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COGNATE-BASED LANGUAGE TEACHING OF VOCABULARY IN A BILINGUAL CONTEXT

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ABSTRACT

Several linguists suggest that prior language knowledge should be taken into consideration in vocabulary teaching. The present study aims to verify the positive effect of cognate recognition and cognate-based instruction in the process of EFL language acquisition. Students randomly assigned to an experimental and a control group by using a PET test. In the pre-test, an English vocabulary test was carried out among students (who are bilingual and know Persian and Azari languages). During the treatment, students in the experimental group, worked on reading passages and translated them. The researcher mentioned the cognates between Persian, Azari and English languages. Students in the control group, worked on the same materials. However, the researcher did not mention the cognates between Persian, Azari and English languages. The results show that the experimental group obtained slightly higher scores on the vocabulary test in the post-test than the control group. The results of this study confirm the expectations that cognate-based instruction can positively influence language acquisition.

Keywords: *Bilingualism, Cognates, EFL, Translation, Vocabulary Teaching*

INTRODUCTION

Cognates are words in two languages that share a similar meaning, spelling, and pronunciation. Researchers who study first and second language acquisition have found that students benefit from cognate awareness. Cognate awareness is the ability to use cognates in a primary language as a tool for understanding a second language (Carlo *et al.*, 2004; Jessner, 1999; Rodríguez, 2001; Soares and Lima, 2012; Solak and Cakir, 2012). One of the most widely accepted practices in foreign language teaching proposes that other languages should be excluded and that the target language is the only one allowed in the classroom. Contrary to this, Jessner (1999) recommends that prior language knowledge should be reactivated in the classroom and that students should look for equivalent expressions in their L1, L2 and L3. In accordance with Jessner (1999), Carlo *et al.*, (2004) consider it useful to teach students to draw on their cognate knowledge, which can serve as a means of figuring out the meanings of new English words.

Review of the Related Literature

Empirical studies focusing on teaching foreign language vocabulary through cognates were first carried out in the L2 acquisition context (e.g. Carlo *et al.*, 2004; Jessner, 1999; Rodríguez, 2001). Rodríguez (2001) proposes that English can be taught through meaningful reading and by relying on the students' knowledge and literacy in their L1. He also suggests that teachers should rely on L1/L2 cognates to teach students to analyze the L2 and be able to understand texts in the L2. Rodríguez (2001) suggests the following steps for teaching Spanish-speaking literates to use cognates and context in reading texts in English.

1. Have students read the text silently or aloud to a partner. Discuss what it means with the partner or in a small group.
2. Discuss the vocabulary with the whole class. Use cognates and context clues to figure out meanings. Point out spelling patterns, like *-tion* in English becomes *-ción* in Spanish.
3. Discuss grammatical differences between English and Spanish such as word order for nouns and adjectives.
4. Read the text aloud as students follow along. Have students listen for words they recognize orally.

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5. Read a similar text with Germanic-based words in place of the cognates.

6. Clarify and explain words in the texts that cannot be figured out from cognates or context.

Dressler (2000, cited in August *et al.*, 2005) carried out a research among Spanish speaking fifth graders learning English who had been taught to search for cognate relationships as a strategy in reading texts in English. The results of the study showed that those students who were taught to search for cognate relationships were more successful in inferring meaning for untaught cognates than their peers in the control group. Furthermore, Dressler points out that there was variability in the perception of L1/L2 cognates, the connection between the phonologically more transparent ones being more easily perceived than between the less salient ones. Caplan (2006) proposed that teaching the systematic relationship of the historical sound changes between English and German would help English speaking learners of German to recognize cognates and as a result expand their vocabulary in German more easily. By comparing the pre-test results with the posttest ones, the author found a difference in scores which could be attributed to the instruction of the structural relationship between the two languages. Although the difference between the two scores was small, Caplan suggests that these findings can be of considerable pedagogical value. Solak and Cakir (2012) found cognates could be helpful in developing materials for Turkish learners of L2 English. Comesana and Lima (2010) focused on the role of cognate and non-cognate words on second language learning methods. The results of their study suggest that cognate words are easier to learn than non-cognate words because of the stronger lexical links and the sentence processing of new words in novice learners is mediated by the lexical representation of L1. Nagi *et al.*, (1993) found out that Spanish learners of L2 English resorted to making a connection between their native language and target language when they were exposed to a new word in English and used positive transfer of cognates as a reading strategy in English. English is a foreign language in Iran. There is not enough exposure to this language in this country. So, Iranian EFL learners have lots of difficulty in learning English vocabulary. Furthermore, In Iran people in several cities (e.g. Tabriz) are bilingual. People of Tabriz know both Persian and Azari (a branch of Turkish Language) languages. English and Persian languages belong to the Indo-European languages. In this way, there are lots of cognates between them. Besides, English language has borrowed several words from other languages like Turkish language. This way, there are lots of cognates between Azari (a branch of Turkish Language) and English. The researcher tries to examine the effect of using cognate based teaching of English vocabulary on developing students' vocabulary knowledge in a bilinguage context. Considering the purpose of the study, the following research question was asked:

1. Does cognate based language teaching have any effect on the vocabulary achievement of EFL learners?

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Due to the proposed research question, a quasi-experimental method of research was required. It contained a pre-test, a post-test, a control group and an experimental group. The aim of this study is to examine the effect of independent variable, instruction of cognates between Azari-Persian-English, on the dependent variable i.e. achievement of EFL learners.

Participants

The participants for this study were 40 Iranian university students majoring at Electrical engineering who were participating in General English classes at university of applied science and technology (UAST) with an age range of 18-45 in Tabriz-Iran. Students were chosen after assigning a preliminary English Test (PET) and a vocabulary test (pre-test) for having homogeneous groups. The researcher randomly assigned them as the experimental and the control group. Those students who got 50 or more out of 100 participated in this study. All students are bilingual and at the low intermediate level of English language learning. They know Azari and Persian languages.

Instrumentation

Different instruments used in the present study involve a preliminary English Test (PET) and two vocabulary tests in the pre-test and the post-test. PET test consists of four parts: listening, speaking,

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reading and writing. Vocabulary tests were written bases on the passages students studied and translated in class.

Procedure

The goal of this study was to examine the effects of a cognate based language teaching in the vocabulary acquisition. The researcher used a quasi-experimental research design with a sample of forty Iranian college learners who were participating in General English classes at university of applied science and technology (UAST) in Tabriz-Iran. After assessing the groups' homogeneity by using a PET test (those who got 50 or more out of 100 were chosen) and a vocabulary test as a pre-test, the researcher randomly assigned them as the experimental and control groups. As mentioned earlier, there are lots of cognates between Azari – Persian and English languages. Researcher as the teacher of two classes uses eclectic method and tries to use best part of every method in her teaching procedure. The focus of General English course is on short passages, grammar teaching and translation of passages. The most difficult aspect in general English course is teaching vocabulary. In the control group, teacher explains the meaning of words in L1 and writes the synonyms or antonyms of words on the board. In the experimental group, teacher not only explains the meaning of words in L1 and writes the synonyms or antonyms of words on the board, but also, speaks about etymology and cognates of words between Azari, Persian and English. Samples of teacher's explanation are mentioned in Appendix A.

At the end of the term, the researcher used another vocabulary test (post-test). Both vocabulary tests were designed based on the passages student learned in the general English course.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In this section, the results of t-test for proficiency test between two groups, t-test for showing the results of pre-test and post-test scores will be presented. Finally, the researcher will discuss the results.

Table 1: Independent sample t-test for proficiency test (PET)

Pre-test	N	Mean	t	F	df
Control group	20	53.25 (3.07)	-1.38	2.129	38
Experimental group	20	54.90 (4.37)	-1.38		34.091

Note: $p = .153$. The adjusted Standard Deviation is shown in parentheses below the means

Table 1 represents the result of the t-test for proficiency test (PET) between two groups; there has not been a significant difference in scores for control group ($M = 53.25$, $SD = 3.07$) and experimental group ($M = 54.90$, $SD = 4.37$), $t(38) = -1.38$, $P > .05$. So, two groups at the beginning of the research are homogeneous.

The descriptive statistics of comparing two groups in the pre-test and post-test for vocabulary test are shown in Table 2.

