The Effect of Formal/Informal Teacher Talk on Lexical Knowledge of EFL Learners

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ABSTRACT

Despite years of vocabulary instruction, most learners are highly apprehensive about learning vocabulary and its retention, determined by the style of teacher talk in the class (informal vs. formal) to some extent. The present study attempts to investigate the effect of formal/informal teacher talk on learning vocabulary by Iranian EFL learners. To do this end, forty homogenous intermediate EFL learners in two experimental groups were selected as the participants. Having taken a vocabulary pretest, both groups received treatment in the form of formal and informal teacher talk for ten sessions. After the treatment, both experimental groups were given the post-test to realize the possible difference in learning vocabulary between the two groups. The results of paired and independent samples t-test revealed that there was a significant difference between the performances of the two experimental groups. The results showed that the learners in informal talk group significantly outperformed those in formal talk group.

Keywords: *Formal Teacher Talk, Informal Teacher Talk, Learning Vocabulary, EFL Learners, Lexical Knowledge*

1. Introduction

Learning and teaching vocabulary has recently received increased attention in Second Language Acquisition (SLA) and Foreign Language Learning (FLL), and it has turned into one of the teaching/learning priorities. Researchers, practitioners, and curriculum developers now acknowledge the necessity of valid theoretical principles in teaching/learning vocabulary and seek rather refined methods of measurement, use, and retention of vocabulary (Read, 2000). To develop the skills and knowledge necessary to successfully meet future language needs is regarded as one of the main goals of vocabulary instruction in EFL classes. The primary reason lies in the fact that, despite years of vocabulary instruction, most learners are still highly apprehensive about vocabulary retention and do not consider themselves as highly intelligent in learning vocabulary. In fact, one of the problems that most learners and teachers commonly complain about, concerns gaining a relatively acceptable command of vocabulary knowledge after long hours and, in some cases, years of EFL instruction. The learners also generally agree that the major problem in using language in real communication arises from their inadequate vocabulary knowledge (Alqahtani, 2015).

Learners' understanding of foreign language generally depends on their vocabulary knowledge. This is the point on which most teachers and students generally agree (Allen, 1983). Moras (2001) claims that students might have a receptive knowledge of a rather wide range of vocabulary. In other words, they can recognize the lexical items and their meanings; nevertheless, their productive use of vocabulary in actual communication is normally restricted, and this is one of the areas that call for further attention.

Moreover, some factors promote learning vocabulary. One of them is 'Noticing'. The learner needs to notice the new vocabulary and realize that it can be highly instrumental in language production. Noticing may happen in various forms; for

example, it is significantly important when the learner search a new word in a dictionary, guesses the meaning of word from a context, or receives explanations about the word. Noticing also includes de-contextualization, it means that the word is taken from the context as a language item to be focused on and learnt deliberately. Another factor is 'Retrieval'. It can be said that learners would not have an active memory of the word without retrieving that word more than one time after noticing it (Nation, 2001). Furthermore, by utilizing multiple avenues of learning new vocabulary, students would be better able to remember and correctly use the words. This is because the more the frequency of using a word, the easier it will transfer to the students' long-term memory. Furthermore, 'short-term memory' has a small storage capacity and can hold information temporarily in processing time. The importance of promoting a deep level of processing lies in the ability to transfer information from short-term to long-term memory, "which has almost unlimited storage capacity" (De Carrico, 2001, p. 289). Creative or generative use is an important factor in remembering words. Specifically speaking, to effective use of word, it should be utilized in different form and different contexts.

On the other hand, foreign language learners have less exposure to target language vocabulary. Therefore, classroom can be the main setting in which the learners can be exposed to target language elements including vocabulary. A main source of comprehensible input for learning new vocabulary comes from teacher talk (Nunan, 1991).

