



EFL language learners' perception for learning vocabulary by using CAP and flash cards

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Abstract

Vocabulary is an important part of learning a language. Vocabulary can be taught and learned by using a variety of techniques. The focus of this study is learning vocabulary by using computer and flash cards. "Computers have been used for language teaching ever since the 1960's." (Ghabanchi and Anbarestani, 2008, p. 87) A question may arise: What is the language learners' perception of using computer assisted program (CAP) and flash cards (FC) in learning vocabulary? The present study tried to answer this question by examining the impact of CAP and FC on language learners' vocabulary learning. To this end, 15 young EFL learners participated in this study. Specific treatment was employed in the class, and finally a questionnaire and an interview were used to gather data. The results have indicated that both of the two techniques were attractive to the students. However, the use of technology proved to be more interesting and effective for the learners. Therefore, the software helped the students to enjoy the learning process.

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Key words: Vocabulary learning; Flash card; Computer assisted program; EFL language learners' perception

1. Introduction

Nowadays Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL) plays a crucial role in many countries. Teaching a language is a complicated process since a language consists of four main skills, including reading, writing, speaking and listening, and some sub-skills, including grammar, pronunciation and vocabulary.

One crucial sub-skill is vocabulary, vocabulary has been considered fundamental to the development of language proficiency. 'Learning vocabulary is an ongoing process' (Mehring, 2005, p. 1) that is an essential part in mastering a second language. EFL learners need a large number of words to speak, read, listen, write, communicate and use an L2 successfully.

Different methods are used for teaching and learning vocabulary. For example some English teachers try to teach new words using L1 equivalents found in the students' first language, or some learners are eager to learn words by pictures or word lists to understand and memorize them better. Another way of learning vocabulary is through flash card. A flash card is a set of cards bearing information, as words or numbers, on either or both sides, used in classroom drills or in private study. (Budden, 2004)

Flash cards can be employed for the first exposure to a word, but many language learners keep on using them to

review it afterwards. One main benefit of flash cards is that they can be taken almost anywhere and practiced when one has spare time. (Brown, 2000) Another advantage of flash cards is that they can be arranged to create logical grouping of the target words. (Gairns, Redman and Cohen, 1990 as cited in Eslahcar Komachali and Khodareza, 2012)

One of educational facilities is employing Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL) which is a new issue in both computer and linguistics sciences. Application of CALL is experiencing a renaissance in the modern language teaching and learning arena, with a high growth of popularity. (Naraghizadeh and Barimani, 2013)

CALL has different subfields such as Computer Assisted Program (CAP), Computer Assisted Vocabulary Learning (CAVL) and Computer Assisted Instruction (CAI) which help learners to improve their foreign language skills like learning vocabulary.

Nowadays, learners tend to enjoy using computer assisted program in order to learn a piece of information. And on the other hand, using flash cards is likely to be effective for learning. Thus, it is worth investigating the perception of language learners regarding the use of computer and flash card for learning vocabulary.

2. Review of literature

One of the considerable and inseparable parts of learning a foreign language is learning vocabulary. EFL learners often claim that their primary problem in learning the target language is lack of vocabulary knowledge. Poor vocabulary is one of the learners' sources of complaint in the process of language learning. The problems arise where a poor knowledge of vocabulary impedes reading or listening process, and they can serve as a stumbling block in effective communication. (Shakouri and Mehrgan, 2012) In other words, communication breaks down when EFL learners do not use the right words.

The importance of vocabulary learning is mentioned by many researchers. For instance, Wilkins (1972) pointed out that "while without grammar very little can be conveyed, without vocabulary nothing can be conveyed. It is obvious that his statement confirms the important role of vocabulary in language learning." (Wilkins, 1972, p. 111-112)

According to Rahimi and Sahragard (2008), learning a foreign or second language at all levels of proficiency involves the acquisition of thousands of words. Language learners look for effective ways to increase opportunities for retaining new words in long-term memory, but forgetting is a common problem. Language learners often complain that they forget new words soon after learning them. The importance of vocabulary learning also poses some challenges for teachers. They like to know in what ways instructional programs might foster the acquisition of so many words. (Eslahcar Komachali & Khodareza, 2012)

