The Impact of Tasks on Male Iranian Elementary EFL Learners' Incidental Vocabulary Learning

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Abstract

The present study was carried out to explore the evidence of incidental vocabulary learning through the different tasks undertaken by male elementary EFL learners. To pursue this purpose, the impact of three kinds of tasks, i.e., reading comprehension, reading comprehension with fill-in gaps, and sentence writing, was measured on incidental vocabulary learning. The materials of the experiment were pilot-studied in advance on learners ($n = 51$) of the same age and proficiency level to assure the unfamiliarity of the target words. Three intact groups of male Iranian elementary EFL learners ($n = 88$) in two junior high schools participated in the main study. Two unexpected vocabulary tests after the completion of each task were administered to examine short and long-term memory retention. The results of ANOVA showed evidence of the significant impact of task involvement on the incidental learning of vocabulary by male elementary EFL learners.

There is a consensus among different researchers (e.g., Allen, 1983; De Bot, Paribakht, & Wesche, 1997; Laufer & Shumeli, 1997; Nation, 1982; Nation & Waring, 1997; Zimmerman, 1997) that knowledge of second language vocabulary plays a crucial role in language learning. This significance is highlighted for EFL learners since, as Hunt and Beglar (2005) state, they “frequently acquire impoverished lexicons despite years of formal study.” A large and rich body of research has explored different aspects of vocabulary learning and found implications for teaching vocabulary, such as the role of frequency of exposure in vocabulary enhancement (e.g., Gass & Mackey, 2002; Rott, 1999, 2007), the role of input, intake, and output on retention of word meanings (e.g., Ellis & He, 1999; Watanabe, 1997), strategies of vocabulary learning (e.g., Fraser, 1999; Gu, 2003; Nassaji, 2004), and vocabulary acquisition through reading (e.g., Wesche & Paribakht, 2000).

Relevant to these issues is the role of consciousness in vocabulary learning that invited a large body of studies, especially in the domains of implicit and explicit learning. There have been debates among scholars on the relationship between implicit and explicit learning on the one hand, and incidental learning on the other hand. Schmidt (1994), in an attempt to make a distinction between these terms, proposed the following basic types of consciousness shown in Figure 1:

Figure 1. Four types of consciousness (Schmidt, 1994)

The notion of incidental learning has been defined from different perspectives. Generally, incidental vocabulary learning is defined as learning vocabulary as a secondary result of an activity, or as Huckin and Coady (1999) define it, incidental vocabulary learning occurs when the focus of attention is not on the main cognitive activity.

Incidental learning could happen in different contexts. Extensive reading is one of the major sources of incidental vocabulary learning (Brown, Waring, & Donkaewbua, 2008; Huckin & Coady, 1999; Kweon & Kim, 2008; Laufer, 2001; Paribakht & Wesche, 1999; Rott, 1999; Swanborn & de Glopper, 2002). Recently, with the development of task-based approaches to teaching different components of language, pedagogical tasks were identified as another principal source of incidental vocabulary learning (Keating, 2008; Moonen, De Graaff, Westhoff, & Admiraal, 2005; Wesche & Paribakht, 2000).

The rationale for task-based syllabuses, according to Ellis (2005), is based on the following ideas. First, from the theoretical view, it is assumed that instruction needs to be compatible with the processes involved in L2 acquisition. Second, it is important that the tasks be cognitively involving and motivating to engage the learner. Third, tasks provide an appropriate unit to comply with learners' needs and thus course design should meet these needs. The structure of a task-based syllabus, according to Ellis (2003), requires processes of task selection and sequencing. A principled selection of tasks needs decisions to select the type and the content of the task. Widdowson (2000) maintained that task design has two important conditions to fulfill: to provide learners with an activity that has meaning and to stimulate learning.

