



The Effect of Visual Aids on Elementary Iranian EFL Learners' Vocabulary Learning

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Abstract

This study aimed to investigate the effect of visual aids on elementary Iranian EFL learners' vocabulary learning. To achieve the aim of the study, 60 elementary EFL learners were selected based on their performance on proficiency test. After administering the pretest, the participants of the experimental group received vocabulary visually. The teacher used different kinds of strategies such as: physical demonstration, creating a visual memory for the word, etc. Control group received vocabulary instruction through the conventional method, which was popular in similar courses by means of using dictionaries, definitions, synonyms, translation, etc. Finally, both groups took posttest. The results of independent sample t-test showed that visual aids were more effective to help elementary EFL learners to learn vocabulary. Accordingly, it was recommended that all the EFL teachers should feel responsible and use various types of visual aids as much as possible effectively.

Keywords: Teaching Aids, Visual Aids, Educational Technology, Teaching, Learning, and English Language Learners (ELLs)

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Introduction

English is the dominant international language of the 21st century. The increasingly growing importance and use of English language in this modern world is indisputable. A latest research from the British Council predicts that the number of people actively learning English around the world is set to be two billion by 2020. The always-increasing number of English Language Learners (ELLs) worldwide places a burden on the English as a Foreign Language (EFL)/English as a Second Language (ESL) researchers to pave the way for better language instruction. By the advent and advancement of technology, different teaching methods, classroom techniques and instructional materials enter the field of English language teaching (ELT), and the EFL/ESL teachers use different kinds of aids to make effective teaching. The use of visual aids is a sine qua non for affecting behavior of learners in every field. It is not possible to deny the need and importance of using visual aids in foreign language teaching processes (Seven & Engin, 2007). The EFL/ESL teachers, then, should borrow a leaf from them (Asokhia, 2009).

Ninety-four percent (94%) of what is learned is through the sense of sight and the sense of hearing (Cobun, 1968; as cited in Aggarwal, 2009). The use of visual aids of various types stimulates the language learners' five senses, mostly the sight and the hearing senses. Visual aids improve language learning in general and English as a foreign/second language in particular. The use of visual aids is effective at all levels of language learning, from beginners to advanced (Corbett, 2003; Mishra & Yadav, 2014), at all age brackets (Goodman, 1987), and also at all English language skills and subskills (Alduaïs, 2012).

Before going further, we shall offer a definition of visual aids. The concept of defining what constitutes visual aids is by nature complex. Dash and Dash (2007) define visual aids as "added devices or supplementary materials, which help the teacher to make his presentation concrete, effective, interesting, meaningful and inspirational. These materials are those devices which help the learners in the assimilation and retention of ideas" (p. 123). To cope with the complexity, classifying visual aids is of use. According to Dash and Dash (2007), visual aids can be classified in five different ways:

1. Projected aids, such as films, slides, and Overhead Projectors (OHPs), versus non-projected aids, such as pictures, charts, etc.
2. Audio aids, such as radios, tape recorders, record players, etc., visual aids, such as models, picture cut-outs, etc., and audio-visual aids, such as TVs and sound film strips.
3. Hardware, such as computers and epidiascopes, versus software, such as books, magazines, etc.
4. Big media, such as Video Cassette Recorders (VCRs), TVs, and computers, versus little media, such as radios, audio cassettes, etc.
5. Two-dimensional aids, such as printed materials, chalk boards, bulletin boards, and flannel boards, versus three-dimensional aids, such as static models, dynamic models, working models, sectional models, and specimen of various kinds.

Review of the Literature

Visual aids have embarked on their journey from the Direct Method, have broken their journey for some time at some intervals, and have reached this point, now.

Before the Direct Method, in the Grammar-Translation Method (GTM), there can be seen no sign of the utilization of visual aids. In the Direct Method, “objects (e.g. realia or pictures) present in the immediate classroom environment should be used to help students understand the meaning” (Larsen-Freeman, 2003, p. 27). It is believed that students need to associate meaning and the target language directly, through the use of realia, pictures, or pantomime; not translation to the student’s native language (Larsen-Freeman, 2003).

Taking one step forward, in Audio-Lingual Method (ALM), it is believed that the native language and the target language have separate language systems and they should be kept apart in order to reduce the students’ native language interference. To fulfill this goal, the language teacher uses only the target language in the classroom, and actions, pictures, or realia are used to give meaning otherwise (Larsen-Freeman, 2003).

The visual aids train arrives at the Silent Way, now. Students begin their study of the language through its basic building blocks, its sounds. These are introduced through a language-specific sound-color chart. The teacher makes use of the sound-color charts and Cuisenaire rods to start with the students’ already known information and build from that to the unknown. Meaning is made clear by focusing on students’ perceptions, not through translation (Larsen-Freeman, 2003). The sound-color charts and Cuisenaire rods form a central visual component of the method, that allow the teacher to present and elicit language while at the same time provide the students with tools for the creative construction of language (Brinton, 2001).

