

## **The Effectiveness of using Vocabulary Exercises to Teach Vocabulary to ESL/EFL Learners**

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### **ABSTRACT**

In the KBSM English syllabus, vocabulary learning is only incorporated in the teaching of the four main skills of reading, writing, listening and speaking as target words are usually taught implicitly. Often, learners are unaware of the different meanings of a word and its spelling due to the common method of teaching the target words. This study investigates the effectiveness of the use of vocabulary exercises for vocabulary teaching involving 60 selected students from Form Two classes of a sub-urban school in Ipoh. The mean scores of the pre-test and post-test are analysed by using descriptive statistics. The questionnaire in the student's feedback form was analysed descriptively in terms of frequency counts and percentage of responses. The open-ended written responses in the student's evaluation form are categorised and analysed using content analysis. The results suggest that the incorporation of vocabulary exercises is effective in learning the target words among Form Two learners.

*Keywords:* ESL/EFL learners, target words, vocabulary exercises, vocabulary teaching

### **INTRODUCTION**

Vocabulary learning is an undoubtedly important element in learning English as a second language or a foreign language (ESL/EFL). Sufficient vocabulary will help learners to construct semantically correct sentences. English vocabulary can be obtained by self-discovery or through formal education. As mentioned by Read (2004), second language (L2) learners

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realise that their limited repertoire of vocabulary greatly affects their ability to convey intended meaning in communication using the target language. ESL/EFL learners usually face problems in communicating and writing in English because of their lack of vocabulary content. As a result, they are unable to write and communicate effectively using English. Perhaps, minimum exposure in terms of English language use in day-to-day life contributes to this ineffective use of the language.

### **BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY**

Gass and Selinker (2008) stated that vocabulary learning can determine success in L2 acquisition. However, lexical errors were the most common errors committed by L2 learners based on the large corpora of errors. In the local context of Malaysia, learners need to have extensive vocabulary in order to be proficient in English. The Ministry of Education of Malaysia has incorporated the learning of vocabulary in the syllabus and also the KBSM English textbook. Although vocabulary has become one of the elements to be included in the lesson, vocabulary learning is only incorporated in the teaching of the four skills.

Oxford and Crookall (1990, as cited in Sanaoui, 1995) have pointed out that very few vocabulary courses are available even though courses on reading, writing, speaking, listening, grammar and culture are common in L2 programmes. Thus, vocabulary learning is a minor focus in

L2 programmes although it plays a vital role in improving learner proficiency. It is very important for the learner to grab any chance of learning new words especially during English lessons in school. According to Dunmore (1989), vocabulary learning involves the use of different exercise types and context is important in comprehending the connotation of unfamiliar words. This will help learners to acquire new words and retain them in their long-term memory. The use of English textbooks and exercise books can be applied in order to increase vocabulary knowledge as it is designed to help L2 learners regardless of their proficiency level.

The outcome of vocabulary exercises in promoting vocabulary knowledge was also emphasised by Llach (2009). According to Min and Hsu (2008), learners will focus on a specific word via vocabulary enhancement tasks and activities that allow them to understand the meaning and function of the word. Therefore, as Hashemzadeh (2012) has stated, using different exercises is essential and beneficial for vocabulary learning and retention.

According to Paribakht and Wesche (1994, as cited in Hashemzadeh, 2012), there are five hierarchies of vocabulary exercises:

*Selective Attention:* Learners are presented with a list of words before a text and asked to read the words and search for them in the text.

*Recognition:* Learners need to relate the word form and its meaning.

*Manipulation:* Learners are required to rearrange the elements of phrases by referring to their morphological and grammatical knowledge.

*Interpretation:* Learners are required to create a connection between vocabulary items and other words that appear in the text.

*Production:* Learners must recall, reconstruct and retrieve the vocabulary items.

In relation to the importance of memory and recall, the processing theory by Anderson et al. (2006) helps to describe the effects of levels of processing on remembering and knowing. This study considered the reasons why some items were recalled more easily than others. Craik and Lockhart (1972) have proposed the level of processing theory that stated the more analysis an item receives the better it will be recalled. A later study by Craik and Tulving (1975, as cited in Anderson et al., 2006) gave further evidence for the validity of the depths of processing theory. Their results showed that shallow and deep encoding resulted in differences in memory trace strength when subject performed an unexpected recall test.

