

Implementing Task-based and Self Access Learning in English Vocabulary Lessons for Undergraduates at Dali University, China

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Abstract. *This study has been designed to explore the implementation of Task-based and self access learning in vocabulary lessons at Dali University in China. The researcher employed two groups pretest and post test experimental research design. The data collection and analysis were from two pre and post tests scores, a questionnaire on vocabulary learning, and teacher and student logs. The pretest and posttest and questionnaire were analyzed with SPSS, and learning and teaching log were coded and categorized. The results were as follows: Task-based and self access learning can make vocabulary learning student centered in a big class at Dali University in this study by making good use of interesting design of tasks, good class management and a qualified lecturer with good language skills etc.; Task-based and self access learning can make vocabulary learning more interesting by cooperative learning, using multi-media language lab and designing and doing good vocabulary tasks; Task-Based and self access vocabulary learning could not make a better vocabulary achievement for undergraduates in Dali University than the traditional teaching in this study, but the students held positive attitude toward the method.*

Key Words: Task-Based Approach, Self Access Learning, Vocabulary, Learning Strategy, Learning Autonomy

Introduction

Vocabulary learning is an ongoing life long process and a basic step to English learning, just as Wilkins (1985) stated that in the processing of communication, without grammar, little can be expressed, but without vocabulary, nothing can be conveyed. Laufer (1986) also points out its importance by saying that, "The learning of vocabulary lies at the very heart of English language learning, it would be reasonable to assume that language acquisition studies should devote no less scope and effort to vocabulary than to phonology and grammar".

Most Chinese classes are very large with a student number of 45 to 60. All of the non-English major undergraduates have to study college English for two years and take the formal national English tests. English classes are generally instructor dominated, especially in vocabulary teaching. As is known, large classes have great disadvantage if the teacher wants to teach with the students as center. All of the English teachers realize the ad-

vantage of student-centeredness, but they have to give way to using teacher centered teaching, in which the teacher explains almost every new word and its usage. However, in reality, some students often get bored with teacher domination. They are passive and inactive in class, and they always have to listen to the teacher. In the meanwhile, teachers do not know their students because only a small number of students often give response or have opportunity to speak in class. Most students cannot show how well they are. Teachers can only judge from students' scores and there is not much communication in class. Students cannot communicate very well in English even if they get a good score in the written examinations.

Although there have been a lot of research on vocabulary learning and teaching within a decade and there have been a fruitful outcome in this area, there are not much research in this area for large size classes. Thus conducting a research on the students' vocabulary learning strategies and introducing some new effective teaching and learning

method and classroom control for big size class has significant and practical meaning in language teaching and learning, especially for China.

Purpose of the Study

This study aimed to implement Task-Based self access learning in vocabulary lessons in a big class in order to make the class teaching learner centered and interesting so as to draw the best out of students. Also the researcher expected to discover whether task-based and self access vocabulary learning can make undergraduates' vocabulary achievement better than the traditional teaching.

Research Questions

1. How can Task-Based and self access vocabulary learning make learning student centered in a big class for undergraduates in Dali University?
2. How can Task-Based and self access learning make vocabulary learning more interesting?
3. Can Task-Based and self access vocabulary learning make a better vocabulary achievement for undergraduate than the traditional teaching?
4. Will students demonstrate a positive attitude toward Task-Based and self access vocabulary learning in class?

Literature Review

One way to see the overall task of vocabulary learning is through the distinction between knowing a word and using a word. In other words, the purpose of vocabulary learning should include both remembering words and the ability to use them automatically in a wide range of language contexts when the need arises (McCarthy, 1984). In fact, evidence suggests that the knowledge aspect (both breadth and depth) requires more conscious and explicit learning mechanisms whereas the skill aspect involves mostly implicit learning and memory (Ellis, 1994). Nation (1990) points out that it is efficient to spend class time on the strategies, and although the teacher's focus is on helping learners gain control of important strategies, the end goal of these strategies is to help the learners to continue to learn new words and increase their vocabulary size. Vocabulary learning strategies, therefore, should include strategies for "using" as well as "knowing" a word. Another way to view vocabulary learning is to see it as a process of related sub-tasks. When learners first encounter a

new word, they might guess its meaning and usage from available clues. Some learners might proceed to look it up in the dictionary. Others might take down notes along the margins, between the lines, or on separate vocabulary notebooks. Some learners will repeat the new word a number of times until they are comfortable with it. Others will go beyond simple rote repetition to commit the word to memory. Some would even try to use the word actively. Each of these task stages demands meta-cognitive judgment, choice, and deployment of cognitive strategies for vocabulary learning. And each strategy a learner uses will determine to a large extent how and how well a new word is learned (Gu, 2003).

