

The Impact of Interactive Output Tasks on Developing Vocabulary Knowledge of Iranian EFL Learners

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Received 29 January 2014; revised 5 August 2014; accepted 24 August 2014

Abstract

This study investigated the role of interactive output tasks in developing EFL learners' vocabulary knowledge. The participants were 103 elementary female Iranian EFL learners who were randomly divided into three groups: input-only, input-output-no-interaction, and input-output-interaction. After all participants took a placement test and a vocabulary pretest, the input-only group was exposed to input tasks, while the other two groups received both input and output tasks with or without interaction. Then, all the participants took a vocabulary posttest. The results of ANOVA and Kruskal-Wallis tests showed that the participants in both the input-output-no-interaction group and the input-output-interaction group outperformed the ones in the input-only group in the vocabulary posttest (in both the overall vocabulary test and in the productive vocabulary section). Moreover, the results of the *t*-test and the Mann-Whitney test revealed that the participants in the interaction and no-interaction groups

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performed similarly on both the overall vocabulary posttest and the productive vocabulary section. The findings of this study support the idea that output is a facilitative factor for the acquisition of L2 vocabulary and, specifically, productive vocabulary development. The results also suggest that both interactive and non-interactive output-plus-input tasks can lead to higher achievement in vocabulary knowledge compared to the input-only condition lacking output tasks.

Keywords: Vocabulary; Output; Interaction; Productive vocabulary; Input; EFL learners

Introduction

Vocabulary is a key component in proficient verbal communication. As Schmidt (2010) notes, “learners carry around dictionaries and not grammar books” (p. 4). Many researchers consider vocabulary as an essential element of communicative competence. Further, vocabulary is considered as a good indicator of general language proficiency. Therefore, it is worthwhile to investigate the most efficient means for developing language learners’ vocabulary. The main goal of this study was to explore the impact of output tasks on developing L2 learners’ vocabulary knowledge. The study also sought to find out the optimum learning conditions to promote the influence of output on L2 vocabulary development. The particular learning condition utilized in this study was the presence or absence of peer-interaction while performing output tasks. The following section discusses the role of input and output in second language acquisition.

Review of the Related Literature

Input and Output

Simply defined, input is the language data a learner is exposed to (Gass & Mackey, 2007). One of the most influential second language acquisition (SLA) hypotheses is Krashen’s *input hypothesis* (1985). Krashen proposes that learners’ target language (TL) develops when they receive input that is one step beyond their current stage of development. Several studies have confirmed the importance of input (Shintani, 2011). Generally, these researchers argue that

input is a necessary and sufficient condition for progress so long as instruction is well-organized, while output might be a facilitative, but not a necessary condition, for L2 acquisition (Kwon, 2006). However, there are others who believe that exposure to input alone is not sufficient and that output is also a necessity for successful language acquisition. Consequently, it is crucial to define the status of output in the process of SLA.

Output, simply defined, is the language a learner produces. Output occurs, for example, when a learner discusses and writes within a group of learners who then give immediate feedback for the purpose of solving a problem or building knowledge (Swain, 2000). Many studies about the role of output in language acquisition are based on Swain's *output hypothesis* (1985). This hypothesis posits that output promotes progress from the semantic, open-ended, strategic processing needed for comprehension to the comprehensive grammatical processing required for accurate production (Gass & Mackey, 2007). Thus, it seems that students' meaningful production of language (i.e., output) has a significant contribution in language development.

Swain (1985) investigated the L2 achievement of learners in Canadian French immersion programs. She claimed that output was the necessary condition for learners to increase control over their learning and, possibly, to overcome the fossilization stage. In later studies, Swain (1995) proposed that the lack of grammatical accuracy might be due to the fact that learners are not pushed to produce language output. Swain and Lapkin (1995) found that through output learners notice gaps in their linguistic knowledge and then respond by analyzing input or existing internal resources to fill those gaps.

