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EFL Learners' Attitudes towards Using Thesaurus Part of Microsoft Word in Vocabulary Acquisition

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Abstract - This study is an attempt to find out intermediate EFL (English as a Foreign Language) learners' attitudes toward the application of Thesaurus software for vocabulary acquisition. To this end, 25 learners who have already participated in an experimental Thesaurus-based study were selected as participants. The learners were given a close-ended questionnaire including 16 items. The quantitative data, collected through the questionnaire, were analyzed using SPSS and the results of the study indicated that Thesaurus was a great motive for students in vocabulary learning and they had positive attitudes towards the application of Thesaurus for teaching and learning vocabulary in EFL classrooms. The results of this study can contribute to the instructors and syllabus designers to incorporate CALL (Computer-Assisted Language Learning) in teaching language and syllabus designing.

Keywords: Thesaurus Software, EFL learner, CALL, Microsoft Word, Attitude, Motivation

1. Introduction

EVERY one's belief gives direction to his or her life and depending on the strength or weakness of the belief, the speed of movement in this direction is different so that the stronger the belief the faster the movement is. One of the fields in which belief or attitude plays an important role is language learning. In this field, language learners' beliefs or attitudes influence their performances. In other words, Learners' performances are subordinate to their attitudes and beliefs, so that the stronger their beliefs and attitudes the better their performances are and vice versa. Learners usually carry out their beliefs, attitudes and other personal learning styles when they get into a language classroom. Most scholars believe that people's success in language learning is highly dependent on their outlook toward the language they intend to learn. In addition, the learners' view of some factors such as target language, target language culture and speakers directly influence their accomplishment in learning the target language. Although merely investigating the learners' attitudes and beliefs do not lead to any success. This investigation provides the learners

with appropriate guidelines to take next steps in the process of language learning.

The relationship between attitude and proficiency in the process of language learning is so important that it has been studied by many researchers to find new ways of improving proficiency through strengthening attitude. Regardless of the language under study, attitudes toward it are of two types: positive and negative. A successful language learner is the one who holds a positive attitude toward the language he or she is engaged in learning. It is true to say that one of the most important factors which plays a major role in language learning is language learner's attitude and a detailed study of this factor is the main objective of this study. More specifically, this study set to investigate EFL (English as a Foreign Language) learners' attitudes toward the application of Thesaurus software (a software in Microsoft Word program which plays almost the role of an electronic dictionary) in learning English vocabulary and the learners' motivation is another point which has been dealt with in this study.

2. Literature Review

The history of Learners' attitudes and its effect on foreign language learning was firstly studied at the beginning of the 1970s. Then some eminent researchers such as Gardner, Horwitz, and Dornyei conducted some comprehensive studies regarding learners' attitude toward foreign language learning. Another researcher named Wesely has dealt considerably with the language learner attitude in 2012. According to Wesely (2012), the key concepts and theoretical foundations of learners' attitudes have been investigated in 1970s.

The results of different studies conducted on language learners' attitudes have indicated that positive attitudes of language learners influence greatly their success in the process of language learning and the learners' negative attitudes reduce their motivation and hence impede their successful language learning (Bagceci & Cinkara, 2013). Based on these findings it is necessary for language teachers to be sure that their students have positive attitude toward the target language. Otherwise they should do their best to build positive attitude in them to avoid negative consequences. For building positive attitudes we should be aware of the fact that Learners view language learning from two perspectives: learning situation and target community (Wesely, 2012). Therefore, by improving the learning situation and by making the learners more familiar with the target community we can improve students' attitude and thus language competence. Finally, the learners' positive attitude toward CALL programs is the influential factor in mastering language.

Many studies have investigated the relationship between learners' positive attitudes toward computers and their achievement in the subject matter learned by computer application (Brown, & Vician, 2004; Akbulut, 2008; Bebetsos & Antoniou, 2009; as cited in Mahmoudi, 2012). Most of these studies have indicated that there is a positive

and favorable attitude toward computer integration in language learning. Additionally, accepting and utilizing new instruction tools depend on the learners' opinion. Cevik (2009, as cited in Mahmoudi, 2012) said that the more experienced the learners are in using computers the more self-confident, self-efficient and less anxious they will be about using computers. However, many teachers and institutions have a negative attitude toward CALL and strongly disagree with the integration of CALL in language learning. Some institutions and teachers' reluctance to use CALL in language classrooms is due to their experience or inexperience in using computers. For example, Min (1998, as cited in Mahmoudi, 2012) conducted a research study to investigate adult learners' attitude toward CALL integration in language learning. The results of this study which was conducted in Korea with 603 adult learners showed that Korean language learners had negative attitude toward CALL integration in language learning. The most important reason for these findings was their lack of learning experience with computers. Therefore, the learners' negative attitudes toward CALL integration in language learning made them resist using computers. In other words, some learners did not agree with CALL integration in EFL classrooms because they believed that CALL incorporation demanded more time and commitment on the part of learners and teachers. Another conclusion based on the above-mentioned study was that CALL threatened language learning and limited the learners' development.