Visual aids breathe in Desuggestopedia, too. Visual aids help students take advantages of peripheral learning, fantasy, and a state of infantilization (Larsen-Freeman, 2003).

A tape recorder plays as the major teaching aid in Community Language Learning (CLL). It records the teacher provided target language translations of students’ native language in chunks, and plays back what it has recorded (Larsen-Freeman, 2003).

Here is Total Physical Response (TPR) station of visual aids train.

The first phase of a lesson is one of modelling. The instructor issues commands to a few students, then performs the actions with them. In the second phase, these same students demonstrate that they can understand the commands by performing them alone (Larsen-Freeman, 2003, p. 113).

Objects present in the immediate classroom environment to which commands are given, play as the major visual aids in transferring the meaning.

Finally, this is the last station of the visual aids train to date, i.e. Communicative Language Teaching (CLT). The most obvious characteristic of CLT

is that almost everything that is done, is done with a communicative intent. Another characteristic of CLT is the use of authentic materials. The final characteristic of CLT is carrying out activities in small groups (Larsen-Freeman, 2003).

One of the most important needs for successful communication is vocabulary. Today, vocabulary is believed to be the central part of language learning and it has great importance for language learners. Without vocabulary items the intended meaning cannot be understood completely. The significance of second and foreign language vocabulary learning has been emphasized by different researchers in language learning field (Nation, 2001). It was believed that learners could learn vocabulary items naturally (Allen, 1983). Today various techniques for teaching items are recognized.

Visual aids are varied forms of devices such as pictures, drawings, real objects, flashcards, photographs, charts, table, etc. which are considered as comprehensive tools used to make the meaning if vocabulary items clear to learners (Gairns & Redman, 1986). Visual aids are illustrative aids, which provide more information for the given materials. They present the information that is not easy or even not possible to be conveyed by words alone. They are especially helpful for teaching concrete vocabulary items (Kakavand, 2013). It is important to mention that the visual aids used in this study are read objects, pictures, and black board drawings.

Best achievements in communication depend on vocabulary learning, which is the chief component of language learning. Vocabulary is essential for understanding all the information in listening and reading and fundamental for developing speaking and writing skills. According to Kang (2004), the main goal of using visual aids for teaching vocabulary items is better comprehension and retention of new words. Visual aids are effective because they help learners to get and exchange information simply and they can make unintelligible concept easier to understand. It is also noted by Lazar (1996) that using visual aids make the difficult task of vocabulary learning easier for learners, they help learners to acquire a large amount of vocabulary items in a short period of time. By using visual aids, students can have more participation in learning task; they increase students' motivation and interest and they are effective for learners at all levels of learning. These have been proved by considering the amount of research conducted which support the positive effect of using visual aids.

However, despite the well-known improving power of visual aids, validated by numerous studies (Seven & Engin, 2007; Asokhia, 2009; Alduais, 2012) conducted to investigate the effectiveness of visual aids on ELLs' learning, most of the language teachers are not aware of the vital importance of them in teaching and learning, and do not make use of them or rarely use them (Wahyuni, 2006; Abebe & Davidson, 2012; Ashaver & Igyuve, 2013; Daniel, 2013; Subathra, 2014). The use of visual aids particularly in the third-world countries, including Iran, is not very copious. As Dolati and Richards (2012) stipulate, many language teachers seem to underestimate or ignore the potentially useful role of visual aids due to the verbal nature of the language-learning classroom. Even if the language teachers know the importance and incorporate visual aids into their teaching process, they fail to

exploit the potential of them to the full (Wright & Haleem, 1992) or to exploit them effectively (Ashaver & Igyuve, 2013; Nguyen, Warren, & Fehring, 2014; Gazimbe, Mapolisa, Khosa, & Tshabalala, 2015).

Some studies have proved the success and advantages of using visual aids in the environments and regions. Nevertheless, few studies have been carried out in Iran about the effects of visual aids on vocabulary learning. Limitation in the amount of vocabulary items is the most important problem for students who learn a foreign language (Alshwiah, 2009). It would be effective if using visual aids help them to learn the vocabulary items they need. In addition, not enough previous research is conducted in Iran, on the one hand, and most of the studies investigated visual aids do not distinguish between learners with different learning style preferences, on the other hand. The present study aimed at examining the effect of using visual aids on vocabulary learning of EFL learners generally.

The purpose of this study is to explore the effect of visual aids on Iranian EFL learners of elementary level of language proficiency. The following research question has been proposed:

- Do visual aids have any significant effect on elementary Iranian EFL learners' vocabulary learning?

