

Effective Methods for Teaching English Vocabulary to Saudi Female Students

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ABSTRACT

Learning vocabulary in an English-language classroom is a major challenge for many students as it is an essential part of foreign language learning. Words convey meaning, and the expansion of vocabulary helps to eliminate misunderstandings in communication. This study investigates the impact of implementing new vocabulary teaching strategies-context drills, word-on-board games, flash-card games, mini-presentations and role playing, dictionary use and blended learning-to develop ESL learners' vocabulary acquisition. The control group was taught vocabulary using the traditional didactic teaching method. The study's sample consisted of 248 first-year students enrolled in the Faculty of Education and the Deanship of the Preparatory Year at the University of Dammam. English instructors with similar qualifications and experience taught the students. Vocabulary pre- and post-tests were given to groups at the beginning and at the end of the class. Data collected from the tests were then documented and statistically analyzed. The findings reveal that students taught using the new methods of instruction had better vocabulary test scores than those taught using the traditional method. These methods have proven to be effective in improving students' vocabulary acquisition.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Over the last three decades vocabulary learning and teaching have attracted significant interest among education professionals as they have come to acknowledge the importance of and the pivotal position played by vocabulary knowledge in second/foreign language learning. As David Wilkins [1] puts it, "[w]ithout grammar very little can be conveyed, without vocabulary nothing can be conveyed" (p.111). Hence, researchers like Harley [2], Coady and Huckin [3], and Richards and Renandya [4] have highlighted the crucial role of vocabulary knowledge in developing the communicative competency of ESL/EFL learners. In the same breadth Neuman and Dwyer [5] stress this significant role through their definition of vocabulary as the words that enable us to "communicate effectively" (p.385).

Young-Kyung Min [6] believes that second/foreign language learners are required to develop their vocabulary in order to succeed in an "English-medium educational environment" (p. 31). He states that "lack of vocabulary knowledge is a problem across all areas" (p. 22). However, in the Saudi EFL context, vocabulary instruction is relatively ignored, and is not receiving the necessary attention from teachers and curriculum designers. In both secondary and post-secondary education most language instructors implement the traditional vocabulary teaching method of "listing and defining the new word" and then asking the learners to memorize meanings in English and Arabic [7]. In this teacher-centered educational environment, language learners become passive recipients of language much more than producers, and this undermines the development of their communicative language ability.

The shift in the focus of the learning process from teacher-oriented approaches to learner-centered approaches over the closing decades of the twentieth century was accompanied by the emergence of the concept of “communicative competence” [8, 9], which was characterized by Lyle Bachman [10] in 1990 as “communicative language ability”-a concept that highlights the theories of the communicative approach to teaching foreign languages. Largely as a result of the influence of the communicative approach, the achievement of communicative competency has become the primary objective of learning/teaching a foreign language. At the same time, the looking up of English/Arabic words in the dictionary-the dominant technique for acquiring new words-has been perceived as being frustrating for both learners and instructors of foreign languages, the most important of which is English, in Saudi general and higher education as vocabulary retention is low in comparison with attrition rates, thus leaving learners struggling with the target language throughout their studies. With the aim of shifting the focus of the vocabulary acquisition process from the teacher-centered method to a learner-oriented strategy, the current study seeks to examine the effectiveness of implementing seven different strategies for learning/teaching English vocabulary within the female section at preparatory level at the University of Dammam. These strategies-context-drills, word-on-board games, flash-card games, mini-presentations, dictionary consultation, role-playing, and blended learning-were considered in terms of the extent to which facilitated and optimized the learning process for the experimental group.

The findings of the present study are based on quantitative data collected from pre and post tests of the female students’ performance pre and post studying using seven methods of teaching vocabulary. The quantitative results are reported.

The findings shed light on several learning/teaching strategies that offer potential to help Saudi female students acquire English vocabulary effectively. In addition, they also aim to inform EFL instructors regarding the strategies that are most commonly employed by their EFL learners. Comparisons of the various strategies help to emphasize the significance of diversifying teaching methods. Instructors and teachers who are hesitant about changing to new methods will obtain valuable information about these strategies and about how students can develop their vocabulary knowledge as a result.

2. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Question 1: Are there any significant differences between the total mean scores of students in the control group and those of students in the experimental group that can be attributed to the use of the seven vocabulary teaching strategies?

Question 2: Are there any significant differences between students’ mean vocabulary scores in the experimental group?

