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The Effectiveness of Using Smart Phones as a Supplementary Tool on English Vocabulary Learning for Yemeni EFL Undergraduates

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Abstract

Motivated by the predominance of smart phones in our lives and the strengthened connection between EFL learners and these hand-held devices, this experimental study investigated the effectiveness of smart phone messages as a supplementary tool on vocabulary learning for thirty-three Yemeni EFL first year undergraduates. Results from the post test showed that the experimental group outperformed the control group, but, statistically, there was no significant difference between the mean scores of the two groups indicating that the traditional way of vocabulary teaching and the way of supporting it by smart phone messages were similarly effective. Results of the delayed post test were also in the same vein assuring that there was no statistically significant difference in vocabulary retention between these two ways of teaching. The post-questionnaire showed the highly positive attitude that the Yemeni EFL learners have toward the use of smart phones in their learning.

Keywords: vocabulary, smart phones, EFL.

Introduction

It is a fact that vocabulary learning is vitally essential to language acquisition, whether the language is first, second, or foreign, and though teaching has not given the vocabulary its deserved priority, the practice of learning and teaching the second language has recently emphasized the role of vocabulary learning. For this reason, specialists now urge that both teachers and learners do need a systematic and principled approach to vocabulary learning (DeCarrico, 2001, p.285).

From our experience and point of view, insufficient vocabulary is a major setback that prevents language learners from successful communication whether they are reading, listening, speaking, or writing. In other words, it would be difficult, or even impossible, for language learners to comprehend the language input if they did not understand the vocabulary that they read or listen to. Similarly, the production of language would be paralyzed if speakers or writers did not have vocabulary that best describe what they really wanted to say or write. However, and in spite of this assertion that teachers should necessarily assist learners to take care of their own vocabulary learning, Nation (2003) maintained that focusing chiefly on vocabulary is not recommended, because it could overwhelm the other components of the target language, (p.134).

Taking into consideration these two views, there has been a continuous research by educators to find effective techniques to help students learn vocabulary, and since smart phones are accessible, personalizable, and portable (Saran & Seferoglu, 2010, p.253), the utilization of these devices in second or foreign language learning could be significantly beneficial in helping learners boost their vocabulary learning and in providing teachers with new means to achieve their teaching objectives.

There have been a lot of studies which investigated how smart phones could improve students' vocabulary learning. For example, Basal, Yilmaz, Tanriverdi, and Sari (2016), Jafari and Chalak (2016), and Taj, Ali, Sipra, and Ahmad (2017) have focused on vocabulary learning with the help of smart phones. They concluded that the use of smart phones to spur vocabulary learning was effectively significant, and that policy makers and teachers should consider this new technology to step up their students' vocabulary learning. However, in the Yemeni context, the use of smart phones to assist vocabulary learning in relation to English language receptive skills is still a new topic. That is, there is a real need to investigate to what extent the exploitation of smart phones could create a new space through which students could be regularly assisted to potentially broaden their vocabulary learning experiences. Therefore, this study aims at answering these two questions: 1) what effect does the use of smart phones as a supplementary tool have on vocabulary learning for Yemeni EFL first year undergraduates?, and 2) what are the perceptions of Yemeni EFL first year undergraduates about the use of smart phones as a supplementary tool on vocabulary learning?

Literature review

Smart phones

As subscribers of smart phones surpassed five billion users (GSMA, 2019) due to their convenience, easiness of use, and small size (Zhu, 2017, p.16), these hand-held devices have revolutionized the field of language learning because they open up great instructional and interactional opportunities for both language learners and language teachers (Hyman, Moser, & Segala, 2014, p.35). Since smart phones have sophisticatedly offered many advantageous characteristics, there has been a growing interest to utilize these devices in language learning and teaching (Burston, 2015, p.4). Some of the distinctive characteristics that these devices have include their ubiquity (Herrington, 2009, p.29; Ng, Nicholas, Loke, & Torabi, 2010, p.43; Traxler, 2017, p.2) accessibility, portability, and interactivity (Ahmad, 2019, pp.45-46; Zaki & Yunus, 2015, pp.12-13), in addition to offering spontaneity, using multimedia, and helping scaffolding (Ahmad, 2019, p.46). Moreover, they richly offer wireless networking, and perfectly save their users privacy (Zaki & Yunus, 2015, p.13).