Studies on input- and output-based vocabulary instruction have shown mixed results. Although many studies confirm the positive role of output production in the development of learners' vocabulary (Hashemi & Kassaian, 2011; Jalilifar & Amin, 2008; Kwon, 2006; Sarani, Mousapour, & Ghaviniat, 2013; Soleimani, Ketabi, & Talebinejad, 2008), input-based instruction has sometimes turned out to be more effective in terms of vocabulary development (Shintani, 2011). Rassaei (2012) concluded that both input-based and output-based instruction can lead to the development of L2 knowledge. Therefore, the results of the previous studies on the superiority of input- or output-based

vocabulary instruction are inconclusive. Hence, additional studies are required to analyze the effect of input and output tasks on developing L2 learners' vocabulary knowledge.

The present study aimed to examine the influence of output tasks on learners' vocabulary development. To this end, the input-only approach was compared with the input-plus-output one. The assumption here was that the output tasks might enhance the learners' productive vocabulary learning. Therefore, the results of the study can contribute to the existing literature on vocabulary learning by describing the types of tasks which best facilitate vocabulary acquisition.

Interaction

The basic meaning of the term interaction is "interpersonal activity that arises during face-to-face communication" (Ellis, 1999, p.3). Thus, learners should interact with each other in the classroom while they are receiving input or producing output. A well-known hypothesis concerning interaction is Long's (1996) *interaction hypothesis* stating that comprehensible input that is modified through interaction promotes language acquisition.

The findings of empirical studies on interaction overwhelmingly confirm the benefits of interaction to second language development. These studies focus on specific aspects of interaction such as effectiveness of negotiation (De la Fuente, 2002; Hashemi & Kassaian 2011; Kwon, 2006) and interactional feedback (Mackey & Oliver, 2002). On the other hand, Ellis (1995) argues that the apparent benefits of acquisition within the interactional modified input group are due to the faster rate of acquisition for the pre-modified input group. Loschky (1994) also found that his three groups (pre-modified, interactional modified and unmodified input with no interaction) did not significantly differ in the acquisition of vocabulary or grammatical structures. In addition, Ellis and He (1999) compared three groups (namely, pre-modified input, interactional modified input, and modified output group) and the results revealed no difference between the comprehension scores of the pre-modified group and those of the interactional modified input group. Rather, the modified output group outperformed the other two groups. Ellis and He, however, concluded

that all the three conditions produced reasonable levels of comprehension and acquisition.

Given the above, there are some mixed results regarding the type of interaction and its link to SLA and vocabulary acquisition. Specifically, the role of interactive output tasks in the development of vocabulary knowledge seems to require further empirical evidence. The current study assumes that the presence of interaction while performing output tasks might be beneficial in vocabulary acquisition, so it attempts to empirically evaluate the interaction hypothesis proposed by Long (1996).

Research Questions and Hypotheses

Based on the objectives of the study, the following two research questions were addressed:

1. Is there any significant difference between EFL learners' vocabulary achievement when they are instructed in input-plus-output vocabulary instruction compared to the input-only instruction?
2. Is there any significant difference between EFL learners' vocabulary achievement when they are instructed in the interaction compared to the no-interaction mode of instruction?

On the basis of the findings from the previous research and the questions raised in the study, the following hypotheses were formulated:

H₁: EFL learners' vocabulary achievement is higher when they are instructed in input-plus-output vocabulary instruction than in input-only instruction.

H₂: EFL learners' vocabulary achievement is higher when they are instructed in the interaction mode of instruction than when they learn through the no-interaction mode of instruction.

Method

Participants

In order to determine the appropriate sample size for this study, the researchers used an a priori power analysis, which suggested 102 as the proper number of participants. Initially, 112 participants were selected and then, nine were excluded due to their extremely high or low scores on the placement test or because of their absence in the treatment sessions or the posttest. Thus, the final participants of the study were 103 elementary female students who were native Farsi speakers studying English. They came from different classes selected out of three private English language institutes located in Yazd. The age range of the participants was 12-26 with an average age of 16 and a standard deviation of 2.76. All of the participants had different language learning experiences, depending on their age and school education. This variability was managed by pretesting.

Instruments

A Nelson English Language Test comprising 50 multiple-choice items (Fowler & Coe, 1978) was administered as a placement test. It is a standardized test which has been utilized in many studies. Fowler and Coe (1978) claimed that the test was empirically validated and the choice distributions were carefully checked. This instrument consists of cloze passages, vocabulary, structure, and pronunciation. Although all the participants had been placed at the elementary level initially by their respective institutes, the Nelson test was used to ensure the homogeneity of the participants at the beginning of the study. The Cronbach's alpha was also utilized to estimate the reliability index of this test ($r = .769$).