Method

Participants

In this study, the participants were 60 non-randomly selected English learners, aged 8-12 whose mother tongue is Persian. The participants included both male and female students. They were studying "Family and Friends" series as their course book, twice a week, each time for 90 minutes. Through these books, they had enough exposure to all four skills.

Instruments

To achieve the objectives of the present study, the researcher used two types of tests and one type of teaching material.

KET language Proficiency Test

KET, which stands for Key English Test, is one of the standardized tests provided by Cambridge ESOL. It is the easiest Cambridge test and well performance on it proves having basic level of proficiency to communicate in English. Due to the fact that KET is one of the standardized tests that shows non-native speakers' elementary level language proficiency, it was selected for this study. The reading section consisting of 35 lexical and grammatical items was administered to learners to select homogenous learners based on their knowledge in these two areas of language.

Vocabulary Pretest and Posttest

Based on what has been mentioned, selected 35 words of Preliminary English Test (PET) vocabulary list were used to design a multiple-choice (M/C) test with 35 items and 4 alternatives for each items. The reason for choosing this type of test format was its high objectivity, which improves the external validity of the test.

Moreover, multiple-choice design is one of the most familiar testing formats. The vocabulary test was piloted among 20 participants. Based on item analysis of the collected data, defected items were revised. Moreover, in order to ensure pilot test's reliability, Cronbach alpha reliability was performed. Finally, the modified version of pilot test was used as both pretest and posttest.

The researcher selected 35 vocabulary items from among the words in PET vocabulary list. There are some reasons for selecting the words from such a word list, which are described as follows:

- First, PET vocabulary list was developed by Cambridge ESOL which is the same. Both KET and PET are more likely to follow the same line which in turn increases credibility of the study.
- Second, PET vocabulary list has been developed to guide the writers who produce materials for this type of test. Moreover, PET is another standard test developed by Cambridge ESOL and well performance on it proves speakers' intermediate language proficiency, which is a level higher than Elementary; therefore, selected words are less likely to be known by participants of this study prior to the treatment.
- Third, based on the corpus evidence, PET vocabulary list includes high frequent words which are considered as important factor in teaching vocabulary. Nation (2003) believes that teachers should facilitate vocabulary learning by teaching useful words to learners.

Visual Materials

A set of 35 teacher-made A4 cards with printed words and related pictures were used in the present study. Although both written form and picture of each word were printed on the same side of the card, cards' design is flexible enough to enable controlling the amount of information to be presented.

Procedure

The study was done in a language institute in Nahavand, Iran. The data were collected during 10 class sessions in 4 months. A structured procedure was adapted in order to investigate the effect of visual aids on elementary EFL learners' vocabulary learning. Therefore, to conduct the research and to verify the research question the following steps were taken:

Prior to the main study, pilot study was performed to determine the reliability of vocabulary test. It was used to measure the vocabulary knowledge of the

participants. A group of 20 EFL learners with almost similar age, sex, and proficiency level was selected to take part in the pilot study. To avoid transferring the content of research from the participants of pilot study to those who took part in the main study, the participants were selected from two different language institutes. The test was administered to the learners, five items were modified, and the final version of the test was prepared to be implemented in the main study. Also, the results of Cronbach's reliability analysis ($r = .78$) showed a satisfactory level of test reliability.

The participants' intended language proficiency level for this study was elementary, in order to ensure the homogeneity of the participants, a standard English language proficiency test i.e., KET was administered. Then, they took pretest in order to measure their knowledge of vocabulary before treatment sessions. Regardless of learners' performance on pretest, they were randomly assigned to two equal groups of experimental and control.

The participants of the experimental group received vocabulary in such a way that they could see the texts with both static and animated pictures. While teaching visually, the teacher used different kinds of strategies such as: physical demonstration, using mime and gesture, creating a visual memory for the word, pointing to the subject, using visual aids, magazines' picture, blackboard drawings, and drawings on students' knowledge of the words, and imagination. However, in learning new words from a reading, other strategies like guessing are used.

Control group received vocabulary instruction through the conventional method, which was popular in similar courses by means of using dictionaries, definitions, synonyms, translation, etc. At the end of the treatment sessions, all participants of the study took the same posttest that covered all of the vocabulary items they studied throughout the sessions in order to assess their vocabulary gain at the very last session of their course. The posttest was similar version of the pretest.

Results

The descriptive statistics of the participants of each group on pretest has been presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics of three groups' performance on pretest

Groups		Statistic
Pretest	Visual Group	Mean
		2.238
		Minimum
	Control Group	Maximum
	17	
	Mean	
	13.63	
	Std. Deviation	
	1.699	
	Minimum	
	7	
	Maximum	
	17	

In order to ensure that there is no significant difference between the two groups regarding their pretest scores, an independent sample t-test was performed. The results are provided in Table 2.

