

## **A Comparative Study of Teaching Vocabulary through Pictures and Audio-visual Aids to Young Iranian EFL Learners**

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### **Abstract**

The purpose of the present study was to compare two techniques of teaching vocabulary to young Iranian EFL learners, namely still pictures and audio-visual aids, to find out if any of them was more effective than the other. In other words, this study was designed to seek answer to the following question: Are audiovisual aids more effective than still pictures on learning vocabulary by young Iranian EFL learners? In order to answer the above question, two classes, each consisting of 30 EFL beginner learners, were randomly selected among 128 students learning EFL in grade two at Imam Hossein guidance school in Zahedan, Iran. Since both groups were homogeneous, the vocabulary test (pre-test) was given to the participants at the outset of the study. One group received its instruction through audiovisual aids for teaching vocabulary while the other group was taught through still pictures. After ten sessions of instruction, the post-test (achievement test) was administered to both groups to see the effect of both instructional techniques. The obtained results through descriptive statistics (mean and standard deviation) indicated there was a significant difference between the group which was taught through pictures and the one which received audiovisual aids. In other words, using pictures was more effective than audio-visual aids in teaching vocabulary to Iranian EFL beginners. Thus, the null hypothesis was rejected and some recommendations are given at the end.

**Keywords:** vocabulary teaching, audio-visual aids, picture, EFL beginner learners

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## Introduction

Learning a second/foreign language needs some skills and components to be mastered. Among those skills and components, vocabulary is one of the most crucial ones in language learning without which communication is not possible. Harmer (2001) argues that “If language structures make up the skeleton of language, then it is vocabulary that provides the vital organs and the flesh” (p. 246). Wilkins (1972) states that without grammar very little can be conveyed, without vocabulary nothing can be conveyed. Thornburry (2002) stated:

If you spend most of your time studying grammar, your English will not improve very much. You will see most improvement if you learn more words and expressions. You can say very little with grammar, but you can say almost anything with words (p.114).

According to McCarthy (1990), it is the experience of most language teachers that the single, biggest component of any language course is vocabulary. No matter how well the student learns grammar, no matter how successfully the sounds of a foreign language are mastered, without words to express a wide range of meanings, communication in a foreign language just cannot happen in any meaningful way. Therefore, teaching vocabulary is an important domain which is worth investigating.

Teachers are one of the main sources who can help their learners enrich and increase their vocabulary. To do so, they employ wide variety of techniques in teaching vocabulary. According to Ur (1996), there are various techniques for teaching new vocabulary. She lists different techniques used in presenting new vocabulary as follows:

1. Concise definition
2. Detailed description (of appearance, qualities...)
3. Examples (hyponyms)
4. Illustration (picture, object)
5. Demonstration (acting, mime)
6. Context (story or sentence in which the item occurs)
7. Synonym
8. Opposite (antonyms)
9. Translation
10. Associated ideas, collocations

As mentioned above, one of the various techniques in teaching vocabulary is using visual aids. Several studies have indicated that the use of visual aids greatly improves information retention and improves student understanding of unfamiliar (Thornburry, 2002). One type of visual aids is using still pictures. Pictures are one of the valuable aids which bring "images of reality into the unnatural world of the language classroom" (Hill, 1990, p. 1). They are also useful to attract learners' attention to the materials being taught.

In spite of having some limitations, e.g. being hard to illustrate abstract words and being time consuming to find the right pictures for a specific type of activity, pictures have several advantages. Some of their pros, as listed by Hill (1990) are: "availability, cheapness, flexibility, and variety, all of which make pictures one of the effective techniques in teaching vocabulary" (p.1). According to Harmer (2001), pictures should be appropriate not only for the language to be learned but also for the classes they are being used for; if pictures are too childish, students may not like them and if they are culturally inappropriate, they can offend people.

Another technique in teaching vocabulary is using audio-visual aids, which is the combination of sound and vision. The role of audio-visual aids is similar to pictures. These kinds of materials make learners use foreign language effectively. In Iran, according to the researcher's experience, teachers do not take advantage of innovative methods in presenting new vocabulary and Persian equivalents are mostly provided for new words and expressions. Students face many problems in learning and retaining words and they complain about forgetting them soon. The present study was an attempt to address the issues mentioned above by examining the vocabulary development of Iranian beginner learners of English as a foreign language. It compared two techniques of teaching vocabulary, (still pictures and audio-visual aids), to find out which of them is more effective for vocabulary learning in the context of Iran.

