78	8,19		

Table VI shows that experimental group's total score of pre-test is lower and the control group's score in terms of arithmetic means.

Table 5. T-Test results of Post-tests / Part I

	n	$\bar{x}$	s	t	p
Experimental Group	20	21,90	3,70	-,507	p>0.05
Control Group	18	21,28	3,86		

When we look at the arithmetic means of groups in the first part of the post-test, we see that there is no significant difference between the groups.

Table 6. T-Test results of Post-tests / Part II

	n	$\bar{x}$	s	t	p
Experimental Group	20	15,86	5,63	1,864	p>0.05
Control Group	18	12,50	5,42		

It is seen in table VI that the arithmetic means of the experimental group are better than the control group. The most apparent difference is seen in this part which is composed of word-formation questions requiring productive academic vocabulary most.

Table 7. T-Test results of Post-tests / Part III

	n	$\bar{x}$	s	t	p
Experimental Group	20	26,86	5,18	-,058	p>0.05
Control Group	18	26,94	4,73		

Table VII shows no significant difference between the groups in the third part which consisting of multiple choice questions.

Table 8. T-Test results of Post-tests / Total Score

	n	$\bar{x}$	s	t	p
Experimental Group	20	64,60	11,44	1,071	p>0.05
Control Group	18	60,56	11,82		

When we look at the table VIII which shows the results of the total scores of the post-tests, we see that arithmetic means of the experimental group is higher than the control group's results.

In the researcher's journal, some important points were observed regarding the ideas and attitudes of participants as well as the implementation process.

According to these notes, it was noticed that students' attitudes towards keeping the notebooks were mostly positive. Some of the ideas of the participants can be seen below:

> *Participant A: At first this application came pointless to me but in time the progress in my remembering and using the words became really apparent.*
> *Participant B: Thanks to the notebooks, now I can even guess the forms of the new words at some points.*
> *Participant C: I was writing the new words on pieces of papers from time to time and I didn't look through them again or even forgot where I put them later on. But after that process, I realized that when it is arranged in a good and meaningful way, I want to study the words in my notebook later on.*

Despite their positive attitudes towards keeping the notebooks, some found it quite time consuming. Here we see a comment made by two different participants in the experimental group:

> *Participant D: Even though I accept the benefit of keeping vocabulary notebooks, I wouldn't have continued keeping them if it hadn't been compulsory because I'm not that kind of a student studying regularly.*

The researcher, also the teacher of the both groups, noted that the participants all agreed on the benefits of keeping the notebooks but only a few of them were really willing to do it as they thought it took so much time to complete the parts after each unit. The researcher collected the notebooks every following week to check the process and she noted this process as being time and energy consuming for the teachers.

5. Discussion

In light of the findings and researcher's journal notes, it is found that the participants keeping vocabulary notebooks were more actively engaged in the learning process and became more familiar with the words, which is also suggested by Schmitt & Schmitt (1995).

It is also noted in Fowle's study (2002) that participants in the experimental group became more aware of the words by keeping vocabulary notebooks.

As noted in the study of Walter & Bozkurt (2009), the students in the experimental group showed more progress in controlled productive vocabulary acquisition. It is also seen that although its benefits were accepted, the process of keeping vocabulary notebook was noted as time consuming by both the students and the teacher. It can be suggested that this problem would be solved if a vocabulary program is incorporated into the curriculum and the students are trained how to keep an effective vocabulary notebook from the very beginning of a semester. In this way, it wouldn't be necessary for the teacher to check students' notebook so often and in detail and also the students would spend less time in keeping their notebooks. It is also suggested in the study of Walter and Bozkurt (2009).

While checking students' vocabulary notebooks it was realized that majority of students needed guidance for finding suitable forms for completing parts in the notebooks. Even though they all have advanced dictionaries, most of them couldn't decide to choose the right forms. Especially in the first four weeks, they needed guidance of the teacher especially for collocations/phrasal verbs and word family parts. It reveals that they need more extensive training about how to keep an effective vocabulary notebook. The same result is also found out in the studies conducted by McCrostie (2007).

6. Conclusion

This study aimed to find out the effects of keeping vocabulary notebooks on activating ELT students' vocabulary knowledge and differences in the use of academic vocabulary between the students who keep vocabulary notebooks and who do not keep them in terms of productive academic vocabulary.

In terms of the results based on arithmetic means, no significant difference is seen in the first (true-false) and third (multiple choice) parts of the tests.

Students in the experimental group did better in the word formation part (2nd part) of the post-tests which requires their usage of productive vocabulary knowledge more.

With these findings, it can be suggested that even though it doesn't make a major difference in the short term, keeping vocabulary notebooks can contribute to activating learners' productive vocabulary in the long term. It is also observed in this study that the group which kept vocabulary notebooks performed better than the other group especially in terms of the second part of the test requiring the participants to use their productive vocabulary.

Vocabulary notebooks can make a significant contribution to learners' productive academic vocabulary if the problems with time and strategy training are solved and it is incorporated to the curriculum from the very beginning of the academic year.

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