Gardiner (1988, as mentioned in Anderson et al., 2006), carried out an experiment that combined the levels of processing theory with the 'remember' and 'know' paradigm. 'Remembering' appears to depend on deep processing while 'knowing' entails shallow processing (Anderson et al., 2006). This indicated that memory should

be seen, at least in part, as a by-product of other perceptual processes. Semantic processing provided a significantly higher recall and generated significantly more 'remember' responses. This phenomenon occurs even without having a conscious awareness of the information in memory. Thus, by semantically (deeply) processing information, a stronger, specific trace and resulting memory of presented stimuli is formed.

A study by Chih et al. (2011) indicated that vocabulary exercises assisted participants in acquiring vocabulary as evident in pre-test scores ( $F(2,75)=0.531$ ,  $p=0.590$ ), immediate post-test scores ( $F(2,75)=1.094$ ,  $p=0.340$ ) and delayed post-test scores ( $F(2,75)=0.288$ ,  $p=0.751$ ). This is also in line with the study by Tsae and Jia (2010), which demonstrated that the technique that helped students most in vocabulary learning was using visual aids as it provided the highest mean score ( $M=90.5435$ ).

Vocabulary is important as it does not only establish cognitive systems of knowledge, but also assists the communicative and comprehensive interaction (Coady & Huckin, 1997). L2 learners have to grasp the threshold level of common words in the target language for their languages skills and linguistics knowledge to improve (Nation, 2001). The useful retrieval of receptive and productive knowledge reflected effective vocabulary learning, which leads to deep processing that boosts long-term retention of vocabulary (Craik & Lockhart, 1972). Hence, lexical tasks and instruction should

intend to trigger learners' ability to process in depth and to achieve a higher degree of involvement load (Hulstijn & Laufer, 2001).

Nowadays, understanding the learning process from a participant's viewpoint is one of the main interests of researchers (Koschmann, 1996). Latest studies by Gomez et al. (2010) have found that motivation has an influence on the relationship between team interactions and perceived learning. Since learners' perceptions of learning environments are accountable in determining their approach to learning during instructional processes (Biggs, 1993), studies investigating learning effects or outcomes ought to take these mediating factors into consideration.

### Previous Studies

In a previous study, Hashemzadeh (2012) investigated whether Elementary EFL learners' vocabulary retention significantly varied by using recognition exercises and production exercises in immediate and delayed vocabulary tests. Forty-six Iranian Elementary learners who were studying English were selected for this study. The result of the study found that EFL learners' vocabulary retention significantly varied by using different exercise types. The most effective exercise type influencing EFL learners' vocabulary retention was fill-in-the-blanks (recognition exercise). The learners' recalled the words better in immediate tests than after two weeks.

On the other hand, a study administered by Yip and Kwan (2006) investigated the usefulness of online games in vocabulary

learning among undergraduate students. The results of the post-test indicated that the experimental group outperformed the control group statistically. Students in the experimental group also preferred online learning supplemented with digital educational games to conventional activity-based lessons.

Finally, Luu (2012) investigated whether games influenced young learners' vocabulary recollection in 'Way Ahead' classes at Ngoi Nha Thong Thai Elementary School, Vietnam. Two classes were randomly selected as the experimental group and control group. The results indicated that the experimental group surpassed the control one in recollecting vocabulary during the immediate and delayed retention stage.

### Research Questions

The current study seeks to investigate the effectiveness of using vocabulary exercises to teach vocabulary to ESL/EFL learners. It is important to know whether learners will learn effectively with the use of an explicit method to teach vocabulary in the local context. In line with the objective, four research questions were presented:

1. How familiar are the Form Two learners with the vocabulary items listed in the English KBSM syllabus?
2. How effective is the incorporation of vocabulary exercises for the Form Two learners?
3. Which techniques or types of vocabulary exercises are preferred by the Form Two learners?

