



The Effect of Task-based Teaching on Incidental Vocabulary Learning in English for Specific Purposes

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Abstract. Learning vocabulary is an essential part of language learning linking the four skills of speaking, listening, reading and writing together. This paper considers the incidental vocabulary teaching and learning within the framework of task-based activities in the hope of improving learners' vocabulary acquiring in English for Specific Purposes courses (ESP), concentrating on Mechanical Engineering students at Islamic Azad University of Hashtgerd, Iran. A total number of 55 male and female students who were taking their ESP courses participated in the study as a control and an experimental group. Homogeneity of the subjects was ascertained by a Nelson Proficiency Test. The test consisted 50 items. Traditional teaching methods of vocabularies were applied for the control group, whereas in the experimental group, technical vocabularies were taught on the basis of task based approach. A teacher-made test of technical vocabulary knowledge was administered as the pre-test. At the end of the semester, a post-test was given to the students to determine the influence of the treatment on the experimental group. The data analysis using SPSS (version 19.0) revealed that the subjects in the experimental group performed better on the post-test than the control group. The results of this study confirm the strong effects of task-based language teaching compared to the traditional approach in teaching technical vocabulary to Iranian ESP learners.

Keywords: task-based language teaching, incidental vocabulary acquisition, traditional approach, ESP.

1. INTRODUCTION

Vocabulary is a core component of language proficiency providing much of the basis for how well learners speak, listen, read and write. Without an extensive vocabulary and strategies for acquiring new vocabulary, learners often achieve less than their potential and may be discouraged from making use of language learning (Richards & Renandya, 2002). Vocabulary has been the most difficult part language learners encounter in the process of their language learning and their daily communication (Li-na, 2012). As Ketabi and Shahraki (2011) argued the outlook on vocabulary has changed during the last three decades and researchers paid lots of attention towards this area. This movement toward effective methodologies for teaching vocabulary has emerged, with researchers and language teachers suggesting many strategies and techniques for vocabulary learning. Two major directions towards vocabulary teaching and learning have been the cause of debate among vocabulary researcher: (1) Explicit instruction which involves diagnosing the words learners need to know, presenting the words for the first time, elaborating word knowledge, and developing fluency with known words; and (2) Incidental learning which is acquiring vocabulary through other communicative skills such as listening, reading, speaking, or writing. According to Khansir, Mousavi Basri and Hajivandi

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(2013) incidental vocabulary learning is learning that occurs when the mind is focused elsewhere, such as on understanding a text or using language for communicative purpose.

A wide range of studies in the literature have addressed the effects of task-based learning (TBL) in teaching English as a foreign language (EFL) classes. Studies have shown that tasks can be used in vocabulary classes to enhance learner motivation and vocabulary gain (Thanh & Huan, 2012). Teaching through task is an activity which involves the use of language but in which the focus is on the outcome of the activity rather than on the language used to achieve that outcome, providing a favorable learning conditions for the students of ESP courses (Iranmehr, Erfani & Davari, 2011).

Therefore, the aim of the paper is to investigate the impact of task-based instruction (sentence making task) incidental vocabulary teaching and learning in ESP courses concentrating on Mechanical Engineering students at Hashtgerd Azad University in, Iran.

2. STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

As Khansir, Mousavi Basri and Hajivandi (2013) argued vocabulary has not always been recognized as a priority in language teaching, but interest in its role in second language learning has grown rapidly in recent years and specialists now emphasize the need for a systematic and principled approach to vocabulary by both teachers and learners. They also mentioned that in communication vocabulary is often more important than grammar noting that difficulties students face regarding vocabulary learning are mostly rooted in lack of systematic practicing, which must first be dealt with in the educational system and later in the classroom. Therefore, teachers and instructors should play their role through using these strategies in their teachings.

Tasks provide activities which has the essential effect in classroom learning processes. TBI emphasizes the importance of the present of tasks in these processes. As learners in EFL contexts have fewer opportunities to practice language outside school, classroom activities become more important in the process of L2 learning. In order to have a more effective teaching-learning environment teachers and syllabus designers turn to tasks (Kasap, 2005).

Thus, due to the importance of a principled approach to vocabulary teaching and learning it seems necessary to investigate whether task-based language teaching has any effect on improving technical vocabulary to Iranian ESP learners.

3. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

3.1. Task-based Language Teaching

Task-based approach to L2 teaching was first performed by Prabhu, who published the Bangalore research report in 1982 and advanced the concept of task-based approach (Bantis, 2008). Prabhu believed that if students' minds are focused on the task, rather than on the language they are using, they may learn more effectively (Hasan, 2014). Task-based language education starts from the basic idea that students learn a language by performing tasks. Task-based teaching (TBT) is the most effective way to teach a language by engaging learners in real language use in the classroom. Task-based instruction creates more favorable conditions and facilitates L2 acquisition. For this reason task-based language teaching has recently been the focus of attention from many L2 language instructors and syllabus designers (Rahimpour,

2006). TBLT has been known for years as a teaching instruction model with a variety of benefits, and it has attracted much attention of ELT teachers since it is the realization of CLT as a branch (Hung, 2012). TBT is done by designing tasks such as, games, problems and discussions which require learners to use language for themselves (D. Willis & Willis, 2007, p1). According to Kasap (2005) as learners in EFL contexts have fewer opportunities to practice language outside school, classroom activities become more important in the process of L2 learning. In order to have a more effective teaching-learning environment teachers and syllabus designers turn to the role of tasks and TBI. Tasks have their everyday meaning as the things people do, such as “painting a fence, buying a cinema ticket, finding a street destination, making a hotel reservation” (Ellis, 2004, p. 16). Ellis (2004) defined task as a workplan that requires students to process language pragmatically in order to achieve an outcome that can be evaluated in terms of whether the correct or appropriate propositional content has been conveyed. So they should pay attention to meaning and to make use of their own linguistic resources, although the design of the task may predispose them to choose particular forms.

3.2. ESP Vocabulary Teaching

Vocabulary knowledge is an important consideration especially for those who need to learn it for specific purposes. In various versions and views of ESP course plans, vocabulary teaching programs are needed to expand learners’ potential in extracting meaning and to develop the knowledge of the jargon of the genre (Riahipour & Saba, 2012).

ESP courses receive a great deal of attention and emphasis among the EFL practitioners and learners especially at universities. According to Dudley-Evans and St John (1998, p. 83) in terms of teaching technical vocabulary in ESP, it is most important to make a distinction between two types of vocabulary: technical (uses of general vocabulary in specific disciplines) and semi-technical or core business vocabulary. They suggest two broad areas related to technical vocabulary as follows;

- Vocabulary that is used in general language but has a higher frequency of occurrence in specific and technical description and discussion.
- Vocabulary that has specialized and restricted meanings in certain disciplines and which may vary in meaning across disciplines.

Technical vocabulary is a major concern for learners who have special purposes in language learning (Chung & Nation, 2004). Words fade away after a few days of memorization (Nowzan, & Baryaji, 2013). Most ESP students in Iran are well aware of the importance of vocabulary in studying a foreign language; they are well aware of their need to enrich their vocabulary but in ESP courses in Iran at university level, despite new methods and approaches, unfortunately most of the techniques teachers use on teaching vocabulary are still traditional; the teacher focuses on the translation of technical text and there is no real interaction among students (Sarani & Sahebi, 2012).

As Ketabi and Shahraki (2011) mentioned the outlook on vocabulary has radically changed during the last three decades, and researchers have shown outpouring interests towards this area. Therefore, researchers and language teachers have also suggested many strategies and techniques for vocabulary learning, which are dependent on the efforts of each learner. Because of the importance of vocabulary learning in English for specific purposes, it seems necessary to investigate whether task-based language teaching has any effect on improving vocabulary in an ESP environment of Iranian students.

3.3. Case Studies

Many researchers suggested that task-based instruction has a significant role in language vocabulary knowledge. (Khansir, Mousavi Basri, & Hajivandi, 2013) tried to find out the effects three kinds of tasks such as reading comprehension, reading comprehension with fill-in gaps and sentence writing on Iranian students' vocabulary learning. The findings revealed the significant impact of task involvement on the incidental learning of vocabulary by EFL learners. Vosoughi and Mehdipour (2013) considered the effect of recognition task and production task on incidental vocabulary learning of Iranian EFL learners. The results indicated that both treatments had a significant effect on incidental vocabulary learning but this effect was greater in production group. Ajideh, Rahimpour, Amini and Farrokhi (2013) conducted a study in order to achieve activation of L2 incidental vocabulary acquisition as a result of engagement with a reading-while listening task. The results of their study confirm the effectiveness of task-specific motivation in improving linguistic achievements. The results also revealed that motivational involvement had an enhancing effect on both retention and ease of activation of L2 vocabulary in short-term assessment. Thanh and Huan (2012) examined the effects of task-based language learning on motivating non-English majors to acquire vocabulary. They concluded that the participants were motivated to learn vocabulary and their vocabulary achievement improved after the experiment under task-based instruction. Sarani and Sahebi (2012) investigated the teaching of vocabulary in ESP courses within the paradigm of task-based language teaching, concentrating on Persian literature students. The results showed that ESP learners who were taught vocabulary through task-based language teaching outperformed those learners who were taught vocabulary through traditional approach. Javanbakht and Yasuj (2011) performed a study in order to explore the evidence of incidental vocabulary learning through three kinds of tasks (reading comprehension, reading comprehension with fill-in gaps, and sentence writing) on male elementary EFL learners. The results showed evidence of the significant impact of task involvement on the incidental learning of vocabulary by male elementary EFL learners.

