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Mimicry as a Strategy to Improve English Language Vocabulary in the EFL Classroom

La mímica como estrategia para mejorar el vocabulario del idioma inglés en el aula

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Resumen

En el mundo actual, el idioma inglés es considerado como una lengua franca debido a su importancia. Sin embargo, algunos de los estudiantes que deben tomar clases de inglés en el Centro de Lenguas de la Pontificia Universidad Católica del Ecuador Sede Ambato, no son conscientes de ello y presentan falencias en la adquisición del idioma, más aún al momento de aprender vocabulario. Por lo que resulta importante realizar esta investigación en la cual se aplica la mímica como estrategia para que los estudiantes aprendan nuevas palabras de manera efectiva y a la vez motivadora. En este sentido, el objetivo general de esta investigación es promover el aprendizaje de vocabulario del idioma inglés mediante el uso de la mímica; estrategia que pretende captar la atención de los estudiantes y lograr que aprendan el vocabulario del idioma inglés de una manera fácil y divertida, a la vez que adquieren y amplían su léxico de forma natural y sin presión alguna. El diseño de la investigación es cuasiexperimental debido a la aplicación de un Pre-posttest para identificar las falencias de los estudiantes al aprender vocabulario, así como para obtener información útil acerca del progreso de los estudiantes después de la intervención. Por otra parte, el enfoque de la investigación es cualitativo y el instrumento utilizado para la recolección de datos es el Pre-posttest. Una vez finalizado el trabajo de investigación, se observó que los estudiantes pudieron aprender, retener y recordar una gran cantidad de palabras de vocabulario de una forma amena, lo cual hizo que ellos se sientan seguros al usar el L2 para transmitir sus ideas. Como se demuestra en los resultados, los estudiantes obtuvieron un promedio de 55.45 en el Pretest y 92.85 en el Post test. Por lo que se concluye que la aplicación de la Estrategia de Mímicar tiene un efecto significativo en el aula de clases de EFL.

Palabras clave: adquisición, estrategia, idioma inglés, mímica, vocabulario

Abstract

In the actual world, the English Language is considered a lingua franca due to its importance. However, some of the students who must take English classes at the Language Center of the “Pontificia Universidad Católica del Ecuador Sede Ambato,” are not aware of it and present problems in language acquisition, even more when they must learn vocabulary in English. This is why it is important to carry out this research in which Mimicry is used as a strategy to help students learn new words in an effective and motivating fashion. In this sense, the general objective of this research is to promote the learning of English vocabulary using Mimicry, which is a strategy that aims to catch the attention of students and make them learn vocabulary in an easy and fun way, while acquiring and expanding their lexicon in a natural way and without pressure. The research design is quasi-experimental due to the application of a Pre-posttest to identify the shortcomings of the students when learning vocabulary, as well as to obtain useful information about the progress of the students after the intervention. On the other hand, the research approach is qualitative, and the instrument used for data collection is the Pre-posttest. Once this research work was finished, it was noticeable that students were able to learn, retain and remember a great number of vocabulary words in an engaging way so that they felt confident using L2 when conveying their ideas. As demonstrated in the results, students obtained an average of 55.45 in the pretest and 92.85 in the posttest. So, it is concluded that the application of the Mimicry Strategy has a significant effect on the EFL Classroom.

Keywords: acquisition, English language, mimicry, strategy, vocabulary

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INTRODUCTION

English Language Vocabulary

Vocabulary is an essential part when learning a language because through it, learners can express their ideas and thoughts. In fact, David Wilkins famously said that “without grammar, very little can be conveyed, without vocabulary nothing can be conveyed” (cited in Thornbury, 2013).

In other words, vocabulary is one of the most important components when learning a language because language acquisition cannot happen without learning its lexicon with unlimited turns in the meaning caused by a variety of contextual variables (Yang, W.D & Dai, W.P, 2012). In this sense, vocabulary can be defined as the words that are taught in another language (Ur, 1996).

Furthermore, meaningful communication in the L2 cannot be possible if people do not have words that express a wide range of meanings. So, if people do not acquire vocabulary, it will be much more difficult for them to communicate (Rohmatillah, 2017).

Likewise, it is well known that English vocabulary differs from Spanish vocabulary because of its pronunciation, spelling and in some cases, meaning. In fact, most students have problems when learning English vocabulary because they tend to write the words as they sound, just as it occurs in their native language (Spanish), reason why students must learn to distinguish sounds and letters, understand meanings, remember information, and finally consolidate them. Consequently, learning vocabulary is not a simple process because it consists of 4 phases such as: discrimination, meaning understanding, recalling, and consolidation and extension of meaning (Grauberg, 1997).