Another researcher named Almahboub (2000, as cited in Mahmoudi, 2012) found that a very important indicator of students' adaptation of a new technology for long life learning is a learner's attitude. According to Lasagabaster and Sierra (2003, as cited in Mahmoudi, 2012) when evaluating CALL programs, the learner's attitude should be considered. They conducted a research and compiled students' opinions and perceptions toward CALL (Computer-Assisted Language Learning). Their research involved 59 university students through an 18-item questionnaire about the effectiveness of CALL programs. The results of the study showed that CALL programs provided the students with a less stressful environment and they could be used as complementary tools in language learning. The study also showed that learners had a positive attitude toward using CALL. Moreover, learners' proficiency affected their opinion towards using computers. One of the main factors that influenced the learners' positive and negative attitude toward using CALL was the time spent using computers. Positive learner attitudes toward the use of computer technology depended on opportunities and training, which were provided for users of the technology (Clark, 2003; Akbaba & Kumbacak, 2003; Herman, 2002; Dexter, Anderson & Becker, 1999; as cited in Mahmoudi, 2012). Students' level of attitude toward computer aid instruction depended on total hours per day or weeks spent working with it (Beckers & Schmidt, 2003).

Similarly, in a study Zuraina et al (2012) exposed 123 undergraduate students to three vocabulary learning methods

including CALL, Dictionary Strategy and Contextual Clues. After exposing the students to these methods, the researchers through a survey investigated the students' attitudes toward them. The results of the study revealed that CALL users had more positive attitudes in learning vocabulary compared to other methods. In other words, CALL changed students' attitudes positively toward learning English vocabulary.

Similarly, Mahmoudi and Abdul Razak (2012) conducted a study to examine the relationship between attitudes toward CALL and the students' performance in learning English vocabulary. In this study which was conducted with 30 Iranian postgraduate students in Malaysia, by using vocabulary tests, the effects of CALL on the students' vocabulary performance were assessed and via questionnaires, the attitudes of the students toward Computer Assisted English Language Learning (CAELL) were assessed. Then, the quantitative and qualitative data gathered from the vocabulary tests were analyzed using SPSS. The results showed that participants possessed positive attitudes towards CALL and the participants' attitudes toward CALL and their vocabulary performance were positively related. They held positive attitude toward CALL.

In summary, most of the studies concerning the learners and instructors' attitude toward CALL integration have indicated that a great majority of learners and instructors have had positive attitude toward the application of CALL in teaching and learning language in general and learning vocabulary in particular.

The use of technology has received little attention in teaching and learning in EFL contexts. For example, in the EFL context of Iran especially in Khansar, Isfahan, Iran, technology is not widely used in teaching and learning. This technology application makes the present study more significant. This study investigates Iranian EFL learners' attitudes, at high school level, toward Thesaurus application in vocabulary learning. Thus, the following research question is addressed in the present piece of research:

Do Iranian EFL learners have positive attitudes toward the application of Thesaurus in vocabulary learning?

3. Method

Participants

In the present study, the participants were 25 female senior high school students in Hefdah Shahrivar high school in Khansar, Esfahan, Iran. Their age range was 17-18 years old. The students in this study had already participated in another study conducted with the purpose of evaluating the effect of Thesaurus software on improving their vocabulary knowledge. These students who were the members of the experimental group in the said study outperformed greatly the control one in the posttest.

Instruments

The applied instrument to collect data in the current study was a questionnaire. The questionnaire included 16 close-ended items concerning the attitudes and motivation of the learners. The questionnaire items were extracted from the questionnaire used in a similar study conducted in an EFL context on the use of Interactive White Board (IWB) in the classroom (Kalanzadeh, Shirvali vand & Javadani Mehr, 2014). These researchers were, too, inspired by Moss et al (2007) questionnaire on instructor and learner perceptions of IWBs. Changes were made in some parts of the questionnaire and in order to validate the changes, three experts in CALL studies checked them. The reliability of the researcher-made questionnaire was calculated using Cronbach Alpha and it was 0.88 for the constructed questionnaire and this figure confirmed a good reliability for the questionnaire items.

Procedure

Before conducting the study all the participants signed a consent form. Then a questionnaire was prepared and given to the learners. The researcher explained to the participants how to correctly fulfill the task based on their experience in using Thesaurus for vocabulary learning. Therefore, having spent 20 minutes, the students finished with the task. Finally, the answers to the questionnaire items were analyzed and the findings were interpreted and discussed in details.