4. RESEARCH QUESTION

This study intends to answer the following question:

RQ: Does task-based instruction of vocabulary (sentence writing task) have any significant effects on ESP learners' technical vocabulary knowledge?

5. METHODOLOGY OF THE STUDY

The methodology of the present study, including participants, the instruments and the procedures applied to answer the research question will be presented in this section.

5.1. Participants

For the purpose of the study 55 BA students in two classes of males and females, majoring in Mechanical Engineering at the Islamic Azad University of Hashtgerd, Iran were chosen to participate in this study. In order to ensure their lexical homogeneity, a Nelson Proficiency Test was administered among the students. Then the two classes were randomly labeled as

experimental (N=29) and control groups (N=26). In addition, the learners' mother tongue was Persian. They were between 19 and 43 years old at the time of data collection.

5.2. Instruments

In this study, the aim was to see whether writing-based task (sentence writing) was beneficial for vocabulary learning in ESP course. The instruments used in this paper are as follows:

5.2.1. Nelson Proficiency Test

First of all a Nelson Test was administered at the beginning of the study. The test was piloted with 28 EFL learners having almost the same features with the main participants of this study. The reliability of Nelson Test, which consisted of 50 items, was assessed to be 0.90 using KR-21.

The test was administered to 81 participants in order to select homogenous participants. Based on the results obtained on Nelson Test, 52 students whose score was one standard deviation, 8.30 above and below the mean (24.86) were selected as homogeneous participants for this study (see Appendix I).

5.2.2. Pre-test and post-test

5.2.2.1. Teacher-made Technical Vocabulary Pre-test

After ensuring homogeneity of students through Nelson Proficiency Test, a teacher-made technical vocabulary test was administered to test the ESP learners' ability regarding their technical vocabulary knowledge. Forty five items were mainly selected from the five units which were to be covered during the course in both groups. To standardize the test, the researcher piloted the test for the target group of 28 learners to calculate reliability. The reliability of Vocabulary Test was estimated to be 0.84 through Cronbach Alpha which is a good indicator of internal consistency.

5.2.2.2. Teacher-made Technical Vocabulary Post-test

In the last step, the similar technical vocabulary test with 45 multiple-choice items was administered to learners as the post-test after treatment in order to see whether the task-based instruction of vocabulary (sentence writing task) had any significant effects on ESP learners' technical vocabulary knowledge.

5.2.3. Procedure

To achieve the purpose of the present study, the following steps were taken during the research process. The purpose of this study was to measure the amount of incidental vocabulary gained through task-based instruction (sentence writing task) by BA students who were majoring in Mechanical Engineering at the Islamic Azad University, Hashtgerd Branch, who were taking their ESP course. Having selected homogeneous learners, and having pre-tested Mechanical Engineering students for ensuring lexical homogeneity, the two classes were randomly labeled into the experimental and the control groups. Both the experimental and the control groups enrolled in an ESP course specific for Mechanical Engineering learners for five sessions of treatment (one hour and a half, once a week). Both groups were instructed by the same teacher, who had experiences in teaching ESP in Mechanical Engineering. During the

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whole course, 75 mechanical engineering words, each session 15 terms, were taught through different activities for each of the two classes. The treatment for both groups, involved teaching 15 new Mechanical terms in each chapter, in which the treatment group received treatment based on sentence writing task in each session and the control group was under the traditional treatment of vocabulary teaching. The textbook utilized for both classes was *English for the Students of Mechanical Engineering (Design of Solids)*. The course book focuses on different topics related to Mechanical Engineering, the items for the treatment were chosen from the beginning five units; mechanical design, mechanics of solids (i): rigid bodies (statics & dynamics), mechanics of solids (ii): deformable bodies, strength of materials: design for static strength and statistical consideration.

