

THE IMPACT OF ORAL READING TASKS ON ENGLISH VOCABULARY ACQUISITION

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the efficacy in improving college students' English vocabulary acquisition through a course design which employs the readers theater and choral reading tasks of performing self-introduction, storytelling, volunteer service talk, news casting and game skit demonstration. The subjects were 45 non English major students at a technology college in east Taiwan. Task performance assessments were used to illustrate students' speaking competency and vocabulary production. Among the task designs, news casting and game skit demonstration incorporated readers theater and choral reading to ease vocabulary reception in comparison with the reciting performances of self-introduction, storytelling and role-playing. The results of the study show students' improvements in word recognition tests from news casting and game skit. The cloze test scores contextualized from game skit outperformed news casting. The study suggests the news casting enhanced students' oral production skills and word recognition skills whereas the game skit led to better vocabulary acquisition due to social interaction.

Keywords: task performance, readers theater, choral reading, word recognition, vocabulary acquisition

INTRODUCTION

Second language acquisition researchers recommend a task-based language teaching approach based on its collaborative nature of team performance function and the role of conversation in language development (Richards and Rodgers, 2001). Pica, Kanagy, and Falodun (1993) identified five task characteristics: piecing information together, finding missing information, problem solving, decision making, and exchanging ideas. Be it a real-world task (e.g., planning a vacation), or a pedagogical task (e.g., drawing geometrical figures from verbal instruction), the concept of task difficulty challenges sequencing attempts (Honeyfield, 1993). Lingley (2006) elaborated Ellis's (2003) definition of tasks as activities focusing on using language to exchange meaning with features of a creating a work plan, focusing on meaning, involving real-world processes of language use, integrating the four distinct language skills, engaging cognitive processes, and resulting in a definite outcome of communication.

Bullion-Mears, et al (2007) examined the effect of performing text in the forms of choral reading, rap, reader's theater, and simulations to conclude that there is a benefit of repeated reading when enhanced by performance conditions. Chen (2008) studied the application of readers theater in junior high school EFL instruction, with the conclusion that participant

students showed a greater willingness to speak English. Liu (2008) reported a positive effect of readers theater on improving English oral reading fluency, learning motivation, and learning satisfaction for vocational high school students. Tsai's (2009) study on readers theater at an elementary school found significant differences in speaking performance, but not in reading comprehension. Therefore, in continuing the research documenting the practice of readers theater, this study intends to explore whether readers theater can be modified to incorporate choral reading to improve EFL speaking performance and vocabulary acquisition.

Choral reading has been used as one of the reading support methods for young language learners, as "youngsters practice oral reading in a more supportive setting than reading aloud alone" (p. 143, Temple & Gillet, 1984). Poore & Ferfuston (2006) explored how fluency was conditioned by solo reading, track reading, and choral reading, and suggested that choral reading evokes better fluency with prosodic features of speech. Furthermore, the benefits of choral reading have been reported in speech therapy studies (Kalinowski, et al, 2000; Kiefe and Armson, 2007). Therefore, the purpose of the study is to promote the combined methods of readers theater and choral reading for EFL teaching.

The acquisition of vocabulary plays a vital role in learning English. If a learner has a broad vocabulary bank, his or her four skills in English can be enhanced (Jordan, 1997). One of Channell's (1988) advocated practices for vocabulary teaching highlights the importance of pronunciation and word stress. The Ministry of Education (MOE) has proposed the 2000 vocabulary list as reference for elementary and junior high school students in Taiwan. Moreover, many educators have been seeking the best means to effect vocabulary learning. According to Hulstijn and Laufer (2001), the acquisition of second-language vocabulary is incidental. That is, vocabulary can be acquired by activities. Yet Lee (2003) found conflicting results that question the results.

Study by Enrique and Mark, (1996) administered cued-recall and sentence-completion tasks to highlight keyword learning. Liu (2008) investigated the effects of teaching English vocabulary through readers theater, finding significant differences among genders and levels. KIM (2008) discussed the pedagogical implications for the use of collaborative tasks to promote vocabulary acquisition. Tsai (2005) also confirmed the relationship between receptive English vocabulary sizes and listening comprehension competence. Laufer (2005) claimed that learners cannot read well with a vocabulary size of fewer than 3000 word families (5000 lexical items). Therefore, researchers continue the relentless efforts to find ways to enhance vocabulary learning in different contexts.

PURPOSE

The purpose of this study is to investigate how readers theater and choral reading are incorporated to enhance the oral fluency and vocabulary acquisition in EFL teaching contexts.

Course Design

Teaching Objectives

The course aims at enhancing students' vocabulary retention through the speaking tasks of performing self-introduction, story telling, role-playing for air travel talk, role-playing for volunteer service talk at a language center, news casting, and game skit demonstration.

Teaching Contents

The materials used for performance tasks were compiled by the project staff funded by the Ministry of Education and researched by Tsai, et al (2009). The contents focused on speaking skills of public presentation. Based on the college's "teaching across the curriculum" policy for the core course, the scripts for news casting and game skit demonstration were generated by the first author as a means to promote environmental protection education. These two particular scripts were the focus of the study in comparing the learning effects of readers theater and choral reading.

