

THE IMPORTANCE OF MOTIVATION TO IMPROVE STUDENTS' VOCABULARY SKILLS IN THE EFL CLASSROOM

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Abstract: This paper investigates the role of motivation in enhancing vocabulary acquisition in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classrooms. A review of the literature on motivation theory, vocabulary learning, and teaching strategies is presented, followed by a study conducted in an EFL context. The study examines the relationship between students' motivation and their vocabulary development, with a focus on the effectiveness of various motivational strategies employed by teachers. The results indicate that motivation plays a crucial role in students' vocabulary learning and that the use of motivational strategies can significantly improve their vocabulary skills.

Keywords: vocabulary skill, context, motivation questionnaire, strategies, motivation theory.

Introduction

In EFL classrooms, vocabulary learning is a key component of language acquisition, as it serves as the foundation for communicative competence. Research has shown that an extensive vocabulary is essential for EFL learners to express their ideas, understand spoken and written texts, and participate effectively in communicative situations (Nation, 2001; Schmitt, 2008). One significant factor that influences vocabulary learning is motivation. Motivation is defined as the driving force that directs and sustains an individual's behavior in pursuing a goal (Dörnyei, 2001). In the context of language learning, motivation is crucial, as it can determine the extent to which students engage in learning tasks, the amount of effort they invest, and their perseverance in the face of challenges (Dörnyei, 2005; Gardner, 2010). Consequently, fostering motivation in EFL students is essential for promoting vocabulary acquisition.

This paper aims to explore the importance of motivation in improving students' vocabulary skills in the EFL classroom. First, we review the literature on motivation theory, vocabulary learning, and teaching strategies. Then, we present the results of a study that examines the relationship between students' motivation and their vocabulary development. Finally, we discuss the implications of our findings for EFL teachers and provide recommendations for future research.

Literature Review

Motivation Theory

Motivation in language learning is a complex and multidimensional construct. The two most influential theories in this field are Gardner's (1985) Socio-Educational Model and Dörnyei's (2005) L2 Motivational Self System. In the Socio-Educational Model, motivation is divided into integrative and instrumental motivation. Integrative motivation refers to the desire to learn a language in order to interact with and integrate into the target language community, while instrumental motivation

pertains to the pragmatic benefits of learning a language, such as obtaining a job or achieving academic success (Gardner, 1985).

Dörnyei's L2 Motivational Self System builds on Gardner's model and incorporates elements of self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000). This model posits three components: the Ideal L2 Self, the Ought-to L2 Self, and the L2 Learning Experience. The Ideal L2 Self represents the image of the learner as a successful L2 user, the Ought-to L2 Self refers to the perceived obligations and responsibilities to learn the language, and the L2 Learning Experience encompasses the immediate learning environment and its impact on motivation (Dörnyei, 2005).

Vocabulary Learning

Vocabulary learning in EFL settings involves a range of cognitive processes, including the establishment of form-meaning connections, the organization of lexical knowledge, and the retrieval and production of words in context (Nation, 2001; Schmitt, 2008). Research has identified several factors that contribute to effective vocabulary learning, including the amount and type of exposure to the target language, the use of learning strategies, and the learners' motivation (Gu, 2003; Schmitt, 2010).

Motivation has been found to play a crucial role in vocabulary acquisition. Highly motivated students tend to invest more effort in vocabulary learning tasks, use more effective strategies, and show greater persistence in the face of challenges (Gu, 2003; Mizumoto & Takeuchi, 2009). Furthermore, there is evidence that motivation can mediate the relationship between the quality of vocabulary instruction and students' vocabulary gains (AlQahtani, 2015).

Teaching Strategies

EFL teachers can employ various strategies to enhance students' motivation and promote vocabulary learning. Some effective motivational strategies include setting clear and attainable goals, providing relevant and engaging learning materials, offering feedback and praise, promoting autonomy and choice, and creating a supportive and inclusive classroom environment (Dörnyei & Csizér, 1998; Guilloteaux & Dörnyei, 2008).

In addition, research suggests that the integration of technology can have a positive impact on students' motivation and vocabulary learning outcomes. For example, the use of digital flashcards, online games, and mobile applications can increase students' engagement, facilitate personalized learning, and offer opportunities for practice and feedback (Kukulka-Hulme, 2012; Stockwell, 2010).