The learners also took two vocabulary tests comprising a vocabulary pretest of 100 items and a vocabulary posttest of 30 items. The book *Elementary Vocabulary* by Thomas (1990) was used to select the items for the vocabulary tests with a format following the Vocabulary Knowledge Scale (VKS). Wesche and Paribakht (1996) developed this scale using both self-reporting and demonstrated knowledge for vocabulary assessment of ESL learners. The scale ratings consist of five scoring categories, ranging from complete unfamiliarity (score of 1), through recognition of the words and some idea of their meaning

(scores of 2-4), to the ability to use the word with grammatical and semantic accuracy in a sentence (score of 5). The Cronbach's alpha coefficient indicated a high reliability ($r = .854$) for the vocabulary posttest (see Appendix 1 for a sample item).

Procedure

In the first session, all the participants were given the Nelson English language test as a placement test. Then, they took a vocabulary pretest. The items for the vocabulary pretest were selected from the word groups in the book *Elementary Vocabulary* by Thomas (1990). Since all the word groups in the source book were designed to be appropriate for elementary level learners, six groups of words were randomly selected out of the book. The total number of items amounted to 100. The words in the above-mentioned book are separated into groups based on a variety of common everyday topic areas. For every group of related words, a corresponding picture is provided. Thus, this study used six groups of related words with their related pictures (see Appendix 2).

In order to conduct the treatment, the researchers extracted from the pretest answers a list of items to which almost all the participants gave a score of 1 or 2 on the VKS scale (i.e., the participants reported either to be completely unfamiliar with these items or to have seen the word before without knowing the meaning). Thirty items were selected which were later used in treatment tasks and the posttest. Since the primary items in the pretest belonged to six word groups from the source book (Thomas, 1990), the unknown words were also naturally related to those six groups. The selected words from each group were arranged as a word list, and finally six word lists were formed along with six related pictures. The six topics of word groups covered parts of the body, clothes, living room, in the street, jobs, and shopping.

In the next step, the participants were randomly assigned to three groups. The participants in these groups received the same input and output tasks under different conditions:

- Group 1 received only the input task treatment (*Input-only group*).
- Group 2 received both input and output tasks in a non-interactive mode treatment (*Input-output-no-interaction group*).

- Group 3 received both input and output tasks in an interactive mode treatment (*Input-output-interaction group*).

The participants engaged in the treatment tasks during the second and third sessions. In the input tasks, the participants received six lists of words along with their corresponding pictures. For every word in each list, the related part was marked by a letter in each picture. The participants were asked to connect each word to the related letter in the picture. All participants followed the same procedure for all the word lists.

The participants involved in the output tasks looked at copies of six pictures and performed a picture completion task. The pictures were the same as those used in the input tasks; however, no word list accompanied them. The participants were asked to write the appropriate words for different parts of the pictures which were marked by letters.

For the input-output-interaction group, the teacher, who was trained to conduct the treatment, guided the learners to interact with each other to complete the tasks. They had to decide on the correct answer in pairs or in a group of three, depending on the physical conditions of the classroom. This approach was used in both the input and output sessions. The participants were encouraged to discuss the items in the target language. However, for the input-output-no-interaction group, the participants were required to complete all the tasks individually.

The fourth session involved the administration of the posttest. It included the same 30 unknown items selected from the pretest and used in treatment tasks. Based on VKS, the participants were asked to form a sentence with each word, provided they had reported being able to use that word in a sentence. Then, during the data analysis, those sentences produced correctly in the posttest (either both semantically and grammatically correct or only semantically correct but grammatically incorrect) were considered to demonstrate the students' productive knowledge of words. Therefore, each hypothesis was investigated according to the following three variables:

- a. Vocabulary test overall scores

- b. Productive vocabulary (semantically correct but grammatically incorrect sentences [SCGI])
- c. Productive vocabulary (both semantically and grammatically correct sentences [SCGC])

The above procedure is summarized in Table 1.

