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The Impact of Age on Iranian Students' Incidental Vocabulary Learning

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ABSTRACT

Incidental vocabulary learning involves unintentional, unconscious learning of a new lexical item while listening to a speech or reading a passage. Corrective feedback can influence language learning of EFL learners in general, and their incidental vocabulary learning in particular. If teachers and practitioners of language teaching know which types of feedback can be more effective, they may be more prone to use them in their classes. The purpose of the present study was to illustrate if age was a determining factor in the effectiveness of giving “repetition” feedback on new lexical items to L2 learners. The participants of the study were thirty students of a language institute in Shiraz, Iran who were provided with a collection of new vocabulary items. As for the instrument of the study, the first two lessons of an IELTS test which contained 20 lessons were involved. Each incorporated 20 multiple choice questions to be done in 20 minutes. A list of vocabulary items were selected from the aforementioned online vocabulary test to be included in a pre-test that participants took. Then half of the most unknown items were identified to be used in the post-test. The teacher was asked to provide repetition type of corrective feedback on students' errors when teaching those items. The statistical procedures included one-way ANOVA and the relevant data were analyzed using SPSS version 22. The results of the study showed that the background variable of age did not influence incidental lexical learning.

Keywords: Lexical Items, EFL, Incidental Vocabulary Learning, Language Learner

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1. Introduction

The basic role that lexis plays in second language learning and teaching has been repeatedly acknowledged in theoretical and empirical SLA vocabulary research. Singleton (1999, cited in Choo et al., 2012) states that the main challenge of learning and using a language—whether as L1 or as L2—lies not in the area of broad syntactic principles but in the ‘nitty-gritty’ of the lexicon, an idea also shared by Hunt and Beglar (2005, p. 2), who argue that “the heart of language comprehension and use is the lexicon”.

A classification is available that considers three approaches to vocabulary teaching: 1) incidental learning (i.e., learning vocabularies as the by-product of other activities as reading, listening, etc.) 2) Explicit or intentional instruction and 3)

Independent strategy development (Hunt and Beglar, 1998; cited in Richards and Renandya, 2002). As proven by many studies, teaching approaches and learning strategies are two main factors affecting learners' performance. Investigating the effects of different modes of teaching vocabularies—incidental and intentional—on learners' acquisition of new vocabulary items might lead to influential and fruitful pedagogical implications on how to teach vocabularies.

As Hulstijn (2003) points out, learning a second language can either mean months and years of intentionall study, by deliberately committing to memory thousands of words along with grammatical words, or it can mean incidentall learning by picking up structures and lexicon of a language, through getting engaged in a



variety of communicative activities, namely reading and listening, while the learner's attention is focused not on the form but on the meaning. In Spadaro's (2013) study, the lexical performance of four groups of participants were analysed.

Incidental learning of lexical items as a by-product of any activity not explicitly geared to vocabulary learning (Hulstijn 2003, cited in Pujol, 2008) Incidental and intentional learning mainly appear in the area of vocabulary. This is because incidental learning can be applied to both abstract and factual declarative knowledge, while intentional is only applicable to factual knowledge (Hulstijn, 2003).

Within the context of the L2 classroom, the teacher can play his role in a variety of ways in how effectively learners learn the bulk of vocabulary items that have either been collected within the teaching materials or which incidentally come up during class discussions and activities. One of these ways is providing feedback to the learners when they make errors. Kepner (1991 as cited in Grami, 2005) defines feedback in general as "any procedures used to inform a learner whether an instructional response is right or wrong." (p. 141).

The employment of the type (from among a large array of feedback types) that works best at any particular case requires that the teacher would consider several variables. Lyster and Ranta's (1997) study is significant in that it offers a systematic picture of patterns of interactional moves between teachers and students, such as the type of feedback arising from different types of errors, or one that leads to more uptake. In addition, their analytical models facilitate further examination of the interactional sequences expected to occur between teachers and students.

Based on the interactional patterns identified in Lyster and Ranta's study and the research on the nature of specific types of corrective feedback (e.g., Han, 2002; Mackey, Gass, & McDonough, 2000; Ohta, 2000), it is possible to suggest to students strategies for producing more output, which is essential for L2 acquisition as it gives the teacher the opportunity to use a specific type or types of corrective feedback within the classroom.

It is important to consider that the effectiveness of corrective feedback is often assessed only in terms of learners' immediate response to the feedback (Ellis, 2001). The learners' responses to feedback

cannot reliably be linked with ultimate use of the language in real life situations. In the artificial classroom context, learners may notice the teacher's feedback and produce the correct form, but this is not a guarantee against future mistakes. Another concern around the use of feedback is the degree it is welcomed by the students, which can in turn either influence or hinder learning.

