'SOLVE THE CROSSWORD': A VOCABULARY-BASED EXAMINATION OF TASK DESIGN IN EFL MATERIALS

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ABSTRACT

Learning vocabulary is an important and time-consuming endeavor for a language learner, and it has been proposed that the foreign language classroom should provide specific support for students' vocabulary development. Vocabulary exercises in instructional materials are a primary source of explicit word focus, and students' learning can be helped if they are designed in a learning-friendly manner. So far, few research have attempted to determine what learning possibilities tasks in materials provide. The current study reports on an examination of the vocabulary exercises in three series of Swedish intermediate EFL materials, with an emphasis on target vocabulary and learning circumstances. The target vocabulary was examined in terms of frequency distribution in general English, and the learning conditions were investigated. The findings imply that substantial retrieval possibilities in the content improve learning. However, it was discovered that the activities rarely required students to utilize the target vocabulary, and that it mostly consisted of high-frequency terms, i.e. words that the learners were likely to already know. As a result, materials creators must adopt a more methodical approach to vocabulary in order to ensure that word-focused assignments contribute considerably to students' learning.

Keywords: ELF, vocabulary , teaching materials, tasks , ILH

INTRODUCTION

The development of an adequate vocabulary for communicating is a major difficulty for language learners This endeavor necessitates a significant amount of time and effort, especially given the high vocabulary requirements for successful language use and comprehension. The discovery that knowledge of approximately 98% of the words in a text is required to grasp it properly demonstrates the importance of vocabulary in reading comprehension. Furthermore, Nation estimates that an English student needs to know 8-9000 word families in order to comprehend written English. Developing a vocabulary of this size is a difficult task, and scholars have claimed that kids require assistance in order to succeed In the EFL classroom, it has been discovered that explicit attention to vocabulary is required to facilitate learning for example, through form-focused instruction or different vocabulary exercises (the terms exercise and task are used interchangeably in the paper). Because a language learning course includes the development of numerous skills and linguistic elements, time spent explicitly on vocabulary will be limited .As a result, it is not just critical to pay attention to vocabulary in the EFL classroom; the activities must also make effective use of time by being designed in a way that promotes learning. Published instructional materials are a frequent use in the classroom.. They are often a source of explicit vocabulary concentration.

METHODS AND MATERIALS

This study examines three series of widely used EFL materials for Chirchik secondary school students (ages 13 to 15). The series was chosen after an informal poll of instructors on the textbooks they use. Awesome were the materials evaluated. It should be mentioned that Digilär is available in two editions: Standard and Advanced. The exercises are often the same, but where they differ, the Standard form of the exercise was examined. The data came from the workbooks and activities that accompanied the textbooks. Any extra resources that could be available were not examined. Because they were not as crucial to the contents, potential extra resources were not addressed. A vocabulary exercise was defined as a task labeled as a word activity by the material (typically by being an activity under the heading 'Vocabulary' in the work book) or where the instructions explicitly drew attention to vocabulary, such as 'use the words in the circle to describe the people in the pictures. Despite the fact that this task requires students to use words and has a clear word focus, it is not labeled as a vocabulary practice in the workbook. By considering these activities as well, it was determined that all activities designed to aid in vocabulary acquisition were taken into account. Thus, the words in the vocabulary list were translated to their lemma form, ignoring any inflectional variation. Proper nouns were excluded since they are not target vocabulary in the same way that common nouns are. Sketch Engine Footnote1 (Kilgarriff et al. Citation2004) was used to create and prepare the target vocabulary lists for analysis.

ANALYSIS

The modified ILH framework was utilized to analyze the task design, which focused on the frequency distribution of the target language (RQ1) and the learning conditions supplied in the task (RQ2). To assess the frequency of the target words in general English, the target word lists were ran through VP-Compleat on the Lextutor website (Cobb Citationn.d.), where the frequency of the words was calculated in proportion to the frequency of the words in general English. In this method, the terms targeted in activities might be evaluated in relation to the intended population of learners, based on the notion that the frequency of a word in common English reflects its value. Because the material was vocabulary exercises for secondary school students in Chirchik, where they are expected to be at least at A2 level when starting secondary school, the argument was that students were likely to know high-frequency words in English and that mid-frequency words were also suitable target words for their continued progression (cf. Qian and Lin Citation2020; Schmitt and Schmitt Citation2014). The target word analysis findings are not provided band by band, but rather according to Schmitt and Schmitt's (Citation2014) classification of high- (first 3000 words), medium- (second 3000 words), and low- (last 3000 words).