The important role of vocabulary has been emphasized in many different methods of language teaching. One of the basic issues that the EFL learners face in their learning career is how they can learn words in the easiest way. (Shakouri & Mehrgan, 2012)

Brown (2001) believes that in the past teachers taught vocabulary by lists, definitions, written or oral drills and flash cards. Flash cards can capture a vivid imagination of new words. But the teachers did not pay attention to the lexical forms of language. This was because on that time, teachers' roles were as a facilitator and a guide, so they were unwilling to directly take students' attention to the lexical forms. According to Brown (2001), there are some of guidelines and techniques for teaching and learning vocabulary include:

- Allocate specific class time to vocabulary learning
- Help students to learn vocabulary in context
- Play down (make something less important) the role of bilingual dictionary
- Encourage students to develop strategies for determining the meaning of words
- Engage in unplanned vocabulary teaching
- Employing new and modern methods such as CALL

CALL is a modern method which is based on computer program and issued to both teach and learn vocabulary. Using computer is so interesting for learners especially children. The variety of computer programs can be a key point to raise learner's enthusiasm to learn and memorize vocabulary.

2.1 Flash Card (FC)

One strategy for learning vocabulary is the use of flash cards. A flash card is a cardboard consisting of a word, a sentence, or a simple picture on it. It should be noted that the letters on it must be visible and large enough for everyone sitting in the front and the back of the classroom. To make sure that everyone can see the letters on the card, it is better to write words with capital letters. (Budden, 2004)

Both sides of the flash card should be used in teaching vocabulary. On one side, the new word is written in L2 and perhaps with a picture beside it and on the other side is the translation. These flash cards can be made by both teachers and learners. Flash cards for EFL teaching or self-study have been used for years, and they are a useful tool for teachers and learners. Flash cards can be a fun, colorful, and creative way to aid in memory and retention of vocabulary words. (Eslahcar Komachali and Khodareza, 2012)

2.2 Computer assisted program (CAP)

CAP is considered as a subcategory of CALL that refers to the use of computers and related technologies to enhance language learning and expanding opportunities for instruction. As new digital technologies, such as tablets, cell phones, and other mobile devices are developed, new affordances of CAP must be examined for their effectiveness in language instruction and learning. (Budden, 2004)

3. The study

The current research intends to tackle the problems of word learning by using two techniques (CAP and FC) and to compare using these two techniques to find out the language learners' perception in order to realize which one of these two techniques is the most effective way to learn vocabulary.

3.1. Participants

In order to carry out this research, an institute with well-equipped audio-visual technology was necessary. A proficiency test was administered to the students of an English institute to obtain a homogenous sample. As a result, 15 students had the required language qualification for a homogeneous sample to fulfill the purpose. Thus, the participants of this study consisted of 15 language learners learning English in an institute.

3.2 Instruments

The following instruments were employed in the present study:

The textbook

Backpack is an English book that is taught to the elementary language learners in Shokouh institute. The book is

written by Mario Herrera and Diane Pinkley in 2009, and it is published by Pearson Longman. This book is usually used in a seven-level course for young learners of English.

The questionnaire

A12-item questionnaire (Appendix A) with four-point Likert scale was used in this study in order to determine CAP users' overall attitudes towards CALL before and after the treatment. This questionnaire was adopted from the study of Tabatabaei (2012).

Computer devices

As it was mentioned before, computer was a necessary device in this study. The required computer hardware must contain a set of computers with monitor, graphic and sound cards, speakers, microphones, and mice. And the computer software must contain Windows 7. Packages of 'tell me more kids' CD-ROM was used as the main software media of instruction in the present study.

Interview

The questions of the interview were written by the researcher, and they were approved by two TEFL Ph.D. instructors. These questions aimed to measure the students' opinions regarding the techniques of FC and CAP for learning vocabulary. In other words, the interview made students able to describe their ideas in detail.