Rubin (1987) suggests that there are three major types of strategies contributing directly or indirectly to language learning. The first group can be divided into cognitive and meta-cognitive strategies. The second group is communication strategies promoting communication with others. The third is social strategies referring to the activities that learners use in an attempt to increase their exposure to the language. Thornbury (2006) agrees with the categories of cognitive strategies, meta-cognitive strategies or social/affective strategies. He holds that cognitive strategies are those that are linked to the way learners process data and perform specific tasks in the target language; metacognitive strategies are those that are used to regulate and manage learning in general; and social/affective strategies are those that learners use in order to interact with other learners or native speakers, such as asking for repetition or clarification. After analyzing the previous division theories given by the researchers in this field, it can be seen that most people agree with these three categories. A closer look at the theories of O'Malley & Chamot, Cohen, Oxford, and Wen will help our understanding to it.

Since Rubin and other researchers studied the strategies used by successful learners in 1975, western scholars, such as Cohen, Nation, Ahmed, Lawson & Hogben, and Sanaoui, did a lot of vocabulary strategies research from the perspective of learners in the 1980s; the study results started to be widely applied in teaching and learning in 1990s. Researchers such as Wen (1996), Wu (1998), Wang (1998), Zhang (2001) in China did a lot of further experimental research on vocabulary strategies used by English and non-English major

undergraduates and graduates students.

Norbert Schmitt and Diane Schmitt (1995) generalized eleven principles that are related to memory and vocabulary acquisition. They think knowing a word is much further than knowing its meaning and the best way to remember new words is to include them into the known language; words should be recycled in order to be learned. Learning a word is an incremental process that gradually develops with repeated exposure and because there is constant interaction between the various stages.

Learning strategies are techniques or behaviors that learners consciously apply in order to enhance their learning (Thornbury, 2006). Chamot (1987) defined learning strategy as techniques, ways or other conscious behaviors that are employed by learners so as to optimize their learning process, increase their language knowledge and memory of information.

There are many definitions of the word 'task' in Task-based Approach. A famous one is that a task is an activity "where the target language is used by the learner for a communicative purpose (goal) in order to achieve an outcome" (Willis, 1996:23).

Researchers of TBA often mention in their research the following remark given by Long: A task is a piece of work undertaken for oneself or for others, freely or for some reward. Thus, examples of tasks include painting a fence, dressing a child, filling out a form, buying a pair of shoes, making an airline reservation, borrowing a library book, taking a driving test, typing a letter, weighing a patient, sorting letters, taking a hotel reservation, writing a cheque, finding a street destination and helping someone across a road. In other words, by "task" is meant the hundred and more things people do in everyday life, at work, at play, and in between (Long, 1985). It can be seen from the definition that Long's tasks mainly refer to the tasks in social life, real everyday life, which is called "target tasks" or "real-world tasks", but it doesn't cover the activities in language teaching class.

Nunan finds that there are "pedagogical tasks" in addition to "target tasks". "Pedagogical tasks" are the activities in class, which people would seldom meet in their real life. Nunan gives a definition of task as follows: The communicative task is a piece of classroom work which involves learners in comprehending, manipulating, producing

or interacting in the target language while their attention is focused on mobilizing their grammatical knowledge in order to convey meaning rather than to manipulate form. The task should also have a sense of completeness, being able to stand alone as a communicative act in its own right with a beginning, a middle, and an end (Nunan, 1989).

Richards defines "task" from the pedagogical perspective. It points out that "task" is an activity or action that is carried out as a result of processing, learning, or understanding of the language. The activities are designed to help achieve a particular goal (Richards et al, 2000).

Skehan (1998), drawing on a number of other writers, puts forward five key characteristics of a task.

1. Meaning is primary.
2. Learners are not given other people's meaning to regurgitate some sort of relationship to comparable real world activities.
3. There is some sort of relationship to comparable real-world activity communication problems to solve.
4. Task completion has some priority.
5. The assessment of the task is in terms of outcome (From Skehan, 1998 *A Cognitive Approach to Language Learning*).

Tasks give learners the chance to focus on using language to create their own meanings – using words and expressions they can recall, and then refine and build on that language as the task cycle progresses. When they find they can achieve the task goals, even with their limited English, they gain confidence, feel liberated, their motivation increases, they learn more and become better communicators. Task-based Learning and Teaching (TBLT) provides learners with natural exposure (input), chances to use language (without fear of getting things wrong) to express what they want to mean (output), to focus on improving their own language as they proceed from Task to Report stage, and to analyse and practise forms (Willis, 2007). Willis (1996) holds that tasks can be used as the central component of a three-part framework: "pre-task phase", "task cycle" and "language focus".

Pre-task Phase

Teacher discusses and explores the topic with students, highlights useful words and expressions

but without detailed explanation, helps the students better understand task instructions and prepare on this stage.