3. LITERATURE REVIEW

Communicative competency theories and the communicative approach to foreign language learning have paved the way for theories and best practices in favour of Vocabulary Learning Strategies (VLS). Rebecca Oxford and David Crookall [11] explore two types of strategies: direct and indirect. They identify direct VLS as a “mental strategy” in which learners study vocabulary intentionally through the following sub-strategies: 1) cognition, 2) memorization, and 3) compensation. Indirect VLS, on the other hand, involve the use of the following sub-strategies: 1) metacognition, 2) affective strategy, and 3) social strategies.

Schmitt [12] classifies five strategies for acquiring new vocabulary: determination, social strategy, memorization, cognition, and metacognition. The subsequently developed Nation’s Taxonomy categorizes VLS into: planning, sources, and processes [13]. L2 learners are required to plan for their learning, and then they explore sources for the learned vocabulary; during the third stage, they use processes to establish vocabulary knowledge based on the previous stages. More recently, Laura Angelini, Amparo García-Carbonell, and Frances Watts [14] highlight the effectiveness of simulation and gaming in vocabulary acquisition.

Over the last decade, VLS seem to have gained increasing attention in the Saudi EFL context. Maha Alhaysony [15] investigates the vocabulary discovery strategies of 746 Saudi male and female EFL students in the preparatory-year program at Ha’il University. This study demonstrates that social and skipping strategies were the most frequently used strategies, whereas guessing and dictionary consultation were used less frequently. The results also demonstrate that females use all of the strategies more frequently than males.

Al-Darayseh [7] examines the relationship between explicit and implicit English VLS in the development of reading comprehension skills among second-year economics students at Al-Imam University, Riyadh. Furthermore, Thamer Alharthi [16] finds that rote learning contributes to higher attrition of receptive vocabulary knowledge. On the other hand, learner-centered strategies, such as note-taking, contribute to

increasing learners' retention of both productive and receptive vocabulary knowledge. At the secondary education level, multiple facets of VLS have been investigated. Mohammed Albousaif [17] aimed to explore the VLS employed by 200 Saudi EFL students at the high-school level and their actual reasons for using or not using those strategies at each of the five essential vocabulary-learning stages: encountering new words, getting the word form, getting the word meaning, consolidating the word form and meaning in memory, and using the word. Bahanshal [18] explores the most common VLS used by Saudi EFL learners at the high-school level. The study indicates that, in their learning of English vocabulary, Saudi high-school students mostly rely unconsciously on using dictionaries, guessing words' meaning from their context, and memorization. In the same vein, Thuraya Alabasi [19] demonstrates the effectiveness of role playing in teaching English vocabulary to female students at secondary level in Al-Madina area.

3.1. The Significance of the Study

In the light of the above, it is concluded that the research that has been conducted thus far into vocabulary acquisition in the Saudi EFL context is mainly focused on investigating the most common VLS used by Saudi learners at both the secondary and post-secondary levels. There are few studies that explore or suggest strategies that may facilitate vocabulary-learning/teaching processes, and that may help the learners to develop their communicative language ability. Hence, the current study seeks to bridge the gap between theory and practice by exploring seven VLS that are thought to enhance the acquisition of foreign language vocabulary. These strategies are as follows: context-drills, word-on-board games, flash-card games, mini-presentations, dictionary consultation, role-playing, and blended learning.

4. METHODOLOGY

4.1. Design of the Study

This study employed a quasi-experimental pretest-posttest experimental design to investigate the effectiveness of using seven teaching strategies to improve students' vocabulary acquisition. The strategies are context drill, word-on-board game, flash-card game, mini-presentations, role playing, dictionary consultation, and blended learning.

4.2. Sample of the Study

The sample of the study consisted of 248 first-year students studying within the Faculty of Education of the University of Dammam. The sample was tested after the use of the traditional didactic method and was divided into two groups, the control group and the experimental group. The two groups were composed of randomly selected students who were studying English as a basic requirement of the Faculty of Education and the Deanship of the Preparatory Year. The data collection was completed during the first semester of the academic year 2013/2014. The students' ages ranged from 19 to 22 years.

4.3. Instrument of the Study and Method

A vocabulary pre and posttest was applied before and after the implementation of each teaching method on the same groups of students. For example, if teacher A used role playing to teach vocabulary she would test the students before and after using this method. With every method there was a test for students' undergrading (Appendix A). One of the researchers on the University of Dammam campuses met with the five EFL teachers and discussed the research idea and the main research question, which deals with the most effective method to teach vocabulary. Each teacher was teaching 30 to 35 students and one was teaching two sections. Each teacher initially taught vocabulary using the didactic method and then taught using the methods identified below. The teacher applied pre and post tests to the group and the results were documented and subsequently analyzed by the researcher.