Teaching Approach

Students were either paired or grouped with partners for all the tasks. An American teaching assistant was co-teaching with the first author during the activities of news casting and game skit activities, while the fourth author was in charge of the activities of self-introduction (SI), air travel talk (AT), story telling (ST) and volunteer service talk (VS) at a language center. Students were encouraged to practice repeated speaking during class to master the contents. The primary coaching was on translation, pronunciation, and clear speech, but not grammatical understanding, such that readers theater and choral reading were integrated for repeated practice in the news casting (NC) and game skit (GS) tasks. With the news casting task, the scripts were typed on the power point slides shown on one jumbo screen facing the news casting students sitting behind the anchor desk, thereby simulating the line feeder for anchor persons. As for the game skit activity, students made their own flash cards of key words, whose back also served as prompt in speaking lines.

Assessment

Students were informed that the assessment criteria of the tasks were time, fluency, pronunciation, facial expression, and body language associated with public speech. In the news casting task, the required length of time was three minutes, during which the students were evaluated on the criteria of pronunciation, fluency, and facial expression. As for the presentation of a game skit, the required length of time was 20 minutes.

Mid-term and final exams included word recognition and cloze tests to measure vocabulary memory. Word recognition was administered via computer screen, with 25 to 40 items keyboarded in the power point slides. Students had to sound out as many of the vocabulary items shown on the slides as possible within one minute for the word recognition test score. The cloze test embodied filling in 20-25 blanks for vocabulary within 10 minutes. The midterm exam contents covered the topics of self introduction, introduction of Taiwan, and air travel talk. However, for the final exam contents, students could choose either the topic of news casting or the game skit demonstration.

The Subjects

The subjects of the study were 45 non-English majors registering for an elective EFL course credited as a general education requirement. At the end of the course, eighteen students participated in the word recognition and cloze tests contextualized in the Environmental Protection Game Skit, referred as GS group. The other 27 students participated in the word recognition and cloze tests contextualized in News Casting for Image Exhibition, referred as NC group.

DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

The research questions in this study are: (1) What is the effect of readers theater and choral reading on students' word recognition and cloze test performances between the midterm exam and final exam? (2) What is the effect of readers theater and choral reading on students' word recognition and cloze test performances between GS group and NC group?

Students' test scores from a norm referenced EFL competency test of listening and reading were drawn to indicate the entry-level competency differences between the GS group and the NC group. T-test was used to examine the effect of readers theater and choral reading on word recognition and cloze test performances between the midterm exam and final exam. ANCOVA was used to examine the within group difference in final exam performance on the word recognition and cloze tests between the GS group and the NC group.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Vocabulary Acquisition Differences between Mid-term and Final Tests

Among the total of 45 students, the statistical analyses through t-test revealed significant differences in the word recognition and cloze tests scores (see Table 1). Students received higher cloze scores in the mid-term cloze vocabulary test (MCV) including 25 blank fillings with bilingual translation than in the final vocabulary test (FVC) including 20 blank fillings with teacher's dictation. As for the word recognition test performance, students received higher scores in the final word recognition test (FWR) including 40 vocabulary items than in the mid-term word recognition test (MWR) including 25 items.

The in-class tasks before the mid-term examination required the students to memorize the scripts of SI, AT, ST, and VS. The Flesch-Kincaid reading ease score for the mid-term cloze script is 61, and the Flesch-Kincaid grade level is 7th grade¹. After the mid-term examination, students were allowed to read the script for volunteers at a language center, and to practice readers theater and choral reading for news casting and game skit.

Table 1. Students' Scores on Mid-term and Final Cloze Vocabulary Tests and Word Recognition Tests through Paired t-test (N=45)

	Mid-term		Final		t	df	p
	M	SD	M	SD			
Cloze	26	10.22	22.04	7.65	2.801**	44	0.008
Word Recognition	21.16	4.8	24.38	9.66	-2.876**	44	0.006

*p<.05 **p<.01

For the final cloze test, 45 students underwent an exam containing the missing vocabulary items from the scripts of news casting (NC) and game skit (GS). According to Table 2, the GS cloze scores were higher than NC cloze scores.

¹ Flesch-Kincaid readability score is a rating index of text difficulty built in Microsoft MS Word. A high Flesch-Kincaid Reading Ease score marks an easy text. The Flesch-Kincaid Grade level matches the grade a person's educational level to understand the text.

Table 2. Students' Final Cloze Scores on News Casting and Game Skit through Paired t-test (N=45)

	Game Skit Task		News Casting Task		t	df	p
	M	SD	M	SD			
Cloze	9.34	7.4	13.2	6.6	-2.103*	43	0.041

*p<.05 **p<.01

The GS task involved 20 students presenting the game using readers theater and choral reading, while the news casting involved students serving in groups of three to choral read the script. The Flesch-Kincaid reading ease score for the GS script is 69.2, and the Flesch-Kincaid grade level is 4.6. For the NC script, the Flesch-Kincaid Reading Ease score is 53, and the Flesch-Kincaid Grade level is 9. Although the NC script is more difficult to read compared to the GS script, 27 students chose the NC script for word recognition test while 18 students chose the GS script for word recognition test. Therefore, the average reading ease score of NC and GS is 61.1, whereas the midterm reading recognition test's reading ease score is 61. Overall, the final word recognition test scores outperformed the mid-term word recognition test score.

