



This journal provides immediate open access to its content under the [Creative Commons BY 4.0 license](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/). Authors who publish with this journal retain all copyrights and agree to the terms of the above-mentioned CC BY 4.0 license

DOI: 10.2478/seeur-2020-0021

THE IMPACT OF PICTURES ON SECOND LANGUAGE ACQUISITION

PhD. Candidate Shejla Tahiri
Faculty of Languages, Cultures and Communication,
South East European University
Tetovo, North Macedonia
shejlabaran@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

The need for worldwide communication has made people learn as many foreign languages as they can in order to be able to send and receive information from all over the world. Realizing this situation, researchers and linguists have carried out a large number of studies in order to find out the best ways for teaching and learning English as a second or foreign language. The terms language learning and language acquisition are not new since in many earlier researches language acquisition is compared to the process of learning the mother tongue whereas language learning is compared to the process when a child learns a second or foreign language. This paper aims to showcase that teaching/learning new vocabulary using pictures is much more effective than the other methods of vocabulary learning. The research also puts emphasis on the language level of learners. It demonstrates that the method of using pictures and illustrations works well with all levels of proficiency and as such, it has brought very useful results. It was carried out at the South East European University (SEEU) in North Macedonia and participants were thirty (30) students from all five Faculties, divided in three different groups based on their language proficiency. Each group consisted of ten (10) students, aged 18 to 22 years. They were of elementary, pre-intermediate and intermediate level of English. The research lasted for six weeks, because the students had to be introduced to six different

vocabulary topics. Since the experiment was carried out in a real classroom environment, the target vocabulary topics used for this purpose were chosen from their students' book. Data were collected in three phases. During the first phase, students were asked to complete a questionnaire, consisting of questions regarding the vocabulary learning methods, mainly vocabulary associated with pictures. In the second phase, they were engaged in real activities in a traditional classroom setting, while in the last phase, at the end of the last session, participants took a quiz that was supposed to provide evidence and additional data about participants' achievements. It is expected that the findings from this experiment will be useful to current and prospective teachers as they show that the method of pictures and illustrations associating the target vocabulary functions well with different levels.

Key words: English as second and foreign language, Language learning, language acquisition, pictures and illustrations.

INTRODUCTION

The vocabulary of a language is one of its most important aspects that need special attention. Even though grammar is important in language learning, it cannot do much in itself. Learning the words automatically helps in learning their grammar as words carry the grammar within themselves. Many learners have difficulties in learning foreign languages since different features should be mastered. Personal experience with teaching adult learners has indicated that they face difficulties in learning new vocabulary. They usually learn a small number of vocabulary items presented in class. Thus it seemed that it would be beneficial if there was some method which would help them recall specific vocabulary even after a certain period of time. This paper introduces such a method. It aims to prove that the method of using pictures is efficient and increases the performance of students with different language proficiency.

For this purpose, an experiment was conducted with three different levels of students. The first group of students was elementary; the second group was pre-intermediate, while the third one was intermediate. During the research, the elementary group was treated more carefully since they did not feel self-confident and participants were afraid of making mistakes. The second group expressed their readiness about the research from the beginning and seemed to be more enthusiastic. They worked individually and in groups. The last group consisted of students with higher English proficiency and they were enjoying the experiment more than the others were. Two methods were used with all levels: the method of pictures associating the target

vocabulary and the method of dictionary explanations. Three topics were presented with each of the methods. At the end, participants took a quiz, which gave evidence on their vocabulary retention during the examined period. Detailed analysis of these issues will be presented in the following chapters.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Finding the proper way for teaching and learning vocabulary is a key question in language development. Even though many researchers have offered evidence for the effectiveness of different methods, not all of them can work with every age and every level of language proficiency. Usually teachers decide which method is more appropriate for their students. Some methods have been proven to be effective in almost any language environment such as pictures and illustrations, Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL), using videos in class, 3D wallpapers in class etc. The present study relies on the psychological process called *Hypermnesia* (Chun&Plass, 1996) according to which pictures are more effective when teaching vocabulary since they are static and can be easily recalled.

In a CALL environment, video games can be a great tool for vocabulary development of learners of different ages. They can meet the needs of different age groups and language proficiency levels. One of the advocates of this method is Palmberg (1988). He presents the effects of playing computer games in children's learning of English vocabulary. Meeting learners' interests is sometimes very hard by following only traditional strategies of vocabulary retention. Having this in mind, Palmberg did an experiment, which offered learners the opportunity to learn by interacting with the computer. Another advantage of this experiment was the fact that learners' needs and interests were met, which encouraged them to work harder. The study showed that learners were motivated because they were learning by doing something that was very interesting for them.