Table 1
A Summary of the Study Procedure

Groups Sessions	Input-only group	Input-output-no-interaction group	Input-output-interaction group
Session 1	Nelson test and pretest	Nelson test and pretest	Nelson test and pretest
Session 2	Input tasks	Input tasks	Input tasks (interactive)
Session 3	-----	Output tasks	Output tasks (interactive)
Session 4	Posttest	Posttest	Posttest

Design of the Study

This study used a quasi-experimental method with a comparison design. For the purpose of examining the influence of output on learners' vocabulary development, an input-only approach was compared with an input-plus-output one. The assumption in this study was that engaging learners in output activities, in addition to language input exposure, would promote their vocabulary development. Moreover, a third group was designed to be compared to the first two and to explore the optimal conditions for output to promote vocabulary development. The examined condition was the presence and absence of peer-interaction while performing the tasks. Accordingly, two research hypotheses were formulated and they were tested as explained in the procedure section. The first hypothesis proposed that input-plus-output conditions are superior to input-only tasks in vocabulary development. The second hypothesis proposed that interactive treatment is superior to an individual-only one.

Results

In order to analyze the data, first the normality of distribution of the data was calculated using Kolmogorov-Smirnov test. The obtained p values were greater than 0.05 ($p > 0.05$) for the vocabulary variable, so the statistical variations were not significant. This result means that the distribution was normal for this variable. On the other hand, for the SCGI and SCGC variables, the statistical results were significant ($p < 0.05$) in some groups which meant that the distributions were not normal for such variables. Accordingly, for the vocabulary test variable, parametric tests were applied, while non-parametric tests were used for the SCGI and SCGC variables.

To ensure that no significant difference in language proficiency existed among the three groups at the beginning of the study, an ANOVA test was used, and the results indicated that the Nelson test scores were not significantly different across the groups ($p = 0.564 > 0.05$). Then, the results of the posttest were analyzed with respect to each hypothesis.

H₁: EFL learners' vocabulary achievement is higher when they are instructed in input-plus-output vocabulary instruction than in input-only instruction.

a. Vocabulary

Because the distribution of the vocabulary variable was normal, and because the comparison of the input-only group with the input-plus-output groups was intended, this hypothesis was investigated by means of ANOVA.

Table 2

The ANOVA Test for Comparison of Vocabulary between Input-Only and Input-Plus- Output Groups

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	2640.394	2	1320.197	5.835	.004
Within Groups	22626.033	100	226.260		
Total	25266.427	102			

The result of the ANOVA test, as shown in Table 2, demonstrated that the performance of the input-only group on vocabulary tests was significantly different from that of the input-plus-output groups ($p = 0.004 < 0.05$). Considering the fact that the mean score of the participants in the input-only group on the vocabulary test ($M = 91.94$) was lower than the mean scores of the participants in the other two groups ($M=105.33$ for input-output-no-interaction group and $M=105.77$ for input-output-interaction group), it can be safely concluded that, unlike the input-only method, the input-plus-output method offers better prospects in the process of vocabulary acquisition.

Table 3

The Scheffe Post-Hoc Test for Pair-Wise Comparison of Vocabulary between Groups

(I) group	(J) group	Mean Difference (I-J)	Std. Error	Sig.
Input-only	In-out-no-int	-13.392*	4.372	.011
	In-out-int	-13.825*	4.257	.007

Note. *In*, *out*, and *int* stand for input, output and interaction respectively.

The pair-wise comparison of results, as shown in Table 3, revealed that with respect to the vocabulary variable, the participants in the input-only group performed significantly lower than the other two groups ($p < 0.05$).

b. SCGI (Semantically correct but grammatically incorrect)

Since the distribution in this variable lacked normality ($p < 0.05$), testing this part of the hypothesis was undertaken through the Kruskal-Wallis test which compared the frequency of semantically correct but grammatically incorrect sentences among the groups.

Table 4

The Kruskal-Wallis Test for Comparing SCGI between the Input-Only and Input-Output Groups

Groups	N	Mean Rank	Chi-Square	Sig.
Input-only	17	29.97	12.283	.002
In-out-no-int	39	54.73		
In-out-int	47	57.70		
Total	103			

Note. *In*, *out*, and *int* stand for input, output and interaction respectively.

