The Effects of Implicit, Explicit and Blended Vocabulary Instruction on the Fourth Graders' Achievement

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Abstract

The aim of this study was to explore the effectiveness of implicit, explicit and blended types of vocabulary instruction on the fourth graders and to discover their retention level. This quasi-experimental study was applied in 2011-2012 academic year in a state school in the western city of Turkey. Three fourth grade groups (N=40) participated to test the effectiveness of implicit, explicit and blended types of vocabulary instruction. Each group took a pre-test, post-test and delayed test and the results revealed that the students who received the explicit treatment statistically outperformed the other two treatment groups in the post-test and delayed post-test. Based on the findings of the study it can be concluded that foreign language learning programs should include the explicit vocabulary instruction especially for young learners.

Keywords: Implicit vocabulary instruction, explicit vocabulary instruction, blended vocabulary instruction, retention, language teaching.

1. Introduction

   Learning in general is not easy to define because of its complex nature and there are many different perspectives emphasizing a different facet of this complex process (Tarpy, 1997, p.6). Learning consists of the acquisition and modification of knowledge, cognitive- linguistic- motor- and social skills, strategies, beliefs, attitudes, and behaviours (Schunk, 2000, p.1). Greek philosophers believe that knowledge is either innate (Plato's view) or derived from experience (Aristotle's view). In the early twentieth century, learning is defined as the change in behavior which is the consequence of a stimulus- response chain shaped by positive and negative reinforcement by the behaviorists. Learning theories have found their reverberations in language learning theories in the same way. In humanism which emerged in the 1960s, language learning is student centered and personalized and the study of the self, motivation and goals are important which is, in contrast, to the behaviorist notion of operant conditioning in which it is claimed that all language behavior is the result of memorization. In cognitivism replacing behaviorism in the 1960s knowledge can be seen as schema or symbolic mental constructions, and language learning is defined as change in a learner's schemata. To the constructivists in 1980s, language learning is an active and contextualized process of constructing knowledge rather than acquiring it, and knowledge is constructed based on personal experiences and hypotheses of the environment. Despite experts' divergence in the precise nature of learning, a general definition of language learning can also be presented as language learning is "an enduring change in behavior or in the capacity to behave in a given fashion resulting from practice or other forms of experience" (Schunk, 2000, p.2).

   From the late 1980s, vocabulary learning was an area that had drawn researchers' interest within the mainstream of language acquisition (Nation, 1997). That is why the instruction type is an important contributor in the development and consolidation of vocabulary knowledge in foreign language teaching and

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learning. As Baker (2003) claims there are various phases in vocabulary instruction one of which is the teacher's presenting the pronunciation and the meaning of the word, and another is the teacher's controlling learners' comprehension and finally making learners relate the word to their own life by using it in appropriate context. In presenting a vocabulary item, various techniques might be applied such as providing a short definition, a detailed description, pictures or real objects, miming and/or acting, matching the word with its meaning and labeling, or giving associated ideas and collocations in context. While checking for the comprehension after presentation and leading learners to produce a new vocabulary item, the primary aim is the correct usage and the retention of the words taught. Sentence completions, cloze tests, crossword puzzles, categorizing, sequencing, deleting the odd one, identifying chunks, semantic mapping (which is a visual strategy to expand and extent vocabulary by showing categories a word is related to), songs, games and keyword method (in which a key word resembling the target word phonologically is taken and pictured together with the target word), and interpreting dictionary entries are some techniques used at this stage. As mentioned above vocabulary instruction can be led through various ways. Some of them do that in a conscious, planned and systematic way and some do in an unconscious way by making learners acquire vocabulary after being exposed to the target language in natural contexts. The first group can be called *direct vocabulary instruction* in which learners learn vocabulary through unnatural activities such as word lists, games, and vocabulary lists. The second group, *indirect vocabulary instruction,* requires the learner to focus on tasks rather than just focusing on vocabulary and aims at developing his vocabulary knowledge subconsciously through language activities based on contextualization (Nation, 2001). Indirect vocabulary instruction is defined as instruction without teaching and without conscious inductions requiring the learners' attention to word form and meaning (Hulstijn, 1997, p. 49). Implicit instruction is defined as facilitating the acquisition of knowledge by means of a process taking place naturally, simply and without conscious operation as in indirect vocabulary instruction (Nick Ellis, 1994, p. 360). However, Stahl (1999, p.14) asserts that context may be a powerful teaching aid in learners' vocabulary growth, but it is a long-term process since word meanings are slowly accumulated through exposure and this process can be shortened by means of explicit instruction. *Explicit* or *intentional learning* is the other term for direct learning and *implicit* or *incidental* for indirect learning. As Schmitt (2000, p. 145) defines it, explicit vocabulary learning means a focused study of words. In explicit learning students memorize term after term with their respective meanings which is quick but also superficial, and they encounter vocabulary in a relatively isolated form without enough contexts. Explicit vocabulary instruction involves learning activities emphasizing attention on vocabulary. Nation and Newton (1997, p. 241) state that explicit vocabulary instruction means allotting time to do explicit vocabulary exercises such as word-building exercises, matching words and definitions, studying vocabulary in context and semantic mapping focusing on the targeted vocabulary. Explicit instruction of vocabulary or direct instruction is conducted through various techniques such as memorizing newly learned vocabulary items, fill-in-the blanks exercises, using the words in new contexts. It is mostly essential at the very first stages of acquiring a target language, especially for beginners learning the most frequent words in order to catch up with the complex structure of the texts or any other input in the target language. The blended type of vocabulary instruction is a type using both types in a balanced way to facilitate language learning by means of an interplay among morphophonological, syntactic, and conceptual processes. However, there is no agreement about the way of instruction- teaching vocabulary implicitly by providing learners with a mere exposure to numerous kinds of input or teaching explicitly through similar exposure along with explicit explanation of the relevant rules (DeKeyser, 1995).