### **Objectives of the Study and Research Question**

Based on the importance of vocabulary and its key role as a leading element in learning the second language, this study was an attempt to find out if Iranian EFL learners whose native language is Persian follow the same pattern of vocabulary acquisition by employing the audiovisual aids or applying still pictures. Therefore, the present study, wanted to answer the following question:

*Is there any significant difference between young Iranian EFL learners learning vocabulary through audio-visual aids or still pictures?*

On the basis of the above-mentioned question, the following null hypothesis was formed:

*H<sub>0</sub>: There is no significant difference between young Iranian EFL learners learning vocabulary through audio-visuals and still pictures.*

## **Background of the Study**

For many years, grammar was at the center of many debates and vocabulary has not been paid enough attention in teaching and learning a foreign language. As Harmer (1991) states grammar structures were seen more important than words. However, it has not lasted so long, in the last fifteen years or so, vocabulary pedagogy has benefited from theoretical advances in the linguistic study of the lexicon, from the communicative trend in teaching, which has brought the learner into focus, and from developments in computers” (Carter & McCarthy, 1991 p. 51).

Since that time, the interest in and importance given to the role of vocabulary in second and foreign language learning have grown rapidly in recent years. Research studies on first language (L1) and second/foreign language (L2) vocabulary acquisition have turned their focus toward several key issues such as what it means to know a word, how many words native speakers know and how they acquire them, which words learners need to know to use another language, and how they should learn them. The results of these studies have revealed the need for a systematic and principled approach to vocabulary teaching and learning (Arkin, 2003).

The start of the technological era in language teaching was marked by audiovisual approach. Having introduced a significant new element, audiovisual approach highlighted that visual presentation is needed in language teaching and stressed the possibility of eliciting language from visual cues. (Iheanacho, 1997) indicated that vocabulary has an important role in development of the four language skills: speaking, listening, reading and writing. He claimed that vocabulary can provide clarity and can enable the speaker to diversify language. He further pointed out that wrong use of vocabulary can lead to misinterpretation, while correct use of vocabulary makes it easier for people to read and write better, understand the main ideas and speak correctly. In this respect, Allen (1983) indicates that the reason for the importance of vocabulary is that: “through research, the scholars are finding that lexical problems frequently interfere with communication; communication breaks down when people do not use the right words” (p. 5).

One of the major concerns in second language vocabulary teaching is the need for developing effective pedagogical methods. Davies and Pears (2003) believe that new vocabulary should not be taught in isolation. Having stressed the importance of contextualization, they state that the context should be rich enough to provide clues to meaning and that learners be given high exposure to words they should learn. More recently, computer programs that include the sounds of the words as well as illustrative pictures provide opportunity for practice with a variety of contexts, both written and spoken. Scot and Ytreberg (1990) state that “words are not enough, most activities for the young learner should include movement and involve the sense. The teacher will need to have plenty of objects and pictures” (p. 5).

Nation (1990) puts forward that meaning can be conveyed to students by demonstration or pictures (using an object, using a cut out figure, using gesture, performing and action, photographs, blackboard drawings or diagrams and pictures from books) and by verbal explanation (analytical definition, putting the new word in a defining context, and translating into another language). Shrum and Glisan (1994) offered many pedagogical methods for developing vocabulary skills. They claimed that new words should be presented in a context using familiar vocabulary and grammar. To learn new vocabulary more effectively, they suggested the use of visuals for presenting new words.

Certainly, in learning word items there are some aids which help the learners to find the meaning of words. Audio-visual materials help learners use the foreign language efficiently. As Holden (1980, p. 5) asserts they can be a tool in all the stages of the lesson – presentation, controlled and guided practice and in production. Nowadays, visual aids and audio-visual aids are familiar terms in the realm of education. Chandler and Cypher (1948) listed a set of values for audiovisual aids when effectively used in teaching. The values are as follows:

1. Lessen major weakness of verbalism.
2. Humanize and vitalize subject matter.
3. Provide interesting approach to new topics and give correct initial impression.
4. Provide happy learning.
5. Economize time in learning.
6. Increase ability of retention.
7. Aid in developing keen observation.
8. Supply concrete material needed.
9. Stimulate initiative of pupils in making materials.

10. Stimulate creative responses in pupils.
11. Provide the best substitute for real experience.
12. Stimulate interest and aid in self-expression.
13. Enrich and clarify instruction.
14. Help in orienting the child to the world in which he lives.

Many authors (e.g., Wright & Haleem, 1992; Allen, 1983; Gairns & Redman, 1995) divide audio –visuals into a sub – group of: Visuals – such as:

- a) Chalkboard and whiteboard: they are the basic tools of teaching in the classroom. “ They are usually black or green, cheap to install, easy and cheap to use and very adaptable” (Wright & Haleem, 1992, p. 5).
- b) Overhead projector: despite being used rarer in classrooms than the chalkboards, it is a very valuable aid in teaching. “The teacher can use the transparencies again and again and at the same time can adapt and create images of many kinds” (ibid. p. 27).
- c) Wall pictures and wall posters: they are used to show scenes, people, and things. They are so big that every learner can see them easily.
- d) picture flash cards: they “are drawn on cards approximately 15cm by 20 cm” (ibid. p. 50).
- e) Word flash cards: they “are usually about 8 cm in height ... and are used in teaching of reading and writing skills” (ibid. p. 59).
- g) Word cards and worksheets: “Work cards and worksheets are for individual student use or for use by students working in small groups” (ibid. p. 65).
- h) Authentic printed materials: they include “anything written and printed in English: newspapers, magazines, publicity, technical instructions for equipment, holiday brochures, etc.,” (ibid. p. 84).
- i) Realia: which refer to real objects, are according to Allen sometimes more meaningful than pictures (Allen, 1983, p. 24).
- j) Mime and gesture: can illustrate some complex words and may serve as extra teaching material (Gairns & Redman, 1986, p. 73).

The second group of audio – visuals: a video, a radio, cassettes, and TV are popular means of media, which need not be described. However, their role in teaching is not less important than visuals.

## **Methodology**

### ***Participants***

The research sample included 60 students who were randomly selected among 128 students learning EFL in grade two in Imam Hossein junior high school in Zahedan, Iran. Having been homogeneous in age and English language proficiency, they were divided randomly into two groups, each one included 30 students.

### ***Instrumentation***

The instruments used in this study were a vocabulary test and an achievement test. The vocabulary test which is used as the pre-test in the study, included 56 words which were selected from the English Book 3, a book which is taught in grade three in guidance schools in Iran, one level above participants' current level. The aim of such a test was to cross out the words which are known for the participants of both groups. The other instrument used in the study was an achievement test. It included all the unknown words of both groups' participants, which is 32 words. The test was used as a post-test at the end of the study.

### ***Procedure***

As mentioned above, the participants were randomly divided into two groups. One group received audiovisual aids for teaching vocabulary while the other group was taught through still pictures. Both classes were taught by the researcher. All the unknown words were taught in 10 sessions (each session 90 minutes), two sessions a week. All classes were held at the same time in different days of a week. Before starting the instruction, the researcher administered the vocabulary test (as a pre-test) to the participants in both groups. They had to translate all the 76 words into Persian, Iran's national language. After the administration of the vocabulary test, the researcher excluded 24 words since they were known to the participants of both groups.

In one group, the words were presented with colorful still pictures with the word written at the bottom. The students were asked to repeat the words and provide Persian equivalent for each presented word. In the second group, overhead projector was used for teaching vocabulary. In this case, each slide consisted of colorful animated pictures for showing the meaning of the word and of the written form and clear pronunciation of the word. Like the first group, the students of second group were also asked to repeat the words and provide Persian equivalent for each presented

word. After the instruction was completed, achievement test was administered to the participants in both groups. Once the data were collected, a T-test was conducted to examine the differences of the mean score and standard deviation of both groups.

## Results and Data Analysis

The descriptive statistics of pre-test for both groups are shown in Table 1.

**Table 1:** Descriptive Statistics of pre-test

Pretest	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
audio-visual	30	12.6000	2.11073	.38536
picture	30	13.3667	1.40156	.25589

Table 1 indicates the descriptive statistics of both groups before the research began. As shown in this table, the mean of the Audio group is 12.60 and that of the picture group is 13.36 which show no significant difference between the two groups before the treatment. Since the means cannot show the actual difference, an Independent Samples *t*-test was manipulated as presented in Table 2.

**Table 2:** Independent Samples *t*-test (pre-test of both groups)

Pre-test Groups		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
		f	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2- tailed)	Mean Differenc e	Std. Error Differ ence	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference Lower Upper	
Audio- visual vs. picture	Equal variances assumed	11.603	.001	-1.657	58	.103	-.76667	.46258	-1.69263	.15930
	Equal variances not assumed			-1.657	50.411	.104	-.76667	.46258	-1.69561	.16227

Data analysis at the pre-test stage showed that there was not any significant difference between the groups before the treatment period ( $p < .05$ ). This proved the homogeneity of the participants before applying the treatments.



**Table 3:** Descriptive Statistics of post-test

	Treatment	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Post-test	audio-visual	30	16.1333	4.36074	.79616
	picture	30	18.4667	3.98907	.72830

As shown in Table 3 the mean and standard deviation of the still picture group are 18.46 and 3.98, while those of the Audio group are 16.13 and 4.36 respectively. According to these findings, the group which was taught through pictures outperformed the group that received audiovisual aids for teaching vocabulary. An Independent Samples *t*-test was run to show and significant difference between the two groups as shown in Table 4.

