



REVIEW ARTICLE

Vol.2. Issue 3., 2015 (July-Sept.)



INTERNATIONAL  
STANDARD  
SERIAL  
NUMBER  
INDIA

2395-2628(Print):2349-9451(online)

THE EFFECT OF EXPLICIT VERSUS IMPLICIT TEACHING ON IRANIAN EFL LEARNERS'  
VOCABULARY KNOWLEDGE

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ABSTRACT

To learn a language vocabulary knowledge occupies an important position. Due to problems experienced by Iranian EFL learners in acquiring vocabulary, this study investigated the effectiveness of implicit and explicit approaches to vocabulary learning. The participants of the study were 36 Iranian male and female undergraduate EFL learners who were studying engineering at one of the Tehran universities. The participants' age ranged from 19-23. There were two intact classes, in one class the researcher taught vocabulary implicitly and in the other explicitly. She administered a multiple-choice pretest to homogenize the participants and ascertained their unfamiliarity with target vocabularies. Then there were two following sessions as a treatment. In first session a text from the participants' textbook was thought. Each part had 4 of the target words taught implicitly and explicitly to the groups by the researcher in each session. After the second session of the treatment, to know their recognition of the target vocabularies, the participants took part in a multiple-choice posttest. The result of t-test revealed that there was a significant difference between the explicit and implicit approaches to vocabulary learning. The explicit group outperformed the implicit group. Despite the considerable limitations in the study, the researcher concluded that the explicit teaching was more effective than implicit teaching because in EFL context the main source of comprehension input is the classroom exposure. So there is a need for a more balanced approach involving both implicit and explicit practice and instruction in order to enhance the acquisition of vocabularies.

Key Words: vocabulary learning, implicit teaching, explicit teaching

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I. INTRODUCTION

Along with other components, vocabulary is one of the most essential components of language learning. Accordingly, foreign language learners are typically concerned of the extent to which limitation in their vocabulary knowledge affect their communication skills since lexical items carry the basic information they wish to comprehend and express (Nation 2001).

Now the field of second language pedagogy concentrates on language vocabulary instruction. In fact the need for finding the most appropriate and the least burdensome trends in vocabulary instruction is felt more than ever.

In this regard Gass (1999) states that learning second language means learning its vocabulary and Wilkins (1967 cited in Thornbury, 2003, p.13) contents that one can convey very little without grammar and nothing without vocabulary.

The question of how one person learns vocabulary is mainly related to approaches to teaching vocabulary. Most of the research studies that focus on the vocabulary teaching and learning follow basically two approaches:

- 1) Implicit or incidental vocabulary learning that focuses on acquiring vocabulary as the by-product of other activities.
- 2) Explicit or intentional approach that proposes teaching words through direct instruction that engages language learners in activities that focus attention primarily on vocabulary.

There has been a long running debate to decide which method of learning vocabulary is more effective and results in longer and easier recall.

A larger number of research studies provide evidence that most of the vocabulary development occurs through exposure to language. However, some other studies reveal that direct instruction of vocabulary plays an important role. Waiting for learners to encounter with the word in natural reading is far less efficient than teaching the words through systematic vocabulary instruction (Anderson and Nagy, 1983).

The purpose of this study was to find out the impact of implicit and explicit teaching on vocabulary acquisition. As mentioned before, learning vocabulary is one of the most difficult tasks for language learners that should be tackled with. This study tended to compare vocabulary learning through explicit teaching and noticing with its incidental learning. The main aim of this study was to measure the effects of explicit and implicit teaching approaches on vocabulary learning of EFL Iranian learners. The researcher question and the null hypothesis under investigation in this study follows:

**Research question:** Is there any significant difference between effects of explicit and implicit teaching on vocabulary learning by Iranian EFL learner?

**Null hypothesis:** There is not any significant difference between effects of explicit and implicit teaching on vocabulary learning by Iranian EFL learners.

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

### A. Historical background

We generally can define vocabulary as the knowledge of words and words meanings. More specifically, we use vocabulary to refer to the kind of words that students must know to read increasingly during the test with comprehension (Hiebert & Kamil, 2005).

“Vocabulary acquisition: A neglected aspect of language learning.”

That’s the title of Paul Meare’s article published in 1980. In the past, vocabulary acquisition was only a by-product of language teaching. Therefore, research on vocabulary acquisition was minimal compared to what researchers had done in other areas such as syntax and phonology. During the late 1970s or early 1980s the situation changed in favor of vocabulary. At the same time, cognitive psychologists started to appreciate the influence of vocabulary learning process. The input hypothesis proposed by Stephen Krashen (1981) was a good example of it. This language acquisition model stresses competence more than performance and it measures competence in terms of adequate word use. Afterwards vocabulary has become a main theme for many language-related studies.