Therefore, one of the most frequently asked questions in language teaching circles is whether vocabulary should be taught explicitly by giving meanings directly as in the traditional approaches or implicitly by letting learners infer meaning from input by using their inner learning mechanisms as they do while learning their mother tongue. The latter is seen superior to the former by many researchers including Krashen.

Long (1991) distinguishes two approaches of form-focused instruction (FFI) in which attention is on forms of language and the aim of instruction is to raise consciousness of learners. The first one is focus-on-forms (FoFs) which requires a planned approach in which a specific form for treatment is selected firstly and learners systematically accumulate these forms as discrete entities. The latter is focus-on-form (FoF) which involves attention to form in tasks that are meaning centered and which includes a communication problem to be resolved in negotiation.

Ellis (2005a, p.713) also defines language instruction broadly as 'indirect' and 'direct' intervention (Figure 1). Indirect intervention is to create conditions where learners can learn things experientially by acquiring how to communicate in the L2. It mostly takes place in a task-based syllabus motivating communication among the classroom participants. Indirect intervention looks like inductive in nature, but it can also take place as a deductive intervention when a specific learning target is selected and masked from

the learners without drawing their explicit attention. Direct intervention constitutes explicit instruction in which metalinguistic awareness is achieved deductively by giving rules and meanings directly and inductively by helping learners discover rules and meanings themselves, and its major function at the outset is to direct and focus learners' attention to the target language. Direct intervention is characterized by a structural syllabus. In direct intervention, skill-getting is aimed and in indirect intervention both skill getting and skill using are required (Ellis, 2005a, p.713). In order to evaluate the contribution of direct or indirect intervention to learning and acquisition, the intervention can simply be classified- for isolating the differential effects of instruction types- as explicit instruction involving some sort of rule being taught during the learning process, and implicit instruction providing learners with experience of specific exemplars of a pattern while they are not attempting to learn it to enable learners to infer rules without awareness (Ellis et al., 2009).

<u>Language Instruction Types</u>

<u>Indirect Intervention (Implicit Ins.)</u>		<u>Direct Intervention (Explicit Ins.)</u>	
Inductive (Experiential Learning)	Deductive (Preplanned masked form in communication)	Inductive (Learners discover)	Deductive (Teacher gives)

Figure 1 Ellis's (2005b) Language Instruction Types

Basically the main characteristics of implicit and explicit instruction can be summarized in the following way :

Table 1
Implicit Instruction vs. Explicit Instruction

Implicit Instruction	***Explicit Instruction***
- Creating learning conditions	- Achieving metalinguistic awareness
- Attracting learners' attention to the target language while communicating in a task-based syllabus	- Directing learners' attention to the target language in a structural syllabus
- Skill-getting and skill-using	- Skill-getting
- Occurring spontaneously or for eliciting a specific linguistic target	- Predetermined and planned or based on learner errors
- Minimal interruption of learning	- Interruption of learning
- Linguistic target in context	- Linguistic target in isolation
- Free practice	- Controlled practice
- No metalanguage	- Metalanguage

2. Method

Studies which are organized around a pre- and post-test, experimental and control groups, and in which subjects are not assigned randomly are called quasi experimental. Having all these characteristics this study has, also, a quasi experimental design (Nunan, 1992, p. 41;Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2008, pp. 48-65). Since in Turkish state schools the implicit instruction is the one recommended by the Ministry of Education for young learners in state schools where there are approximately 35-50 students in one class and where English lesson has only three hours a week, the main purpose of this quasi-experimental investigation is to find out and compare the effectiveness of implicit, explicit, or blended type of vocabulary instruction on the fourth graders' achievement levels. In addition, this study attempts to find out whether implicit, explicit, and/or blended types of vocabulary instruction affect the students' vocabulary retention level in English or not.