Through investigation, different tasks are able to be designed to measure the different dimensions of vocabulary learned as an ancillary product. Laufer and Hulstijn (2001) went one step further and proposed the Involvement Load Hypothesis as the first comprehensive theoretical attempt to operationalize traditional general terms such as noticing, attention, motivation, and elaboration into task-specific components. They introduced an involvement load index that is illustrated by plus (+) and minus (–) signs representative of the presence or absence of involvement load components (i.e., need, search, and evaluation) respectively. The presence of an involvement load component equals 1, and its absence equals 0 to indicate the numerical value of the involvement load index. Components such as need and evaluation, which are comprised of moderate and strong, will be shown as 1(+) and 2(++) respectively. The minimum involvement value of a task is 0 and the maximum is 5. The degree of

involvement load determines the effectiveness of a task as a result of interaction between these three basic components of involvement.

The theoretical basis of task-induced involvement has a close relationship with the Involvement Load Hypothesis; the basic assumption behind this construct was that retention of words in a task when processed incidentally is conditional upon three factors of “need,” “search,” and “evaluation” (Laufer & Hulstijn, 2001). Table 1 shows the effectiveness of different kinds of tasks in vocabulary retention in terms of involvement load (Laufer & Hulstijn, 2001).

Table 1
Task-Induced Involvement Load

Task	Status of the Target Word	Need	Search	Evaluation
1. Reading and comprehension questions	Glossed in a text but irrelevant to the task	–	–	–
2. Reading and comprehension	Glossed in a text and relevant to the task	+	–	–
3. Reading and comprehension	Not glossed, but relevant to the task	+	–	–/+ (depending on word and context)
4. Reading and comprehension questions and filling gaps	Relevant to reading comprehension. Listed with glosses at the end of text	+	–	+
5. Writing original sentences	Listed with glosses	+	–	++
6. Writing a composition	Concepts selected by the teacher (and provided in L1); the L2 learner-writer must look up L2 form	+	+	++
7. Writing a composition	Concepts selected (and looked up) by the L2 learner-writer	++	+	++

Note. Laufer & Hulstijn, 2001, p. 18

Whether or not tasks can be classified according to the extent to which they are effective in vocabulary learning has been subject of different studies. This issue motivated researchers to find empirical evidence for the efficacy of tasks in the retention of words learned incidentally. As a first attempt, Hulstijn and Laufer (2001) designed two reading-based tasks and one composition writing task to test their Involvement Load Hypothesis on EFL university-level students; the results confirmed their hypothesis. Kim (2008) measured the same tasks on matriculated undergraduate students versus students in an intensive English program. Lu and Huang (2009), with non-English major students, studied the impact of listening-based tasks on incidental vocabulary learning. The results were in line with the Involvement Load Hypothesis.

There is general consensus that incidental learning is not involved in the process of acquisition of the first two or three thousand most frequently occurring words (Huckin & Coady, 1999). In other words, the claim is that incidental learning does not occur in beginners. Despite a plethora of studies in the field of incidental learning, no empirical evidence confirms it. The most common feature of the majority of studies in the field of task-specific vocabulary learning is that university-level learners were investigated. A very scarce number of researchers have studied lower level of students in terms of proficiency and age range.

In order to undertake the present study, the following research question was formulated:

Do different tasks have any significant impact on the male elementary learners' incidental vocabulary learning?

To fulfill the research question, the hereunder null hypothesis was formulated:

Different tasks have no significant impact on the male elementary learners' incidental learning of vocabulary.

Method

Participants

The participants of the main study ($n = 88$) and pilot study ($n = 51$) were EFL learners in the second and third year of two junior high schools located around the city of Qazvin in Iran. The participants are all male, aged from 13 to 15, with an elementary level of English proficiency. All the participants are native speakers of Persian.

The participants were selected from five intact classes. Without manipulation of the class members, the participants of two classes studying in the second and third year were randomly assigned to the pilot study. The other three classes participated in the main study. In the main study, the members of Group 1 and Group 3 were second-year students and the members of Group 2 were third-year students. Regarding space, time, and facilities, the conditions of the two schools were approximately the same.

Formal English language education in Iran's schools begins in junior high school, when learners have completed five years of elementary school and are usually 12 years old. In the first year, they become familiar with the alphabet, basic words, and simple question and answer sentences. In the next two years, they gradually learn the basic structure of English. The textbooks are highly structure-based and consist of dialogues, patterns, and readings.