Table 2: Descriptive statistics of comparing two groups in the pre-test and post-test

group	N	mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	Sig(2-tailed)	F	t	df
pre control	20	10.45	1.5050	.31891	.835	.254	.216	38
experimental	20	10.35	1.6608	.30667	.835		.216	37.618
Post control	20	12.90	1.2137	.28028	.000	.820	-8.778	38
experimental	20	17.05	1.6393	.37119	.000		-8.778	35.672

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As Table 2 shows, mean score in the pre-test for the control group is (M =10.45, SD =1.50) and experimental group (M=10.35, SD =1.66), $t(38) = .216$, $P > .05$. The mean score shows that the vocabulary scores between two groups in the pre-test were the same. In the post-test, scores for control group (M =12.90, SD =1.21) and experimental group (M=17.05, SD = 1.63), $t(38) = -8.778$, $P = .000$.

The results show that there is a significant difference between two groups in the post-test. In the post-test, the experimental group outperforms the control group in the vocabulary test.

Bilingual students whose first language is a Romance language like Spanish, French, Italian, Portuguese and Romanian, are not beginning from ground zero when it comes to vocabulary acquisition in English. These students can often call on their knowledge of cognates in their native language to determine the meanings of the words in their second language. Furthermore, English belong to Indo-European languages. In this case, there are languages (e.g. Persian) that have a lot of cognates with English. In addition, English language has borrowed lots of words from other languages (e.g. Azari Language that is a branch of Turkish language). Then, Iranian students specially people of Tabriz who are bilingual (know both Persian and Azari) can benefit their prior knowledge of two languages and learn English by its cognates with these two languages. Nagy (1988) and Nagy *et al.*, (1993) found that not all second language learners automatically recognize and use cognates. The teachers in their studies were able to teach their students to better use the cognate knowledge that they did possess in their native language, Spanish. Green (2004) states that words have two dimensions a *label* and the *concept* or *meaning* behind the label. Often English language learners, especially if they are orally proficient and literate in their first language, already know the equivalent concept for new English words they encounter. In these cases they can be quickly taught the English label, usually by just translating the English word for them into their native languages. In other cases, they know both the concept and the label in the form of a cognate. She further mentions that a teacher does not need, by the way, to be bilingual in order to use cognates for teaching. The teacher can look words up in a bilingual dictionary to see if it is a cognate or ask the students if they know of a similar word in their native language. The purpose of this study was to investigate whether instruction of the cognates between the Persian, Azari and English can facilitate vocabulary acquisition in English. The results showed that the students receiving such instruction obtained higher scores both on cognate target words and overall on the English vocabulary test. It was proposed that the method of teaching foreign language vocabulary through pointing out the similarities between the languages is recommended because it may facilitate vocabulary acquisition in EFL. This finding supports the previous studies (Carlo *et al.*, 2004; Jessner, 1999; Rodríguez, 2001; Soares and Lima, 2012; Solak and Cakir, 2012) regarding the positive effect of cognate-based vocabulary teaching. In order to fully understand how instruction of cognates affects vocabulary acquisition, further research has been recommended. This research can be done on students with different gender and language proficiency. Finally, possible applications in the methodology of foreign language teaching have also been proposed. Teachers in bilingual context can use cognates to facilitate students' vocabulary learning.

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APPENDIXES

Appendix A

Samples of cognates between Azari, Persian and English languages

English	German	Persian	Azari
is	ist	ast	
two		do	
three		se	
you		to	
home		khone	
six		shesh	
eight	akht	hasht	
daughter	dakhter	dokhtar	
father		pedar	
mother		madar	
better		behtar	
chin		chane	
Over there			orda
say			soyla
angry			angerer
god		khoda	
where	woher		hara
search			sech
hobble			hobbol
understand			annade
jealous			chilis
ashamed		sharmande	
devil			dev
agriculture			akinchilig
murmur			mirildir
big			beig
have	haben	daram	
Get away			get
paid		pardakht	
paradise		pardis	

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orange	toranj	
believe	bavar	
door	dar	
pretty	pary	
sun		gun
cloud		blout
Dull		Dul
injury		Injiri
challenge		chalish
teeth		deeshlar

German language is used to show a clear relationship between Indo-European languages