2.1. Participants

The participants of the study are 120 fourth graders in three groups learning English as a foreign language in a primary school in the academic year of 2011-2012. The groups were assigned randomly to be taught

with implicit, explicit, or blended types of vocabulary instruction. The groups were made up of equal or almost equal numbers of male and female students. The first group which was instructed implicitly included 20 male and 20 female students, the explicit group had 20 males and 20 females, and the blended group consisted of 16 male and 24 female students totaling 120 students. Necessary permission was granted and the participants were informed about the confidentiality of their answers, the procedure and the involvement in the study.

2.2. Data Collection Instruments

The instrument to collect data quantitatively was developed according to Language Curriculum for Primary Education in Turkey. After the necessary official permission, the achievement test was designed by the researchers. The test consisting of 25 items (a multiple choice test with 4 options) was piloted on two different fourth grade classes (89 students) in a primary school. A reliability analysis was conducted and the alpha coefficient for 25 items was .83, which suggests that the items had relatively high internal consistency. Then this test was administered as the pre, post and delayed post tests to the intervention groups. The last one was used to see to what extent vocabulary retention level changed in terms of the vocabulary instruction type.

2.3. Procedure

The study was implemented in the first semester and the unit entitled as 'My Clothes' was chosen. After the selection of the target vocabulary, lesson plans were prepared by the researchers. The achievement test was designed in multiple choice forms and its reliability was measured in November and implemented as the pre-test at the beginning of December. Three fourth grade classes were taught in three different ways of instruction- implicit, explicit, and blended- during six weeks, by the researcher, in the regular English lessons (three hours a week). In the explicit instruction, vocabulary was presented through acting-out, drawing, and spelling. Then students' comprehension was checked through categorization, matching, vocabulary lists, games, sentence completions. Finally, in the production phase they were asked to create their own posters.

In the implicit vocabulary instruction, learners were provided with experience of specific examples of a word through acting and miming. The researchers designed a lot of problem solving tasks (such as preparing a summer holiday suitcase for the character in the story or the new year shopping list for the teacher, preparing some paper dolls with pieces of clothes, turning the classroom into a store for clothes shopping). Almost no error correction, the primary aim is to complete the task, vocabulary is not focused just some part of context.

In the blended type of vocabulary instruction, both implicit and explicit ways of instruction were used by providing the meaning first and then making learners to infer the meaning from the specific examples to complete a problem-solving task. Some explicit explanations are given with a lot of error correction through some frequent instruction types such as categorization, drills, completing tables, repetition, matching, true false exercises.

After the experiment was over, the same test was conducted as the post-test to measure the success level of the students. After forty five days, in the second semester the same test was applied as the delayed post-test to see whether some changes took place in the retention level of the target vocabulary or not.

Limitations of the Study

First of all, one of the limitations of this study was the inadequate sampling of class; the number of participants is only 120 students, 40 students in one class for each instruction type. Moreover, independent or intervening variables such as language proficiency and educational background of learners were not controlled. Thirdly, the study was conducted only for six weeks.

3. Findings

When the mean scores of the groups were compared, the groups were found to be similar concerning their English target vocabulary knowledge levels at the beginning of the intervention (the implicit group had the means of .28, the explicit one .31, the blended group .33)

The same 25 questions were administered as the post-test and delayed post-test to the same groups after the vocabulary teaching process. Its goal was to compare the groups' improvement in their vocabulary knowledge. Over all descriptive statistics are given in Table 2.

Table 2
Descriptive Statistics for the Groups

Mean Scores	Groups	N	Mean	Std. Dev.
Pre-test	Implicit	40	.284	.113
	Explicit	40	.310	.130
	Blended	40	.333	.162
Post-test	Implicit	40	.538	.230
	Explicit	40	.735	.196
	Blended	40	.647	.230
Del. Post-test	Implicit	40	.553	.248
	Explicit	40	.764	.190
	Blended	40	.701	.232

When a paired sample t-test was computated, the p value of the implicit group is ,000, which means there is a significant difference between pre and post test results of the implicit group. Secondly, the pre- and post-tests of the explicit group were compared and the p value is .000. Lastly, the pre-test and post-test of blended group were compared and the p value is .000. All groups have showed some progress in the post test scores.