There are some reasons pointing to the importance of teacher talk in helping learners acquire vocabulary. Firstly, research has indicated that teacher talk serves as a valuable source of comprehensible input for learners. Learning cannot occur without comprehensible input, and according to Stern (1983) "if the second language is learnt as a foreign language in a language class in a non-supportive environment, instruction is likely to be the major or even the only source of target language input" (p. 400). Krashen (1981) states as this is essential for language acquisition, asking the teachers to minimize their talk would not necessarily be in the interests of learners. Secondly, so far all attempts to eliminate or minimize the role of teacher talk in the classroom were not successful. This happen

in many parts of the world (including EFL situation in Iran) where the teacher is traditionally considered as the transmitter of knowledge and values, and reducing the role of teacher talk would be inappropriate and unrealistic. Thirdly, classroom research showed that some aspect of teacher talk like asking question, can significantly have effect on the quantity and quality of learners' interaction (Brock, 1986), as well as effects on training (Long & Sato, 1983).

Rod Ellis (1985) claimed that teacher talk is the special language that teachers use when teaching learners in EFL/ESL classrooms. They may simplify the properties of the language. In fact, teacher talk is a source of comprehensive input. Stern stated:

The teacher, like the learner, brings to language teaching certain characteristics which may have bearing on educational treatment: age, sex, previous education, and personal qualities. Above all, the language teacher brings his/her language background and experience, professional training, and more or less formulated theoretical presuppositions about language, language learning, and teaching. (1983, p. 500)

According to Ellis (1985), "whether it is a subject lesson or a language lesson, successful outcomes may depend on the type of language used by the teacher and the type of interactions occurring in the classroom" (p. 143). To put it precisely, it can be concluded that teacher talk has two important features: first, teacher talk can be considered a source of comprehensible input, and second teacher talk has different types.

Similarly, the studies of teacher talk that investigate the type of language teachers use in the classroom is categorized as the informal teacher talk, and those that examine the type of language used in subject lessons is categorized as formal teacher talk. He also believed that teacher talk is a kind of register which has its own linguistic properties (Ellis, 1985). In other words, in informal talk, the focus is on the message throughout not on the channel. The teacher should be concerned with what is to be said rather than how they are to be said. They use of instructional methods such as immersion, where both the teacher and students use only the second/foreign language for classroom instruction and interaction with the aim of providing comprehensible input (Krashen, 1981) fall under this category.

In this study, there is an attempt to investigate the effect of formal and informal

teacher talk on learners' vocabulary learning. To the best of the researcher's knowledge, there has been no previous attempt to investigate the mentioned issue in EFL situation of Iran. Having master over greater range of vocabulary is determined by not only memorization but also by a series of phenomenon such as structure, context. On the other hand, learning vocabulary by memorizing by means of a list in every material is boring for the EFL learners and does not usually lead to successful vocabulary learning. Therefore the language which is used by teachers (teacher talk) is of prime importance in learning vocabulary.

In the line with the mentioned gap in the literature, this study attempted to find to answer for the following questions:
1. Does teacher talk have a significant effect on lexical knowledge of Iranian EFL learners?
2. If the answer to the first research question is yes, which type of teacher talk (formal vs. informal) is more effective in acquiring English vocabulary by Iranian EFL learners?

To answer the research questions, they were turned into two null hypotheses, and the researcher tried to confirm or reject the accuracy of the assumptions made in the hypotheses:
1. Teacher talk does not have a significant effect on lexical knowledge of Iranian EFL learners.
2. There is no significant difference between formal and informal teacher talk in terms of their effect on acquiring English vocabulary by Iranian EFL learners.

2. Review of Related Studies
In the recent years, some relevant studies have been carried out on the role of lexical knowledge of learners in English language learning process and the significant role of teacher talk as a source in the lexical learning. Chung, E., (2018) attempted to investigate the learners' vocabulary development and some vocabulary teaching strategies. Tendering certain valuable insights into foreign vocabulary teaching, he supported the idea that the significance of vocabulary development should not be underplayed in language teaching & that educational policymakers have to take steps in highlighting the vocabulary development in the English language curriculum. Regarding the role of vocabulary in language learning, some various techniques are proposed through which ESL/EFL teachers use to affect the lexical learning (Alqahtani, 2015). Some of them are as before presenting the meaning or form of

vocabulary items; teachers need to notice the type of the vocabulary, the students' level and characteristics, and also the value of the techniques for the learners. i.e. students' age, level of education as well as English proficiency ...etc. In a research carried out by Rezaee & Farahian (2012), it was found that some 70 percent of the class time was allocated to teacher talk. Regarding the allocation of such time to teacher talk; it is deemed that the role of teacher talk is not to be underemphasized. Similarly, the findings of a research done by Horst (2010) revealed that the incidental vocabulary acquisition would be efficient if the EFL learners are in the exposure to the meaning-focused teacher talk accompanied with other learning activities.