3. Results

The results obtained from the analysis of the questionnaire are presented in three parts below.

Reliability Analysis

Since the researcher has used a questionnaire to measure the respondents' attitudes and motivation, examining the reliability of the questionnaire was necessary. Therefore, the researcher utilized Cronbach's alpha technique to obtain the reliability of the attitude and motivation themes which were reported 0.88 and 0.84, respectively.

After being sure of the reliability of the questionnaire, it was used in the study and the data obtained from the first part of the questionnaire were used in one sample t- test. The results of the one sample t-test, as shown in Table 1, indicate that the participants had a positive attitude toward Thesaurus application and its effect on vocabulary learning (t =41.9, P < 0.001).

Table 1. Participants' Attitude toward Thesaurus Application

Variable	T	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean	Std. Deviation
Attitude	-41.90	24	0.0000	1.463	0.183

Similarly, another one-sample t-test was utilized to analyze the data obtained from the second part of the questionnaire. The results of this analysis, as shown in Table 2, indicate that the participants were motivated to use Thesaurus software (t =32.26, P < 0.001).

Table 2. Participants' Motivation in Using Thesaurus

Variable	T	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean	Std. Deviation
Motivation	-32.26	24	0.0000	1.13	0.2898

5. Discussion

This study has attempted to answer the question of "Do Iranian EFL learners have positive attitude toward the application of Thesaurus in vocabulary learning? To supply an appropriate answer to the question, through a survey, the students' attitudes toward Thesaurus have been explored and most of the students have expressed that Thesaurus-based teaching and learning is more interesting and enjoyable than blackboard or paper-based teaching and learning. In simple words, all the students in this study showed positive attitude toward this software. It can be said that the positivity in students' attitudes was due to special features of Thesaurus such as its user friendliness, accessibility, authenticity, its nearly grammatical nature, etc. Some of the features yielding this result are that in using Thesaurus program, 1) learners have very much exposure to many different words with the same meaning; 2) they are able to see and read them in a very short period of time; 3) they consciously or unconsciously make a comparison between the old and new words; 4) by considering the point that all of these words have the same meaning, the learners learn unfamiliar words.

Regarding the learners' attitude and motivation, there are some similar or different studies. For example, the results of this study support Zuraina et al (2012) who conducted a study to investigate students' learning attitudes toward three vocabulary learning methods, i.e., CALL, Contextual Clues and Dictionary Strategy. The results of the study revealed that students who used CALL showed more positive attitudes in learning vocabulary.

Similarly, the results of the current study are in agreement with Mohsenzadeh, Marzban and Ebrahimi's (2014) study in which they investigated the attitudes of EFL learners and instructors concerning the use of power point presentation in teaching and learning. To this end, they selected 40 learners and 10 instructors as participants. The learners and instructors were given questionnaires including 10 and 15 items, respectively. The results indicated that both learners and instructors had positive attitudes towards the use of power point presentations in teaching and learning.

Moreover, the results of the present study are compatible with Başaran's (2014) study, conducted in Turkey, in which the researcher aimed to investigate the attitudes of teachers and students towards CALL. The teachers and students' attitudes were collected through using an appropriate questionnaire. After analyzing the answers to the questionnaire, the researcher came to the conclusion that the students and teachers had positive attitudes towards CALL application in language teaching and learning. However, the teachers were reluctant to utilize computers in their classes because they were not trained enough to incorporate technology into English teaching process. They also said that they had low confidence in trying new technological tools in their teaching process.

In summary, almost all of the previous studies and showed that instructors and learners had positive attitudes towards the application of CALL in language acquisition in general and vocabulary acquisition in particular. But the possible reluctance may be due to lack of confidence and specialization in using CALL on the part of instructors and learners.

6. Conclusion

The present study set out to examine the attitudes of Iranian EFL intermediate learners towards Thesaurus application in vocabulary learning and also their motivation in this process. Analysis of the learners' responses to the questionnaire indicated that they had positive attitude towards Thesaurus and they were interested greatly in learning vocabulary using this sofware. Moreover, they believed that the use of technology; 1) could facilitate their learning; 2) motivated them greatly; and 3) made learning more joyful. The findings presented in this study inspire instructors and learners to tie up firmly this software in their instruction and acquisition programs.

This study would specifically contribute to syllabus designers in paying a closer attention to instructional goals of the learners by making more process-oriented syllabi. The researchers can use this study as a model to investigate the attitudes of the EFL learners and also instructors towards other modes of technology such as interactive white boards, web log, etc. In addition, for other researchers who intend to carry out similar study with the focus on other modes of technology, it would be better to use both a questionnaire and an interview to increase the validity and reliability of the results. The limitation of this study which hinders generalization of the results could be the small number of participants and this number can be increased in other studies to get more reliable and generalizable results.

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