Significance of vocabulary

With both Wilkins' (1972) quote ". . . while without grammar very little can be conveyed, without vocabulary *nothing* can be conveyed" (pp. 111–112), and Harmer's (1994) quote "[I]f language structures make up the skeleton of language, then it is

vocabulary that provides the vital organs and the flesh" (p. 153), one can clearly perceive how important vocabulary is in learning a particular language be it first, second, or foreign. Despite his old view that emphasized the importance of grammar over vocabulary, Krashen (1982) noted that the more vocabulary language learners acquire, the more listening and reading they understand, and that the more comprehension language learners achieve, the more grammar they learn, (p.80). For most of us, communication can take place using words even though they are not ordered appropriately, uttered correctly, or marked with proper morphology, but without using the correct word, communication is most likely to break down (Lightbown & Spada, 2013, p.60). This is abundantly clear since we understand what children mean though what we hear from them are only isolated words or fragments, and the same is true with the beginner learners of other languages. Such view that dominates vocabulary over grammar is in large part due to the fact that vocabulary contributes to the meaning of a piece of language more than what grammar does (Viera, 2017, p90).

Vocabulary is of crucial importance to language learners. It is the most essential aspect that all language learners should develop (Saville-Troike, 2006, p.138). Not only it is the fundamental and essential linguistic ability to comprehend and produce languages (Mohamad, 2012, p.62; Viera, 2017, p.91), but it is also an every indication of learners' acquisition and proficiency in certain language skills (Boers & Lindstromberg, 2008, p.4; Shandu-Phetla, 2017, p.1; Viera, 2017, p.91) . Moreover, vocabulary enriches learners' minds to help them make successful and effective mental processes like: connecting, patterning, and organizing (Willis, 2008, p.80).

Methodology

Participants

This study has targeted thirty-three first year undergraduates in the academic year 2018-2019 at the Department of English language, Faculty of Education - Shabwa, University of Aden. They were divided into two groups; 16 students represented the experimental group and 17 students represented the control group.

Research design.

This is an experimental study through which participants were taught a course of reading called *Inside Reading: The Academic Word List in Context (intro level)*. The control group learned the targeted list of vocabulary traditionally, i.e. they encountered them in their reading tasks, and learned them by doing some exercises in the classroom. Whereas the experimental group learnt the same list in the same classroom and under the same circumstances, and also received smart phones massages that support their learning of this list which was selected from the Academic Word List in coincidence with the selected course book and the taught units.

Instruments of Data Collection

Many instruments were used to collect data: a list of forty-eight academic vocabulary; pre and post questionnaires; pre and post tests; and a delayed posttest. This

triangulation of instruments was of great help to comprehensively answer the two research questions.

Results and discussion

The pretest and the posttest

To answer research questions 1, the experiment started by having both groups took the same vocabulary test as a pretest. The purpose of this test was to find the extent of equality between the participants' knowledge of the targeted vocabulary before the beginning of the experiment. An independent sample t-test was conducted using SPSS to know succinctly the significance of the difference between the means of these two groups in this pretest. There was no significant difference between the control group (M = 7.29, SD = 5.89) and the experimental group (M = 9.68, SD = 14.45); t (21.44) = -0.63, p = 0.54 (two-tailed). The mean difference was -2.39 with a 95% confidence interval ranging from -10.29 to 5.51, (see table 1).

Table 1: Independent sample t-tests for the two groups in the pretest, the posttest, and the delayed posttest:

	Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
	F	Sig.	t	Df	Sig. (2-tailed)	MD	SED	95% CI	
								LL	UL
The pretest									
Equal variances assumed	8.76	0.006	-0.62	31	0.54	-2.39	3.89	-10.32	5.54
Equal variances not assumed			-0.63	21.44	0.54	-2.39	3.80	-10.29	5.51
The Posttest									
Equal variances assumed	12.34	0.001	-1.09	31	0.286	-6.67	6.15	-19.21	5.87
Equal variances not assumed			-1.11	19.26	0.279	-6.67	5.99	-19.20	5.86
The Delayed Posttest									
Equal variances assumed	7.82	0.009	-1.15	31	0.26	-7.10	6.18	-19.71	5.51
Equal variances not assumed			-1.18	19.5	0.253	-7.10	6.03	-19.70	5.50