The results of the Kruskal-Wallis test, as shown in Table 4, indicated that the mean ranks were significantly different among the groups ($p = 0.002 < 0.05$). It further showed that the mean ranks in the input plus output groups were higher than that of the input-only group. In other words, the participants in the input-plus-output groups outscored those of the input-only group in making semantically correct (but grammatically incorrect) sentences.

c. SCGC (Semantically correct and grammatically correct)

Since the data for this variable were not normally distributed ($p < 0.05$), testing this part of the hypothesis was accomplished by the Mann-Whitney test in which the frequency of both semantically and grammatically correct sentences was compared among the groups.

Table 5

The Kruskal-Wallis Test for Comparing SCGC between the Input-Output and Input-Only Groups

group	N	Mean Rank	Chi-Square	Sig.
Input-only	17	27.00	15.303	.000
In-out-no-int	39	57.60		
In-out-int	47	56.39		
Total	103			

Note. *In*, *out*, and *int* stand for input, output and interaction respectively.

The results of the Kruskal-Wallis test, set forth in Table 5, indicated that the mean ranks were significantly different among the groups ($p = 0.00 < 0.05$). One can observe that the mean rank of the participants in the input-only group was lower than those in the input-plus-output groups. Given the above, the instruction in the input-output groups, contrary to that in the input-only group, can be more effective with respect to SCGC variable.

H₂: EFL learners' vocabulary achievement is higher when they are instructed in the interaction mode of instruction than when they learn through the no-interaction mode of instruction.

a. Vocabulary

Since the distribution of the vocabulary variable was normal, this hypothesis was investigated through an independent samples *t*-test.

Table 6

The Independent *T*-Test for Comparison of Vocabulary between Interaction and No-Interaction Groups

Statistics Groups	N	Mean	SD	SEM	Mean Difference	t	df	Sig. (2- tailed)
Input- Output no- interaction	39	105.33	16.53	2.648	-.433	-.127	84	.899
Input- Output Interaction	47	105.77	15.08	2.200				

The result of the independent *t*-test, as presented in Table 6, shows that there was no significant difference between the two groups ($p = 0.899 > 0.05$). The data analysis indicated that the interaction and the no-interaction learners performed statistically the same on the vocabulary test. The comparison of the obtained mean scores revealed that the vocabulary mean scores in the two groups were very close to each other.

b. SCGI (Semantically correct but grammatically incorrect)

Since the normality assumption was not met for the SCGI ($p < 0.05$), a Mann-Whitney test was used to compare the frequency of semantically correct but grammatically incorrect sentences between the two input-output groups.

Table 7
The Mann-Whitney Test for Comparing SCGI between the Interaction and No-Interaction Groups

Statistics Groups	N	Mean Rank	Sum of Ranks	Z	Sig. (2-tailed)
Input-Output no-interaction	39	42.14	1643.50	-.483	.629
Input-Output interaction	47	44.63	2097.50		
Total	86				

The results of the Mann-Whitney test, depicted in Table 7, indicated that the mean ranks were not significantly different between these two groups ($p = 0.629 > 0.05$). The mean rank scores in the interaction and no-interaction groups were statistically the same. In other words, the participants from both the interaction and no-interaction groups performed similarly in forming semantically correct (but grammatically incorrect) sentences.

c. SCGC (Semantically correct and grammatically correct)

The results of the normality test for SCGC revealed that the obtained data were not normally distributed ($p < 0.05$). Therefore, a Mann-Whitney test was employed in order to compare the frequency of both semantically and grammatically correct sentences between the two input-output groups.

Table 8

The Mann-Whitney Test for Comparing SCGC between the Interaction and No-Interaction Groups

Statistics	N	Mean Rank	Sum of Ranks	Z	Sig. (2-tailed)
Groups					
no-interaction	39	44.14	1721.50	-.225	.822
interaction	47	42.97	2019.50		
Total	86				

The results of the Mann-Whitney test, shown in Table 8, indicated that the mean ranks were not significantly different between the two groups ($p = 0.822 > 0.05$). The participants in both the interaction and the no-interaction groups performed similarly in their formation of both semantically and grammatically correct sentences. Table 9 presents a summary of these findings.