3.1. The Comparison of Implicit, Explicit and Blended Groups

When the mean scores of these three groups were compared through one way analysis of variance, it was found out that there was no statistical significant difference among these three groups: the p- value was .34

According to these results, when the values of the post-tests and delayed post-tests were analyzed, it was observed that experimental groups' mean scores did not decrease in either the post-test and delayed post-test. Moreover, the explicit group taught with explicit vocabulary instruction had the best scores, while the blended group performed less and the implicit group the least in post-test and delayed post-tests, which indicates that the explicit group outperformed the implicit and blended groups on the post and delayed post-test, but indeed the difference is not statistically significant enough in especially the delayed post-test (p>50).

The syllabuses of ESP I and II, textbooks and materials were examined. In ESP I, reading and writing skills were addressed through the specifically selected texts. Literal, inferential, critical and appreciative comprehension skills were targeted in reading classes. The uses of spelling and punctuation conventions were practiced in controlled, guided and free writing activities alongside writing skills such as strategy, organization, and style. ESP II aimed to enable students to translate various texts in the content area from English into Turkish. The student evaluation was based on class participation, quizzes and tests.

4. Discussion

4.1. The Effect of Implicit Vocabulary Instruction

The first aim was to see whether the implicit vocabulary instruction affected the fourth graders' vocabulary development and retention or not. The results of this study showed that the implicit vocabulary instruction did not yield as high successful scores as the explicit and blended instruction types. From this study we can conclude that insufficient time for implicit vocabulary instruction may be the reason of these poor results because it does not provide enough processing time for implicit learning to be reflected in students' performance.

4.2. The Effect of Explicit Vocabulary Instruction

As to whether the explicit vocabulary instruction affected the fourth graders' vocabulary development and retention or not, the results indicated that the explicit vocabulary instruction led to the best mean scores either in the post-test or delayed post-test. There are a lot of studies in consonant with this finding, one of which is Zimmerman's pilot study (1997) investigating the effectiveness of reading through interactive vocabulary instruction. The results demonstrated that vocabulary instruction could provide better scores when students' attention were drawn towards a limited set of words and lexical features as in explicit instruction. In this study it was found out that a long treatment and repeated exposure of explicit vocabulary teaching led to better vocabulary learning and retention.

4.3. The Effect of Blended Vocabulary Instruction

As to whether the blended vocabulary instruction affected the fourth graders' vocabulary development and retention or not, the blended vocabulary instruction was in the middle in terms of scores obtained by the students in post- and delayed post-test. It can be concluded that this type of instruction led to better mean scores than implicit vocabulary instruction because in blended vocabulary instruction pre-, while, and post-exercises helped students comprehend the meaning of words much better.

There is an endless debate over the effectiveness of explicit and implicit vocabulary learning. For instance, Krashen (1989) is a supporter of implicit vocabulary teaching. On the other hand, Schmidt (1990) contends that unconscious language learning without attention is impossible. Ellis (1994) adds that the recognition and production of the phonetic aspects of vocabulary learning is best learned through implicit ways with repeated exposure, but arbitrary aspects of vocabulary require explicit learning with conscious processing at semantic and conceptual levels.

5. Conclusion

The aim of this research was to see the effect of vocabulary instruction types on the fourth graders. The explicit vocabulary instruction is a powerful instruction type. The research comparing three types of vocabulary instruction- implicit, explicit, and blended- led to the conclusion that explicit vocabulary instruction and secondly blended vocabulary instruction led to much better performance than implicit vocabulary instruction although the first two types do not have any place in the current English Language Curriculum for Primary Education in Turkey (2006). Sökmen (1997) claims that an effective vocabulary learning program should let learners build their vocabulary, establish mental connections by integrating new words and already existing ones, provide multiple exposure, promote learners' processing skills (such as guessing from the context), ease imaging, use various vocabulary learning and teaching techniques, and encourage learner autonomy.

In general, it can be claimed that considering the goals of individuals and groups, setting priorities for these goals, taking multiple dimensions into account, adapting learning and teaching processes, there is not a "best" way to learn or teach a language (Troike, 2006). This study's value lies in helping teachers understand that, activities should be altered in various ways by engaging students in meaningful interactions without ignoring the benefits of explicit instruction.

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