Importance of English Language Vocabulary in the EFL Classroom

Vocabulary is one of the most important subskills when learning a language. It helps learners to have a wide repertoire to express and convey their ideas, not only when speaking but also when writing, listening, and reading.

In words of Steven Stahl (2005), “Vocabulary knowledge is knowledge; the knowledge of a word not only implies a definition, but also implies how that word fits into the world.”

As a matter of fact, teaching vocabulary in EFL Classrooms is challenging for students but even more for professors because they must find the appropriate method for students to learn, understand, retain, recall, and use as many vocabulary words as possible in an accurately way, so that students feel confident using L2 when expressing and interchanging their ideas. In this sense, studies have shown that vocabulary knowledge is a necessary condition for comprehension (Hsueh-chao, Marcella Hu, & Nation, Paul, 2000).

Additionally, Afzal (2019) mentions that if learners lack knowledge of vocabulary, they will also have deficiencies in the academic performance. From this perspective, learners must have a rich vocabulary which must continuously grow based on different experiences such as language and literacy to understand complex texts and produce appropriate oral language (Government, 2019).

Types of vocabulary-words

English has between 450,000 and 750,000 words of which 3,000 words must be taught per year. Unfortunately, only 400 words are taught in a direct way Stahl (1999); due to different reasons such as the lack of interest of the students to learn vocabulary or the use of inadequate or usefulness strategies to teach it. Therefore, studies about the way how vocabulary is taught and learned affirm that classrooms must have a positive atmosphere and must provide fun learning

experiences to make the learning process remarkable and memorable to have creative and passionate students eager to learn (Pique, 2000).

Regarding to the information provided by Hilbert and Kamil (2005), vocabulary can be divided into: receptive-productive, and intentional-incidenta.

Receptive vs Productive Vocabulary

According to some researchers and studies, vocabulary can be receptive and productive, but what is the difference between them? Based on what Hiebert & Kamil (2005) ensures, Receptive Vocabulary or Passive Vocabulary is the group of words which are not frequently used, so students give them meanings while they read or listen to them; while Productive Vocabulary or also known as Active Vocabulary, is the group of words that students use when writing or speaking.

Indeed, it has been said that students first learn receptive vocabulary and later, they start using productive vocabulary (Zhou S. , 2010). It is worth mentioning that to acquire both types of vocabulary, it is essential to consider that students learn new words gradually, on a count of it is necessary to expose them to different situations and contexts.

Intentional vs Incidental Vocabulary

Vocabulary acquisition can be done in many ways, although some of the strategies used may not be the adequate ones. E.g., some students intend to learn vocabulary by memorizing, others learn it by translation, or by using their L1, which can be problematical Barcroft (2009), because in most of the cases, the translation will be inappropriate or without sense due to the cultural differences.

It means that teachers will provide students with a set of words which will support comprehension. Teachers will also provide students with helpful strategies to help them learn and use words independently by developing students' awareness and motivation to learn and use words, (Graves, 2000). Furthermore, Hulstijn (2003) remarks that Intentional Vocabulary is the means of learning, in which learners are told and advice what they are going to learn.

On the contrary, Incidental Vocabulary is when learners acquire vocabulary because they are focused on the message and not on the form, (Krashen, 1989). Moreover, Zeeland and Smitch (2013) mentioned that this kind of vocabulary happens when students learn a second language without being focus on it.

In this sense, it is concluded that Incidental Vocabulary are the words that are learned without following any spelling rules, knowing the meanings previously, or focusing the students' attention on particular words. Therefore, this process is done while learners read, watch TV, listen to the radio, or are active part in a conversation because Incidental Vocabulary can be acquired while the learner is doing another activity (Rieder, 2003).

The Mimicry Strategy in Vocabulary Learning

The evidence illustrated that Mimicry is a strategy that helps students improve the learning process to acquire vocabulary in a new language in an easy and simple way using hearing, sight, and body movements. Mimicry comes from the word imitating, so Mimicry is the strategy to learn, in this case English vocabulary, through imitation. The Mimicry Strategy also helps people to develop their social interactions creating links between the affective and cognitive field (Chartrand & J. A. Bargh, 1999). In view of this, when teachers use mimicry to teach vocabulary words to students learning a new language, it was shown that they scored better (Zhou J. , 2012).

As claimed by Morsella & Krauss (2004) movements have an important role in cognition because they facilitate and make students improve their spatial memory and lexical recovery. As Wesp R.,

Keutmann, D., & Wheaton, K. (2001) comment, gestures made by hands and arms can contribute to the spatial representations in working memory. Likewise, mimicry boosts social interaction and learning, facilitates negotiations, decreases racial bias, reduces victim blaming, and increases affective social deficits in social disorders.