Instruments

The aim of the present study was to explore the impact of different tasks on the extent to which elementary EFL learners can learn vocabulary. The key instruments of the researcher to pursue this purpose were tasks. Two kinds of reading-based tasks and one writing-based task were adapted from those in studies by Laufer and Hulstijn (2001) and Martínez-Fernández (2008). These tasks were selected to examine the extent to which they could impact learners' promotion of vocabulary learning.

Task 1 was a reading comprehension exercise with a glossary. It consisted of a short reading text along with five multiple-choice comprehension questions. The content of the text did not contain abstract concepts or ambiguous sentences; it was about going to a stadium to watch a football match. This task was provided for second-year junior high school participants.

The participants' task was to read the text and answer the comprehension questions. The glossary contained the Persian equivalents of ten unfamiliar words that were used in the reading comprehension exercise (see Appendix A). In the process of target word selection, some factors were considered, such as the unfamiliarity of the participants with the words, the selection of words representing different parts of speech, the avoidance of the use of words with different meanings, the avoidance of the use of ambiguous and abstract words, and the use of words that learners can apply in the sentence-writing task.

Task 2 was another reading comprehension exercise; learners were supposed to fill in the gaps with the ten target words and then answer comprehension questions. This task was provided for the third-year participants, so the text and the target words were different from those used in Task 1. Five additional words that acted as distractors were given at the end of the reading text to decrease the possibility of filling the last blank spaces by the remaining words. The L1 meaning of all 15 words was provided in the glossary at the bottom of the page (see Appendix B).

In Task 3 (sentence writing), the second-year participants were obliged to write a contextualized sentence for each of the ten target words. The target words were the same as those employed in Task 1. The structure of this task was different from Tasks 1 and 2 in that there was no text to read and no questions to answer (see Appendix C). It was emphasized that slight spelling errors or ungrammatical sentences would not be considered as the primary criteria for scoring; rather, clarity in transferring the meaning of the words in sentences would be the main criterion.

Identical immediate and delayed vocabulary post-tests were conducted after each task to test the vocabulary knowledge of participants. The time interval between the immediate and delayed post-tests was one week. The post-tests were composed of a table, in which the participants had to give the L1 equivalent for each word (see Appendix D and Appendix E).

Procedure

Prior to the main study, the familiarity of the participants with the target words was pilot studied on two groups through the use of a vocabulary test. The first group ($n = 28$) and the second group ($n = 25$) were similar to the groups in the main study regarding age, gender, and proficiency level. The first group was composed of second-year students and the second group was composed of third-year students. The results showed that in Task 1, just one participant in the first pilot group knew two out of ten target words, and in Task 2, one participant in the second pilot group knew one out of ten target words.

In order to ensure the homogeneity of the proficiency level of the participants in all groups, a standard proficiency test, namely KET (Key English Test), was administered. Twenty of the participants (out of 88) with low frequent scores were eliminated from the whole sample.

One task each was given to one intact class group. In each session, the task sheets were given to the participants and the necessary instruction was provided. Time on the tasks was not controlled, since, as Skehan (1996) stated, when a specific amount of time is given to do a task, it puts pressure on the learners, but when the learners are allowed to take all the time they need, this pressure will be removed.

After the participants finished each task in their group, they were required to take an unannounced immediate post-test to measure their short-term retention of the target words in

the tasks. To serve the purpose of the study, the participants had no previous knowledge about upcoming vocabulary post-tests. One week after the immediate post-test, learners received another post-test to assess their long-term retention of the target words.

The method of scoring was adopted by the researcher in line with Laufer and Hulstijn's (2001) study in such a way that every item received a point from zero to one. An incorrect translation or no translation received no points or 0; a correct translation received the maximum point or 1; and finally, a partial translation or an acceptable, but not accurate item was assigned half a point or 0.5.

Results and Discussion

In total, the three groups received two post-tests each. There was a one-week interval between the immediate and delayed post-tests. Descriptive statistics of the obtained scores for the different groups are tabulated in Table 2.