### B. Explicit versus implicit teaching vocabulary

The National Reading Panel identified five main methods for teaching vocabulary (NRP, 2000, p. 4-3), the first two of which provide an illustration of the difference between explicit and implicit instruction:

- **Explicit Instruction:** The researcher gave students definitions or other attributes of words to be learned.
- **Implicit Instruction:** The researcher exposed students to words or given opportunities to do a great deal of reading.

Ellis (1994, p.1) provides definitions of implicit learning:

"Implicit learning is acquisition of knowledge about the underlying structure of a complex stimulus environment by a process which takes place naturally, simply and without conscious operations."

Ellis (2004, p. 244–245) provides definitions of explicit learning:

"Explicit L2 knowledge is the declarative and often anomalous knowledge of the phonological, lexical, grammatical, pragmatic and sociocritical features of the L2 together with the metalanguage for labeling this knowledge. It is held consciously and is learnable and verbalizable. It is typically processed through controlled processing when L2 learners experience some kind of linguistic difficulty in the use of the L2. Learners vary in the breadth and depth of their L2 explicit knowledge."

**Explicit teaching:** Anderson and Nagy (1941) pointed out "there are precise words children may need to know in order to comprehend particular lesson of a subject matter". Explicit or intentional vocabulary learning generally means making use of special strategy such as note taking, repetition and making use of dictionaries in order to intentionally memorize a word's meaning. Here in this research by explicit vocabulary teaching, we mean providing the definition of target vocabularies in the text by the instructor in L2 (English).

Schmidt (1990) proposed the Noticing Hypothesis. According to this hypothesis "attention with some low level of awareness is the necessary and sufficient condition for transforming input to intake."

There is no doubt that L2 learners can benefit a lot from the contexts that expose them to comprehensible input. However, such input alone does not necessarily lead learners to high level of proficiency in the L2. Sometimes the input does not become intake. To improve learner's language learning the teacher should provide the learners with a variety of consciousness-raising activities. Sharwood Smith (1991) has proposed that the term consciousness-raising can be replaced by "input enhancement" because he believed that the instructor can only know that some aspects of input are highlighted in some way, but it is impossible to tell whether the learner's consciousness has been raised.

Tomlin and Villa (1994) proposed three components for the role of attention in second language acquisition: *Alertness, orientation, Detection*. Robinson (1995, as cited in Robinson, 2005), inspired by both Schmidt's and Tomlin and Villa's idea about attention, reported that noticing includes detection and rehearsal in short-term memory. R. Ellis (1997, as cited in Cross, 2002) proposed that input becomes intake via noticing language features in input.

**Implicit teaching:** by implicit teaching we mean picking up words and their meanings during reading activities; while the reader's goal is to comprehend the meaning of the activity or for example a reading rather than learning new words intentionally.

Krashen (1983) proposed "input hypothesis" in order to emphasize the primacy of meaning and the importance of vocabulary through the unconscious process of language acquisition. In his view language is essentially its vocabularies and the quantity of vocabularies actually is beyond the quantity of other parts of language (Celce-Murcia, 2001; Mitchell & Myles, 2004). According to Hulstijn (1996, as cited in Pulido, 2003: 241), "during reading, easily guessed words may not be better retained because of lack of need to sufficient attention to the new word form."

Most of the researchers used the term implicit learning in connection with the learning of vocabulary through reading. Krashen (1983, as cited in Mitchell & Myles, 2004), in his input hypothesis, proposed that we acquire vocabulary through exposure to comprehensible input. The reason for using implicit learning mostly in vocabulary learning is that the concept of implicit is applicable both to abstract and declarative knowledge whereas the concept of intentional is just used for declarative knowledge. Learning vocabulary from context often seemed as something opposed to the intentional learning and teaching of vocabulary. As far as reading for text comprehension and reading to learn about a subject is the matter, it is apparent that more able readers learn words incidentally when reading for these purposes (Laufer & Hulstijn, 2001; Swanborn & de Gloper, 2002).

Coady (1997, as cited in Krashen and Mason, 2004) believed that most vocabulary learning occurs through reading but according to him there is a "threshold level" of vocabulary knowledge below which a learner cannot read well enough to learn new vocabulary through reading.

### C. Empirical studies

Many researchers have been done regarding the two approaches, explicit and implicit approaches, toward learning vocabulary. However these studies have by no means been conclusive and have almost always given mixed results.

