

The Use of ICTs to Overcome Vocabulary Attrition in EFL Context:

Case of First-year EFL Students at Tlemcen University

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استخدام تكنولوجيا المعلومات والاتصالات للتغلب على استنزاف المفردات في سياق

اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية

حالة طلاب السنة الأولى في جامعة تلمسان

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Abstract:

Vocabulary attrition or the gradual decline of lexical items over time is a phenomenon that can pose challenges for language learners in all languages; be it first, second or a foreign language. Therefore, in Foreign Language (FL) the occurrence is more observable since learners are not constantly exposed to

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the target language. Thus, this article was an attempt to investigate the reasons whereby students forget their vocabulary during formal instruction. In this vein an experimental endeavour was launched among EFL learners in their very beginning initiation to tertiary education where all modules are meant to present a fully English-oriented instruction in terms of content, form and methodology. The experiment spotted light on the use of Information and Communication Technologies as a medium to mitigate storing and recalling as well as to enhance the students' proficiency through the daily exposure to contextualised vocabulary. Accordingly, a case study involving 54 students from the department of English, Tlemcen University was carried out. The researcher opted for three different research instruments to ensure the validity of the collected data, namely students' questionnaire, teachers' interview, and a classroom observation. The employed instruments revealed that first-year EFL students are affected by attrition mainly in the productive skills, specifically speaking for the significant role it plays in daily life communication. Moreover, it revealed that lack of interaction and exposure to the target language are the main reasons of vocabulary attrition. Finally, the results suggested that the advent of ICTs in the current era is beneficial to overcome vocabulary attrition in EFL context. Overall, optimizing technological tools in language learning is essential in order to strengthen the students' linguistic repertoire.

Key Words:

Advent of ICTs, EFL context, formal instruction, language learning proficiency, vocabulary attrition

الملخص:

يعد استنزاف المفردات أو الانخفاض التدريجي للعناصر المعجمية بمرور الوقت ظاهرة يمكن أن تشكل تحديات لمتعلمي اللغة في جميع اللغات. سواء كانت الأولى أو الثانية أو لغة أجنبية. لذلك ، في اللغة الأجنبية (FL) يكون الحدوث أكثر قابلية للملاحظة لأن المتعلمين لا يتعرضون باستمرار للغة الهدف. وبالتالي ، كانت هذه المقالة محاولة للتحقيق في الأسباب التي تجعل الطلاب ينسون مفرداتهم أثناء التدريس الرسمي.

في هذا السياق ، تم إطلاق مسعى تجريبي بين متعلمي اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية في بداية بدء التعليم العالي حيث تهدف جميع الوحدات إلى تقديم تعليم موجه بالكامل باللغة الإنجليزية من حيث المحتوى والشكل والمنهجية. وسلطت التجربة الضوء على استخدام تكنولوجيا المعلومات والاتصالات كوسيلة للتخفيف من التخزين والتذكر، فضلا عن تعزيز كفاءة الطلاب من خلال التعرض اليومي للمفردات السياقية. وبناء على ذلك، أجريت دراسة حالة شملت 54 طالبا من قسم اللغة الإنكليزية بجامعة تلمسان.

اختار الباحث ثلاث أدوات بحثية مختلفة للتأكد من صحة البيانات التي تم جمعها ، وهي استبيان الطلاب ، ومقابلة المعلمين ، وملاحظة الفصل الدراسي. كشفت الأدوات المستخدمة أن طلاب اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية في السنة

الأولى يتأثرون بالاستنزاف بشكل رئيسي في المهارات الإنتاجية ، وعلى وجه التحديد التحدث عن الدور الهام الذي تلعبه في التواصل في الحياة اليومية. علاوة على ذلك ، كشفت أن عدم التفاعل والتعرض للغة الهدف هما السببان الرئيسيان لاستنزاف المفردات. أخيرا ، أشارت النتائج إلى أن ظهور تكنولوجيا المعلومات والاتصالات في العصر الحالي مفيد للتغلب على استنزاف المفردات في سياق اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية. بشكل عام ، يعد تحسين الأدوات التكنولوجية في تعلم اللغة أمرا ضروريا من أجل تعزيز الذخيرة اللغوية للطلاب.

