An Investigation into
the use of ‘Vocabulary Sacks’
as a means of Enhancing
Students’ Vocabulary Learning

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Introduction

This paper describes a small-scale study conducted during the course of a ten week internship in a boys’ primary school in the United Arab Emirates. It examines the effects of teaching vocabulary through the use of a teaching resource I created, which I have named ‘vocabulary sacks’. The resource was used with a whole class that consisted of eighteen Grade Two Arabic language speakers who were learning English in a state school, while the data on the results of its implementation was collected through a focus group of five students within the larger group.

In this school, according to my preliminary investigation, English is taught and learned as a second language under the following conditions:

- The classroom is the only place where most of the students hear English.
- The English coursebook, New English Parade (Herrera & Zanatta, 2000), is considered to be the actual curriculum.
- The teachers’ priority is to ensure that students have covered every single page of the coursebook.
- Only the vocabulary that is presented in the coursebook is taught.
- New language is presented in traditional ways: the method of teaching is teacher centered, where students listen, imitate, and copy the teacher.
- The use of flash cards (pictures and words) is the most common way of presenting, revising and practicing new vocabulary.
- Language learning is exam driven, which results in a lot of recall and memorization activities.

The research began during the first semester of my final year teaching practice placement when a preliminary investigation into the current teaching strategies for vocabulary was conducted. During my internship in the second semester, I continued the research by implementing and investigating the use of the teaching resource that I developed - the vocabulary sack - to teach a theme entitled “My House” in New English Parade (Herrera & Zanatta, 2000).

I adapted the idea of the vocabulary sack from a Story Sack workshop I attended by Neil Griffiths who created sacks full of characters and learning resources to be used while reading stories to attract young learners (Griffiths, 2004). In my adaptation, I designed small cards containing pictures and words which I put on a ring, and then in a small sack. I did this to attract young learners’ interest, and to protect the cards from being lost. The sacks I created contained 36 cards with vocabulary items related to the unit ‘My House’. (There were eighteen vocabulary items from the coursebook, and an additional eighteen other related vocabulary items which I included.) The idea of using small cards was adapted from the ‘word cards’ technique in which second language learners are encouraged to use small cards containing a word and a picture with its
translation on the other side to learn new vocabulary (Thornbury, 2002, p. 146). The resource was developed to be used in two contexts: in the classroom where students are asked to use it as a reference to complete particular tasks, and at home where learners are encouraged to freely select the words they want to play with, use, or learn. The vocabulary sack differs from a picture dictionary in that it allows for the tactile feature of flipping through the cards, which attracts young learners.

Research Questions

The results of my preliminary investigation revealed the need to introduce different teaching vocabulary strategies in UAE government schools to enhance young learners’ vocabulary learning and acquisition. As a result, I was interested in implementing and investigating the use of the new vocabulary teaching resource that I developed, vocabulary sacks, and to explore their effectiveness in the development of young learners’ vocabulary. In particular the investigation process sought to answer the following questions:

- What effect does the use of vocabulary sacks have on students’ vocabulary recognition and production?
- What effect does the use of vocabulary sacks have on students’ motivation?
- What effect does the use of vocabulary sacks have on students’ ability to stay on task?

Literature Review

Vocabulary Learning

Cameron (2001) believes that “Building up a useful vocabulary is central to the learning of a foreign language at primary level” (p. 72). This is because it provides the learner with the important language items that they need to enable them to communicate and convey messages. Thus, it is important for language teachers to develop and implement different vocabulary teaching strategies that enable young learners to understand and recognize different lexical items.

Learners’ ability in second language (L2) vocabulary learning is hindered due to difficulties such as forgetting words, first language (L1) interference, and word difficulties like pronunciation, spelling, length and complexity. As a result, many points should be considered when teaching vocabulary in order to help young learners learn and acquire a reasonable amount of vocabulary. Experts suggest that many steps are essential in vocabulary learning in terms of learners’ strategies: for example, having sources for encountering new words; getting a clear image - whether visual or auditory, or both - for the forms of new words; learning the meaning of the words; making a strong memory connection between the forms and the meanings of the words, and using the words (Cameron, 2001, p. 84). These processes help the learners to make connections
between new words and their vocabulary schemata, thus maximizing opportunities for L2 vocabulary learning and acquisition.