Actually both approaches to acquire the second language learning have been shown to be conducive to acquisition. However explicit learning has been shown more frequently to be of higher effectiveness in improving acquisition (Bardovi –Harlig Hatford, 1998; Beaton, Cruneberg and Ellis, 1996; Harley, 1989; Hulstijn, Hollander and Greidanus, 1996; Knight, 1994; Rott, 1999).

Bill miller and Boote (2006) found that while rereading stories improved students understanding of word meaning by 12 % and an additional 10 % gain occurred when word explanation were taught directly during the reading of a text.

A similar study in Ipswich, England (Cain, 2004) with third grade students investigated whether or not the use of word explanation (definition) facilitated students' word learning. The investigator found that although students made gains when explanation was provided for unfamiliar words, they made the greatest increases when they explained their own definition of target words.

Moradian (2009) studied the effect of level elaboration and typographical enhancement via reading on vocabulary learning. No difference was found between the effect of explicit and implicit means of instructing the target words on acquisition of meaning of the words.

As mentioned before, the hypothesis that vocabulary can be learned implicitly or incidentally while reading is not new. The hypothesis is supported by some studies showing that learners can guess the meaning of unknown words while reading (Hulstijn, 1993; Liu and Natich , 1985).

Previous studies have shown that "meaning inferred" yields higher retention than "meaning given" (C.Hulstijn, 1442; Mondria and witde Boer, 1991; Watanab, 1942). Rott (1999) investigated incidental acquisition and retention of vocabulary through reading texts.

She concluded that exposure did have significant effect on both the acquisition and retention of vocabulary in terms of production and reception respectively.

Sthal (2005) was against mere repetition or drill of a word, emphasizing that vocabulary instruction should provide students with opportunities to encounter words repeatedly and in variety of contexts.

In a multiple study research design, Biemiller and Boote (2006) found that repeated reading of a story book resulted in greater average gains in word knowledge.

As it is seen from results both explicit and implicit approaches to vocabulary learning has been supported by different studies, and it can be concluded that a mixed design approach should be used by curriculum designers.

### III. METHODOLOGY

#### A. Participants

Two intact classes of Iranian undergraduate EFL learners participated in this study. They were studying engineering at Islamic Azad University, Shahre Rey branch, located in Tehran. The number of students in two classes totaled 36. The participants' age ranged from 19-23. They were actually 18 and 24 in the implicit and explicit groups respectively. They were of both sexes. To decide if the subjects formed a homogenous sample, a pretest was administered to them. A cut-off point of 3 was used as the measure of familiarity of participants with target words, in this regard 2 students from the implicit group and 4 students from the explicit group were omitted because they could answer more than 3 items correctly. The results were analyzed by a t-test to compare the mean scores of two groups. The results showed that there was no significant difference between the two groups. Therefore it was assumed the students formed a homogenous sample. Then the two classes formed the two groups of this study. Finally 4 participants from the explicit group who got zero on the posttest were omitted in the final analysis as outliers. Because this showed that either they answered the pretest by chance or were not attentive enough on the posttest we would have had error variance.

**1. Explicit group:** 16 participants in this group were provided by the exact definition of target vocabularies in L2.

**2. Implicit group:** 16 participants in this group were expected to infer the meaning of target vocabularies from the context.

#### **B. Instruments**

Two types of instruments were used in this study. They included multiple choice tests as pretest and posttest and a text as a context for target vocabularies.

**1.** A text of about 300 words was chosen from the participant's text book. The students were studying General English at university, and the text book title was "General English in Use". In order to determine the proper text, the views of some experts were obtained and applied. The chosen text included two parts. In each part 4 items assumed to be unknown were chosen by the researcher as the target words.

**2.** Tests: pretest and posttest

2-a) Pretest. In this study because of limitations of time, pretest was used for two aims: one important use of pretest was to ensure the homogeneity of the participants. The other purpose of the pretest was to recognize a set of vocabularies that were not known by any participants in the study. Vocabularies of the test were chosen from a text of the participants' book. It was supposed that no one knew the vocabularies. Based on the results of the pretest the words that were unknown by participants were selected as the target vocabularies in the study. The pretest included 10 multiple choice items. Because 2 items could be answered by most of the participants in the two groups, they were omitted at the process of analyzing the results.

2-b) Post test. In this study the same multiple choice items were used as posttest. The order of items has been changed not to include remembering effect.

#### **C. Data collection procedure**

The participants were notified of the general purpose of the study and were informed that the performance on the tests will not affect their course final scores. All the participants took the test in class periods.