The impact of videos in language learning is another issue related to the context of multimedia environment. Mc William (1986) and Charge & Giblin (1988) independently of each other have carried out studies on the relationship between videos and learning the English language. Both of the above-mentioned methods prove that using videos in language learning and acquisition is worthy. The illustrative segment of the videos supports the assumption of this research.

Margaret Early (1991) conducted a research on using *wordless picture books* to promote second language learning. She notes that using wordless picture books has always been seen to be useful for young learners. However, some recent research has shown that they are also effective for adult learners too (McGee & Tompkins, 1983 cited in Early, 1991). She then continues to argue that these kinds of books promote oral language while at the same time encourage positive attitude about books. She argues that illustrations can help in language development “since the illustrations in the books are generally beautifully detailed, and they can be used to develop the language of description” (Early, 1991, p.245). The most important point of her study is that by using these types of books learners develop the language, which is needed for hypothesis, prediction and cause/effect.

Based on the findings of some previous research on the matter of using pictures for vocabulary acquisition, it can be concluded that the ability or capability of knowing the lexicon of a language is the key matter when learning a language. There is a close relationship between vocabulary retention and language development. It is noted that “features associated with the macro level of lexical competence vary as a function of an increase in second language (L2) proficiency” (Nikolova & Schwanenflugel & Zareva, 2005, p.567).

METHODOLOGY

Second language acquisition (SLA) is a complex process, which needs special attention. Methods, which are used to reach specific goals, should be determined and designed carefully since not every method works with vocabulary acquisition. It is so since every individual has different learning preferences and learning styles. Visual learners have benefits. They can easily learn a word by associating a picture to it, which later can be easily recalled.

Using pictures as authentic material can be very useful in vocabulary acquisition. This does not mean that teachers should use only the hard copy of the pictures. Nowadays technology offers diversity in the method of using pictures in SLA. For example, if a teacher can teach a language by using computers in the classroom, it would be an efficient method for saving time and materials. Presenting the target vocabulary and the associated pictures/illustrations in the monitor can be both fun and economical.

A lack of computers is not an obstacle for using different methods of SLA. It is the teachers' role to search for different sources and adapt them to the learners' needs and to the different

working conditions. This is actually what the present study tried to prove. The method of using pictures with different levels and in different situations was the key element of the research. The way this method was presented with different topics showed us how it can work when the steps of the used methods are organized carefully.

The research was carried out at the South East European University (SEEU) in North Macedonia and the participants were from all five Faculties (Business and Economics, Law, Contemporary Social Sciences, Contemporary Computer Sciences and Languages, Cultures and Communications) grouped in three different groups. Their groups were determined according to their English proficiency. The target groups, aged 18-22, consisted of ten students each. They were of elementary, pre-intermediate and intermediate level of English. The research lasted for six weeks because the target groups had to be introduced to six different vocabulary topics. The experiment had three different phases. The first one was the questionnaire. It consisted of questions regarding the vocabulary learning, mainly vocabulary associated with pictures. In the second phase, students were engaged in the real activities done in a traditional classroom while in the last phase, participants took a quiz, which was used to provide evidence and additional data about the whole process.

THE QUESTIONNAIRE

In order to gain information about students' perceptions on the effectiveness of the method of using pictures for vocabulary learning, three different questionnaires were designed for the participants from three different levels. All three questionnaires consisted of seven questions and the third one determined the participants' language level. The main focus was to reveal their attitude towards learning vocabulary associated with pictures. Their answers indirectly gave a clue for the provability of the hypothesis. Most of the questions were asked in the first person singular in order to be more understandable for participants. In this way, they did not need to transform the order of the questions.

GROUP EXERCISES

Group exercises were the most interesting part of the research. Actually, they were the productive part, the heart of the research. Each session was more interesting than the previous one and the participants were totally engaged in the process without being aware that in fact

they were playing the most important role of the research. As mentioned before, the research lasted for six weeks, and as such all three groups were introduced to six different topics in vocabulary, chosen from the material they had to cover during that semester. Except the exercises for practicing the target vocabulary, participants were asked to complete the *Exit Tickets*. This was divided in two parts where students started and finished the class with the same activity. This gave a double effect in collecting the data about participants' knowledge of the target vocabulary before and after working on a specific topic on vocabulary.