6. RESULTS

The goal of this study was to investigate the significant effect of task-based instruction of vocabulary (sentence writing task) on ESP learners' technical vocabulary knowledge. The data collection procedure was carefully performed and the raw data was submitted to SPSS (version 19.0) to run the required statistical analyses in order to address the research question of this study. This part describes the detailed statistical analyses performed throughout the research. Every step which was taken in analyzing the obtained data is presented in form of tables and figures in this part.

6.1. Reliability Statistics

Nelson Test, Vocabulary Pre-test and Vocabulary Post-test Test that were employed in the present study were piloted to estimate their reliability. The results in Table 2 indicate that these three tests were piloted with 28 EFL learners having almost the same features with the main participants of this study. The reliability of Nelson Test, which consisted of 50 item, was assessed to be 0.90 using KR-21 and the reliability of Vocabulary Test was estimated .84 through Cronbach Alpha which is a good indicator of internal consistency.

Table 1. Reliability Statistics of Nelson Test, Vocabulary Test.

Test	No. of Students	No. of Items	Reliability Index	Reliability Method	Test
Nelson Test	28	50	.90	KR-21	Nelson Test
Vocabulary Test	28	45	.84	Cronbach Alpha	Vocabulary Test

6.2. Nelson Proficiency Test Results

Nelson Test was administered to 81 participants to select homogeneity participants. Table 1 below displays the descriptive statistics of the participant's scores on Nelson Test. The table shows that the mean, median and mode of the Nelson scores were 24.86, 24, and 24 respectively. These central parameters are not very different from each other implying that the scores are distributed almost equally around the mean.

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics for Nelson Homogenizing Test Scores.

N	Range	Mean	Median	Mode	SD	Skewness	Kurtosis
81	36	24.86	24.00	24	8.30	.160	-.568

Based on the results obtained on Nelson Test, those 55 students whose score was one standard deviation, 8.30 above and below the mean, 24.86 were selected as homogeneous participants for this study. Figure 1 below illustrates the distribution of the Nelson scores on a normal curve. The normality was proved since the ratios of skewness and kurtosis (Table 1) over their respective standard errors did not exceed the ranges of +/- 1.96.

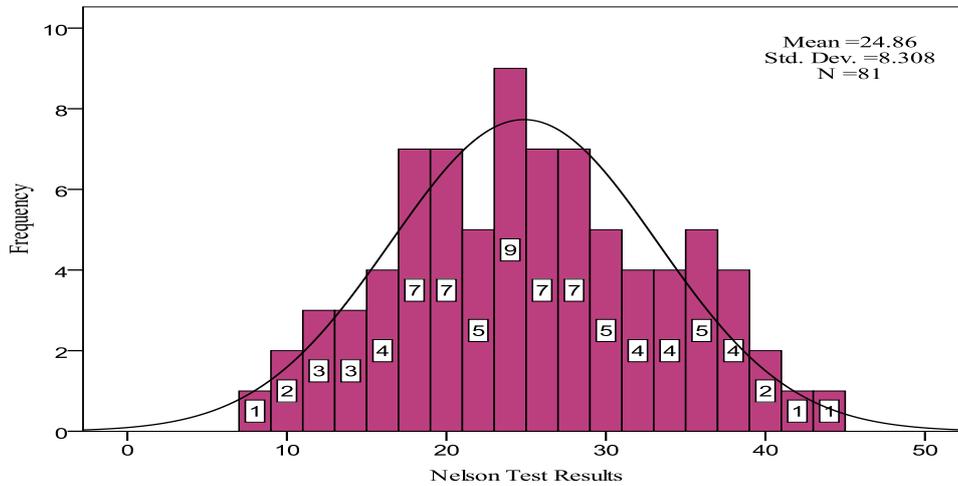


Figure 1. Distribution of Nelson results.

6.3. Testing Assumptions

Four assumptions of interval data, independence of subjects, normality and homogeneity of variances should be met before one decides to run parametric tests (Field, 2009). The first assumption is met because the present data are measured on an interval scale. Bachman (2005, p. 236) believes that the assumption of independence of subjects is met when - the performance of any given individual is independent of the performance of other individual.

