

## INFLUENCE OF PRESTUDY ON FOREIGN LANGUAGE LEARNING ATTITUDE

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In this experimental study, based on qualitative and quantitative data collection from an experimental and a control group, the influence of 2 different ways of prestudy on foreign language learning attitude of the upper-intermediate level of English language learners was investigated. One prestudy program was based on specially designed familiarization handout-materials comprising topic-related reading activities, the other program entailed using a dictionary focusing on the words used in the target unit. Students who worked with the handout were significantly more motivated, active, and interactive than those who worked with a dictionary. In addition, teachers felt that students who did prestudy using handouts found the unit more meaningful and developed a better attitude towards learning a foreign language than did those who relied on a dictionary.

*Keywords:* prestudy, language learning attitude, dictionary use, handout use, self-study, foreign language learning.

The importance of the learner is emphasized in initiatives such as the European Language Portfolio, based on the key concepts of learner autonomy and self-assessment (Council of Europe, 2001). In pilot schemes in various European countries three kinds of learner autonomy have been identified; academic, interactive, and independent. Learners with academic autonomy have their own learning responsibilities; learners with interactive autonomy take part in activities and projects as they wish; and learners with independent autonomy develop their own awareness through keeping diaries or discussing their own learning char-

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acteristics (Kumaravadivelu, 2001). Extensive prestudy might be quite helpful for the teaching-learning process through promoting autonomous learning in language classes.

If students have conceptual familiarity with a particular unit, they can participate in classroom activities more enthusiastically, since they feel more secure (Aspatore, 1984; Bensoussan, Sim, & Weiss, 1984; Coady, 1991). When learners feel secure, they are able to absorb comprehensible input in low anxiety situations and thus learning is facilitated (Larsen-Freeman, 1986). In the language learning process improvement comes from the teacher supplying communicable and comprehensible input, and not from forcing and correcting production (Krashen, 1981). Therefore, if the learners study parts of, or the vocabulary of, the unit before the class lesson, they can develop better learning strategies for the unit to be studied in class time (Nunan, 1988). Moreover, learners should also aim to learn the target language not only inside but also outside the classroom because language skills are too complicated and varied to develop only during class hours (Harmer, 2001; Wenden, 1991; Wenden & Rubin, 1987).

When students reach the upper-intermediate level of English language proficiency, they are expected to have completed the coursework to develop the self-confidence that will enable them to read, write, speak, and understand their teachers in their English study. Because of lack of time, brainstorming activities such as pair or group discussions related to the topic of the target unit or concept mapping through target vocabulary are often neglected. The methods of use of the dictionary, wordbooks, notebooks, or index cards as described by Celce-Murcia and McIntosh (1989) are often not applied in the preparatory class for the same reason. Instead, students are assigned extensive supplementary exercises to fill the gap between the objective of the unit and their achievement. Sometimes such supplementary exercises become a constant struggle with a dictionary and students often do not spend time looking up words in their dictionaries. There have been many studies on the effectiveness of dictionary study, with most showing that this has little or no effect on language learning (Aspatore, 1984; Bensoussan, 1983; Bensoussan et al., 1984; Goyette, 1996; Hulstijn, 1993). Other studies have been carried out on vocabulary acquisition techniques, including contextual guessing, again with mixed results being reported (Bensoussan & Laufer, 1984; Brutton, 1981; Carmine, Kameenui, & Coyle, 1984; Carroll & Drum, 1982; Hosenfeld, 1984; Huckins, Haynes, & Coady, 1993; Kelly, 1990; Koda, 1989; Levine & Reves, 1998). In the current study, extensive prestudy material was provided through a handout using texts based on a similar topic to the target unit, with topic-related activities to develop certain reading skills – especially figuring out the meaning of unknown words – finding the main idea of the text, making inferences, and drawing conclusions from a particular part of the text before every unit. Reading through the unit with a dictionary to help is another type of

self-study for the target unit before the class lesson. The purpose of this activity is not specifically to teach reading skills; the aim is, rather, to help these upper-intermediate level students to grasp the meaning in the target unit easily and to increase their schemata (Carrell & Eisterhold, 1988).

English preparatory class students generally assume that it will be helpful for them to understand texts in their course books better if they study the target unit before every lesson.

The research questions to be addressed in the current study were:

1. What are the students' problems with understanding texts at the upper-intermediate level?
2. Does providing a handout of topic-related texts with some reading activities such as predicting the meaning of unknown words, finding the main idea, making inferences, and drawing conclusions before every unit have a positive effect on students' comprehension in the subsequent unit of the texts, their participation in activities, and on the development of a positive language learning attitude?
3. Does direct prestudy before every lesson for each unit through a dictionary have a positive effect on students' comprehension of the texts in the subsequent unit on their participation in activities and on the development of a positive language learning attitude?
4. Is prestudy based on extensive topic-related handouts or direct prestudy through a dictionary a more effective way for the students to develop a positive language learning attitude?
5. What are the students' and the teachers' views on topic-related handouts and a dictionary as prestudy tools?
6. Does prestudy through either handouts or a dictionary have a more positive influence on students' attitude towards and motivation in learning a foreign language?