Proficiency test

To select the participants of this study, fifty students took a quick placement test version 2. This test is published by Oxford University Press and University of Cambridge Local Examinations Syndicate. The aim of taking this test is to find a homogeneous sample (regarding the language proficiency) for conducting the study.

Flash cards

The utilized textbook has a series of flash cards. The same flash cards of the textbook were used. The flash cards were large, colorful and glassy.

3.3 Procedure

The participants consisted of 15 language learners. The textbook of the participants is Backpack that is published by Pearson Longman. These learners learned vocabularies by using both of the two techniques; in other words, during the first 4 weeks, the vocabularies were taught by using CAP, and during the second 4 weeks the vocabularies were taught by using flash cards. Finally, they filled a questionnaire regarding their attitude toward CAP and flash cards. Moreover, they were interviewed to reveal their opinions in details.

Therefore, the results of the questionnaire are analyzed by using percentages. And also the students' opinions in the interview section are analyzed qualitatively.

4. Results of the study

The results of the study are divided into two parts. The first part describes the outcome of the questionnaire, and the second part describes the finding of the interview section.

4.1. The result of the questionnaire

The questionnaire (Appendix A) items were prepared in English; however, in order to ensure the absolute comprehension by all the students, the questionnaire items were translated in Farsi. It is worth mentioning that the questionnaire is analyzed item by item. In other words, each item is examined by using percentage points.

1. How was practicing with the provided software regarding learning English vocabularies?

More than half of the students (i.e. 60%) believed that using and working with the software is easy, and 40% of the students mentioned that using and working with the software is a bit difficult. It can be concluded that using the software is not very difficult for the students.

2. How necessary do you think it is to use the software for learning English vocabularies?

Half of the students (i.e. 47%) mentioned that using the software for learning vocabulary is very necessary. 40% of

the students stated that it is almost necessary, only 13% of students believed that it is a bit necessary. It is obvious that students generally consider using the software for learning vocabulary necessary.

3. Which of the following methods do you prefer for learning English vocabularies?

Nearly all of the students (i.e. 87%) believed that a combination of using FC and CAP is preferable for learning vocabulary. And only 13% of the students mentioned that simply the software is preferable. It indicates that a combination of these two techniques is attractive to the students.

4. Do you think the software has increased your motivation for learning English language?

Half of the students (i.e. 53%) thought that using the software increased their motivation to a large extent. 40% of the students believed that the software is to an average extent motivating for them. Only 7% of the students think that the software is a little motivating for them. This result shows that the software can be effective for motivating the students.

5. How useful was the software to memorize and remember the vocabularies?

60% of the students mentioned that the software is fairly useful to memorize and remember the vocabularies. And 40% of the students thought that it is very useful to employ the software for memorizing and recalling the vocabularies.

6. Can the software reduce stress in learners?

More than half of the students (i.e. 60%) pointed out that to an average extent. The software can reduce stress in them. Almost 13% of the students mentioned that the software cannot decrease their anxiety. 13% of the students believed that the software is extremely helpful in decreasing the level of anxiety, and also 13% of the students mentioned that this technique is a little effective for the concept of stress. It can be realized that in general using this software does not create stress. Moreover, many students felt comfortable with it.

7. How interesting was the quality of teaching with the software?

We all know that interest is a crucial issue in learning. More than half of the students (i.e. 60%) pointed out that the quality of teaching with the software is very interesting. A quarter (34%) of the students thought that learning with the software is fairly interesting. 6% of the students believed that the software is a bit interesting to them. Generally, the students considered the software interesting. We all know that interest is a crucial issue in learning.

8. How effective was using flash cards in learning and memorizing the vocabularies?

Half of the students (i.e. 53%) mentioned that using flash cards in learning and memorizing the vocabularies is fairly effective. 33% of the students pointed out that this technique is not effective at all. 14% mentioned that it is a bit effective for learning and memorizing the vocabularies. It can be concluded that based on the opinions of the participants of the present study, FC is not considered as a highly effective technique for learning and memorizing the vocabularies.

9. To what extent large, colorful and glassy flash cards had effect on creation and growth of your interest and motivation in learning vocabulary?