4. What are the Form Two learners' perceptions of learning vocabulary using English vocabulary exercises?

## METHODOLOGY

This study employed a quasi-experimental research design. According to Creswell (1994), an experiment is a highly controlled method. Experiments give the researcher valuable data for judging and comparing changes in scores of pre- and post-tests between the experimental group and the control group.

### Subjects

The sample of populations in this study consisted of 60 selected students from two classes of Form Two in a school located in the sub-urban area of Ipoh, Perak. The purposive sampling technique was employed to select the participants so that learners with particular characteristics could be selected. The participants selected were all Form Two learners and the English language was their second or foreign language. These two classes were then randomly selected as the experimental and control group.

### Research Instruments

**New word test.** A check list of 90 words was created for the new word test. The list of words was selected from the list of words to-be-learned in the Form Two KBSM English curriculum specification document by the Ministry of Education, Malaysia (2003); the words were also listed in the index of the Form One and Form Two KBSM English textbooks. This test was conducted to pick

out 30 target words (words to be learnt) that were later tested in the pre-test and post-test.

**Pre-test and post-test.** In the pre-test, there were 11 short reading texts in which synonyms or same-meaning phrases of the target words were used in sentences. The reading texts were prepared by the researcher and verified by an appointed expert. The synonyms or same-meaning phrases were also underlined, highlighted and numbered so that the learners could choose the target words, which were the words to be learnt, in the multiple-choice answers. There were 30 multiple-choice questions created and participants were required to answer them within 45 minutes. The full score for the test was 30. On the other hand, the post-test was actually the same test used in the pre-test but changes were made in terms of the arrangement of the texts.

**Pictorial vocabulary handout.** The pictorial vocabulary handout consisted of the target words, pictures and annotations of words. This is underpinned by Nassaji's (2003) idea of the fallibility of inferring the meanings of unknown words from pictures. This handout was prepared by the researcher and verified by an appointed expert.

### Vocabulary Exercises

The vocabulary exercises were taken and adapted from the Form Two KBSM English textbook as well as from Form Two KBSM reference books.

**Matching.** Learners were required to match the words with the correct definition of the words.

**Fill-in-the-blanks.** Learners were asked to fill in the blanks with the appropriate answers. They had to choose the answers from given choices.

**Spelling.** Learners were requested to listen carefully and spell correctly on their own words from the list that were called out by the teacher. The definition and the use of word-in-context were read for each word.

**Unscramble letters.** Learners had to unscramble letters of the synonyms of the underlined and bold words in the sentences.

**Crossword puzzle.** Learners were given hints in the form of meaning of the words and a few letters of the answer for each word to solve the puzzle.

### **Student's Feedback Form**

The student's feedback form was created in the form of a 3-point Likert-scale questionnaire. The statements in the feedback form were divided into positive perceptions and negative perceptions.

### **Student's Evaluation Form**

The student's evaluation form was developed in the form of eight open-ended written questions to investigate the learners' overall perceptions towards their learning experience during the experiment and the factors influencing their perception, participation and performance.

### **Data Collection**

Prior to the experiment, all the participants took the new word test so that 30 to-be-learned words in the formal study could

be identified. After the researcher had identified the 30 to-be-learned words, all the participants sat a vocabulary test, which the researcher used as the pre-test in the formal study. In the formal study, the learners of the experimental group were introduced to seven sessions of vocabulary instructions using exercises taken and adapted from the Form Two KBSM English textbook and other resources by the teacher. A feedback form was distributed to the learners after each type of vocabulary exercise was used in the vocabulary instructions. Consequently, seven sessions of normal English lessons were conducted for the control group. After the vocabulary instructions, the learners of both groups sat an immediate recall test (post-test) consisting of 30 predetermined target words listed by the researcher. After the post-test, a follow-up open-ended evaluation form was administered to the experimental group. Before the formal experimental study, the researcher conducted a pilot study to investigate problems and errors that may occur.