## METHOD

### PARTICIPANTS

The participants of the study were 36 randomly selected upper-intermediate level English preparatory class students with an average age of 20 with the same English proficiency level (called Group B). They were assigned to two different class groups (20 students in the Dictionary Group and 16 in the Handout Group).

### INSTRUMENTS

Two semistructured interviews with open-ended questions about the function of the prestudy and prestudy materials (one addressed to the students, one to

the teachers), an observation sheet of classroom and participation interaction (developed from various classroom observation forms – see Appendix A), a foreign language attitude scale (developed by Raymond & Roberts, 1983), students' dictionaries, and extensive topic-related reading handouts were used as the instruments of the study.

## PROCEDURE

Before the experimental procedure was established, some randomly selected students and instructors in the English preparatory classes were interviewed face to face, and the final form of the research questions was determined.

The handout and dictionary groups were just starting the upper-intermediate programme.

For the first unit (*Dreams Come True*) of the course book (*Summit 2*; Saslow, Ascher, & Ruzicka, 2006), the students in the both groups came into the classroom without having done any prestudy to enable each group to realize the difference between doing and not doing prestudy before every target unit. The first observations were carried out by two different instructors who also teach English in the preparatory classes. For 20-45 minutes student-teacher interactions were observed as well students' interactions with each other in the classroom environment during the lesson (in classroom activities and in pair or group work). After the observation had been completed, brief teacher and student interviews, which took less than 10 minutes, helped interviewers and participants clarify aspects of the observation.

For Unit 2 (*Character Counts*), the students in the handout group were provided with an extensive prestudy activity in the form of a topic-related handout focusing on contextual guessing and various reading skills such as finding the main idea, making inferences, drawing conclusions, and so on, and those in the dictionary group prepared for the same unit with prestudy via only a dictionary. They were asked to read the unit to be studied as homework using a dictionary to help them understand the content. The second observation was carried out with both groups.

The same procedure was repeated for Units 3 (*Dealing With Diversity*) and 4 (*Personality and Life*), respectively.

The students in the handout and dictionary groups and their teachers were interviewed by the researcher to determine their opinions about the use of handouts and a dictionary as prestudy tools. The interview was recorded on a tape and the responses of the teachers and students were transcribed for analysis of the study.

In addition, the students' attitudes towards learning a foreign language before and after the study were assessed through an attitude test which was translated and adapted from Raymond and Roberts (1983). The items of the attitude

test were about the respondents' demographic features and their viewpoints concerning the significance of their linguistic and intercultural development in one or more foreign languages. The scale was adapted into the native language of the students by the researcher and a group of colleagues separately. There were small discrepancies which were resolved later. Then the native language version was back-translated into English by a colleague who has a degree in English Language Teaching. Small dissimilarities between the original scale and the back-translated version were then resolved by the researcher and the back-translator.

## RESULTS

Findings of the study are set out in accordance with the research questions:

### STUDENTS' PROBLEMS WITH UNDERSTANDING TEXTS

The interview with the students in both groups and the instructors revealed that the students had difficulty understanding the texts generally because they were not familiar with the content and most of the vocabulary in each unit. Furthermore, they pointed out that the lack of autonomous learning and poor classroom interaction during the lessons prevented them from active participation and caused serious learning obstacles which then had a negative influence on their motivation.

### THE EFFECT OF PRESTUDY WITH TOPIC-RELATED HANDOUTS OR WITH A DICTIONARY

The observation sheets and interview with teachers and students revealed that the teacher of the dictionary group was always prepared for the class, encouraged the students to participate in the activities, and made use of every kind of material and equipment available in order to create an atmosphere that was conducive to learning. However, the students generally did not seem to be prepared for the lesson, and they did not take part in pair or group interactions; they generally tended to interact with the teacher only when a question was addressed directly to them.

The teacher of the handout group was also well prepared for every class lesson, made sure that every student participated in activities, and made use of all sorts of educational tools available in the classroom. Unlike the dictionary group students, the handout group students took part in pair and group interactions and were highly motivated to participate in classroom activities.

Consequently, it was found that for students to develop a positive foreign language learning attitude, providing a topic-related text and extensive reading activities that involved predicting the meaning of unknown words, finding the main idea, making inferences, and drawing conclusions as a handout before

every unit helps students understand the texts better in the subsequent unit than does a direct prestudy for each unit through a dictionary only. Therefore it can be assumed that prestudy based on an extensive topic-related handout is a better familiarization activity than is direct prestudy through a dictionary only.

### **STUDENT AND TEACHERS' VIEWS ON HANDOUTS AND DICTIONARIES AS PRESTUDY TOOLS**

Responses of students in the handout group show that 90.7% have difficulty understanding the texts in a unit if they are not familiar with the topic and the related vocabulary; 78.5% believe that when they reach upper-intermediate level they have already developed reading skills such as skimming, scanning, finding the main idea, making inferences, drawing conclusions, and guessing the meaning of unknown words from the context; 35.7% believe that it is tiring or boring for students to study handouts; 21.5% believe that using a handout as a prestudy tool is a waste of time for students; 71.8% believe that it is always possible to figure out accurately the meaning of unknown words using the context to provide clues; 90.5% believe that prestudy via a handout is beneficial for students; 99.8% do their homework when they are assigned a handout to study; and 90.5% believe that prestudy has increased their success in the classroom.