Before the treatment, a pretest was administrated to ensure the homogeneity of participants. Because of limitation of time in present study, the pretest used for homogeneity purpose was administered to choose the target vocabularies of the research. When target vocabularies were recognized through the results of the pretest, the researcher started the treatment in two following sessions. The treatment included teaching a text from the participants' textbook. Each part had 4 of the target words. 4 items were taught by the researcher from the text in each session. After the second session of the treatment a posttest, again in multiple-choice form was given to the participants.

**1. Procedure in explicit group:** Participants in this group were provided with the exact meaning in L2 (English). At each session of the treatment the researcher taught on the parts of the chosen text. During the reading the researcher notified the target words explicitly and talked about their definitions. Each session 4 vocabularies from one part of chosen text were covered. And at the end of the treatment the participants were asked to answer the posttest.

**2. Procedure in implicit group:** In this class the same researcher read the 2 parts of the chosen text in two different sessions of the treatment. Participants in this group were assumed to infer the meaning of words from the context and no explanation and no notification regarding target words were provided by the researcher. Each session 4 target vocabularies from one part of text were covered. A posttest was given to participants at the end of the treatment.

#### **D. Data analysis**

In this study all of the test data were scored by giving one point for a correct response and zero for an incorrect response. Students who answered more than three out of ten items correctly were omitted because they could not meet the needs of beings unfamiliar with the target vocabularies. This study includes a descriptive statistics for the two groups. A t-test was run to show any significant difference between the two groups with different treatments.

#### **IV. RESULTS and DISCUSSION**

After the administration of the post-test, the results obtained from these two groups were compared by using t-test procedure to analyze data.

As discussed above, to answer the research question 2 considerations were put in practice:

**A.** An overall language proficiency of participating students on pre test “homogeneity result”;

Table 1 displays the descriptive statistic on pretest that was administered to 36 students at Islamic Azad University, Shahre Ray branch.

**Table 1** Descriptive statistics of the pretest for the explicit and implicit groups

Type of teaching	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
explicit teaching	16	1.25	0.931	0.233
implicit teaching	16	1.88	1.147	0.287

The table indicates that there is slight difference among means of two groups. Therefore the two groups seemed to be similar.

A t-test was run to compare the mean of the two groups.

**Table 2** T-test for pretests by the explicit and implicit groups

Group	N	Mean	t	df	sig	Means difference	Std. error of differences
explicit	16	1.25	-1.692	30	0.348	-0.625	0.369
implicit	16	1.88					
Total	32						

P < 0.05

As it is understood from Table 2, p value, 0.348, is more than defined p value 0.05; therefore, it can be concluded that there was no significant difference between mean of the two groups, and they were homogeneous in terms of their proficiency prior the treatment of the study.

**B.** The performance of the two groups on the posttest after the two different treatments “recognition results” Descriptive statistic of the two groups on the posttest is presented in Table 3.

**Table 3** Descriptive statistics of the posttest by the explicit and implicit groups

Type of teaching	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
explicit teaching	16	4.625	2.825	0.706
implicit teaching	16	4.062	1.948	0.487

A t-test was run to compare the results of the posttests of the two groups.

**Table 4** T-test for the posttests by the explicit and implicit groups

Group	N	Mean	t	df	sig	Means difference	Std. error of differences
explicit	16	4.62	0.656	30	0.042	0.562	0.858
implicit	16	4.06					
Total	32						

P < 0.05

In Table 4, obtained p value of the posttests between groups 0.042, was less than critical p value of 0.05. Therefore, we can reject the null hypotheses and it was concluded that there was significant difference between the vocabulary learning by the explicit and implicit groups. To see which group was better, we compared the means, and because the mean of the explicit group, 4.62, exceeded than the mean of the implicit group, 4.06, it was understood that the explicit group outperformed the implicit group in this study.

## V. CONCLUSION

Considering the results of the study, the null hypothesis was rejected and there was a significant difference between the explicit and implicit approaches to vocabulary learning. Despite the considerable limitations in the study, and being cautious about generalizing beyond students of Islamic Azad University, Shahre Rey branch, we can conclude that the explicit teaching was more effective than implicit teaching. Indeed in EFL context in which the only source comprehension input is the classroom exposure, the explicit teaching should be considered as an indispensable part of the language teaching.

During the past decades, research studies have confirmed that more than incidental exposure might be important for the second language acquisition to occur. However dependence on a single vocabulary instruction method will not result in optimal learning (NICHHD, 2000). According to Brown (2001:371) the vocabulary learning requires “good grounds for intervening as the metacognition levels. This does not mean the rebirth of the same traditional method of the vocabulary instruction (Brown, 2001; pica, 2005) therefore learners should be guided through the balanced amounts of the implicit and explicit instruction for the vocabulary learning.

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