### **Data Analysis**

The vocabulary scores of the pre-test and post-test were first analysed using the descriptive statistics, with mean scores, standard deviation and the total improvement score in percentage presented. This was implemented using SPSS software version 21. In addition, the data collected from the questionnaire (student's feedback form) was analysed descriptively in terms of frequency counts and percentage of responses for each statement. Regarding the qualitative

data, open-ended written responses in the student's evaluation form were analysed using content analysis, which involved categorising the data accordingly.

## RESULTS

Referring to Table 1, for the 'Don't Know' category, all the participants claimed that they did not know the meaning of the words 'Filthy' and 'Cope'. Twenty-nine students selected the words 'Annually' and 'Severe' for the 'Don't Know' category, indicating that they were unfamiliar with these words. Only 15 participants stated they did not understand the meaning of the word 'Talented' and another 16 students claimed that they were not familiar with the words 'Provide' and 'Irregular'. Generally, more than half of the participants were unfamiliar with 30 out of the 66 words listed in the new word test. The list of unfamiliar words or the target words selected for this study is presented in Table 2.

According to Table 3 and 4, in the pre-test, the mean score for the experimental group was  $M=13.9$ , but in the post-test, ( $M=26.5$ ). This indicated an improvement ( $M$  difference) of the pre- and post-tests of the experimental group, which was 12.6. Moreover, the total improvement score percentage was up to 90.6%. Meanwhile, the mean score for the pre-test of the control group was  $M=14.7$  and in the post-test, ( $M=16.1$ ). It was found that the improvement ( $M$  difference) for the post- and pre-test of the control group was 1.4 and its total improvement score percentage was only 9.5%. After the experimental treatment,

both groups demonstrated an increment of the mean scores in the post-test. However, the total improvement score percentage for the experimental group exceeded the control group by a staggering 81.1%.

Table 5 shows that 24 learners (80%) disagreed with the statement that they wished the teacher had given them a different type of exercise. Fourteen learners (about 47%) disagreed with the statement, "I dislike the exercise." Regarding the statements indicating positive perception, 40% of the participants agreed that they liked this kind of exercise. About 33% of the participants also agreed that they were familiar with the words in the exercise. These results indicated positive responses from the participants for the matching exercise. Thus, matching was a preferable exercise among the participants.

Table 6 indicates that 19 learners (about 63%) disagreed with the statement, "I dislike the exercise" and only about 3% of the participants wished the teacher had given them a different exercise. This indicated that the learners disagreed with the negative statements in the student's feedback form. The findings were further supported by more than half of the learners (about 57%) agreeing with the statement "I like this exercise" where the remaining 13 learners neither agreed nor disagreed with this statement. Besides that, 50% of the participants wanted to do more of this type of exercise as they preferred crossword puzzles. This shows that participants in this study preferred to do crossword puzzles.

Table 1  
*Results of the New Word Test*

List of Words	Number of Students	List of Words	Number of Students
Advise	4	Grateful	6
Annoy	21	Greenery	26
Annually	29	Hazardous	25
Apply	5	Dangerous	1
Balance	1	Deforestation	20
Busy	1	Deserted	20
Believe	2	Joyous	23
Challenging	1	Litter	10
Cheap	3	Manufacture	21
Cheerful	7	Migration	23
Common	17	Nutritious	14
Cope	30	Overcome	22
Costly	9	Peaceful	5
Creative	3	Pleasant	19
Crowded	13	Polite	11
Crushed	14	Reuse	14
Curious	27	Selfish	3
Daily	3	Severe	29
Design	3	Infectious	28
Destroy	5	Irregular	16
Difficult	3	Itchy	21
Disappointed	8	Preserve	23
Efficient	26	Provide	16
Encourage	21	Punish	5
Erosion	27	Reasonable	7
Estimate	9	Reduce	8
Excess	24	Refund	27
Explode	9	Refuse	13
Extremely	10	Reliable	25
Fade	25	Responsible	4
Filthy	30	Successful	3
Frequently	22	Talented	15
Friendly	3	Untidy	10