4.4. Participants

The number of female students enrolled in the preparatory year within the Faculty of Education and the Deanship of the Preparatory Year at the University of Dammam in the fall of 2014 was 2,242 (with females comprising 60% of the total) students for the university's branch program used in this research which encompasses the health, education, science, engineering, administrative (business), and computer sciences. The age range of the participants was 18 to 22 (the majority of whom were between 18 and 20 with an Arabic language background). Because of the gender segregation in Saudi Arabia and hence our greater access to the female student population, the participants in this study were exclusively female. Thus, gender is not a variable that was considered in the research design. Further, in order to minimize the impact of external factors that may affect the findings, such as the ability to speak multiple languages, only those students who were working with a first language L1 of Arabic were included in the analysis.

4.5. Strategies Used to Teach English Vocabulary

In this study seven methods were employed to teach vocabulary to students in their preparatory year. In the quotations set out below, the teachers shed light on the methods that they used to teach the students. For instance, according to teacher A, the context drill

...uses vocab in context (groups): put all unit words on the board and students have to make a skit, conversation, paragraph, or short story using the words in a context related to the unit-usually I will ask them to use half of the words; however, for differentiated learning-the strong groups I will ask to use all of the words-the weaker groups, less of the words-this only works if the instructor has assigned the groups. I also usually incorporate a grammar point here as well (Teacher A).

Another teacher explained her use of the word-on-board game, which she defined as follows:

Game daily review (teams)-one student is a judge; one student from each team comes to the board-the teachers say a definition and then they write the word on the board aided by their team with the correct spelling-the first team to get it wins the point (Teacher B).

A third teacher who used the flash-card game explained it as follows:

My students do a vocabulary workbook over the semester which amounts to 100 new words from their reading book lessons. In the workbook they must include five elements: the English word, the word in Arabic, its part of speech, the definition and an example of the word in a sentence or a drawing or an example. There are 10 lessons for the semester and 10 vocabulary words per unit. I go over the words in class and have them give definitions or sentences to show understanding. We have a vocabulary test each week, but it is combined with a reading test or a listening test, so I can't give you the numbers for these tests. For the review of the words, we play games before the exam to help them review. Ninety percent of the girls do very well on the vocabulary sections of the test, scoring from 90 percent to 100. Those girls who don't study or do their workbook get in the 70s or less, but this does not occur too often.

Teacher E explained mini-presentations as follows:

Every week each student brings a term or a vocabulary that they heard on TV or read in a newspaper. She will then bring it to class to discuss it and explain it to the group. In each session every student will have 7-10 minutes to do a mini presentation about the term she studied. This will be repeated for 12 weeks. So if I have 30 students in classroom this means that the class will be exposed to over 12 times 30 words per semester. I found this to be very productive method.

As one of the professors suggested, it is valuable to have each student use role playing to animate the vocabulary being studied, an approach that adds fun and excitement to the teaching and learning atmosphere and thus helps to arouse the interest of the learners and make the language acquisition process more effective. Dictionary consultation is another method that was employed. As one of the professors explained regarding her instructions to her students,

Use your dictionary (groups): (a) Write the new words on the board. Go over about half of the known ones together as a class usually through definitions, pronunciation, parts of speech, synonyms. (b) The other half of the students look up in their dictionaries, have group roles and the reporter shares with the entire class. I've given them websites for ESL learners and they also know I discourage Google translate as often it is incorrect and I want them to use English synonyms if possible as they are at an advanced level.

Blended learning was said to imply the following:

Students will learn to use computer databases and online sources in English as well as library materials and will significantly sharpen their ability to read journal papers in English. The course will emphasize critical reading, thinking, and understanding in the context of comprehensive research projects. Beginners will be introduced to the nature and uses of online learning tools. Students will learn to read and understand English vocabulary. The students will collect different uses of the same and that reflect their interests and experience. Students will also learn to read their work and the work of their peers as other readers will make revisions in response to the peer evaluations.