When encountering new words, second language learners should be exposed to different sources of comprehensible input; that is, language they understand. According to Lightbown and Spada's interpretation of Krashen's (1982) theory, “One acquires language in only one way - by exposure to comprehensible input” (Lightbown & Spada, 1999, p. 39). In relation to vocabulary acquisition, experts believe that “Most vocabulary growth takes place through incidental learning, that is, through exposure to comprehensible language in reading, listening, discussions, bulletin board displays, videos, and so forth” (Eyraud, Giles, Koenig, & Stoller, 2000, p. 1). This emphasizes the importance of applying vocabulary teaching strategies that offer comprehensible language, such as reading stories, communication activities, displays and videos to promote vocabulary acquisition.

**Memory**

Memory plays an important part in vocabulary development. Waring (2002) believes that, "It is easier to forget a word than remember it. Initial word knowledge is very fragile and memories of new words that are not met again soon, are lost. This is because our brains are designed to forget, not remember” (p. 1). Nation (1994) suggests a practical way to overcome this obstacle. He suggests that “A very important factor in learning is the quality of mental activity in the brain of the learner at the moment the learning occurs. If this activity is at a deep and thoughtful level, the learning will remain for a long time” (p. 5). This is consistent with Thornbury’s (2002) belief that “The more decisions the learner makes about a word, and the more cognitively demanding these decisions, the better the word is remembered” (p. 25). Therefore, second language teachers should present new vocabulary through activities that involve thinking and mental work in order to support active vocabulary learning.

Being exposed to comprehensible input only, however, is not enough for L2 vocabulary learning. This is because many factors such as how many opportunities are provided for recycling, learners’ ability to remember new words and learners’ motivation has an impact in vocabulary learning. In relation to recycling opportunities, Cameron (2001) stresses that, “Learning words is a cyclic process of meeting new words and initial learning, followed by meeting those words again and again, each time extending knowledge of what the words mean and how they are used in the foreign language” (p. 74). This is similar to Waring’s point: “We do not learn a word from one meeting… it takes between 5 – 16 meetings (or more) to ‘learn’ an average word” (2002, p. 1). Therefore, second language teachers should implement different strategies to present and recycle new vocabulary to promote vocabulary knowledge and enhance learning. They should also provide opportunities for practicing and using new words by incorporating different activities in meaningful contexts to expand learners’ knowledge of words (Cameron, 2001, p. 74).

**Motivation**

Motivation is another important factor that influences L2 vocabulary acquisition. Thornbury claims that “As language teachers, we must arouse interest in words and a certain excitement in personal development in this area” (Thornbury, 2002, p. 159). This
is because the learners’ desire to learn and achieve a reasonable amount of new words positively influences their performance. Many strategies could be used to boost young learners’ motivation and interest in vocabulary learning. According to Moon (2000), “When they (children) are enjoying themselves, they are usually absorbed by the activity and want to continue with it. They are not always aware that they are learning language” (p. 6). Accordingly, second language teachers should incorporate interesting vocabulary activities such as games, songs and stories in order to enhance young learners’ motivation and interests in vocabulary learning.

Research Approach and Methodology

Action research has been described as “a small-scale intervention in the functioning of the real world and a close examination of the effects of such an intervention” (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2000, p. 226). Similarly, Thornbury (2002) defines action research as “Small-scale classroom research implemented by teachers and directed at improving learning outcomes” (p. 139). The process allows teachers to gather information and provide practical feedback that can support effective change to improve students’ learning outcomes.

Hence, I employed multiple sources of data: classroom observations which were administered by different observers, a focus group semi-structured interview with the parents, and a survey with the students. These sources offered opportunities to collect data from different perspectives, which in turn increase the validity as well as the reliability of the study, through triangulation.

The main data collection method that I employed was observation because it has been stated that “Observation methods are powerful tools for gaining insight into situations” (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2000, p. 315). Therefore, the group of students involved in my study was closely observed while using the sack, following a semi-structured approach. While observing, I noted down every single action that represented students’ reactions to the strategy and how they used the sack to complete the tasks. The strategy’s flexibility enabled the collection of useful data that helped to find out the effects of the vocabulary sack on students’ vocabulary learning, motivation and performance of task.

From this experience, I agree with Bell (1999) that, “It is very hard to stand back and adopt the role of objective observer” (p. 158). This is because it is human nature to be subjective while observing one’s own teaching. Wallace (1998) suggests that having more than one observer may help to minimize this subjective element (p. 109). Thus, non-participant observers were invited to observe the small group each week and also to note the students’ reactions in terms of motivation and the use of the sack to support task completion. These procedures helped by collecting data from different perspectives which minimized the influence of subjectivity and the possibility of bias.