Table 2

Descriptive Statistics of Performance on Immediate and Delayed Post-tests

Task	Group	N	Immediate post-test		Delayed post-test	
			Mean (out of 10)	SD	Mean (out of 10)	SD
Task 1: Reading comprehension	1	23	3.36	2.27	2.39	1.82
Task 2: Reading plus gap-fill	2	22	5.86	3.09	4.61	2.72
Task 3: Sentence writing	3	23	8.39	2.08	6.56	2.06

Table 2 shows that Group 2 performed better than Group 1, and the participants of Group 3 outperformed the other groups on both the immediate and delayed post-tests. To verify the statistical difference in the mean scores of both immediate and delayed post-tests in the three groups, a one-way ANOVA with the number of groups as an independent variable or factor and types of tests (immediate and delayed) as a dependent variable was conducted.

As shown in Table 2, the results of the ANOVA indicated that there was a statistically significant difference in the immediate post-tests among Group 1 ($M = 3.36$, $SD = 2.27$), Group 2 ($M = 5.86$, $SD = 3.09$), and Group 3 ($M = 8.39$, $SD = 2.08$), $F_{2,65} = 22.92$, $p < .001$. It was also demonstrated that there was also a statistically significant difference in the delayed post-tests among Group 1 ($M = 2.39$, $SD = 1.82$), Group 2 ($M = 4.61$, $SD = 2.72$), and Group 3 ($M = 6.56$, $SD = 2.10$), $F_{2,65} = 19.96$, $p < .001$.

Table 3

ANOVA on the Students' Post-Test Scores

ANOVA						
		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Immediate Post-Test	Between Groups	290.010	2	145.005 6.326	22.923	.000
	Within Groups	411.178	65			
	Total	701.188	67			
Delayed Post-Test	Between Groups	200.621	2	100.310 5.025	19.964	.000
	Within Groups	326.596	65			
	Total	527.217	67			

The effect size, or eta squared, as shown in Table 3, was large for both immediate ($ES = 0.41$) and delayed post-tests ($ES = 0.38$); their magnitudes are large enough to interpret that the difference among groups on immediate and delayed post-tests was meaningful.

Table 4

Eta Figures on Post-Tests

Measures of Association		
	Eta	Eta Squared
Immediate Post-Test * Tasks	.643	.414
Delayed Post-Test * Tasks	.617	.381

Since the F value was significant, Scheffé post hoc tests were performed for two post-tests in order to investigate the location of differences. The results showed that there was a significant difference in performance between Groups 1 and 3 in the immediate and delayed post-tests (see Appendix E). Furthermore, the scores of all participants declined from the immediate post-test to the delayed post-test. The decline may have been due to the one-week time interval between the immediate and delayed post-tests.

Conclusion

The results of the study significantly support the evidence of incidental vocabulary learning in elementary EFL learners as a result of performance on tasks with different degrees of involvement. Therefore, the null hypothesis of the study was rejected.

In this study, each one of the three tasks was significantly different from the others in vocabulary retention and of these, the writing task was the most powerful in keeping the words in learners' short-term and long-term memory. Although there were differences in the extent of vocabulary retention through the tasks, what is clear is that each of the kinds of learning which occurred was the result of the treatments used in this study.

To conclude, vocabulary learning tasks are advocated as a major vehicle to help EFL learners to learn foreign language vocabulary and retain it after a period of time.

Implications and Suggestions for Further Research

The important theoretical implication of this study is characterizing incidental learning as an effective way of vocabulary learning for learners of all proficiency levels.

This study also represented more involving tasks as a way of keeping vocabulary in long-term memory. More involving tasks, such as those that incorporate more involvement load components, provide optimal conditions for learners to interact with the words on deeper levels.

The findings of the present study, from a pedagogical point of view, pave the way for EFL teachers to manipulate language components and to design tasks that enhance incidental vocabulary learning. Moreover, as Allen (1983) points out, vocabulary activities have been criticized in that they take much of the class time and the teacher's energy; therefore vocabulary learning should be integrated with other language skills (such as reading or writing) in a structured and purposeful task. The teacher's role is to create such situations, and to be an informant and supervisor during the administration of tasks.

A task, as Ellis (2003) puts it, “is a powerful construct for designing courses” (p. 79) so the findings of the present study are conducive for syllabus designers in the sense that they can use the tasks as units to organize materials for vocabulary learning. This can be applicable, as the results of this study suggest, by designing interesting and attractive tasks, such as those employed in this study, instead of less engaging activities. This matter is significant when learners are at the beginning levels of language learning.