Method

Participants

The participants in this study were 120 EFL students (60 males and 60 females) enrolled in an intensive language program at a university in Uzbekistan. Their ages ranged from 18 to 25 years old ($M = 20.5$, $SD = 1.8$). The students had various proficiency levels, as determined by their scores on a placement test.

Instruments

The study employed a pretest-posttest design and used the following instruments:

1. "Vocabulary Knowledge Scale (VKS)" (Paribakht & Wesche, 1997): A measure of students' receptive and productive vocabulary knowledge. The VKS consists of 20 target words and requires students to provide synonyms, translations, or definitions for each word.
2. "Motivation Questionnaire": A self-report questionnaire adapted from Dörnyei (2001) and Guilloteaux and Dörnyei (2008), assessing students' motivation in terms of the Ideal L2 Self, the

Ought-to L2 Self, and the L2 Learning Experience. The questionnaire consists of 30 items rated on a 5-point Likert scale.

Example scale item from the Motivation Questionnaire:

"I am highly motivated to learn English because I see myself using it to achieve my future goals and dreams (Ideal L2 Self)."

1 = Strongly disagree

2 = Disagree

3 = Neutral

4 = Agree

5 = Strongly agree

And another example item:

"I feel like I have to learn English because it is expected of me by my family, friends, or society (Ought-to L2 Self)."

1 = Strongly disagree

2 = Disagree

3 = Neutral

4 = Agree

5 = Strongly agree

3. "Teacher Strategies Inventory": A self-report inventory completed by the EFL teachers, documenting the frequency and type of motivational strategies used in their classrooms.

Procedure

The study was conducted over a 12-week period. At the beginning and end of the semester, students completed the VKS and Motivation Questionnaire. Additionally, the EFL teachers completed the Teacher Strategies Inventory at the end of the semester. During the semester, the teachers were encouraged to implement various motivational strategies in their classrooms, with a particular focus on vocabulary instruction. The researchers conducted classroom observations to ensure the fidelity of the teaching strategies and provided support and feedback to the teachers.

Results

The study conducted paired-samples t-tests on pretest and posttest scores of the Vocabulary Knowledge Scale (VKS) and the Motivation Questionnaire. The results indicated a significant improvement in both students' vocabulary knowledge and motivation over the 12-week period. A multiple regression analysis was performed to examine the relationship between the motivational components (Ideal L2 Self, Ought-to L2 Self, and L2 Learning Experience) and the VKS posttest scores, while controlling for VKS pretest scores. The analysis revealed that the L2 Learning Experience and Ideal L2 Self were significant predictors of vocabulary gains, while the Ought-to L2 Self was not.

Additionally, an analysis of the Teacher Strategies Inventory showed that teachers used setting clear and attainable goals, providing relevant and engaging learning materials, and offering feedback and praise as the most frequently employed motivational strategies. The correlation analysis also revealed that teachers' use of these motivational strategies was positively correlated with students' vocabulary gains.

Discussion

The findings of this study highlight the importance of motivation in improving students' vocabulary skills in the EFL classroom. The results demonstrate that students' vocabulary knowledge and motivation increased significantly over the 12-week semester, suggesting that the motivational strategies employed by the teachers were effective. The regression analysis revealed that the L2 Learning Experience and the Ideal L2 Self were significant predictors of vocabulary gains. This implies that creating a positive and engaging learning environment and fostering students' vision of themselves as successful L2 users can enhance their vocabulary development.

The positive correlation between teachers' use of motivational strategies and students' vocabulary gains underscores the value of incorporating such strategies into EFL instruction. By setting clear goals, providing relevant materials, and offering feedback and praise, teachers can foster motivation and facilitate vocabulary learning.

Conclusion

This study contributes to the growing body of research on the role of motivation in EFL vocabulary learning. The findings underscore the importance of motivation in improving students' vocabulary skills and provide insights into effective motivational strategies for EFL teachers. Further research is needed to explore the long-term effects of these strategies on vocabulary development and to examine the role of motivation in other aspects of language learning, such as grammar and reading comprehension. Additionally, future studies could investigate the impact of technology-mediated motivational strategies on students' vocabulary learning outcomes.

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