ظهور تكنولوجيا المعلومات والاتصالات ، سياق اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية ، التعليم الرسمي ، إتقان تعلم اللغة ، استنزاف المفردات

الكلمات المفتاحية: ظهور تكنولوجيا المعلومات والاتصالات ، سياق اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية ، التعليم الرسمي ، إتقان تعلم اللغة ، استنزاف المفردات

1. Introduction

Nowadays, learning a language has become a vital need in our daily lives; whether the purpose is for studying, communicating or just for mere entertainment. Eventually, if the target language is English, then its position as a language which is widely spoken and used as a global language in the 21st century, makes more stress in the betterment in the overall learning process. Also, it is the tool of interaction between friends, teachers, or foreigners *per se*. Hence, many scholars agree that using information and communication technology (hereafter, ICT) during the English language learning process may enhance students' capacities to learn new words and phrases regularly and make vocabulary acquisition more engaging and memorable.

However, for EFL learners it may be difficult to reach a certain level of proficiency unless they are well exposed to a real-like atmosphere and rich context. Yet, learning a language efficiently and effectively takes time and effort. Most importantly, EFL learners are learning a language which holds the status of a foreign language where occasions of use are very limited to some educational domains and to certain leisure-time instances. That typical state of the arts may cause language attrition and/or lead to the loss of some language skills at the level of lexis. Moreover, students tend to forget their vocabulary or struggle to retain it while making oral presentations in front of their classmates. This could be embarrassing in the early stages of learning English as first-year EFL learners.

Thus, this article strives to investigate the reasons behind the phenomenon of vocabulary attrition among EFL learners; whereby the goal of the study is to raise student's awareness to use Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) to enrich their vocabulary repertoire and to ease their learning process. In fact, learners may forget words while learning English and this reduces their self confidence and prevents them from learning new skills. However, this case study exhibits some tools and methods to overcome language loss in order to be immersed within the culture, the context of use and usage and an engaging endeavour to speak English fluently and accurately; as well as to improve their speaking and writing skills alike. Essentially, it aims at keeping learners exposed to the language through multiple exposures to the language through ICT's in order to better their capacities in developing their vocabulary; hence retention of lexis is guaranteed.

2. Research Methodology:

The researcher in the present article seeks to provide first-year EFL learners with tangible solutions which are almost available for the majority but a need for awareness should be stressed and given more external circumstances to help alleviate the burden of lexical loss. So raising awareness, strengthening self-confidence, encouraging individual engagement and projecting future beneficial uses of ICT's are all procedures undertaken by the researcher to gain more language proficiency among our EFL learners; and most importantly help retain new lexis in the target language. Accordingly, this study seeks to answer the following questions:

- A- To what extent does attrition affect vocabulary acquisition in particular and learning in general?
- B- Can the lack of interaction and exposure to the language constitute a source to attrition?
- C- How can EFL learners promote vocabulary retention in the process of language learning through the use of ICT's?

The above mentioned research questions are hypothesised as follow:

- 1- Students tend to forget vocabulary in the productive skills: writing and speaking.
- 2- Lack of interaction and exposure to language may lead to language attrition.
- 3- The use of technology-mediated tools and high levels of motivation help learners to store and retain vocabulary and progress in language learning.

3. Research Instruments

Concerning data collection, three instruments are used to answer the research questions cited above. One group of first year EFL students from the Department of English at Tlemcen University is addressed to answer a questionnaire composed of thirteen questions in order to identify their level of motivation and the causes of vocabulary loss. Both quantitative and qualitative data will be gathered to confirm or reject the research hypothesis. A second tool is a structured interview administered to ‘*comprehension and oral expression*’ (henceforth, COE) EFL teachers to know how to deal with vocabulary loss among students, and which technology-mediated tools are chosen during the session. The last tool is a classroom observation in which the researcher opted for real-class inspection to diagnose the main aspects of language elements related to natural wastage and/or pure linguistic attrition of vocabulary by EFL learners while presenting orally.

The overall awaited claim from these research tools’ results is to fetch whether the use of ICT’s to could constitute one of the advantageous ways to enhance language proficiency and its evolution in language learning since it is used daily.

4. Review of Literature

The literature background in this article includes two main components: the first one is ample and large clarification of the term “attrition” in linguistic domain; the second is typically related to the use of ICTs in language learning and teaching

4.1.