Table 9

A Summary of Findings

Compared groups	Vocabulary	SCGI	SCGC
Input-only vs. Input-plus-output	SD	SD	SD
Interaction vs. No-interaction	NSD	NSD	NSD

Note. SD stands for Significantly Different and NSD represents Not Significantly Different.

Discussion and Conclusion

The results of the study support the first hypothesis, which predicted that EFL learners' vocabulary achievement would be higher when instructed in input-output vocabulary instruction compared with the input-only instruction. The participants who received output tasks in addition to input tasks outperformed those in the input-only group in the vocabulary posttest. Their outperformance occurred in both overall vocabulary test and in the productive section of the test. These findings support previous studies (Ellis & He, 1999; Hashemi & Kassaian, 2011; Jalilifar & Amin, 2008; Kwon, 2006; Sarani, et al., 2013), mainly emphasizing the importance of output in developing L2 vocabulary knowledge and considering output as essential for the acquisition of productive

vocabulary. The findings are also in line with the conclusions of De la Fuente (2002) who found that output was crucial for productive acquisition within negotiation processes.

Therefore, regarding the first hypothesis, the results of this study confirm the findings of the above-mentioned studies. They also provide support for the output hypothesis (Swain, 1985) by revealing the facilitative effect of the output approach in L2 vocabulary development. Swain (1993) states, “language production provides the opportunity for meaningful practice of one’s linguistic resources permitting the development of automaticity in their use” (p. 159).

The second hypothesis, predicting that EFL learners’ vocabulary achievement will be higher when they are instructed in the interaction mode of instruction compared with the no-interaction mode of instruction, was not supported by the findings of the study. That is, the performance of those in the input-output group who accomplished the tasks interactively was similar to the other input-output group who worked without interaction. This result was persistent in both the overall vocabulary score and productive vocabulary achievement. Although many studies approve the positive role of interaction in L2 acquisition, the findings of this study appear to be in line with Loschky (1994) and Ellis and He (1999). Loschky (1994) found no main effect for the acquisition of vocabulary or grammatical structures among his pre-modified, interactional modified, and unmodified input with no interaction groups. The study by Ellis and He (1999) showed no difference between the comprehension scores of the pre-modified and interactional modified input groups. In addition, they revealed that the modified output group outperformed the other two groups. Ellis and He (1999) argue that reasonable levels of comprehension and acquisition can be achieved in all three conditions and maintained over time.

It is useful to consider the factors leading to the similar performances of interactive and non-interactive groups. One explanation could lie in the type of interaction in which they were engaged. Interaction among participants occurred only for the purpose of finding appropriate words for different parts of the pictures, and not for discussing a subject in the target language. Moreover, although the participants were encouraged to interact in the target language to find the answers, they seemed to partially interact in their native language, in

addition to interacting in English. Most studies supporting the positive role of interaction in L2 acquisition conducted the interaction at the conversational level and only in the target language. Thus, these deviations may have influenced the effectiveness of peer-interaction in vocabulary achievement. However, considering the fact that both input-plus-output groups (with or without interaction) outperformed the input-only group, it can be safely concluded that both interactive and non-interactive output modes can lead to higher vocabulary achievement in comparison to the input-only condition.

The limitation of the current study was that the researchers were not allowed by the institutes to conduct the treatment personally and control the process of interaction more carefully. However, the respective teachers were trained to do the treatment and testing prior to the study. It would be worthwhile to replicate the study with male subjects and also to investigate the effect of interaction on the development of oral productive vocabulary. Moreover, the study can be replicated with an emphasis on interacting in the target language only. This aim would be facilitated by requiring conversation on certain topics and even by assigning a project whose plan would be executed solely in the target language.

Notes on Contributors:

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Appendices

Appendix A: Sample item for vocabulary tests

Instruction: For each word, select one of the choices and provide answer when you decide to choose 3, 4 or 5.

1. Waist

- 1) I don't remember having seen this word before.
- 2) I have seen this word before, but I don't think I know what it means.
- 3) I have seen this word before, and I think it means _____.
(Synonym or translation)
- 4) I know this word. It means _____. (Synonym or translation)
- 5) I can use this word in a sentence: _____. (If you do this section, please also do category 4)

Appendix B: Sample word group along with its corresponding picture

Word group (Clothes):

Sweater – overcoat – casual jacket – trousers – suit – shorts