RESULTS

In contrast to studies of flowing text, where a major proportion will be high-frequency words due to the nature of language, the target vocabulary here is individual words in, for example, fill-in-the-blanks activities. This means that the frequency distribution cannot be attributed to the nature of English because each word has been carefully chosen. Given that students are expected to already know many high-frequency terms, it is interesting that the proportion of high-frequency words in all materials surpasses 50%. Over 70% of the lemmas practiced in each Good Stuff Gold book originate from the high-

frequency bands. The Digilär series has the lowest proportion of high-frequency vocabulary, ranging from 57.1% to 67.4%.

Aside from the amount of relevant vocabulary in the materials, the raw frequency of target words may be used to show how much vocabulary children can acquire from working with word-focused tasks. As demonstrated in Table 4, the amount of mid-frequency lemmas varies between books (and years) in the various series. It should also be noted that, while Good Stuff Gold has the lowest proportion of mid-frequency words, when the raw figures are considered, the series has the highest number of mid-frequency words (397 words in the series), implying that, of the materials studied, it provides the most opportunities for learning mid-frequency words. Digilär, on the other hand, has the lowest raw number, with a total of 259 words spread across three novels. If the targeted learners do not know any of the target vocabulary's mid-frequency terms, they are given the opportunity to practice between 259 and 397 unique and appropriate words in secondary school vocabulary activities. Given the strong demands for vocabulary development for English usage and understanding, this fraction of unique terms looks low after three years of focused study.

DISCUSSION

The present study set out to investigate whether vocabulary exercises in three series EFL materials support learning for intermediate learners by analysing the target vocabulary and learning conditions provided. The results reveal that the tasks encompass both aspects that are likely to facilitate learning for the intended group of students and aspects that are unlikely to contribute to learning. The primary supportive feature of the exercises is the prominence of retrieval opportunities. Considering that empirical studies indicate a positive impact of retrieval on vocabulary development (e.g. Barcroft ; Strong and Boers , the finding that a majority of exercises require students to retrieve words suggests that the task design, in this sense, is conducive to learning. In contrast, the study also identifies areas where the tasks are not constructed in a facilitative way. This is particularly notable in the focus on high-frequency words and the low proportion of exercises requiring students to use vocabulary in original ways . Although this study is based on a limited sample, consisting of three series of EFL materials, the results are important. As teaching materials have a central role in the classroom, the structure of tasks is indicative of the vocabulary learning opportunities in school. EFL learners face a considerable learning task and working with well-structured vocabulary exercises is a way of making this burden lighter. The study shows that exercises in teaching materials are not unequivocally constructed to support learning and an implication of these results is that EFL teachers need to provide more opportunities outside the materials, especially by working with mid-frequency words and use in context. EFL teachers can also utilise the original or modified ILH framework as a tool to assess the vocabulary activities they include in the classroom, to ensure that time is spent on supportive tasks. This study sheds light on an area of vocabulary research mainly unstudied, namely the learning opportunities in explicit vocabulary learning activities in the classroom. Additional studies are encouraged to illuminate the issue further. Studies could apply a similar methodology on teaching materials in other contexts or aimed at other age groups. Another area of study could be combining the two methods and investigating what kinds of words are practised under different learning conditions.

CONCULISON

The study has shown that vocabulary exercises in Swedish EFL teaching materials offer limited support to students' vocabulary development. It is true that they provide good conditions for retrieving vocabulary, which is likely to facilitate learning and can also be a way to include motivating tasks in materials. However, the main findings of the study, namely that most target words are from high-frequency bands and the scarcity of exercises promoting use, show that they, to a large extent, are not designed in a way that supports other aspects of word learning. It can be concluded that the vocabulary tasks do not appear to be constructed with a systematic and research-based approach to vocabulary, in terms of word choice or task design. The study thus shows that vocabulary needs to become a priority in materials development, for both publishers and developers, if word-focused exercises are to support students' learning and make a significant contribution to the EFL classroom.

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