The third assumption concerns the normality of the data which is tested through the ratios of skewness and kurtosis over their respective standard errors. As displayed in Table 3 the ratios of skewness and kurtosis over their respective standard errors are within the ranges of +/- 1.96 for the scores of the two target and control groups on the pre-test and post-test.

Table 3. Normality Tests for Scores on the Pre-test and Post-test of Vocabulary in the Two Groups.

Source	Group	N	Skewness		Kurtosis	
			Statistic	Std. Error	Statistic	Std. Error
Pre-test	Target	29	-.262	.241	.434	-.436
	Control	26	-.201	-.288	.456	-.224
Post-test	Target	29	-.177	-.214	.434	-.623
	Control	26	-.412	-.380	.456	-.639

The last assumption – homogeneity of variances – will be discussed when reporting the results of the inferential statistics.

6.4. Descriptive Statistics

Before discussing the results of inferential statistics, the descriptive statistics of participants' vocabulary scores in the target and control groups on both pre-test and post-test were computed and presented in Table 4. The table shows that the mean and standard deviation of the two target

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($M = 10.55$, $SD = 2.08$) and control ($M = 11.04$, $SD = 2.35$) groups are not different from each other on pre-test of vocabulary. However the results revealed that the students in the target group ($M = 28.66$, $SD = 4.93$) surpassed those in the control group ($M = 25.54$, $SD = 4.58$) on post-test of vocabulary.

Table 4. Descriptive Statistics of Two Group's Scores on the Pre-test and Post-test of Vocabulary.

Source	Group	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Pre-test	Target	29	10.55	2.080
	Control	26	11.04	2.358
Post-test	Target	29	28.66	4.937
	Control	26	25.54	4.580

6.5. Inferential Statistics to Answer the Research Question

The research question of this study asked whether task-based instruction of vocabulary (sentence writing task) have any significant effects on ESP learners' technical vocabulary knowledge.

In order to answer this research question, Independent Sample Test was conducted. The results of Independent Sample Test to compare to compare two target and control groups' vocabulary scores on pre-test of vocabulary are provided in Table 5. The table shows that the hypothesis of equal of variances was met since the Sig. of Levene's Test, 0.69 exceeded .05.

Table 5. Independent Samples Test to Compare Two Groups' Scores on the Pre-test of Vocabulary.

Levene's Test for Variances			T-test for Means			
	<i>F</i>	<i>Sig.</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>Sig. (2-tailed)</i>	Mean Diff.
Equal variance assumed	.151	.699	-.813	53	.420	-.487

Independent Samples Test results in Table 5 indicate that there was no statistically significant difference in means between the two groups on the pre-test of vocabulary, $t_{(53)} = .813$, $p = .42$, $p > .05$, in which the t observed, 0.81 was lower the t critical, 2.00, and the p value, .42 was above the selected significant level for this study, .05. So we could conclude that the two groups were homogeneous regarding vocabulary knowledge before experiencing the treatment of this study.

Further, another analysis of Independent Samples Test was run to compare two groups' vocabulary scores on the post-test of vocabulary, and the results are provided in Table 6. As the table shows, the Sig. of Levene's Test, 70 was higher than 0.05 showing that the assumption of equal of variances was met.

Table 6. Independent Samples Test to Compare Two Groups' Scores on the Post-test of Vocabulary

Levene's Test for Variances			T-test for Means			
	<i>F</i>	<i>Sig.</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>Sig. (2-tailed)</i>	Mean Diff.
Equal variance assumed	.144	.706	2.418	53	.019*	3.117

* $p < .05$ = It shows significant difference.

Table 6 indicates that Independent Samples Test detected a statistically significant difference in vocabulary scores between the two target and control groups, $t_{(53)} = 2.41$, $p = .019$, $p < .05$, in which the t value, 2.41 was greater than the t critical, 2.00, and the p value, .01 was below the selected significant level for this study, .05; accordingly the answer to the research question of the current study was positive. Therefore, with 95% confidence, it can be claimed that task-based instruction of vocabulary (sentence writing task) influences ESP learners' technical vocabulary knowledge. In fact the two groups scored significantly different on the final test of vocabulary. Figure 2 below is a bar graph that graphically illustrates the results. A quick look at the figure hands on that the treatment of this study has been significantly effective.