Well aware that vocabulary plays an important role in the efficacy of the communication in a second language, teachers often provide corrective feedback to their students when they teach this aspect of the language. How effective this feedback is, however, depends, among other things, on a number of learner attributes including their learning style, their proficiency level, their motivation for contribution to class activities and their age. As a result, studying different types of feedback given in various classroom settings and different learner attributes can supply the teachers with more insight into which feedback type they should use with which learner. This can in turn help curriculum designers at different L2 teaching institutions to make improvements in their English program, and addresses one of the common concerns of learning an L2, namely the vocabulary.

Ellis (2008) maintained that age was an obvious factor which influence language learning procedures. Moreover, Barjesteh and Farsi (2018) attempted to investigate the role of age in students' learning of lexical items. They divided their participants into two age groups of teenagers and adult learners.

This study focuses on 'age' and 'repetition' type of feedback as its elements of focus. Regarding the relationship between age and vocabulary acquisition in any SL or FL context, Singleton (1995) offered what he believed to be the most plausible idea considering the age factor and lexical acquisition. He maintained that the age factor functions in relation to second or foreign language vocabulary learning in the same way as it operates in relation to other dimensions of second or foreign language learning; older learners show an initial advantage, which is progressively eroded as younger learners catch up with them and eventually overtake them. The present study sought to investigate the relationship between age and incidental lexical learning in an EFL setting when corrective feedback of the 'repetition' type is provided.

[2. Research Question & Hypothesis](#)

This study asked the following research question:

Does repetition corrective feedback have any effects on incidental vocabulary learning among selected EFL learners of different ages?

In attempting to answer the question, the study adopted the following null hypothesis:

“Repetition corrective feedback does not exert differential effects on incidental vocabulary learning of selected EFL learners of different ages.”

3. Methodology

3.1 Participants

As mentioned before, 30 participants were selected randomly from among advanced-level EFL learners in an English institute in Shiraz. They were then asked to complete a bio-data questionnaire. Based on the collected data, participants were divided into three age groups: 25 to 35; 36 to 45; and 46 and above. One experimental and a control group were involved. In the experimental group there were eleven male participants (73.3%) and four female ones (26.7%) and in the control group there were nine male participants (60%) and six female ones (40%).

3.2 Instruments

An IELTS test containing 20 lessons in which there were 20 multiple choice questions to be done in 20 minutes, then the key existed to correct the participants' replies. The first two lessons of the tests were chosen. To see whether the tests were appropriate and to check the validity of the exam which was to be used in the study, the researcher gave it to five experienced and sophisticated colleagues to review it, and they shared their views regarding the needed change, manipulation or deletion with the researcher. The aforementioned tests are provided in the appendix.

3.3 Data Collection

Selecting 20 of the most unknown vocabularies of the aforementioned text, the instructor tried to make some passages and substitute the selected words in those teacher-made texts. In both experimental groups the texts were taught to the students through some passages but indirectly and without focusing on them intentionally and after each time of error making, the students were given a special kind of corrective feedback based on which group they were placed in. The control group didn't receive any treatment during the instruction to help the researcher to compare whether there were any significant differences between the

groups who received the treatment and the one who didn't. Handling the project took two weeks after the pre-test to instruct the 20 vocabularies in 4 sessions each session 5 words which were conceptualized in texts to be better and more tangible and memorable for candidates.

In other words, a list of vocabulary items were selected from the foregoing online vocabulary test to be included in a pre-test that participants took. Then half of the most unknown items were identified to be used in the post-test. The one-hour long classes were held for a total of sixteen weeks. Throughout the course the chosen vocabularies were incidentally incorporated in some readings. Feedback of the type of concern (i.e. corrective) was provided after each erroneous use by the students. Lexical tests then were then constructed based on the list of vocabularies in the participating classrooms. The main purpose of these items was to find out whether the students had learned from the errors that were the focus of the feedback episodes.

4. Results and Discussion

To measure the effect of age variable on the scores students had obtained on the vocabulary test, the scores were categorized into three groups based on participants' age: group 1, with an age range of 25 to 35; group 2, with an age range of 36 to 45; and group 3 with the age of 46 and above.

Means and standard deviations for the values in these three groups were calculated. Students whose ages were in the age range of 25 to 35 had the highest mean and those who were 46 and above had the lowest mean scores. The results are illustrated in the following figure and table.