5. RESULTS

The results are presented in the form of tables and figures as below. Table 1 shows study sample distribution on teaching methods used in the current research study. Table 2 shows descriptive statistics results of unidirectional analysis of variance (anova) for previous applications of testing english language vocabulary. Table 3 shows unidirectional analysis of variance (ANOVA) for previous application of testing english language vocabulary. Table 4 shows descriptive statistics results of unidirectional analysis of

variance (ANOVA) for post-application test of english language vocabulary. Table 5 shows unidirectional analysis of variance (ANOVA) results for the dimensional application of testing english language vocabulary. Table 6 shows Tukey test for the dimensional application of testing english language vocabulary. Figure 1 shows study sample distribution percentages of teaching methods used in this research study to teach english vocabulary. Figure 2 shows average distributions of the study samples in pre-application for testing english language vocabulary. Figure 3 shows average distributions of study samples dimensional application for testing english language vocabulary.

Table 1. Study Sample Distribution on Teaching Methods Used in the Current Research Study

Group	Number	Percentage
Context drills	33	13.3%
Word-on-board game	39	15.7%
Flash-card game	31	12.5%
Mini-presentations	37	14.9%
Role playing	31	12.5%
Dictionary use	38	15.3%
Blended learning	39	15.7%
Total	248	100%

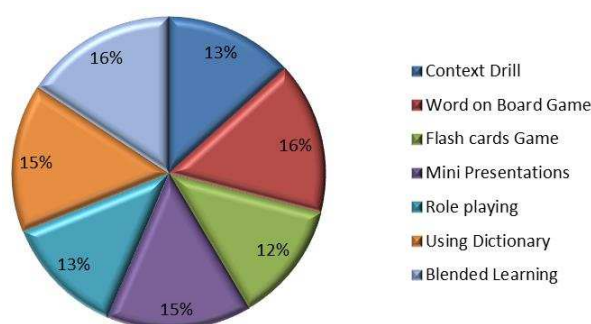


Figure 1. Study sample distribution percentages of teaching methods used in this research study to teach english vocabulary

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics Results of Unidirectional Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) for Previous Applications of Testing English Language Vocabulary:

Group	Number	Mean	Std. Deviation
Context drills	33	4.727	1.398
Word-on-board game	39	4.872	1.399
Flash-card game	31	5.194	1.223
Mini-presentations	37	5.027	1.384
Role playing	31	5.032	1.354
Dictionary use	38	5.237	1.515
Blended learning	39	5.000	1.539
Total	248	5.012	1.404

Table 3. Unidirectional Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) for Previous Application of Testing English Language Vocabulary:

Source of Variance	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between groups	6.411	6	1.069	.536	.781
Within groups	480.552	241	1.994		
Total	486.964	247			

Table 4. Descriptive Statistics Results of Unidirectional Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) for Post-Application Test of English Language Vocabulary

Group	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Context drills	33	7.727	1.398
Word-on-board game	39	7.859	1.082
Flash-card game	31	7.968	1.087
Mini-presentations	37	7.757	1.103
Role playing	31	8.952	.810
Dictionary use	38	7.776	1.101
Blended learning	39	8.833	1.632
Total	248	8.117	1.290

The above-stated data show that the unidirectional analysis of variance test for the application of the English-language pre-test reveals that $F=0.536$ which is not a statistical function at function level 0.05. In addition, the degrees of freedom are 6 and 241, thus indicating that the seven groups, applied by considered in the current study, had been previously and equally engaged with English-language vocabulary education before the implementation of the methods used in the current study. This is intended to identify the extent to which these methods are sufficient in terms of developing English-language vocabulary.

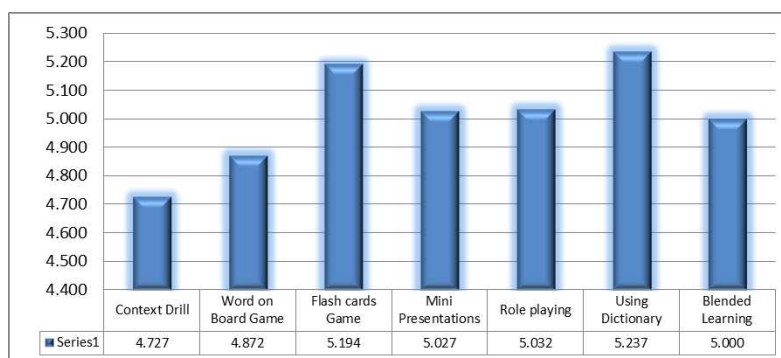


Figure 2. Average distributions of the study samples in pre-application for testing English language vocabulary

Table 5. Unidirectional Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) Results for the Dimensional Application of Testing English Language Vocabulary