The lack of such tasks, especially in Iranian English language textbooks, is one of the major reasons for the demotivation of students in learning language. For the sake of vocabulary learning, designing tasks which interactively engage learners’ interest, such as reading texts with the highlighted new words along with marginal glosses, and creating ideas with the words in such a way that facilitate incidental vocabulary learning would be helpful.

The present study did not examine the participants’ opinions about their experience in learning vocabulary through using the tasks. These viewpoints could certainly have given valid and reliable insights to the researchers to fairly judge, discuss, and draw conclusions on the findings of the study. Thus, it seems necessary for future research to provide a structured interview process for the above purposes.

Regarding the skill-based tasks in this study, vocabulary learning was integrated with reading and writing skills. It would be worthwhile for another study to examine vocabulary learning through speaking and listening-based tasks.

In the case of regarding intentionality in vocabulary learning, this study, with its unexpected post-tests, investigated incidental vocabulary learning through the tasks. It is proposed that future studies organize a research project with two experiments: the first one, similar to that of this study, to inspect incidental learning, and the second one which informs the participants about upcoming tests to verify intentional learning to make comparisons to find which kind of learning is more effective.

Author Note

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This paper is based on my Master’s thesis. I would like to thank Dr. Natasha Qal’e who contributed to the development of this study.

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Appendix A

Task 1: Reading Comprehension

Football Match

There is a football **match** at Azadi stadium. We are going to the stadium this afternoon. **Everybody** can see the match. They can **stay** at home and watch TV. We should **leave** home at one. We may take a taxi. We should be in time. They close the doors of the stadium at 2:45. We don't **want** to be late. But many **people** go by bus because it's very **cheap**. People can have a good time at the stadium.

My friends and I **usually** go there by bus. We don't take a taxi because it's **expensive**. Young people usually go to the stadium for football matches. They have a good time there and **enjoy** the games.

Answer the following questions:

1. We are going to the stadium _____.
a) at 2:45 b) this afternoon
c) this evening d) at one
2. People go to the stadium by bus because _____.
a) they can have a good time b) it's expensive
c) it's very cheap d) they enjoy the game
3. Everybody _____.
a) can see the match b) watch TV
c) take a taxi d) go by bus
4. Which of the following sentences is **true**?
a) They close the doors of the stadium at one.
b) We should take a taxi.
c) We want to be late.
d) We should be in time.
5. Which of the following sentences is **false**?
a) People can have a good time at the stadium.
b) Young people go to the stadium for football matches.
c) People can stay at home and watch TV.
d) My friends and I usually go to the stadium by taxi.

Word List

match (noun):

مسابقه

everybody (pronoun):

هرکس ، هرکسی

stay (verb):

ماندن

leave (verb):

ترک کردن

want (verb):

خواستن

cheap (adjective):

ارزان

people (noun):

مردم ، افراد

usually (adverb):

معمولاً

expensive (adjective):

گران

enjoy (verb):

لذت بردن

Appendix B

Task 2: Reading Comprehension with Fill-In Gaps

Instructions: Read the following text carefully. Fill in the blanks with ten of the following words in the box below. Each word **MUST** be used just once and in the correct form. You are free to use word-list sheet when you need. Then answer the questions.

break	busy	difficult	free	guess
heavy	life	place	problem(s)	relative(s)
spend	slow	think	town(s)	use

Town vs. City

Mr. Kamali and his family are from Tehran. They now live in Birjand. They had a _____ life in Tehran. They _____ people in small _____ have a happy _____. They don't have many of the _____ that people have in a big city. There are not many cars in the street. And they don't _____ a lot of time in the _____. traffic every day. They can get the things they need easily and fast. People are not always in a hurry. They have a lot of _____ time. They can visit their _____ and friends. People are not very _____ in small towns. And they help you when you need them.