Table 2  
*Selected Target Words*

List of Unfamiliar Words	Number of Students	List of Unfamiliar Words	Number of Students
Filthy	30	Migration	23
Cope	30	Joyous	23
Annually	29	Frequently	22
Severe	29	Overcome	22
Infectious	28	Manufacture	21
Erosion	27	Itchy	21
Curious	27	Encourage	21
Refund	27	Annoy	21
Efficient	26	Deforestation	20
Greenery	26	Deserted	20
Reliable	25	Pleasant	19
Hazardous	25	Common	17
Fade	25	Provide	16
Excess	24	Irregular	16
Preserve	23	Talented	15

Table 3  
*Descriptive Statistics for the Pre- and Post-Tests of the Experimental Group*

Experimental Group	Mean Score (M)	Standard Deviation (SD)	M Difference	SD Difference	Total Improvement Score (%)
Pre-Test	13.9	3.13	12.6	0.03	90.6
Post-Test	26.5	3.16			

Table 4  
*Descriptive Statistics for the Pre- and Post-Tests of the Control Group*

Control Group (2A3)	Mean Score (M)	Standard Deviation (SD)	M Difference	SD Difference	Total Improvement Score (%)
Pre-Test	14.7	4.37	1.4	0.15	9.5
Post-Test	16.1	4.52			

Table 5  
*Analysis of the Student's Feedback Form*  
*Vocabulary Exercise Type: Matching*

Statement (Negative Perception)	<u>Agree</u>		<u>Neither</u>		<u>Disagree</u>	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Most of the words in the exercise are not familiar.	9	30	18	60	3	10
I wish the teacher had given me a different exercise.	0	0	6	20	24	80
The exercise is difficult.	8	26.67	13	43.33	9	30
I dislike the exercise.	1	3.33	15	50	14	46.67

  

Statement (Positive Perception)	<u>Agree</u>		<u>Neither</u>		<u>Disagree</u>	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
I am familiar with the words in the exercise.	10	33.33	15	50	5	16.67
I want to do more of this type of exercise.	9	30	13	43.33	8	26.67
It is easy to do this exercise.	8	26.67	13	43.33	9	30
I like this exercise.	12	40	13	43.33	5	16.67

Table 6  
*Analysis of the Student's Feedback Form*  
*Vocabulary Exercise Type: Crossword Puzzle*

Statement (Negative Perception)	<u>Agree</u>		<u>Neither</u>		<u>Disagree</u>	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Most of the words in the exercise are not familiar.	9	30	11	36.67	10	33.33
I wish the teacher had given me a different exercise.	1	3.33	17	56.67	12	40
The exercise is difficult.	7	23.33	15	50	8	26.67
I dislike the exercise.	5	16.67	6	20	19	63.33

  

Statement (Positive Perception)	<u>Agree</u>		<u>Neither</u>		<u>Disagree</u>	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
I am familiar with the words in the exercise.	11	36.67	15	50	4	13.33
I want to do more of this type of exercise.	15	50	10	33.33	5	16.67
It is easy to do this exercise.	9	30	17	56.67	4	13.33
I like this exercise.	17	56.67	13	43.33	0	0

Table 7 shows that 19 learners disliked the exercise. About 57% of the participants wished that the teacher had given them a different type of exercise. These findings were in line with more than half of the learners (16 learners) disliking the exercise as the other 12 learners (40%) decided that they disagreed with the statement, "I want to do more of this type of exercise." The results of the student's feedback form indicated negative perceptions among learners for the fill-in-the-blanks exercise as this exercise was not preferred by the participants of this study.

Table 8 shows that about 63% of the participants agreed that they liked this type of exercise. Moreover, 13 learners (about 43%) stated that they agreed with doing more of the same type of exercise. Referring to the statement indicating negative perception, 60% of the participants disagreed with the statement, "I dislike the exercise" as they preferred to do the exercise. Furthermore, 12 learners (40%) did not want the teacher to give them a different exercise. This demonstrated positive perception for the unscramble letters exercise among the participants in this study. They preferred to do this type of exercise.