Vocabulary Acquisition Differences in Cloze Tests between NC Group and GS Group

The statistical analyses of t-test and ANCOVA found significant differences between NC group and GS group. The GS group students performed better than the NC group students on the final cloze vocabulary test (FCV). According to Table 3, through t-test analysis, both groups were not significantly different based on their entry level test. There was no significant disparity between the groups in their mid-term exam, as well as the six in-class speaking tasks of self-introduction (SI), air travel talk (AT), story telling (ST), volunteer service talk (VS), news casting (NC), and game skit (GS) through ANCOVA (see table 4)

Table 3. T-test for Differences among Tasks (N=45)

	NC Group (n=27)		GS Group (n=18)		t	df	p
	M	SD	M	SD			
Entry Reading	72.74	15.83	74.72	16.85	-.401	43	.691
Entry Listening	75.37	17.36	77.77	19.31	-.436	43	.665
SI	74.17	5.09	74.05	5.63	.077	44	.939
AT	77.53	16.36	80.72	2.88	-.815	44	.420
ST	74.35	15.53	80.05	4.98	-1.502	44	.140
VS	67.64	19.62	75.72	4.57	-1.710	44	.094
NC	79.57	17.71	86.33	3.25	-1.596	44	.118
GS	86.25	17.79	92.16	2.30	-1.397	44	.169

Table 4. ANCOVA for Differences between the Groups and among the Tests

	NC (n=27)	GS (n=18)					
	Adj. M	Adj. M	SS	df	MS	F	p
MCV	24.05	28.58	217.63	1	217.63	2.59	.115
MWR	21.47	20.48	10.27	1	10.27	.683	.413
MET	64.50	69.47	265.16	1	265.16	.801	.376
FCV	18.82	25.81	524.84	1	524.84	10.42	.002
FWR	22.94	24.97	44.01	1	44.01	.519	.475
FET	69.16	76.913	644.42	1	644.42	1.43	.237

Note. MCV stands for Mid-term Cloze Vocabulary. MWR stands for Mid-term Word Recognition. MET stands for Mid-term Exam Total. FCV stands for Final Cloze Vocabulary. FWR stands for Final Word Recognition. FET stands for Final Exam Total.

However, there was a significant difference between the student subgroups with the task variable. As explained in the earlier discussion regarding the reading ease of GS script over NC script, students choosing the GS cloze test performed better than the students choosing the NC cloze test. The GS cloze blanks were drawn from the action plans of the script whereas the NC cloze blanks were drawn from the opening and ending remarks of the script. Nevertheless, the word recognition scores between the GS script and the NC script revealed no significant differences, indicating students' oral reading performances were quite consistent not only between GS script and NC script, but also among different tasks of SI, AT, ST, and VS.

CONCLUSION

Whether it is memorization practice or readers theater practice or choral reading practice, the focus of the instruction is on language experience, not language knowledge. The study suggests the greater importance of gaining language experience over that of raw knowledge in cases applicable to technical college students having a low level of EFL learning motivation. The significance of the proposed study lies in its examination of the effect of making task engagement an important aspect of EFL instruction by exposing students to oral reading tasks contextualized in a social atmosphere and incorporated with readers theater and choral reading approaches.

Considering the cloze test performances, it seems memorization practice leads to better vocabulary production in filling in the blanks scoring the reading ease of 61 and assisted with bilingual translation. Also the readers theater practice with the game skit demonstration contributes to more gains in cloze testing over the news casting task, when comparing the number of students involved. For GS demonstration, 20 students or more choral read the script through readers theater practice, whereas the NC task involved only 3 students to choral read the script.

With respect to word recognition performance in sounding out vocabulary, the readers theater and choral reading practices seem to elevate the students' speaking performance in the final test of word recognition with a confirmed result of more vocabulary items recalled than in the midterm test.

This task-oriented course, characterized by a series of oral performances in the forms of self-introduction, air travel talk, story telling, volunteer service talk, news casting, and game skit, was conducted to expose students to vocabulary with Flesch-Kincaid Grade level from 4 to 9. Instead of lecture and test, students worked as pairs or groups to make oral presentation in front of the class. The game skit involved the largest number of students carefully listening to each other and building up each other's talk. As for the news casting task, the studio atmosphere also helped enliven the students' attention and called for repeated practice due to the time constraint, which later proved beneficial for word recognition test performance. On the other hand, the social interaction and total physical response on the game skit scene led students to engage in active learning of new vocabulary. Therefore, readers theater and choral reading may have more extended practices in EFL classrooms, even for college students.

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