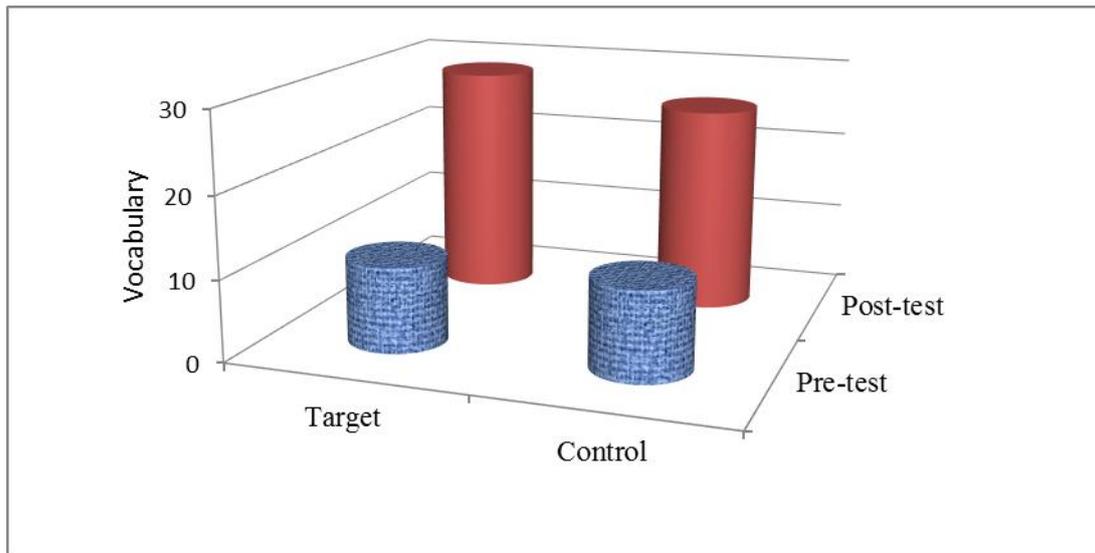


Figure 2. Bar graph of two groups' means on the pre-test and post-test of vocabulary.

7. DISCUSSION

This study was primarily aimed at examining the effect of task-based teaching on incidental vocabulary learning in English for specific purposes. In this section the finding will be presented and discussed findings in relation to other studies.

Regarding the research question posed, examining the effect of task-based instruction on ESP learners' technical vocabulary knowledge, it was found that the participants in the experimental group outperformed the control group. The significant improvement regarding the participants vocabulary learning ability in the experimental group must have originated from the type of instruction they had been exposed to during the time that the experiment was conducted (Sarani and Sahebi, 2012). This finding is consistent with the results that Vosoughi and Mehdi-pour (2013); Sarani and Sahebi (2012); Thanh and Huan (2012); and Javanbakht and Yasuj (2011) obtained. These four studies revealed the significant impact of task involvement on the incidental learning of vocabulary by EFL learners. Therefore, it is plausible to argue that when learners are under task-based instruction showed higher preference in learning technical vocabularies. The findings are also in agreement with the findings of studies by Li-na (2012) and Ajideh, et al. (2013). The findings of this study are also in line with the study of Khansir, Mousavi Basri, & Hajivandi, (2013) regarding the significant effect of TBT on the incidental learning of vocabulary by EFL learners.

In summary, task-based instruction has a marked effect on vocabulary acquisition. As Li-na (2012) argued task-based instruction is an effective way in English vocabulary learning in which it can afford interest and authenticity, improve language by negotiation of meanings, and

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create a climate of intimacy and deep cooperativeness basic to learners' emotional and cognitive growth.

8. CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

L2 learners need a large number of L2 new words, the use of different kinds of activities might increase the interest and motivation of L2 learners to learn L2 new words better. The purpose of this study has been to investigate the impact of task-based instruction (sentence writing task) in enhancing ESP vocabulary to EFL learners. It attempted to empirically reveal that activities in the form of classroom tasks can be very helpful in accelerating students' language learning development. According to the gained results (discussed in data analysis part) ESP learners who have been taught vocabulary through task-based language teaching outperformed those learners who have been taught vocabulary through traditional approach.

The findings of this study suggested the importance of including task-based language teaching in ESP courses as an innovative alternative in order to make ESP vocabulary learning an autonomous process. They can help students build their vocabulary by doing different types of tasks to improve their incidental vocabulary learning. The finding of this study may add to the present literature in SLA theory, syllabus design, and material development. In summary syllabus designer can provide programs to insert different task-based instruction in all related courses; such as, EAP, EGP.

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