Table 9 shows that 16 learners (about 53%) disagreed with the statement that they disliked the exercise. About 37% of the participants also disagreed with the statement, "The exercise is difficult." These findings were also supported by the statements indicating positive perception when 13 learners (about 43%) agreed that they wanted to do more of this type of

exercise. These learners also agreed with the fact that this exercise was easy for them to do and they liked this type of exercise.

### **Analysis of the Written Responses in the Student's Evaluation Form**

When the learners were asked what was easy about the vocabulary exercises, 11 of them stated that the questions were direct and easy to understand. The learners were also asked what was difficult about the vocabulary exercises. A high number, 10, stated that they had to comprehend the definition of the target words in order to answer the questions. Nine of them stated that some of the target words used were unfamiliar.

When they were asked what they liked about the vocabulary exercises, 10 learners stated that some of the questions in the exercises were easy to answer. Besides that, they were also asked what they disliked about the vocabulary exercises. Ten learners stated that some of the questions were difficult.

Furthermore, when the learners were asked which type of vocabulary exercise they liked the most, the majority, 17, indicated that the crossword puzzle exercise was their favourite. They had different opinions for liking it such as they preferred to do this type of exercise whereas others agreed it was easy and interesting.

Next, when they were asked which type of vocabulary exercise they needed more practice in and to give their reasons for saying so, 11 learners stated that spelling was what they needed to practise the most. This was because they preferred this type

Table 7  
*Analysis of the Student's Feedback Form*  
*Vocabulary Exercise Type: Fill-In-The-Blanks*

Statement (Negative Perception)	<u>Agree</u>		<u>Neither</u>		<u>Disagree</u>	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Most of the words in the exercise are not familiar.	3	10	21	70	6	20
I wish the teacher had given me a different exercise.	17	56.67	8	26.67	5	16.67
The exercise is difficult.	11	36.67	14	46.67	5	16.67
I dislike the exercise.	19	63.33	7	23.33	4	13.33

  

Statement (Positive Perception)	<u>Agree</u>		<u>Neither</u>		<u>Disagree</u>	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
I am familiar with the words in the exercise.	6	20	20	66.67	4	13.33
I want to do more of this type of exercise.	9	30	9	30	12	40
It is easy to do this exercise.	7	23.33	14	46.67	9	30
I like this exercise.	6	20	8	26.67	16	53.33

Table 8  
*Analysis of the Student's Feedback Form*  
*Vocabulary Exercise Type: Unscramble Letters*

Statement (Negative Perception)	<u>Agree</u>		<u>Neither</u>		<u>Disagree</u>	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Most of the words in the exercise are not familiar.	3	10	19	63.33	7	23.33
I wish the teacher had given me a different exercise.	3	10	15	50	12	40
The exercise is difficult.	7	23.33	16	53.33	7	23.33
I dislike the exercise.	2	6.67	10	13.33	18	60

  

Statement (Positive Perception)	<u>Agree</u>		<u>Neither</u>		<u>Disagree</u>	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
I am familiar with the words in the exercise.	7	23.33	22	73.33	1	3.33
I want to do more of this type of exercise.	13	43.33	9	30	8	26.67
It is easy to do this exercise.	11	36.67	14	46.67	5	16.67
I like this exercise.	19	63.33	9	30	2	6.67

Table 9  
*Analysis of the Student's Feedback Form*  
*Vocabulary Exercise Type: Spelling*

Statement (Negative Perception)	<u>Agree</u>		<u>Neither</u>		<u>Disagree</u>	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Most of the words in the exercise are not familiar.	4	13.33	17	56.67	9	30
I wish the teacher had given me a different exercise.	13	43.33	14	46.67	3	10
The exercise is difficult.	4	13.33	15	50	11	36.67
I dislike the exercise.	2	6.67	12	40	16	53.33

  

Statement (Positive Perception)	<u>Agree</u>		<u>Neither</u>		<u>Disagree</u>	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
I am familiar with the words in the exercise.	11	36.67	15	50	4	13.33
I want to do more of this type of exercise.	13	43.33	14	46.67	3	10
It is easy to do this exercise.	13	43.33	16	53.33	1	3.33
I like this exercise.	13	43.33	13	43.33	4	13.33

of exercise. Another 11 learners also chose the fill-in-the-blanks exercise as the type of vocabulary exercise that they needed the most and stated that it was difficult to do this type of exercise.