Note: F = *f*-test, df = degree of freedom, MD = Mean Difference, SED = Standard Error Difference, CI = Confidence Interval, LL = Lower Level, UL = Upper Level

After the completion of the eight-week's treatment, both groups took another version of the pretest as a posttest. This version only differs from the pretest in the order of items within each question. The results indicate that there was no significant difference in the posttest between the control group (M = 13.67, SD = 7.33) and the experimental group (M = 20.34, SD = 23.52); t (19.26) = -1.11, p = 0.28 (two-tailed). The magnitude of difference in means (MD = -6.67, 95% CI: -19.2 to 5.86) was small (eta squared = 0.038) which indicated that the effect size of the difference between the two groups in this posttest

was minor, (see table 1). Consequently, it is concluded that there is no statistically significant difference in vocabulary learning between the method of sending smart phone messages and the traditional method of teaching.

Despite the fact that the participants of the experimental group outperformed the participants of the control group in the posttest, the mean difference between their scores was not significant. This means that the treatment of getting vocabulary learning messages was not highly effective. And this in turn leads to conclude that the use of smart phone messages as a supplementary tool on vocabulary learning is not significantly effective for Yemeni EFL first year undergraduates.

These findings are in the same vein of many other studies that have been conducted in the field of vocabulary learning. For example, Alemi, Sarab, and Lari (2012) compared the vocabulary competence of a control group who was taught the targeted vocabulary using a paper dictionary and an experimental group who was taught the same vocabulary via phone SMSs. They found that both groups have remarkably improved their vocabulary competence in the posttest and that there is no significant difference between vocabulary competence using the dictionary and the phone SMSs. Further, Lai (2014) conducted a study whose results revealed that the difference between the means of the control group and the experimental group is not significantly different. The aim of that study was to investigate the effectiveness of WhatsApp messenger on vocabulary learning. The control group was taught 200 high-frequency verbs traditionally while the experimental group was taught the same list via instant messaging of WhatsApp.

The delayed posttest

In order to check our participants' retention of the targeted vocabulary, the participants of both groups took a delayed posttest two weeks after taking the posttest. It was a copy of the same pretest that they took before commencing the treatment at the beginning of the academic semester. The results of the independent sample t-test demonstrate that there was no significant difference in the delayed posttest between the control group (M = 12.63, SD = 7.63) and the experimental group (M = 19.73, SD = 23.58); t (19.5) = -1.18, p = 0.25 (two-tailed). The magnitude of difference in means (MD = -7.1, 95% CI: -19.7 to 5.5) was small (eta squared = 0.043) which indicated that the effect size of the difference between the two groups in this delayed posttest was minor, (see table 1). Based on these two indicators, it is concluded that there is no significant difference in vocabulary retention between the method of sending smart phone messages and the traditional method of teaching. (For more detailed results and discussion, see Ja'wal (2020))

The results of the delayed posttest also indicate that there was only a minor recession in the participants' knowledge of the targeted vocabulary during the two weeks that separated the posttest from the delayed posttest. This can be explained by knowing that participants ceased their learning of the targeted vocabulary after the end of the treatment. Therefore, it is reasonably believed that they forget, or even doubt, the meanings

of some of these words in the delayed posttest. In other words, the participants' performance, in both groups, slightly deteriorated between the two tests due to the fact that they were not intentionally exposed to any of the targeted vocabulary after taking the posttest. This in turn leads to conclude that the vocabulary retention of the experimental group was not significantly better than that of the control group.

What can also be inferred is that, and after two weeks from the last lesson, the participants of both groups have successfully recalled the meanings of many of the targeted vocabulary items, which they have studied as a part of their syllabus in the course of Reading. This leads to demonstrate that those students did actually learn, and are presumed to be able to use, many of these targeted vocabulary items. That is, the traditional way of teaching vocabulary and the experimental way of supporting this way of teaching via smart phone messages are both effective in vocabulary retention.

In literature, there are some studies whose results, with regard to vocabulary retention, are similar to these of the present study. For example, Derakhshan and Kaivanpanah (2011) carried out a study to investigate the impact of phone SMSs on vocabulary learning of forty-three Iranian first year undergraduates. All the participants were taught 15-20 words per session for seven weeks, and they were asked to write a sentence for each of these words. The comparison of group means indicated that there was no significant difference in vocabulary learning of both groups and that the score of both groups decreased in the delayed posttest. Also, Lu (2008) found that the scores of the two groups in the delayed posttest were less than their scores in the posttest. In that study, thirty Taiwanese high school students studied fourteen words each week for three weeks. The control group received the targeted words in printed lists while the experimental group received them via phone SMSs. Besides, Zhang, Song, and Burston (2011) concluded that the one-week delayed post test revealed that there is no significant difference in vocabulary retention between the thirty-two learners who learnt 130 vocabulary items via smart phone SMSs and the thirty learners who learnt the same list of vocabulary traditionally.