Exit tickets

Level: _____ Topic: _____

Word	Possible Definition	Verified Definition

The activity (illustrated in the above Table) contained three columns: the first column labeled **Topic** presented the target vocabulary of that session. There were always ten items on that list. The second column, **Possible Definitions**, was completed in the beginning of each session. Participants were asked to give their definition about each item from the list, which showed how familiar were they with each topic and item before being introduced. The third column, labeled **Verified Definition**, was completed after they were finished with the actual exercise on a specific topic. In this column, participants had to give the exact definition or description of each item. That showed participants' progress from the beginning until the end of the session. It also helped in gathering data about the usefulness of the method used in introducing a specific topic.

ACHIEVEMENT QUIZZES

While the research started with the *Questionnaire*, it finished with the *Achievement Quiz*. Except *Exit Tickets*, which showed participants' performances constantly after each session, the quizzes gave a clearer picture of their improvement during the whole research. Similar to

the exercises, which had been adapted to the levels of the participants, the quiz was designed in the same way. The difference was in the topics it contained for each level. This approach was used in order to see if the method of pictures was effective for every level. The quiz lasted for 20 minutes in each group and it was taken after the last class of the experiment. Each quiz contained six exercises for the six topics the groups were introduced to. Pictures were used in the exercises and quizzes and the results were expected to provide final data. The following charts give visual information about the data gathered from the quizzes. The quizzes contained of 30 points and the scores given in the chart are points out of 30.

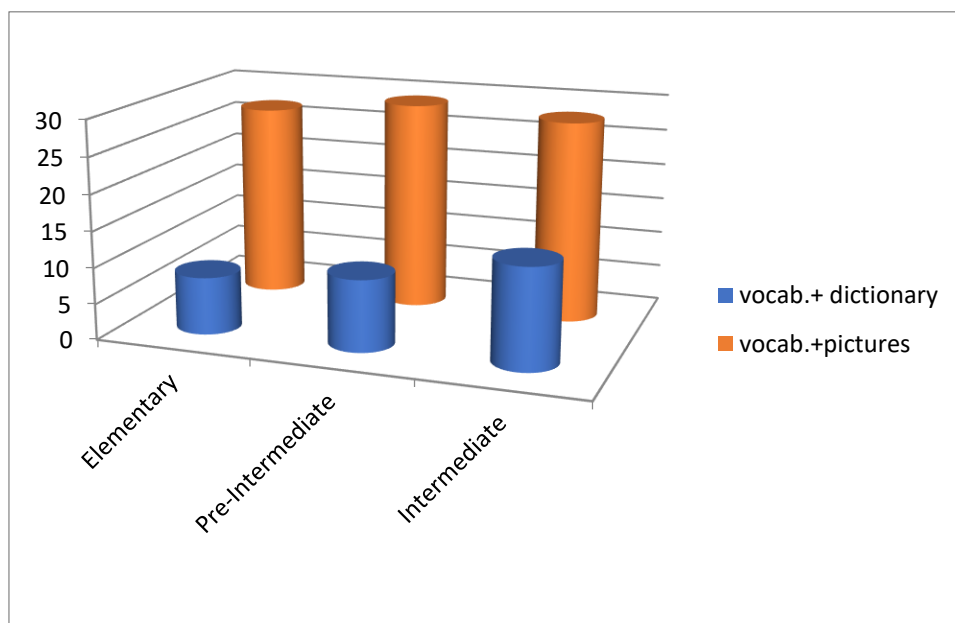


Chart 1 Visual information about the data gathered from the quizzes

FINDINGS

The present research was carried at the SEEU. There were 30 participants aged 18-22, from different Faculties, who were attending three different levels of English. Each of the groups contained 10 students of the same level. All of them were voluntarily participating in the research.

The hypothesis of the research was that the method of presenting the vocabulary with pictures and illustrations brings good results with students from every level. In order to prove this hypothesis, the participating groups belonged to different levels. First of all, participants'

attitudes on this method were very positive. They were given a Questionnaire that helped in gathering data about participants' opinions on learning vocabulary. Group 1 (elementary) was facing the picture method for the first time and did not know what to expect from it. They liked the idea of pictures but were curious to see what would come next. The second group (pre-intermediate) was slightly more advanced since they had worked with pictures earlier, even though it was not exactly the same method. Another advantage was that they had a larger vocabulary background and could express their opinions better than the previous group. The last group (intermediate) had a better knowledge of English and as such felt more confident when giving answers. They could communicate freely and participate in class discussions. All these groups were introduced to the method of dictionary explanations. None of the groups found it useful and they did not experience good results.