40% of the students stated that colorful and glassy flash cards had great effect on creation and growth of their interest and motivation in learning vocabulary. Similarly, 46% of the students mentioned that this is fairly effective on their interest and motivation. 14% of the students mentioned that it not effective at all. Surely, good quality flash cards are considered to be effective; specially, by considering the fact that the participants of this study were kids.

10. How was the interval between teaching the vocabularies and showing flash cards?

74% of the students pointed out that the interval between teaching the vocabularies and showing flash cards was short, and 26% of the students said that the interval was a little long. Most of the students mentioned that there was a short interval of time between teaching the vocabularies and showing flash cards.

11. To what extent using flash cards is useful for learning vocabulary?

Half of the students (i.e. 53%) mentioned that using flash cards is a little useful for learning vocabulary. 27% of the students stated that using flash cards is fairly useful, and 20% of them pointed out that it is highly useful to use flash cards for learning vocabulary. It can be realized that the students did not consider FC highly useful for learning

vocabulary.

12. Can teaching vocabulary with flash cards relieve stress in learners?

More than half of the students (i.e. 60%) believed that teaching vocabulary with flash cards can fairly relieve stress in them. A quarter of the students (i.e. 26%) mentioned that this technique is a little effective for decreasing the anxiety level. And only 14% of the students mentioned that teaching vocabulary with flash cards is highly effective for reducing stress in them. It is almost likely that FC can be helpful for reducing stress.

The result of the questionnaire indicated that using the software is easy, necessary, preferable, motivating, useful, relieving and attractive to the students. The intensity of the interest of the students is not completely the same for using flash cards. Therefore, it can be suggested that if the students have a choice, they would definitely select the software for learning English.

4.5. Interview

An oral interview (Appendix B) was conducted to gather useful and detailed information regarding the usage of the two techniques of teaching vocabulary, namely FC and CAP. The same participants who answered the questionnaire were interviewed. All of the students participated in the oral interview willingly. The interview items were validated in the oral interview of the pilot study. The results of interview are presented as follows.

- What are the advantages of using the software for learning vocabulary?

Nowadays, most of the people, especially young students, like new technologies. Therefore, Computer assisted language learning can surely increase the interest of learning for learners. Nearly all of the students mentioned that one main advantage of using the software is that they really enjoyed this experience. They said that without using the software, the English class is quite similar to their classes at school.

Most of the students believed that another advantage refers to maintaining independence. They mentioned that they felt better and more secure when they themselves were responsible for their own learning.

- What are the disadvantages of using the software for learning vocabulary?

Some of the students pointed out that at the first session of the course, it was a bit difficult for them to learn how to work with the software, but later using it became easy for them. In other words, they had no difficulty or problem in using the software.

- What are the advantages of using flash cards for learning vocabulary?

It was mentioned that flash cards are interesting since the employed pictures were nice. Beauty can be considered as one benefit of flash cards. Another advantage is that teachers played different games by using flash cards, and it was exciting for the students. Also, students could use the flash cards for different classroom activities.

- What are the disadvantages of using flash cards for learning vocabulary?

Some of the students believed that the meanings of some flash cards were not clear, and they became confused. Some students pointed out that using flash cards necessitated a lot of interaction with the teacher, and there were times that the interaction was not pleasant for the students.

- Which technique do you prefer to use for learning vocabulary? The software or flash cards? Why?

Nearly all of the students pointed out that if they are supposed to select only one of these techniques, they would choose the software. They said that working with the software is more interesting, exciting, pleasant and useful to them.

- How much is it necessary to use the software for learning vocabulary?

“It is 100% necessary”, said one of the students. Most of them enjoyed the experience of working with the software, and they were willing to continue learning English with the same technique.

- How much is it necessary to use flash cards for learning vocabulary?

One of the students said that, “using the flash cards for learning vocabulary is necessary but not adequate.” Nearly all of the students were willing to add this technique while they are also allowed to use the software. Therefore, it can be concluded that using the software is more vital for the students, and using flash cards is of secondary importance to them.