3. Methodology
3.1 Participants
The population of the study included all Iranian EFL learners who learn English as a foreign language. However, due to feasibility problems, the researcher had selected her participants from Ideal Institute of Ardebil, which is a mono-educational language institute teaching English to female EFL learners across different proficiency groups. The original sample consisted of 100 female EFL learners. Their mother language was Turkish, and the range of their age was from 19 to 25. To ensure the homogeneity of the participants in terms of language proficiency, an Oxford Proficiency Test (OPT) was administered. From among the original 100 participants, 60 learners were excluded from the study, and 40 students whose scores ranged between one standard deviation above and below the mean were identified as intermediate learners and were finally selected for participation in the study. The participants were randomly divided into two experimental groups, who received a treatment in the form of formal or informal teacher talk. The whole treatment continued for 5 weeks, two 30-minute sessions of instruction every week.

3.2 Instructors
Two colleague-researchers were asked to assist the researcher in conducting the study. The selection of the teachers was based on their willingness to participate and their availability during the treatment sessions. Both teachers were female and native speakers of Turkish; they also spoke English fluently. In order to select them as research assistants, the researcher observed them while teaching. Prior to the observation, the researcher prepared a

checklist (Appendix A) to distinguish formality or informality of teacher talk.

3.3 Instruments and Materials
Oxford Placement Test (OPT)

OPT (Appendix B) used in this study contained 50 multiple choice questions to assess the knowledge of participant about key grammar and vocabulary from elementary to intermediate levels. It included a reading text with 10 graded comprehension questions. The participants answered the questions in 45 minutes. This test enabled the researcher to select the final participants of the study. The learners whose scores fell between one standard deviation above and below the mean were included in the study as intermediate learners. It should be mentioned that the reliability of the test in Cronbach's alpha was obtained as .73 which is an acceptable reliability level.

Vocabulary Pre-test and Post-test

The pre- and post-tests of the study focused only on single word vocabulary; learning idioms and expressions were excluded in this study. In both test (Appendix C), the both groups were asked to answer 30 fill-in-the-blank test. They were allowed 30 minutes to complete the vocabulary test. The validity of the test items was cross-checked with two expert colleagues, sand the faulty items were removed. The vocabulary test was adopted from the reading books titled Select Readings. The total score for each test was 30, and one mark was subtracted from the total mark in case learners failed to answer one item correctly. The main material for this study was a book entitled 'Select Readings', from which the topics of each session for teacher talk were selected.

3.4 Design

The present study has a true experimental pretest-treatment-posttest design in which there is no control group and both experimental groups receive pretest before treatment and take a posttest after finishing the experiment. A true randomization procedure was adopted. That is to say, first the learners took proficiency test and after making sure of the homogeneity of the groups about their language proficiency, the participants were randomly assigned to two experimental groups.

3.5 Procedure

An initial pool of 100 participants were required to take an Oxford Placement Test (OPT). Based on their scores, 40 participants whose scores fell one standard deviations above and below the mean were included in the study; the selected participants were, then, categorized into two experimental groups. Following the ethics of research on informed consent, all the participants were informed about the general purpose of the study by the researcher.

Two days before the treatment sessions, both groups took the pretest to obtain their vocabulary knowledge scores before launching the experiment.