The learners were also asked what improvements they would suggest to improve the vocabulary exercises and their reasons for their suggestions. Nine of them, who had written responses for this question, suggested that more interesting exercises could be created in the future. Finally, the learners were also asked to suggest other vocabulary activities that they wanted to do in order to improve their vocabulary and the majority, 11 learners, suggested reading comprehension exercises.

## DISCUSSION

This section summarises the data collected based on the questions in the survey.

### Question 1

1. How familiar are the Form Two learners with the vocabulary items listed in the English KBSM syllabus?

Half of the learners (30 students) from both groups were unfamiliar with the target words. The list of words selected in the new-word test included the words that had to be learnt when the participants were in Form One. This shows that the common practice of implicit method of teaching the target words was less effective as some of the words were still unknown to the participants.

This might also have resulted because of the learners' low language proficiency in English (Read, 2004). The participants selected in this study used their mother tongue in their daily conversation and the use of English language was limited only to the classroom during English lessons.

Limited opportunities and resources of English language may also have been the contributing factor for the generally low level of English proficiency among the participants (Gass & Selinker, 2008). In the student's evaluation form, the learners disliked that they had to find the meaning of unknown words from the dictionary while answering the questions. This indicated a low level of interest in terms of learning new words. If the learners were interested, they would have been excited at the prospect of or at least committed to discovering the meaning of unknown words referring to the dictionary.

2. How effective is the incorporation of vocabulary exercises for the Form Two learners?

The experimental group indicated a significant improvement, with the difference in the mean score of the post-test compared to the pre-test being 12.6. Although both groups indicated an increment, the total improvement score percentage for the experimental group was exceeded by 81.1% compared to the control group. Nation (2001) states that a one-time encounter is not enough for learning a word as there is so much to discover about the word. Therefore, vocabulary items should be reiterated in different exercises so that they can be stored in long-term memory as well as be recalled easily (Sokmen, 1997). Therefore, teachers need to prepare more vocabulary tasks and offer more practice opportunities for learners. Webb (2007) stated that 10

repetitions are required to acquire a new item.

The features of the vocabulary exercises also contributed to its effectiveness as a tool to learning new words. Learners were exposed to a variety of questions where they had to use certain techniques or ways to answer the questions. When advanced knowledge is acquired, the flexible reassembly of pre-existing knowledge will adaptively fit the needs of a new situation (Spiro et al., 1991). Therefore, learners are able to remember target words better by using different types of vocabulary exercises.

3. Which techniques or types of vocabulary exercises are preferred by the Form Two learners?

The type of vocabulary exercise preferred was matching, crossword puzzle, unscramble letters and spelling. Nineteen learners did not like doing the fill-in-the-blanks exercise according to the student's feedback form. This finding is in contrast with Hashemzadeh (2012) and Folse's (2006) findings, both of which claimed that fill-in-the-blanks exercises were preferred and were effective. The contrast in terms of the findings could be due to difference in the participants' preference and interest.

The amount and type of practice influence the ability to recall new words learnt and the retention level (Chastain, 1988). In this study, the participants liked the use of matching, crossword puzzle, unscramble letters and spelling exercises.

Teachers should be aware of students' preference in terms of the type of vocabulary exercise so that effectiveness in acquiring the target words can be optimised. This is also to scaffold the learners' needs in order for them to learn the target words better.

There are nine intelligences in the theory of multiple intelligences proposed by Gardner (2002): logical-mathematical, visual-spatial, linguistics, bodily-kinesthetic, musical, interpersonal, intrapersonal, naturalistic and existential. In order for learners to acquire target words better, they should use the learning styles that suit them. In this study, learners were introduced to a pictorial vocabulary handout that required them to draw images related to the target words. This was in line with the findings of Tsae and Jia (2010), who concluded that visual aids help learners most in vocabulary learning.