Table 2. Independent samples t-test between experimental and control groups on pretest

	Levene's Test for Equality of Variances			t-test for Equality of Means					
	F	Sig.	t	df	Sig.	Mean	Std. Error	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
						Difference	Difference	Lower	Upper
Pretest	Equal variances assumed	.576	.451	.452	58	.653	.36667	.81043	-1.255 1.98892

It was found that there is not any significant difference between experimental and control groups ($t = .45, p > 0.05$) in their performance on pretest. The descriptive statistics of the groups of participants' post-test vocabulary scores has been presented in Table 3.

Table 3. Descriptive statistics of three groups' performance on posttest

	Groups	Statistic	
		Mean	28.00
Posttest	Visual	Std. Deviation	1.645
		Minimum	19
	Control Group	Maximum	33
		Mean	16.11
	Control Group	Std. Deviation	1.132
		Minimum	10
		Maximum	18

In order to detect the effects of visual aids on enhancing elementary EFL learners' vocabulary learning, an independent sample t-test was performed between the performances of both groups on posttest. The results are provided in Table 4.

Table 4. Independent samples t-test between the posttest scores of control and experimental groups

	Levene's		t-test for Equality of Means						95%	
	Test for	Equality of	F	Sig.	t	df	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference		
								Confidence Interval of the Difference		
									Lower Upper	
Posttest	Equal variances assumed		1.348	.250	6.500	58	.000	9.71	.352	1.584 2.987

The results of independent samples t-test showed that there is a statistically significant difference between the participants of control and experimental groups' scores ($t = 6.50, p < 0.05$) on posttest. It indicates that EFL learners of visual group outperformed vocabulary posttest. Thus, the research question of the study was verified.

Discussion and Conclusion

On the basis of the results of statistical analyses, it was found that visual aids were effective instruments to help EFL learners to learn foreign language vocabulary. The findings of the study provided an empirical support for the effectiveness of visual instruction on Iranian EFL learners' vocabulary learning.

The results of this study supported the findings of Wright (1992) who found out that visual instruction of vocabulary is motivating and drawing learners' attention. Also, the findings of this study were in line with those of Wright and Haleem (1992) as they provided several significant ways to illustrate the meaning of a new word or a piece of language through pictures.

The results of this study are also able to support those of Scott, Ytreberg, and Lisbeth (1993) who specified that visual activity is useful for checking object vocabulary, prepositions, colors, and numbers.

In line with the findings of this study regarding the inadequate use of visual aids in the teaching-learning process, Abebe and Davidson (2012) carried out a research to examine the role of visual materials in teaching English vocabulary. The results of the study revealed that the majority of the teachers believe that the use of visual materials would help learners to improve their vocabulary.

The findings of the present study contradict those of Gazimbe, Mapolisa, Khosa, and Tshabalala (2015) who studied to see whether teachers in primary schools in Nkayi district effectively use visual aids when delivering lessons; it was found that teachers were not effectively using visual aids to deliver lessons.

The results of this study proved that teaching vocabulary items while using visual aids would lead to better learning among EFL learners. Visual aids also

increased the motivation of learners to improve their vocabulary knowledge as they experienced different ways to learn vocabulary items. They were involved in the process of learning by interactive exercises and activities, so it helps them promote their vocabulary learning. It was also found that by the use of a visual vocabulary instruction framework like the one investigated in this study, EFL learners can be exposed to more opportunities to communicate in EFL classes.

To conclude, this study might have clarified some issues attributable to some visual vocabulary learning activities in terms of collaborative and cooperative learning techniques in addition to their effects on EFL learners' language learning. However, it might also have given rise to more issues regarding the matter. EFL learners in their learning activities were provided conditions to take more advantages of classroom time by being involved in fruitful and interesting tasks. This fact confirmed the effectiveness of our given program.

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Author Biography



Masoumeh Azma was admitted to English teaching at Azad university of Shiraz in September 2013. In addition, she has worked in these courses in different English institutes from 2007 to 2010 for three years. Then she accepted in MA degree and studied it for two years. Next, she started teaching again at Azad University, Payamnoor University, Pirapezeshki University and Jahad daneshkahi univesity from 2012 till now. So, she collected some good experiences theoretically and practically. Having succeeded in her academic research, and gaining invaluable experience in teaching, she feels she is well-prepared for further challenging studies and research in the fields of Teaching. Thus, to achieve the aforementioned goals, she chose PhD program in Teaching English in Nanjing Normal University that is definitely one of the best Universities in China.