The post-questionnaire

As for the research question 2, participants of the experimental group were surveyed so as to obtain their general attitude toward the whole experiment. They filled in a questionnaire that sought their perceptions on the treatment they had. Figure 1 summarizes their responses on the attitudinal questions that this questionnaire included. 74% of responses support the use of smart phones as a vocabulary learning tool compared to only 7% of responses which were against this trend. The other 19% of responses were neutral. This high percentage of positive responses does not only reflect the enthusiasm that the participants have toward the utilization of their smart phones in their English vocabulary learning, but it also encourages both teachers and learners to employ this means in order to fulfil their teaching and learning objectives.

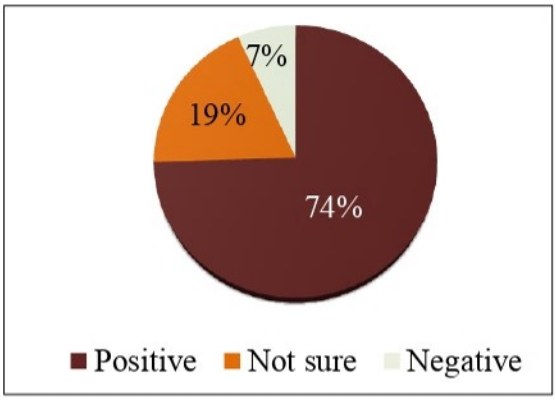

Figure 1: Percentage of the experimental group's attitudes toward the experiment

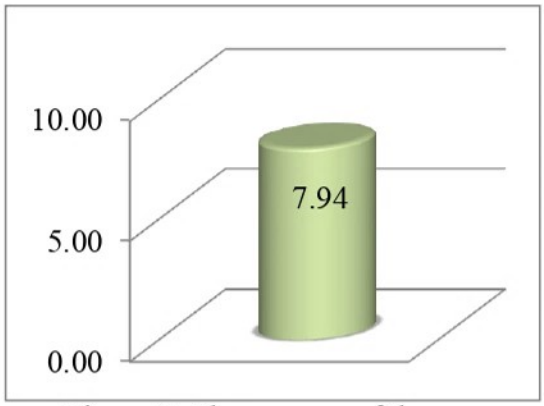

Figure 2: The average of the experimental group's overall evaluation out of 10 degrees

Further, the participants were asked to give, out of ten degrees, their overall evaluation of the whole treatment. From figure 2, which illustrates the average of their responses, we can infer the extent to which the participants of the experimental group were satisfied with the treatment in general. 7.94 out of 10 degrees is the average of the overall evaluation that they have given to the treatment. In other words, the level of their satisfaction has reached almost 80%, which leads to conclude that their general attitude toward the whole treatment was highly positive.

Such high level of satisfaction can be reasonably attributed to some factors; first, the participants have felt real progress in their vocabulary learning using this method as opposed to the traditional way. Second, this treatment has not only helped the participants learn the targeted vocabulary, but it also exposed them to many other vocabulary items as well as to other skills and aspects of the English language. Third, this treatment has attracted the participants' attention to the potentials that smart phones have in facilitating the process of learning, and to the fact that using smart phones does not necessarily mean wasting of time; it can be rich of benefits.

This high positive attitude that this study has found is in line with similar findings that many other studies have reached. For instance, Almekhlafy and Alzubi (2016) concluded that the attitiudes of EFL Saudi learners toward the use of WhatsApp as a tool to learn English was highly posititve. Their participants' responses showed high general satisfaction that reached around 88% indicating that they have improved different aspects of their English including vocabulary, grammar, and spelling. Furthermore, Redd (2011) found that the overall level of satisfaction of using a smart phone application in vocabulary learning was about 80%. Similarly, Hu (2011) found that the overall attitude to use smart phones as a vocabulary learning tool was highly positive with a percentage of nearly 80%.