#### 4. What are the Form Two learners' perceptions of learning vocabulary using English vocabulary exercises?

In the student's evaluation form, the participants mentioned that they liked the incorporation of vocabulary exercises because the questions were simple and easy to understand. Seventeen participants had chosen the crossword puzzle as their favourite vocabulary exercise. They mentioned that the crossword puzzle was an interesting and fun exercise to do. Participants felt this type of exercise was the most engaging activity as they could explore possible answers using the trial and error

method in order to find the correct answers. This activity also promotes cooperation and collaboration among the learners, and this leads to active participation (Luu, 2012). When learners are involved in active learning, the chances for meaningful learning to occur are high. As a result, learners acquire the target words.

This is supported by Luu (2012). According to the results of the pre-test and two post-tests in his study, the experimental group, which was exposed to vocabulary games in recollecting vocabulary, surpassed the control group, which was involved in exercises without games. Games create a fun learning environment, add motivation when students' motivation shrinks and promote team learning and collaborative skills.

In this study, 10 participants mentioned that they felt the vocabulary exercises were difficult because they had to know the meaning of the target words to answer the vocabulary questions. This was because some of the target words were unfamiliar and some questions were also at higher levels of difficulty. According to Craik and Lockhart (1972), in order for learners to acquire knowledge, they have to be exposed to questions a level higher than their current knowledge so that they can use their prior knowledge to solve the questions presented. In this matter, their cognitive ability will be challenged and improved. Thus, learners will acquire and retain the target words in their long-term memory as they can be remembered easily in the future.

Nine learners also suggested that teachers should create more interesting

exercises in the future. Luu (2012) stated that vocabulary games provide an enjoyable learning experience. Creating a fun and enjoyable learning environment is a large first step towards motivating students. Among the suggestions of the alternative vocabulary exercises were reading comprehension, synonym and antonym, sentence completion and essay writing.

### **Summary of the Discussion**

The findings from the present study suggest that the use of vocabulary exercises is effective in teaching unfamiliar words to Form Two learners. Learners' attention to particular vocabulary items can be drawn by using effective vocabulary tasks (Folse, 2006). Thus, teachers are advised to focus on teaching the target words utilising different exercise types as this results in better retention.

In line with some other studies (Nation, 2001; Hunt & Beglar, 2005; Schmitt, 2008; Yali, 2010), the current study affirms that the best method to teach vocabulary is by using the explicit vocabulary teaching method, which results in better retention and vocabulary learning. According to Paribakh and Wesche (2000), numerous encounters of the words in vocabulary exercises promote vocabulary acquisition to a greater degree. Thus, teachers are encouraged to offer many opportunities for learners to encounter the words via preferred vocabulary exercises for better retention and more depth of vocabulary learning of unfamiliar words.

The use of visual aids to help learners learn the target words is also recommended.

According to Gardner (2002), learners should be encouraged to use the learning styles that they prefer in order to maximise learning ability. Participants who were visual learners would have benefitted from the use of a pictorial vocabulary handout to learn the target words. This is because they were able to create mental images related to the target words that helped them to memorise the words and store them in their long-term memory.

### **Limitation of the Study**

One of the limitations of this study was that some of the words in the list of 30 target words selected from the new-word test might have been easier to learn using a certain technique while others might have been easier to learn using another.

### **CONCLUSION**

It can be concluded from the results of this study that the incorporation of vocabulary exercises was effective in helping these Form Two students learn the target words. The learners' retention level of the acquired words was also seen to be high, indicating meaningful learning occurred through the use of vocabulary exercises. The target words were stored in their long-term memory and they could recall the target words to answer the questions in the post-test successfully. Therefore, teachers and curriculum developers should consider incorporating appropriate vocabulary exercises explicitly or extrinsically to improve students' vocabulary knowledge.



## RECOMMENDATION FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

Further research should consider using a wider sample to investigate the effectiveness of using vocabulary exercises to teach vocabulary to ESL or EFL learners. This sample can be selected from schools around Malaysia so that more learners will have the opportunity to participate in such a study. Besides that, learners from a different form or age can also be included in the sample for future research. In terms of the characteristics of the sample selected, variation related to gender, family background and race can also be considered for further research.

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