GROUP1–Elementary

The Elementary group was the most worrisome during the research. They were in Level 1 and it was their first contact with the English Language. However, as adult learners, they have mastered the form of their mother tongue and as such, it may serve them as a frame of reference when learning a foreign language. The most concerning issue about them was the disability of expressing themselves. The progress of their language acquisition could be seen when comparing the Exit tickets filled in the beginning of the research and those at the end. They managed to complete the *Questionnaire*, the *Exit Tickets* and the *Achievement Quiz* putting great effort and all that data gathered proved the effectiveness of the method of pictures in their vocabulary retention during this six-week research.

GROUP2–Pre-intermediate

This group was positive in using pictures in learning new vocabulary since they had had experience on it. They reasoned that it was easier to learn by having fun and that was what they were expecting from this method. Having positive opinions about something, leads to greater success on it. There was a real progress when the tickets were analyzed. While in the first column there were no exact definition of the words, the last column i.e. after the vocabulary topic is presented, was completed with great confidence. In addition, the *Achievement Quiz* was taken very seriously and gave results, which were more than satisfactory.

GROUP3 – Intermediate

When analyzing the *Questionnaire*, participants' positive attitudes on learning vocabulary associated with pictures were evident and they mentioned that they had had positive results on it in the past. The tickets helped to give evidence on participants' progress during the research and the results were as expected. The last part, the *Achievement Quiz*, was checked and the results were also in favor of our assumption. The performance they showed gave qualitative evidence about the impact of pictures in new vocabulary acquisition and the scores gained proved the hypothesis of the research.

CONCLUSIONS

This research has been focused on teaching vocabulary of a new language. The purpose of the research was to prove that new vocabulary could be easily learned when presented with pictures. When analyzing the data gathered from six-week experimental period, it can be easily seen that most of the vocabulary was acquired when presented with pictures. Even though participants were of different ages and different language levels, all of the three target groups showed great interest and as such great results on language acquisition. According to the results, this method is a viable teaching strategy since it is interesting for the students. Participants' attitudes toward this method were very positive as well as the results on the quiz. This method definitely brought expected results in vocabulary acquisition.

REFERENCES

- Agullo, G.L. (2006).** Overcoming age-related differences. *ELT Journal*, 60(4),363-365.
- Charge N.J. & Giblin K. (1988).** Learning English in a video studio. *ELT Journal*, 42(4), 282-287.
- Chun, D.M. & Plass, J.L. (1996).** Effects of multimedia annotations on vocabulary acquisition. *The Modern Language Journal*, 80, 183-198.
- Dong, Q. & Sun, Y. (2004).** An experiment on supporting children's English vocabulary learning in multimedia context. *Computer Assisted Language Learning*, 17(2), 131-147.
- Grace, C.A. (1998).** Retention of word meanings inferred from context and sentence level translations: Implications for the design of beginning-level CALL software. *The Modern Language Journal*, 82, 599-544.
- Greidanus, T. & Hollander, M. & Hulstijn, J.H. (1996).** Incidental vocabulary learning by advanced foreign language students: The influence of marginal glosses, dictionary use, and reoccurrence of unknown words. *The Modern Language Journal*, 80, 327-339.
- Heltai, P. (1989).** Teaching vocabulary by oral translation. *ELT Journal*, 43(4), 288-293.
- Hewings, M. (1991).** The interpretation of illustrations in ELT materials. *ELT Journal*, 45(3), 237-244.
- Richardson, J.S. & Morgan, R.F. & Fleener, C. (2009).** Reading to learn in the content areas. Seventh Edition. Belmon CA: Wadsworth Cengage Learning.
- Mages, W.K. (2008).** Does creative drama promote language development in early childhood? A review of the methods and measures employed in the empirical literature. *Review of Educational Research*.
- McCrostie, J. (2007).** Examining learner vocabulary notebooks. *ELT Journal*, 61(3), 246-255.
- McWilliam, I. (1986).** Video and language comprehension. *ELT Journal*, 42(2), 131-135.
- Nikolova, Y. & Schwanenflugel, P. & Zareva, A. (2005).** Relationship between lexical competence and language proficiency: Variable sensitivity. 567-595.
- Palmberg, R. (1988).** Computer games and foreign-language vocabulary learning. *ELT Journal*, 42(4), 242-252.
- Sheu, H.C. (2008).** The value of English picture story books. *ELT Journal*, 62(1), 47-55.
- Stieglitz, E.L. (1983).** A practical approach to vocabulary reinforcement. *ELT Journal*, 37(1), 71-75.
- Young, R. (1983).** The negotiation of meaning in children's foreign language acquisition. *ELT Journal*, 37(3), 197-206.
- Zivkovich, P.V. (1997).** Building vocabulary with a 3-D word wall. *Teaching PreK-8*, 58-59.