Language Attrition

Recently, foreign language learning has become more prominent due to several factors, ranging from academic goals to simply having fun at home or travelling abroad and connecting with other people around the world. However, learners may get acquainted with a linguistic phenomenon that is called attrition. The term attrition refers to the process of losing or forgetting a language either during the learning process that is the focal point in this article or once the (need to) use of the language ceases. Yet, it should be mentioned that the field of foreign language attrition is still under research (Hakem, 2016).

The phenomenon of language attrition often refers to the generational shift, loss or death as well as pathological language loss (Lambert and Freed, 1982),

however, the focus of the researcher is on the non pathological language loss by healthy individuals in a language that is being learnt in academic settings (Budiman, 2020)

The field of language attrition emerged as a separate field in the 1980's where it has been studied from different angles in order to cover all its implications in the field of language acquisition/learning. The previous research works attempted to study the phenomenon from different perspectives including linguistics, sociolinguistics, psycholinguistics and neurological perspective.

Foreign language lexical attrition is defined by Bardovi & Burghart (2020) as the erosion of FL skills; i.e., the process of recalling the language skills is hard to be accessed to by FL learners. Many studies have shown that the productive skills are more vulnerable to attrition (Cohen 1989, Tomiyama 1999, Morshedian 2008, Schmid 2011, Alharthi 2014, cited in Hakem: 2016) mainly speaking and writing because when learning a language, the primarily goal of any learner is to communicate effectively in any context as well as to sound fluent. As a matter of fact, the most crucial component in a language is vocabulary since the learning process is all about vocabulary acquisition

However, in the field of foreign language teaching/learning, the main focus of teachers and scholars in general is on the environment in which the learning process occurs because the target language may not be akin to the mother tongue. This shows the important role of Krashen theory of comprehensible input which is closely related to the receptive skills, i.e. focusing on getting meaningful and understandable input will develop the students' reading and listening skills in the initial stages of learning (Benrabah, 2015). Thus, this will aid them to build a strong lexical repertoire through regular practice as well as daily exposure. However, in the present study the aim of the researcher is to shed light on forgetting words during formal instruction to guide them even after the end of the learning process.

To do so, the study of Morshedian (2008) is significant since it deals with the students' initial proficiency level and lexical attrition/retention among EFL Iranian learners which is quite similar to the current case study of EFL students at Tlemcen University. In parallel, the aim of the researcher here is to measure the students' proficiency level as well as the amount of attrition before and after the summer vacation and to test their background knowledge of receptive and productive vocabulary. The results show that students with high proficiency level are less subject to forgetting whereas students with mid or low proficiency are more concerned with vocabulary forgetting and they struggle with retaining.

The questions that are plausibly put in this context are as follows:

1. How can we (teachers) level up the capacity of both high and low proficiency level EFL learners to retain the learnt vocabulary?
2. Can the use of ICT's help the overall groups of EFL students lessen the impact of attrition on their language proficiency?

The answer to the above questions may suggest itself below

4.2.

The

Role of ICT's in Foreign Language Learning/Teaching

ICT or Information and Communication Technology refers to the various types of technology used to transmit, store, generate, share, or exchange information, as pointed out by UNESCO. The aforementioned definition shows that accessing data or knowledge requires some tools that facilitate the process of gathering information. Those tools include two categories. The first category is the hardware such as computers which play an important role since the advent of technology and mobile devices or smart phones which are widely used by the digital generation. The second category is software; it includes mobile apps and access to the internet...etc.

Furthermore, the acronym ICT which stands for Information and Communication Technology is distinct from ICTs in which the word Communication is in the plural form. The singular form is related to human interaction while the plural form which is Information and Communications Technologies denotes the equipment(s) that enable(s) the interaction between individuals.

The advent of ICTs in educational settings denotes the shift of focus of both teachers and students to create interactive and engaging language classrooms through using technology mediated strategies and programs. Teachers adopted communicative approaches in teaching foreign language classrooms where technology facilitated the interaction of teachers and their students. In sum, ICTs render teaching easier because teachers may display educational videos and help learners to picture their thoughts (Warschauer and Healey 1998). Moreover, ICTs help to maintain collaborative learning through interactive activities such as video conferencing, quizzes and role plays. Benmoussat & Bouyakoub (2019) states that: **“for collaborative-based learning that requires brainstorming, planning, negotiation and problem solving synchronous communication optimizes performance because of its speed and immediacy.”** This highlights the benefits of collaborative learning (CL) in which students work in small groups for example 4 or 5 in each; therefore, it is

an effective way to keep student motivated and develop important skills like problem solving, critical thinking and decision making as well as it helps to create an engaging learning atmosphere.