Answer the following questions:

- Mr. Kamali and his family _____.
a) had a happy life in Tehran b) live in Birjand now
c) have a difficult life in Birjand d) are from Birjand
- People in small towns _____.
a) have many problems b) spend a lot of time in the heavy traffic
c) are very busy d) have a lot of free time
- In a big city _____.
a) there are many cars in the street b) people are not always in a hurry
c) people have a happy life d) people can get the things easily
- Which of the following sentences is **true**?
a) In big cities people can visit their relatives and friends.
b) In small towns people are always very busy.
c) In small towns people are not always in a hurry.
d) In big cities people can help you when you need them.
- Which of the following sentences is **false**?
a) People have a lot of free time in small towns.
b) People spend a lot of time in the heavy traffic in big cities.
c) People can get the things they need easily and fast in big cities.
d) People in small towns don't have many of the cities' problems.

Word List

break (verb):	شکستن	problem (noun):	مسئله ، مشکل
busy (adjective):	پرمشغله	relative (noun):	خویشاوند
difficult (adjective):	دشوار	spend (verb):	گذرانیدن
free (adjective):	آزاد	slow (adjective):	آهسته
guess (verb):	دس زدن	think (verb):	فکر کردن
heavy (adjective):	سنگین	town (noun):	شهر کوچک ، شهرستان
life (noun):	زندگی	use (verb):	به کار بردن
place (noun):	مکان		

Appendix C
Task 3: Sentence Writing

Instructions:

Make sentences with the following words. You can use the word-list sheet when you need.

1. **match:**

2. **everybody:**

3. **stay:**

4. **leave:**

5. **cheap:**

6. **people:**

7. **usually:**

8. **want:**

9. **expensive:**

10. **enjoy:**

Word List

match (noun):

مسابقه

everybody (pronoun):

هرکس ، هرکسی

stay (verb):

ماندن

leave (verb):

ترک کردن

cheap (adjective):

ارزان

people (noun):

مردم ، افراد

usually (adverb):

معمولاً

want (verb):

خواستن

expensive (adjective):

گران

enjoy (verb):

لذت بردن

Appendix D

Immediate and Delayed Post-Test for Task 1 and Task 3

Read the following words. If you know the meaning, write it down in the table provided.

	WORD	MEANING
1	<i>match</i>	
2	<i>everybody</i>	
3	<i>stay</i>	
4	<i>leave</i>	
5	<i>want</i>	
6	<i>cheap</i>	
7	<i>people</i>	
8	<i>usually</i>	
9	<i>expensive</i>	
10	<i>enjoy</i>	

Appendix E

Immediate and Delayed Post-Test for Task 2

Read the following words. If you know the meaning, write it down in the table provided.

	WORD	MEANING
1	<i>busy</i>	
2	<i>difficult</i>	
3	<i>free</i>	
4	<i>heavy</i>	
5	<i>life</i>	
6	<i>problem</i>	
7	<i>relative</i>	
8	<i>spend</i>	
9	<i>think</i>	
10	<i>town</i>	

Appendix F

Scheffé Post Hoc Multiple Range Test for Immediate and Delayed Post-Tests

Multiple Comparisons

Scheffé

Dependent Variable	(I) Groups	(J) Groups	Mean Difference (I-J)	Std. Error	Sig.	95% Confidence Interval	
						Lower Bound	Upper Bound
Immediate Post-Test	G1	G2	-2.49407*	.75005	.006	-4.3731	-.6150
		G3	-5.02174*	.74167	.000	-6.8798	-3.1637
	G2	G1	2.49407*	.75005	.006	.6150	4.3731
		G3	-2.52767*	.75005	.005	-4.4067	-.6486
	G3	G1	5.02174*	.74167	.000	3.1637	6.8798
		G2	2.52767*	.75005	.005	.6486	4.4067
Delayed Post-Test	G1	G2	-2.22233*	.66847	.006	-3.8970	-.5477
		G3	-4.17391*	.66100	.000	-5.8299	-2.5179
	G2	G1	2.22233*	.66847	.006	.5477	3.8970
		G3	-1.95158*	.66847	.018	-3.6263	-.2769
	G3	G1	4.17391*	.66100	.000	2.5179	5.8299
		G2	1.95158*	.66847	.018	.2769	3.6263

*The mean difference is significant at the 0.05 level.