Source of Variance	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between groups	59.118	6	9.853	6.746	.000
Within groups	351.991	241	1.461		
Total	411.109	247			

Table 6 Tukey Test for the Dimensional Application of Testing English Language Vocabulary

Group	Context drills	Word-on-board game	Flash-card game	Mini-presentations	Role playing	Dictionary use	Blended learning
Context drills	----	-.13170	-.24047	-.02948	-1.22434*	-.04904	-1.10606*
Word-on-board game	.13170	----	-.10877	.10222	-1.09264*	-.04904	-.97436*
Flash-card game	.24047	.10877	----	.21099	-.98387*	.19143	-.86559*
Mini-presentations	.02948	-.10222	-.21099	----	-1.19486*	-.01956	-1.07658*
Role playing	1.22434*	1.09264*	.98387*	1.19486*	----	1.17530*	.11828
Dictionary use	.04904	-.08266	-.19143	.01956	-1.17530*	----	-1.05702*
Blended learning	1.10606*	.97436*	.86559*	1.07658*	-.11828	1.05702*	----

*means variation is at function level 0.05

The above-stated data show the statistical variation functions for the dimensional application test of English-language vocabulary for the two groups: the group that studied using role playing and the group that studied using blended learning.

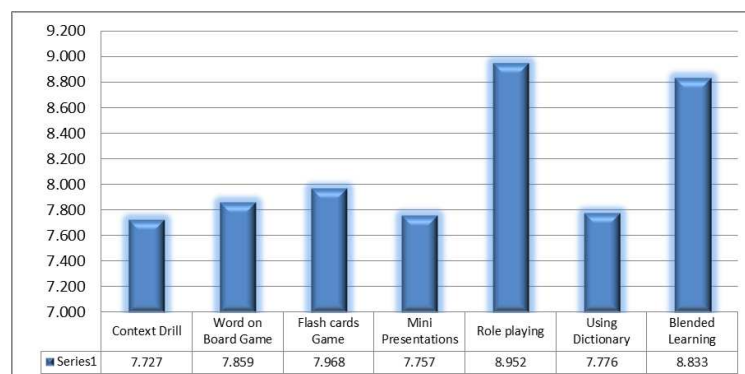


Figure 3. Average distributions of study samples dimensional application for testing English language vocabulary

6. ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

This paper investigates which teaching methods are most useful in teaching EFL vocabulary. The participants in this study were female preparatory-year students enrolled in a Saudi university. The main purpose was to investigate the students' results from a variety of teaching methods. Concerning the first question of the study (about whether there were any significant differences between the total mean scores of the students in the control group and those of the students in the experimental group that could be attributed to the use of the seven vocabulary teaching strategies), the results revealed that there was a difference for blended learning and role playing. Concerning the second question (about whether there were any significant differences between the students' mean vocabulary scores in the experimental group), the results revealed that there was a difference to the advantage of the experimental group in comparison between blended learning and role playing. This result is in line with the findings of Al-Darayseh [7]. Thus, it has been concluded that role playing and blended learning were the two strategies that showed the best results. Both role playing and blended learning engage students in the learning process. The results also show that context drills, mini-presentations, and dictionary consultation are all close in the range; this could imply that there is no difference in the impact of the three methods on teaching and learning English vocabulary.

7. CONCLUSION AND PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

The current study will help EFL teachers and researchers in Saudi Arabia to deepen their understanding of vocabulary teaching at the university level. There are several pedagogical implications. English teachers play an important role in helping students to improve their vocabulary knowledge and understanding and in helping them to retain this knowledge and understanding for future use and reference while reading and writing in English. In order to be successful in EFL, students need to be able to be autonomous learners. Teachers also need to think of ways to improve less successful students' understanding and retention of English vocabulary.

From the results of this study, we clearly found that the strategies of role playing and blended learning are the most effective for teaching female university students EFL vocabulary while making language learning enjoyable and meaningful. These two methods are considered to be examples of active learning whereby students are placed at the center of the learning process.

Finally, it should be underscored that the current research had some limitations that can be the focus of future research. Firstly, the current research was undertaken on female preparatory-year students and therefore it is conceivable that different results would emerge if the same study were to be conducted with male students. Secondly, the sample could be broadened to include students from other universities in order to compare the results and thus identify the best strategies for teaching English vocabulary. Indeed, there exists considerable scope for undertaking further research focused on the effects of using active learning strategies that place the students at the center of the language-learning learning process.

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