Parents were another important source of data. I engaged them in the process by asking them to provide any support their children might need while using the vocabulary sacks at home. In addition, a semi-structured interview with the parents of students in the group was conducted in Arabic. The interview was audio-taped, translated, analyzed and interpreted to find out what effects the strategy had on children’s
motivation and vocabulary learning, in particular word production and recognition, from the parents’ point of view. Bell (1999), argues that “interviews... provide important data, but they reveal only how people perceive what happens, not what actually happens” (p. 156).

The third form of data collection I employed was a survey which was given to students to find out, from their point of view, if the use of the vocabulary sacks had influenced their vocabulary learning and motivation. The survey was conducted once with the group and then each individual student in the group was asked to answer survey questions which enabled an evaluation of the process in terms of motivation and vocabulary learning. Some obstacles, however, had been anticipated during the process as it was felt some specific factors might influence students’ responses. This is because young learners may sometimes try to please the teacher by selecting the most expected answers, select the one that their friends have chosen, or be unable cognitively to cope with searching questions. Therefore, I supported the survey results by incorporating the multiple data collection strategies, as previously mentioned, to overcome this problem and increase the validity of the study.

Throughout the research process, I ensured ethical standards were followed. Bell (1999) suggests that, “Research ethics is about being clear about the nature of the agreement you have entered into with your research subjects or contacts” (p. 39). Therefore, permission was sought from the school principal, the English teacher and parents, through sending written documents that clearly explained the purpose of the study, how it was going to be conducted, time required and other kinds of support which would be needed. It was also clarified that the process would be completely anonymous to ensure that their individual rights were protected. Additionally, permission was sought from the parents to allow their children to be audio taped during the interview.

**Data Analysis and Interpretation**

The data was analyzed and interpreted to illuminate what effects the use of vocabulary sacks had on the young learners’ vocabulary acquisition. The results suggest that many opportunities arose to enhance students’ task performance, their independent learning, their motivation and their vocabulary acquisition, and each of these is now examined in turn.

Through the research period it was evident that the vocabulary sacks were cognitively challenging. According to Peregoy and Boyle (2001), students need to be challenged, but with support and encouragement which aids progress in their learning and development (p. 85). While observing the students, I noticed that a higher level of thinking was required to enable them to complete the tasks which were challenging, but carefully scaffolded, as students had the chance to refer to the vocabulary sacks which enabled them to complete the activities. The following comments from two non-participant observers illustrate this:

> The scaffolding provided by the vocabulary sacks is excellent for the developmental stage of these Grade 2 students. Requires some thought, and the boys clearly enjoyed the cognitive challenge. They enjoyed it so much, they didn’t want to stop.

*(Observer A)*
Some students went through the cards one by one; other students (e.g. M and A) looked for all the items for each room before moving to look for the items belonging in another room. These different approaches reflect the cognitive challenge and complexity of the task.

(Observer B)

Piaget’s cognitive development theory suggests that, “Knowledge is constructed throughout the action of the learner... Learning also involves mental action: the learner must do something mentally with new information in order to really learn it” (Trawick-Smith, 2000, p. 51). From this point of view, it appeared that the vocabulary sack activities offered the opportunity for deeper thinking which enhances vocabulary acquisition and language development.

Another theme that emerged was the level of assistance offered by the vocabulary sacks in enhancing independent learning. I noticed that the strategy enabled students to work independently and freely, taking responsibility to make decisions about selecting the right way to find answers to complete tasks. This was confirmed by one of the non-participant observers who remarked that:

It is unusual to see such a level of independent work in a UAE classroom... The boys clearly enjoyed the tactile feature of shuffling through the cards to find the right picture/word and match it to the picture in the booklet. Visual, kinesthetic needs catered for.

(Observer A)

This finding was also supported by data from the interview with parents when they were asked about the kind of support provided to their children while using the vocabulary sack at home. The following comments were made by parents during the interview:

I used to encourage my son to learn the words in the vocabulary sack in order, but he always refused and followed his own strategy, which was learning the words by categorizing them... The boy was always capable of learning all the words that he selected himself, more than I asked him to learn.

(Parent 1)

Although I was trying to teach my son individual words from the sack, he preferred taking out all the cards from the ring and successfully learning the words through playing games like memory and guessing games.