Mimicry effects on learning vocabulary as well as in students' behavior

Learning a new language is not an easy task because it takes time, effort, and basically pushes the learner's brain to build new cognitive frameworks. These are some of the reasons why educators must find the most appropriate way to teach vocabulary in such a way that students feel comfortable, and engaged while the process is effective, because "In fact, the lexicon may be the most important language component for learners" (Gass, Behney, J., & Plonsky, L., 2013).

As mentioned above, one of the strategies that facilitates students' vocabulary acquisition is Mimicry, not only because it is a catchy one, but also because it addresses psychological factors of pronunciation, reduces the affective filter and anxiety of students when learning new words, at the time that enhances empathy and integration between pairs (Seaver, 1993).

Another important aspect of the Mimicry Strategy is that it provides educators the method to teach learners how to internalize suprasegmentals first and then elements such as vowels, syllable stress and phrasing (Yates, 2023).

The advantages of the Mimicry Strategy are countless, and here there are some of them:

- Teachers teach vocabulary according to the scheduled lessons.
- Students mime vocabulary words until they learn and internalize them.
- Students learn vocabulary in a free stress environment.
- Students get confidence to speak and use the language.
- Students can remember the words by miming them, and
- Teachers play an important role in the teaching process but students are the main actors in the learning process.

Finally, it is useful to mention that Mimicry can work with children and adults, even with students who present social disorders such as autism, social anxiety, or schizophrenia because Mimicry increases the social and educational part as well as boosts and facilitates the learning process.

How does the Mimicry Strategy work?

As it was mentioned before, Mimicry is a strategy used to teach vocabulary, so students can learn it in a simple and catchy way through the imitation, movements and sounds of the taught words. In practice, this strategy conducts students to imitate and remember what was taught, but how does the Mimicry Strategy work?

To apply this strategy during classes and create a connection between the vocabulary words/concepts and the students' brain by using physical movements, teachers must follow the subsequent steps:

Preparation

The teacher must select the vocabulary words to be taught according to each unit or topic. The material or didactic tools can vary, and they can be a Word document, PowerPoint, Canva, posters, etc.

Teacher Modeling

The teacher presents the new vocabulary words to the students by asking them to look at the templates (chosen material or didactic tools), to listen to the pronunciation and repeat, at the time that the teacher uses gestures, facial expressions, props, or body movements to teach their meanings.

Student Modeling

Students (as a whole class) mimic the words by using the Mimicry Strategy, while they say the words aloud.

Student Participation

Teacher asks for volunteers; students mimic the words the teacher said. Then the instruction is changed which means that the teacher will mimic the word and students say it aloud. This activity can be done individually or as a whole class.

Writing

The teacher asks students to work on dictation exercises, so that they can make the connection between oral and written words. It is also a good idea if the class is divided into groups so students can work on a competition. Extra points can be offered to motivate students as well.

Repetition and Practice

Finally, the teacher introduces the rest of the vocabulary words using the same strategy and keeping in mind that they must not forget to review and practice words with students as much as possible to ensure learning. It is also important to mention that recycling words regularly is a good strategy to make sure that students do not forget words that were previously taught.

METHOD

This research work adopts the quasi-experimental research design due to the application of a Pre-posttest to identify the shortcomings of the students when learning English vocabulary, as well as to obtain useful information about the progress of the learners after the intervention.

On the other hand, the research approach is qualitative, and the instrument used for data collection was the Pre-posttest. Once the research work was finished, it was evident the progress students had to learn, retain, and remember as many vocabulary words as possible in an engaging way so that they feel confident using L2 when conveying their ideas.

A Pre-posttest was applied to obtain, measure, and analyze information on the research topic. This instrument was considered because it is the most appropriate to compare the results obtained by the participants and because of their similarities and to avoid information biases.

To collect relevant data from the students of the Language Center of the "Pontificia Universidad Católica del Ecuador Sede Ambato" (PUCESA), the researcher established two instruments validated by experts in English. First, the students took a Pre-test focused on the acquisition of new vocabulary words, which was divided in two sections: Meaning Recall and Meaning Recognition.

Each section had fifteen items and contained different vocabulary words that belonged to the first two units of the Life-Second Edition book. The test lasted forty-five minutes and the students worked in a welcoming environment, which helped to reduce the affective filter, typical of the situation.

Section I

Meaning Recall

Section I. Meaning Recall

Please read the sentences and underline the meaning of the word in bold. (Only one is correct).