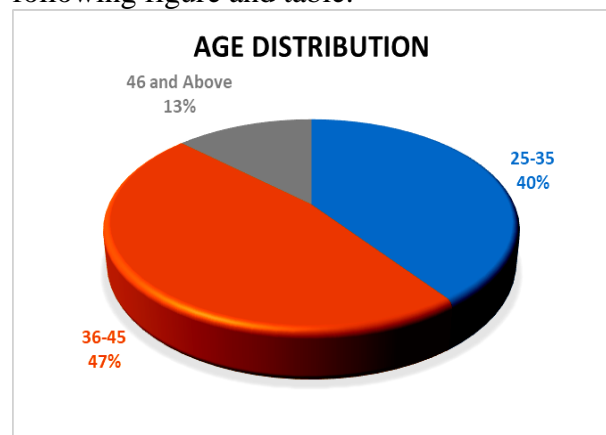


Figure 1: Participants Demographic with Regard to Age



Table 1: Descriptive Statistics of Learners with Different Age Groups

Age Range	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error	95% Confidence Interval for Mean	
				Lower Bound	Upper Bound
25-35	22.1111	4.24110	.99964	20.0021	24.2202
36-45	22.0952	4.02374	.87805	20.2637	23.9268
46-above	19.1667	4.79236	1.95647	14.1374	24.1959
Total	21.7111	4.23525	.63135	20.4387	22.9835

For multivariate analysis of variance to be performed, Levene's test of equality of variances should turn to be non-significant, which will show equal group error variances. The results of Levene's test for learners of different age as a pre-condition for ANOVA is reported in Table 2. Data obtained for students of different age groups revealed that error variance of the dependent variable was equal across groups and the assumptions of error variances were not violated among groups.

Table 2: Test of Homogeneity of Variances for Age

Levene Statistic	df1	df2	Sig.
0.156	2	42	0.856

Following the test of homogeneity of variances for age, analysis of variance (ANOVA) was used to investigate the possible effects of repetition corrective feedback as independent variables together with age (25 to 35, 36 to 45, 46 and above) on incidental vocabulary learning, which was the dependent variable (see Table 3). As the results were not statistically significant, it can be claimed that age does not affect incidental vocabulary learning. Therefore, there is no need to run the Post Hoc test for learners of different ages.

Table 3: Results of one-way ANOVA for age among learners

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	P
Between Groups	44.824	2	22.412	1.264	.293
Within Groups	744.421	42	17.724		
Total	789.244	44			

To reduce the probability of Type I error, one-way analysis of variance was used in the present study. As Levene's test estimates, which showed the variance homogeneity, were not statistically significant among different groups, and due to having more than one independent variable, test of ANOVA could be run (see the table above).

Using one-way ANOVA for the analysis of the effects of age, it was found that although learners in group 1 (25 to 35 years of age) gained the highest means

(22.11) in comparison with learners in other two age groups (22.09 in group 2 and 19.16 for group 3), the difference was not statistically significant. Therefore, it was concluded that the age factor was not influential in incidental lexical learning. In this way, our null hypothesis was retained.

The higher means in younger learners might have been due to the fact that they are more motivated to learn and more disposed to exercise. Therefore, it was concluded that the age factor was not influential in incidental lexical learning and learners at any age can learn incidentally.

The results of the present study revealed that the pre-condition for age being effective on incidental lexical learning did not show a significant difference among learners in different groups of aging. Thus, it was concluded that the age variable did not influence incidental lexical learning. Therefore, the null hypothesis was retained.

This study is not in line with Spadaro's (2013) study in which analysis of lexical performance of four different groups showed that younger participants were more native-like and outperformed other groups. Moreover, the findings are inconsistent with Ellis' (2008) claims stating that younger learners were more successful. However, the results are consistent with Barjesteh and Farsi's (2018) findings who affirmed that there was no significant difference between participants of different age in their vocabulary learning.

Regarding the relationship between age and vocabulary acquisition in any SL or FL in the field of vocabulary learning, Singleton (1995) offered what he believed to be the most plausible conclusion considering the age factor and lexical acquisition. He maintained that the age factor functions in relation to second or foreign language vocabulary learning in the same way as it operates in relation to other dimensions of second or foreign language learning; older learners show an initial advantage while is progressively eroded as younger learners catch up with them and eventually overtake them.

5. Conclusion

Learner background variable of age was considered as a factor can potentially influence the incidental vocabulary learning of EFL learners. To investigate the research question, 30 students of varying age groups ranging from 25 and above who attended an EFL institute were selected randomly from both genders. A set of online vocabulary test

was given to the aforementioned learners as the pre- and post-test scale. It was first hypothesized that selected participants' age had no effect on incidental vocabulary learning among selected EFL learners. The statistical procedures encompassed one-way ANOVA and the data were analyzed using SPSS version 22. It came to light that the background variable of age did not influence learners' incidental lexical learning while receiving corrective feedback.

Teacher's perception of the role and importance of using corrective feedback in the class and the measures to be taken when facing different types of errors are also determining issues inherent to the process of teaching and relevant to be considered by researchers. By and large, the most important thing an instructor or corrector should notice while giving feedback is adopting a positive attitude toward learner errors.

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Appendix: Test 1