(Parent 2)

It seemed that the learners enjoyed the level of freedom provided in deciding on the appropriate techniques to carry out the tasks and in selecting the words they wanted to learn, or needed to use. Researchers believe that the more freedom the students have in selecting what they want to learn the more successful the learning process is (Hansen-Thomas, n.d.). The use of the vocabulary sacks therefore appears to facilitate the learning process as it allows individuals to decide on appropriate learning strategies that suit their learning styles and needs which might support vocabulary acquisition (Reid, 1995, p. 225).
The third theme arising from the observations is the effect that the use of the vocabulary sack had on students’ motivation. During the observations I noticed that the students were highly motivated and actively involved in the task, which maximized the opportunities for vocabulary learning. I noted that most of them grabbed the sacks and curiously took out the cards and flipped through them several times without looking at the activity worksheets. This was evident also in the feedback I received from another observer who wrote that:

They (students) are interested in their vocabulary sacks. I think one aspect is that they are motivated to study outside of the target language. They are looking at pictures and talking about them.

(Observer C)

These observations were confirmed in the students’ responses to the survey, where 100% of them indicated that they enjoyed using the sack and would like to use the vocabulary sacks again. It appeared that these young learners were attracted by the quality of the materials and the colorful pictures. The sacks also complemented different learning styles, such as visual and kinesthetic, as it allowed learners to look closely at the words in context through observing, touching and turning over the cards, while promoting vocabulary exposure.

Enhanced vocabulary learning was another theme which emerged during the study. Throughout the process I noticed that students’ vocabulary was gradually developing, as most of them were able to use the words from the sack in different contexts, such as describing house items, where people were in the house, and what they were doing. Parents also noticed this, as the following excerpts from two of the interviews show:

My son was very enthusiastic about using the sack and learning as many words as he can from it. He was very proud of his vocabulary development, and he used to tell his sister that he knows different words such as ‘wardrobe’ that she does not know.

(Parent 3)

The strategy is very helpful as I can clearly see how my son is improving in his vocabulary knowledge. He is now able to describe most things at home.

(Parent 4)

This was also supported by informal discussion with the English class teacher, who believed that the students in this particular class showed clear improvement in their vocabulary knowledge. She stated that most students in this group did well on the post unit test and could perform well in different classroom activities such as speaking and listening compared to the other grade two classes that she teaches. One possible reason for this result is that the strategy offered various opportunities for practising and recycling as students had the chance to meet the words in different circumstances while doing different classroom activities and using the sack at home which increases the opportunities for vocabulary learning and acquisition (Cameron, 2001, p. 74; Waring, 2002, p. 1). The strategy also appeared to increase the ability to remember the words as most of the activities required a high level of mental work which is believed to allow the words to settle in the brain’s long term memory and thus to enhance vocabulary acquisition (Nation, 1994, p. 5; Thornbury, 2002, p. 25).
Conclusions and Recommendations

Analysis of the data suggests that the introduction of vocabulary sacks as a learning resource had an impact on young learners’ vocabulary learning and acquisition. There was an improvement in the five students’ vocabulary knowledge as they were able to produce and recognize most of the selected items and words related to the particular unit, ‘My House’. This might be because the strategy appears to offer support for key areas in vocabulary learning, such as recycling, remembering, meaning clarification, motivation, scaffolding and cognitive challenge, which are believed to be essential in enhancing and facilitating vocabulary learning and acquisition (Cameron, 2001, p. 74; Thornbury, 2002, p. 25; Waring, 2002, p. 1).

The research results suggest that similar vocabulary teaching strategies should be adopted in UAE government schools to promote vocabulary learning. Although it is difficult for teachers to prepare individual vocabulary sacks for each unit, I recommend that vocabulary sacks be incorporated as part of the curricular resources for English language teachers. The strategy could be implemented once or twice a week in the classroom when children are practicing, presenting and reflecting on the new vocabulary.

Although I learnt a lot about second language learning, and vocabulary acquisition in particular, through this research, I believe that more study and investigation should be carried out in this area, especially in the UAE. With regards to vocabulary learning strategies, I believe that the vocabulary sack strategy could be developed to suit different levels and to support different language learning purposes, such as emphasizing different grammar points to facilitate language accuracy. Hence, I recommend further investigation be done to answer the following question:

- What effect will it have if students have the chance to select and add their own vocabulary items, and are totally free in deciding when to use the vocabulary sack?

The research focused on a particular group of students who have individual personalities, attitudes, beliefs and abilities that could not necessarily be generalized to other learners in other contexts. Educational researchers, nevertheless, suggest that, “it is possible to assess the typicality of a situation – the participants and settings, to identify possible comparison groups, and to indicate how data might translate into different settings and cultures” (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2000, p. 109). Accordingly, the study’s findings could be generalized to other UAE government primary school for boys and girls, as these children share the same values, beliefs and have very similar settings for learning. The findings also could be generalized to other second language learning contexts with grade two children in particular, as most children of that age share similar characteristics such as being attracted by colorful materials, and enjoying the tactile features the vocabulary sacks offered.
References