Overall, ICT tools can be a useful aid to reinforce and promote the acquisition of new languages. Yet, it has a significant impact on both personal and professional life. According to Klimova, B. (2021), ICTs have rapidly emerged as one of modern society's fundamental components that is, it is constantly changing the way of thinking. However, the right integration of ICT's should be taken into consideration by teachers as well as learners because when implemented properly, ICT is supposed to enhance the quality of education and make the teaching learning process more effective, hence, achieving the desired outcomes of the process.

Therefore, in the digital age the task of both teachers and learners has become easier because using ICTs keep learners more exposed to the language hence, fostering their lexicon in various fields which may facilitate and decrease the teacher's responsibilities. However, the teacher's role remains significant during the learning process though the current theories support the learner centeredness approach where students play an active role to manage their language learning process with the help of technology equipments.

5. The Empirical Phase

In this section, the researcher will deeply dive into analysing the obtained results from the three tools of research representing a thorough triangulation aspect in the selected research methodology. After analysis and interpretation, the researcher will be able to provide logical answers to the research questions and therefore, confirm or simply infirm the already mentioned hypotheses.

5.1.

Data

Analysis and Interpretation

The researcher will start providing objectively the collected answers from the respondents first. Then, some deep reading of the results will follow to come up with the final outcomes after interpretation.

- a- Questionnaire: the results obtained from first-year EFL students showed great enthusiasm in using ICT's all along their learning process. The main arguments behind is the non-stop use of data-related procedures in the achievements of purely linguistic tasks. Moreover, the ability to connect

and work in group without having neither space nor time constraints.

- b- Interview: within this purely qualitative tool, teachers proposed voluntarily to start thinking from now on to set ICTs as an important component in the teaching/learning process. Besides, their tasks of teaching become more flexible and fruitful being able to set extra activities in-and-outside the language classrooms
- c- Class observation: During the classroom observation which lasted for three sessions with three different groups, the researcher gained results through using note taking. The first thing that was observed is that all the classes are crowded which was difficult for the researcher to identify the attrited aspects of language.

As far as the language aspects are concerned EFL students generally forget grammar rules mainly the final “s” of the third person singular while presenting because they focus on their pronunciation. Moreover, the majority of students are motivated to learn and improve their vocabulary. Furthermore, the degree of attrition goes from not affecting them to totally blocking them, that is, when they lose their vocabulary they try to control their behaviour by laughing or through ignoring the idea.

Overall, the data gathered from the questionnaire, the interview, and the class observation can approve the hypotheses of this research work. As language learners are affected by attrition in their learning process, both teachers and students agreed that lack of exposure to the language may be challenging to build and retain their vocabulary. In addition to that, the productive skills are more prone to attrition since writing and speaking are important skills to convey their thoughts. As a matter of fact, ICT tools can help students to develop their vocabulary knowledge and also to overcome vocabulary attrition during their learning process and even after graduation.

6. Conclusion

The findings revealed that ICTs play an essential role in enhancing students' vocabulary repertoire as well as overcoming attrition of language aspects as they are constantly exposed to these tools. The results showed that the majority of students know how to deal with attrition through the help of their teachers and the frequent exposure to ICT tools. Overall, this denotes that this new-technology generation or the so called '*generation z*' is highly familiar with the technological tools in different domains.

Through conducting a case study and administering triangular research instruments (students' questionnaire, teachers' interview and classroom observation), the three hypotheses put forward were confirmed. The results revealed that attrition generally occurs at the level of the productive skills mainly speaking and writing, since students' objectives of learning English is to be competent speakers who can retain their vocabulary; this confirm the first hypothesis. Additionally, the position of English in Algeria may be the reason of lack of exposure and interaction which leads to vocabulary attrition which is a decline in language skills and this confirms the second hypothesis. Accordingly, the integration of ICT tools in the teaching/learning process can help teachers in boosting the students' level of motivation and empowering their vocabulary as well as greatly help EFL students in the storage and retrieval of the forgotten words; this confirm the last hypothesis.

To conclude, this research dissertation aimed to raise the students' awareness towards the use of ICTs explicitly in a reasonable way to overcome vocabulary attrition and gain sound language proficiency.

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