The Task Cycle

Teacher creates a lot of opportunities for students to express themselves and understand the others, and fluency is emphasized. Students do the task in pairs or small groups. Teacher monitors the progress, encouraging all attempts at communication, not correcting. Mistakes are allowed at this stage. Then students prepare to report the result of a task. More attention is paid to accuracy in order to demonstrate orally or in writing form in “public”. Naturally the focus is converted from “fluency” to “accuracy”. At last, the students are required to speak in public. Teacher may ask some students or several groups as representatives to report to class, or exchange written reports and compare results, while the other students comment or supplement after that. Teachers act as chairpersons. The students obtain more opportunities to be exposed to the target language by doing all of these. Learners get motivated during the process. Short-term motivation comes from the need of accomplishing a task or a report in public. Success in doing this can increase long-term motivation. Listening to fluent speakers doing the task also motivates students because learners will notice gaps in their own language, and will listen carefully to others.

Language Focus

Language focus can also be called “Analysis” and “Practice” stage. Students examine and then discuss specific features of the text or transcript of a recording. The language data comes from the texts or transcripts of recordings used in the task cycle, or from samples of language they have read or heard in earlier lessons. The students summarize the meaning and usage of the words by themselves in observation and analysis. Analysis activities can be in the form of oral or written practice, or dictionary reference work. In the meanwhile, students need time to note down useful words, phrases, and patterns. Regular revision helps vocabulary acquisition.

Dickinson (1987: 11) defines self-access learning as learners using materials in a self-instructed way to facilitate learning as “the term is neutral as to how self-directed or other-directed the learners

are”. This learning may range from self-directed to teacher-directed. Though its applications may vary, the ultimate goal is the same---facilitating autonomous learning

Self access language learning promotes the approach where students study independently choosing from among different resources that are available. The theory behind this style of learning is that students, especially foreign language students, learn better if they take responsibility in their learning. Self-access language learning has a close relationship with learner-centered approach, learner autonomy and self-directed learning as all focus on student responsibility and active participation for his/her own learning. This kind of instruction is most often done in the setting of a self-contained learning environment or self-access center (Gardner, D. & Miller, 1999).

A self-access center is a part of a language teaching institution allocated to self-directed study, and it is usually equipped with books, computers, video monitors, and audio equipment (Thornbury, 2006).

Research Design

The design of the present study is that of two groups pretest—posttest experimental design. The Vocabulary Pretest and post test was administered to the experimental group which includes 53 students and the control group which includes 58 students of the same major and grade before applying Task based and Self-access learning and teaching in vocabulary lessons. Moreover, a questionnaire was administered to both classes to find out their vocabulary learning and learner autonomy. The study lasted twenty hours.

A survey about the subjects’ respective vocabulary learning was held at the end of the experiment by completing a rate scale questionnaire. The questionnaire was written in English and Chinese, and the Chinese version was used so that the students could understand better.

During the implementation of Task-based self access learning, both the instructor and the students wrote teaching and learning logs.

Research Methods

A Pretest and posttest, a rating-scale questionnaire, teaching and learning logs were used to as instrumentation to collect data, and then SPSS v.

16.0 software was used to analyze the data output. Last, the results and discussion was gained to answer research questions of the study as well as proving the hypotheses.

Data Collection

The researcher designed vocabulary learning tasks, lesson plans, and a questionnaire first and got reliability and validity by consulting experts, doing pilot study to analyze reliability. After getting approval and solving ethic issues, the researcher implemented Task-based and self access learning in vocabulary lessons at Dali University, China. The subjects in experimental group were asked to write their opinion and impression just like reflexive journals, while the researcher wrote about the observation and implementation of Task-based self access learning as well as feelings. The posttest and the questionnaire were administered and got back in the last session.

Data Analysis

Paired samples t test, independent-Samples t-test and descriptive statistics output of the subjects' scores were analyzed and interpreted. The questionnaires were also analyzed with SPSS v.16 in descriptive statistics separately and tabulated to learn the learner autonomy in vocabulary learning. Teaching log and student logs were coded and categorized.

Results and Discussion

The data output of the pretest and posttest scores and questionnaire were tabulated, and learning and teaching logs were coded and categorized to get a result. The discussion section was devoted to the discussing the results in detail. Specific research questions got an answer from this chapter.

Response to the Research Questions:

The results of the pre-test and post-test showed that Task-Based self access vocabulary learning could not make a better vocabulary achievement for undergraduates than the traditional teaching in this study.

The results of the questionnaire were as follows:

1. Students hold positive beliefs about vocabulary autonomous learning.

2. The current ability of vocabulary autonomous learning of college student needs to be improved.

3. Task-based self access learning develops learner autonomy to some extent.

The results of learning logs and teaching log indicated that Task-Based self access learning made vocabulary learning more interesting, students demonstrated a positive attitude toward Task-Based self access vocabulary learning, and it made learning student centered in a big class for undergraduates at Dali University in this study.

Recommendations

On the basis of the research results, recommendations on teaching and learning and further research recommendation were made. Task-based self access learning can be used to facilitate student interest and student-centered teaching and learning in class. It is also recommended that a longer time experiment be done to explore an effective way of implementing Task-based self access vocabulary learning in the future because it takes time to see the effectiveness of implementing Task-based approach. More studies on Task-based self access learning in other areas of learning a second language (eg. grammar, listening, speaking...) should be very helpful to explore this student centered approach.

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