Then the main phase of the study started. During the treatment sessions, one experimental group received instruction through informal teacher talk. They used instructional methods such as immersion programs, where both the teacher and students use only the foreign language by which learners are provided with comprehensible input (Krashen, 1981). Teachers designed and implemented activities in which they interacted with students to give opportunities to them to use the vocabulary they are learning. Encouraging learners towards using dialogic interaction by means of the newly-acquired vocabulary is a valuable activity. One way is also expanding students' answers to teacher question and making connections with students 'experiences. These activities invite and support the use of the target vocabulary in the context of learning about the subject matter that is made relevant and interesting to the children. The other group received vocabulary instruction through formal teacher talk in which the teachers teach subject matter of students by using formal instructional English. The students learn the vocabulary on academic subjects without any informal interaction. The instruction was given in a period of ten sessions each of which lasted about 30 minutes. Finally, after finishing the treatment, a parallel post-test was administered to both groups to compare the performance of the two groups in retaining and retrieving their new vocabulary focused upon during the treatment sessions.

4. Data Analysis

The pre-test and post-test papers in both groups were corrected, and the obtained scores were fed to Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) software. Two Paired-samples t-tests were run to compare the statistical differences for the mean pre-test and post-test scores of the two experimental groups. One Independent-samples T-test was also run to measure the differences in means of the posttests of the experimental groups in order to see which group showed more significant improvement

in acquiring vocabulary. The purpose was identifying the type of teacher talk that was more efficient in helping learners acquire vocabulary.

5. Results

5.1 Data Analysis for the Placement Test

In order to select the participants with the same proficiency level, Oxford Placement Test (OPT) was used. The reliability OPT was measured in Cronbach's alpha (Table 1), and reliability value turned out to be .73 ($r=.73$), indicating the test was a reliable instrument for measuring the learners' proficiency.

Table 1: Reliability of Oxford Placement Test in Cronbach's Alpha

N of Items	Cronbach's Alpha
4	.731

The learners were asked to take part in OPT test to select homogeneous samples in terms of language proficiency before starting the treatment. The results are presented in Table 2.

Table 2: Descriptive statistics for groups on the OPT

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Placement test	100	47	64	53.46	7.09

IT: Informal Talk Group, FT: Formal Talk Group

As the statistics in Table 2 shows, the mean score and standard deviation for the participants were 53.46 and 7.09, respectively. Later, the learners whose scores fell one standard deviations above and below the mean (40 learners) were selected as the participants. The learners were, then, categorized into two experimental groups, namely Formal Talk Group (FT) and Informal Talk Group (IT). The descriptive statistics for OPT is given in Table 2.

The researcher later conducted an independent samples t-test to ensure the homogeneity of the participants in the two experimental groups. The results are given in Table 3.

Table 3: Independent samples T-Test for Checking Homogeneity of Experimental Groups

	Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means		
	F	Sig.	T	Df	Sig.2-tailed
Equal variances assumed	.011	.917	.510	38	.601
Equal variances not assumed			.510	58.000	.601

As the information in Table 3 shows, the sig. value is .9 which is greater than 0.05, (t 38)=.91>.05) showing that there is no statistically significant difference between the FT and the IT groups in terms of English proficiency, and the study can be safely conducted.

5.2 Testing the Null Hypotheses

The pre-test and post-test scores of the learners in both groups were statistically analyzed. Descriptive statistics for pre-test and post-test scores are presented in Table 4.

Table 4: Descriptive Statistics for Pre-test and Post-test Scores

	Informal Talk (IT)		Formal Talk (FT)	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Pre-test	9.13	3.02	9.50	3.70
Post-test	26.30	6.35	12.26	4.15

As the statistics in Table 4 shows, the mean score and deviation for IT group in pretest and post-test are 9.13 and 26.30, respectively, and the mean score of the participants of FT group are 9.13 and 9.50, respectively. Table 4 shows that the mean scores of IF group has improved in the post –test, but the mean score of the participants in FT group shows less improvement in comparison with the IF group.