Conclusion

This experimental study has investigated the effectiveness of using smart phones as a supplementary tool on English vocabulary learning. It showed that, statistically, there was no significant difference between teaching vocabulary traditionally and supporting it with the use of smart phones though the experimental group outperformed the control group. In addition, it revealed the high positive attitude that the participants had on using smart phones to learn vocabulary. There are many ways in which the current study can be duplicated with either of the following alterations: increasing the number of participants, applying it with participants of different levels, expanding the time span, changing the type of vocabulary, redesigning the vocabulary tests, or comparing male and female performances.

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فعالية استخدام الهاتف الذكي كأداة مساعدة لتعلم مفردات اللغة الإنجليزية لدى طلبة المستوى الأول الجامعي اليمنيين

الملخص:

استنادًا إلى هيمنة الهواتف الذكية على حياتنا، وإلى تعزيز الرابط بين متعلمي اللغة الإنجليزية وهذه الأجهزة المحمولة، استقصت هذه الدراسة فعالية استخدام الهاتف الذكي كأداة مساعدة لتعلم مفردات اللغة الإنجليزية لدى متعلمي اللغة الإنجليزية اليمنيين في المستوى الأول من قسم اللغة الإنجليزية بكلية التربية – شبوة، جامعة عدن.

أجريت هذه الدراسة التجريبية خلال الفصل الأول من العام الجامعي 2019/2018م، وشارك فيها ثلاثة وثلاثون طالبًا وطالبة، تم تقسيمهم على مجموعتين: مجموعة ضابطة (16 طالبًا وطالبة)، وأخرى تجريبية (17 طالبًا وطالبة) في بداية الدراسة ، خضع أفراد المجموعتين لاختبار قبلي؛ وذلك بغرض قياس مدى معرفة هؤلاء الطلبة بالمفردات الثمان وأربعين المستهدفة في الدراسة، والمأخوذة من قائمة المفردات الأكاديمية (AWL). على مدى ثمانية أسابيع، تم تدريس كلتا المجوعتين المنهج المخصص لمادة القراءة المسمى (في عمق القراءة: قائمة المفردات الأكاديمية في السياق – المستوى التمهيدي) معًا، داخل فصل دراسي واحد. وكان أفراد المجموعة التجريبية فقط هم من تلقَّوا معلومات إضافية عن المفردات المستهدفة، وذلك عن طريق رسائل هواتفهم الذكية. وشملت تلك المعلومات بعضًا أو كلًا مما يلي: تعريفات كاملة للمفردات المستهدفة، مرادفاتها، أضدادها، وأمثلة إضافية عنها في سياقات مختلفة.

بعد انتهاء فترة التجربة خضع المشاركون من المجموعتين لاختبار بعدي؛ بهدف قياس مستوى التطور في معرفتهم للمفردات المستهدفة. وبعد أسبوعين من الاختبار البعدي، خضع هؤلاء المشاركون كذلك لاختبار بعدي متأخر بغرض مقارنة قدرة المجموعتين على استبقاء المفردات المستهدفة. كما قام المشاركون في المجموعة التجريبية بتعبئة استبيان بعدي، هدف إلى استطلاع آرائهم عن التجربة.

أظهرت نتائج الاختبار البعدي تفوُّق أفراد المجموعة التجريبية على أقرانهم في المجموعة الضابطة، ولكن هذا التفوق لم يُظهِر فرقًا ذا دلالة إحصائية بين معدل درجات المجموعتين، مما يشير إلى تشابه تأثير طريقة تدريس المفردات تقليديًا وطريقة تدريس المفردات بمساعدة رسائل الهاتف الذكي. وأظهرت نتائج الاختبار البعدي المتأخر أيضًا الشيء نفسه؛ إذ لم يكن هناك فرق ذو دلالة إحصائية بين معدل درجات المجموعتين، مما يقود إلى القول بعدم وجود فرق بين الطريقتين فيما يتعلق باستبقاء المتعلمين للمفردات. أما نتائج الاستبيان فقد أشارت إلى الموقف الإيجابي القوي الذي يتبنَّاه متعلمو اللغة الإنجليزية اليمنيون تجاه استخدام الهاتف الذكي في التعلم. كما خلصت الدراسة إلى بعض التوصيات والمقترحات، التي قد يستفاد منها في مشاريع بحثية مستقبلية ذات صلة.

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