5. Conclusion

Learning vocabulary in an EFL context is not an easy task, especially for elementary students. It seems that employing an appropriate technique for teaching and learning vocabulary is crucial. The use of multimedia technology, especially computer assisted language learning, has recently been in the center of attention of some research studies in the various area of vocabulary teaching and learning.

Computer programs can be successful in both teaching and learning the target language. Moreover, it can be used for other educational purposes and other skills of language learning; however, other fields are very broad, and they are beyond the spectrum of the essentials of this study.

This research put computer assisted language learning under study in order to investigate the perception of language learners regarding two techniques (i.e., CAP and FC). As mentioned before, the results showed that the two techniques had the potential to highly encourage the EFL learners in learning English vocabulary. However, CAP proved to be more motivating and effective for the students. In addition, the performance of the group who learned vocabulary by using CAP was significantly different.

Computer-assisted language learning programs can be great stimuli for language learning in the EFL contexts. "Today, with the high development of computer technology, computers can capture, analyze, and present data on second language students' performances during the learning process." (Kritsonis & Lai, 2006, p. 2) Nowadays, computer technology can contain a variety of fun games and activities, decrease the learning anxiety, and provide remedial lessons when needed. By providing a variety of activities, computer technology can be helpful for language learners in improving the learners' linguistic skills, affecting their learning attitude, creating their self-instruction strategies and strengthening their self-confidence.

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Appendix A: Questionnaire

Dear student:

This questionnaire aims at exploring your attitudes toward the vocabulary learning program in which you participated. Your responses will remain confidential and they will not affect your scores. Please read each item carefully and choose the best answer.

Thank you for your cooperation

1. How was practicing with the provided software regarding learning English vocabularies?
 - a. Easy
 - b. A bit difficult
 - c. difficult
 - d. Very difficult
2. How necessary do you think it is to use the software for learning English vocabularies?
 - a. Not necessary at all
 - b. Just a little
 - c. To an average extent
 - d. Very much
3. Which of the following methods do you prefer for learning English vocabularies?
 - a. Flash cards
 - b. The software
 - c. Both flash cards and the software
 - d. None of them
4. Do you think the software has increased your motivation for learning English language?
 - a. Not at all
 - b. A little
 - c. To an average extent
 - d. A lot
5. How useful was the software to memorize and remember the vocabularies?
 - a. Not useful at all
 - b. A bit useful
 - c. Fairly useful
 - d. Very useful
6. Can the software reduce stress in learners?
 - a. Not at all
 - b. A little
 - c. To an average extent
 - d. Very much
7. Was teaching vocabularies with the use of the software interesting to you?
 - a. Not interesting at all
 - b. A bit interesting
 - c. Fairly interesting
 - d. Very interesting
8. How effective was using flash cards in learning and memorizing the vocabularies?
 - a. Not effective at all
 - b. A bit effective
 - c. Fairly effective

- d. Very effective
- 9. To what extent large, colorful and glassy flash cards had effect on creation and growth of your interest and motivation in learning vocabularies?
 - a. Not at all
 - b. A little
 - c. To an average extent
 - d. A lot
- 10. How was the interval between teaching the vocabularies and showing flash cards?
 - a. Very short
 - b. Short
 - c. A little long
 - d. Very long
- 11. To what extent using flash cards is useful for vocabulary learning?
 - a. Not at all
 - b. A little
 - c. To an average extent
 - d. A lot
- 12. Can teaching vocabulary with flash cards reduce stress in learners?
 - a. Not at all
 - b. A little
 - c. To an average extent
 - d. Very much

Appendix B: Interview

- 1. What are the advantages of using the software for learning vocabulary?
- 2. What are the disadvantages of using the software for learning vocabulary?
- 3. What are the advantages of using flash cards for learning vocabulary?
- 4. What are the disadvantages of using flash cards for learning vocabulary?
- 5. Which technique do you prefer to use for learning vocabulary? The software or flash cards? Why?
- 6. How necessary is using the software for learning vocabulary?
- 7. How necessary is using flash cards for learning vocabulary?