However, to test the research hypothesis, the data needs to be checked through inferential statistics. To test the first null hypothesis two paired samples t-test was conducted.
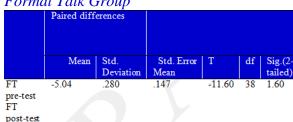
The first paired t-test was conducted on pre-test and post-test scores of IT group. The results are indicated in Table 5:

Table 5: Paired t-test on Informal Talk Group before and after Treatment

	Paired differences			T	df	Sig.(2-tailed)
	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean			
IT pre-test IT post-test	-11.42	2.105	.350	-23.19	38	.000

As indicated in Table 5, the significance level is lower than .05 ($t(38)=23.19, p<.05$). Therefore the first null hypothesis is rejected regarding informal group showing that informal teacher talk has a significant effect on lexical knowledge of Iranian EFL learners. Moreover, a second paired t-test was conducted on pre-test and post-test scores of FT group. The results are presented in Table 6:

Table 6: Paired Samples T-test results for Formal Talk Group

	Paired differences			T	df	Sig.(2-tailed)
	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean			
FT pre-test FT post-test	-5.04	.280	.147	-11.60	38	1.60

As Table 6 indicates, the significance level of 1.60 is higher than the p value of .05 (*t(38)=11.60, p>.05*) showing that in the case of formal talk group the first null hypothesis is not rejected, and formal teacher talk does not have a significant effect on lexical knowledge of Iranian EFL learners.

The second null hypothesis stated that: There is no significant difference between formal and informal teacher talk in terms of their effect on acquiring English vocabulary by Iranian EFL learners. To test the hypothesis an independent samples t-test was performed on the post-test scores of the participants. The results are given in Table 7:

Table 7: Independent samples T-Test on the post-test Scores

	Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means		
	F	Sig.	T	Df	Sig-2ta
Equal variances assumed	5.528	.022	12.748	38	.000
Equal variances not assumed			12.748	40.735	.000

As the significance value in Table 7 shows (*p=.022<.05*), the second null hypothesis is rejected, and there is a significant difference between learning vocabulary by Iranian EFL learners in IT and FT groups. In other words, the participants in IT group have significantly outperformed those in the FT group.

6. Discussion

The results of this study indicated that informal teacher talk, unlike formal teacher talk, can significantly affect learning vocabulary by Iranian EF learners indicating that the provision of comprehensible input in the form of informal teacher talk can significantly improve vocabulary knowledge of Iranian EFL learners. Moreover, it was found that informal teacher talk is more successful in improving lexical knowledge of the learners.

The failure of formal teacher talk to improve the learners' vocabulary knowledge may stem from the rather incomprehensible nature of formal teacher talk. In other words, it seems that informal teacher talk provides the source of comprehensible input, but formal teacher talk fails to do so. Therefore, teachers should be mindful of the fact that learners, especially those at the beginning stages, cannot easily understand their language; thus, they should teach at a slow pace in line with Krashen's i+1 (as cited in McLaughlin, 1987) and Pienmann's Teachability hypothesis (as cited in Ellis, 2008). Both of these lines of argument advocate the level of instruction that is slightly above the learners' current level of development. They can chunk thoughts into manageable phrases, but not into individual words, as this will interrupt the rhythm of speech.

These results are in line with some earlier investigations on the effects of teacher talk on vocabulary learning (Zhao, 1998; Cook, 2001) because teacher talk occupied the main portion of class time; therefore, it is the best source of learning vocabulary. Furthermore, Xiao-Yan (2006) examined the amount of teacher talk in total class time and investigated its impact on foreign language learning of 80 Chinese students. The results of the study revealed that most of the class time (76%) was allocated to teacher talk. According to the results of this study, this amount of teacher talk could change the atmosphere of the class because most of the students prefer to listen to teachers' instruction and consider it as a good learning strategy.

Moreover, the results of the present study confirmed the results found in a study by Rezaee and Farahian (2012) who showed that teacher talk is an effective strategy in language learning. The findings of this study was also consistent with the results obtained by Horst, Collins, White, and Cardoso (2010) who found that teacher talk improves incidental vocabulary learning of the students.

7. Conclusion

The results of this study indicating the effectiveness of the informal teacher talk have significant implications for teacher education and research. Teachers should be conscious of the significance of effective language use in the EFL classroom. By recognizing the connection between instructional purpose and language use, teachers can be more conscious of the significance of appropriate language use in line with the teaching goal. Teachers also need to be proficient enough in the use of both formal and informal language to be able to better help their learners achieve their educational goals including learning vocabulary.

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