For example:

0. The old man was **benevolent** with his fortune.

- a) secretive
- b) stingy
- c) kind
- d) careful

Source: Villacrés, M. (2023)

Section II

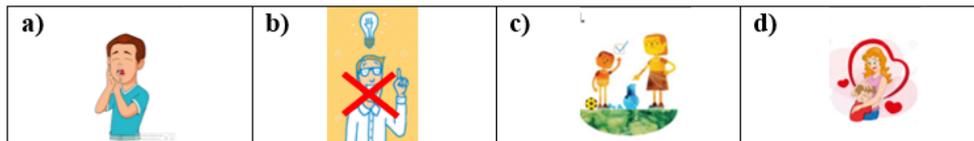
Meaning recognition

Section II. Meaning Recognition

Please cross out the picture that matches the word. (Only one is correct)

For example:

0. **bright**



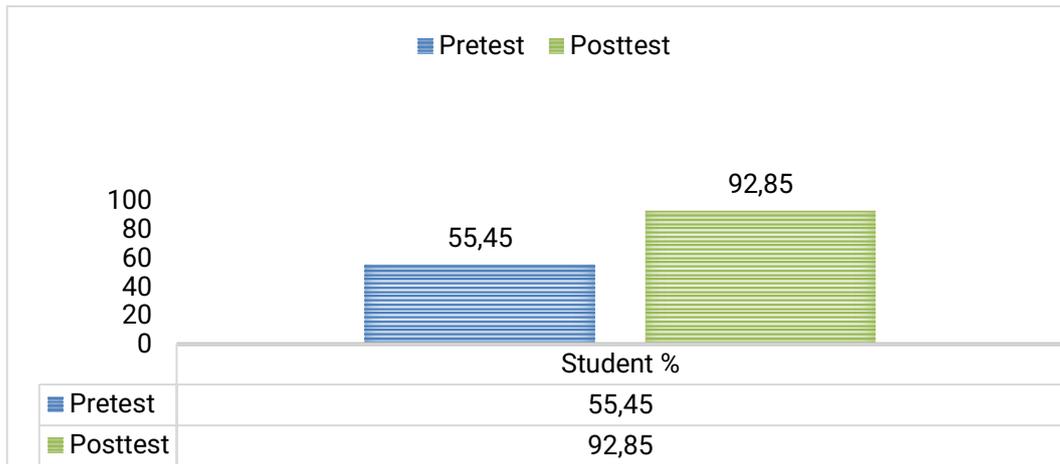
Source: Villacrés, M. (2023)

Second, after applying the Mimicry Strategy to help students acquire and learn the greatest possible number of vocabulary words throughout the first partial, students were asked to take the Posttest, which kept the same characteristics and contents as the Pretest. The results obtained helped the researcher to visualize that the students acquired the required knowledge, as well as how much they improved in the vocabulary acquisition subskill in the field of language learning.

The research aimed to implement the Mimicry Strategy in the classroom to help students acquire and learn as many vocabulary words as possible because during practice it was detected that students had difficulties with this English subskill, due to different factors such as lack of motivation, useless or outdated strategies used by professors, memorization, among others. In this sense, the population was made up of students (11 male and 19 female), who study English at the Language Center of the "Pontificia Universidad Católica del Ecuador Sede Ambato" (PUCESA).

RESULTS

Mimicry as a strategy to improve English language vocabulary in the efl classroom



Source: Villacrés, M. (2023)

Based on the results obtained in the Pre-posttest and according to the graphic above, it is remarkable that:

1. The Mimicry Strategy is useful and effective when learning English vocabulary because it makes students improve their learning process while increasing their interest in learning more words.
2. Students can learn, retain, and remember many vocabulary words easily.
3. The level of productive vocabulary of the students increased thanks to the application of the Mimicry Strategy.
4. Students' confidence has increased because they felt motivated and eager to learn vocabulary.

DISCUSSION

Vocabulary is one of the most important sub-skills of the English language. It is essential to develop other skills such as: reading, writing, listening, and speaking; so, educators must have adequate and updated strategies so that students learn vocabulary in the simplest, funniest, and most attractive way. Based on the results of the statistical analyzes of both, the Pre-posttest, it is highlighted that thanks to the application and use of the Mimicry Strategy, the acquisition of vocabulary in students who study English in the Language Center of the "Pontificia Universidad Católica del Ecuador Sede Ambato" (PUCESA) is evident because they were able to learn, retain and remember a large number of vocabulary words, which made them feel confident in using English and improve in the other areas of the learning process of the language.

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