**Table 4:** Independent Samples *t*-test (post-test of both groups)

Post-test Groups	Levene's Test for Equality of Variances	t-test for Equality of Means								
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
									Lower	Upper
Audio-visual vs. picture	Equal variance assumed	.515	.476	-2.162	58	.035	-2.33333	1.07902	-4.49323	-.17343
	Equal variance not assumed			-2.162	57.546	.035	-2.33333	1.07902	-4.49360	-.17307

According to Table 4, there was a significant difference between the group which was taught through pictures and the one which received audiovisual aids after the instruction period ( $p < .05$ ). In other words, using pictures is effective in teaching vocabulary among Iranian EFL beginners. In order to find out the effect size of the findings, eta squared was conducted. In the present study eta squared is .07 which is a moderate effect. The above results will be discussed in the following section.

## Discussion

There are many reasons for using pictures in language teaching. As Wright (1990) pointed out, they are motivating and draw learners' attention. This fact will be repeatedly demonstrated in the practical part of this thesis. Furthermore, he refers to

the fact that they provide a sense of the context of the language and give specific reference point or stimulus. Based on the findings, teaching English vocabulary through pictures was more effective than audio-visuals aids. One reason of this may be the attractiveness of pictures for young learners the other may be that pictures have a more permanent effect on learners. The other reason may refer to the fact that Iranian teachers use colorful pictures less than audio-visual aids thus; it was interesting for younger learners to be taught through picture presentation. Pictures are those kinds of visual instruction materials that can be used more effectively to develop and sustain motivation in producing positive attitudes towards English and to teach or reinforce language skills. Teachers felt that pictures attract the pupils' attention and deepen their understanding of words; teachers also felt that when pupils associate new words with a picture they find it, easier to remember the meaning of the word. These positive views about the role of pictures in teaching vocabulary reflect those mentioned in the literature review earlier (e.g. Harmer, 2001). As Hill (1990) pointed out, the standard classroom is usually not a very suitable environment for learning languages. That is why teachers search for various aids and stimuli to improve this situation. Pictures are one of these valuable aids which bring "images of reality into the unnatural world of the language classroom." (Hill, 1990 p. 1) Pictures bring not only images of reality, but can also function as a fun element in the class. Sometimes it is surprising, how pictures may change a lesson, even if only employed in additional exercises or just to create the atmosphere. Pictures meet with a wide range of use not only in acquiring vocabulary, but also in many other aspects of foreign language teaching. Wright (1990) demonstrated this fact on an example, where he used one compiled picture and illustrated the possibility of use in five very different language areas. His example shows employing pictures in teaching structure, vocabulary, functions, situations and all four skills can be very effective. Furthermore he pointed out that "potential of pictures is so great that only a taste of their full potential can be given" in his book. (Wright 1990, p. 6) To be more specific, beside lessons where pictures are in the main focus, they might be used just as a "stimulus for writing and discussion, as an illustration of something being read or talked about, as background to a topic and so on" (Hill, 1990 p. 2). Pictures, being suitable for any group of learners independently on age or level can be used in lots of various ways. As Hill (1990 p. 2) stated, "What is done is limited only by the preparation time available, the visuals to hand and the imagination of the individual teacher." However, "pictures have their limitations too". For example in teaching vocabulary, pictures are not suitable or sufficient for demonstrating the meaning of all words (McCarthy 1992). According to Thornbury (2004), it is hard to illustrate the

meaning of some words, especially the abstract ones such as opinion or impact through pictures.

### **Conclusion and Pedagogical Implications**

The research results revealed the effect of pictures on Iranian EFL learners' vocabulary acquisition of language at the beginner level therefore, it is recommended that Iranian teachers understand the value and effectiveness of pictures in teaching vocabulary and other aspects of English language. Vocabulary is one of the important factors in all language teaching learning. And the students must continually learn new words as they learn structure and as they practice sound system, but most of the students are not interested and motivated at all. Therefore, the writer uses pictures as one of the strategies in teaching that benefits the students in many ways.

Based on the research, the writer concludes that:

1. Pictures help the students to understand the difficult words easily by looking at the pictures.
2. The use of pictures make the vocabulary learning more enjoyable and interesting because they can memories the meaning of the difficult words by singing the song with the pictures as key words and without asking another person or looking them up in the dictionary.
3. Pictures are possibly used in teaching pronunciation and structure also.
4. The use of Pictures makes the class more active and alive.
5. The use of pictures could attract the students' curiosity in learning new vocabulary.

The followings are pedagogical implications from the writer for model of teaching vocabulary by using pictures for kindergarten students, that there are so many approaching type and method that can be developed by teachers for having a good and enjoyable class situation to reach out the curriculum target.

1. The teacher should choose the technique and materials that are appropriate with the students. needs and experiences so the class atmosphere becomes enjoyable and interesting.
2. The teacher should give short, clear and simple instruction.
3. The teacher should keep in control the students activities.

4. The teacher should present the language in an enjoyable and relaxed way. It could be done by using pictures, songs, games etc.
5. The teacher should be creative and active to find various methods to teach the beginner students.

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