Responses of the students in the dictionary group show that 92% have difficulty understanding the texts in a unit if they are not familiar with the topic and the related vocabulary; 81% believe that when they reach upper-intermediate level they have already developed reading skills such as skimming, scanning, finding the main idea, making inferences, drawing conclusions, and guessing the meaning of unknown words from the context; 81% believe that it is tiring or boring for students to study the unknown words of the units using a dictionary; 72.5% believe that using a dictionary is a waste of time for students; 20.3% believe that it is always possible to find out the exact meaning of unknown words in a dictionary; 15.5% believe that prestudy with a dictionary is beneficial for students; 23.4% do their homework when they are assigned study of unknown words in a dictionary before a lesson; and 37.5% believe that prestudy has increased their success in the classroom.

The students, therefore, showed a clear preference for prestudy with a handout and an appreciation of its potential for supporting learning, while dictionary use as a prestudy activity was not popular with the students.

The responses of the teachers show that teachers agree that students have difficulty understanding the texts in a unit if they are not familiar with the topic and the related vocabulary; prestudy increases the in-class success of the students; when students reach upper-intermediate level they are expected to have developed reading skills such as skimming, scanning, finding the main idea, making inferences, drawing conclusions, and guessing the meaning of unknown

words from the context; it is tiring and boring for the students to study unknown words of the units using a dictionary; using a dictionary as a prestudy tool is a waste of time for students; it is not always possible for students to find the exact meaning of all unknown words in the dictionary; students do not do their homework it is to study unknown words from a dictionary; students do their homework when they are assigned handouts to study; it is not tiring and boring for students to study handouts; using a handout as a prestudy tool is not a waste of time for students; it is always possible for students to figure out the meaning of unknown words accurately using the context to provide clues; and prestudy via a handout is beneficial to students.

Similar to the students' responses, the teachers agreed that prestudy through handouts which are based on extensive topic-related contextual reading activities is better than prestudy by using a dictionary. The teachers were of the opinion that the students who did prestudy using handouts construct meaning in the unit better than do those who have used only a dictionary in their prestudy.

#### **PRESTUDY AND ITS EFFECT ON STUDENT MOTIVATION AND ATTITUDE**

Results of analyses about students' attitude towards learning a foreign language at the beginning and at the end of the study procedure were obtained through a Wilcoxon Signed Rank Test for Paired Samples. It was found that there was no significant difference in the Dictionary Group students' attitude before and after the process ( $z = 0,88, p < 0.05$ ). On the other hand, it was found that there was a significant difference in the Handout Group students' attitude before and after the study process ( $z = -3,42, p < 0.05$ ).

Consequently, it can be said that prestudy based on topic-related texts and some extensive reading activities has a positive effect on students' attitude towards learning a foreign language, while use of a dictionary does not.

#### **CONCLUSION**

In conclusion, familiarization through prestudy with the topic of a unit and participation in classroom activities play a significant role for upper-intermediate students in understanding unfamiliar texts at this level. Providing a topic-based handout for study before each unit appears to promote autonomous learning and also helps students learn better in the classroom. Both students and teachers have a positive view concerning handout use for prestudy.

It has also been found that extensive use of handouts contributed to interaction in the classroom and to the students' success, and thus helped them develop a positive attitude towards learning. In addition, as the results of other studies have also indicated, it can be seen that when the students develop a positive attitude or self-confidence, they can then be persuaded to take part in classroom activities,

and, thus, learning can be facilitated. Furthermore, since a handout is helpful in activating long-term memory, saving time, and preventing the learners from having to tackle so many unknown words, it can be a time-saving tool during limited preparatory class time, for which timing is of great significance. Further studies should be undertaken in various educational settings, such as middle-schools, secondary, and tertiary educational institutions, to further confirm the usefulness of handouts as a prestudy aid in helping English language learners to gain contextual understanding, confidence in the language, and the ability to participate more in the foreign language classroom.

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## APPENDIX A

### OBSERVATION SHEET

#### Part I: General information

Please give the necessary information for each space.

Institution : \_\_\_\_\_  
 Department : \_\_\_\_\_  
 Date of observation : \_\_\_\_\_  
 The classroom observed : \_\_\_\_\_  
 The book/unit observed : \_\_\_\_\_  
 The prestudy observed : HANDOUT USE / DICTIONARY USE  
 Classroom teacher : \_\_\_\_\_  
 Observer : \_\_\_\_\_  
 Purpose of observation : \_\_\_\_\_  
 Notes : *Please, comment in the space provided on each question. If not applicable, or not observed, please note.*

1. Is the instructor properly prepared for this class?  
Comments:
2. Is there evidence of student preparation for this class?  
Comments:
3. Does the instructor demonstrate an adequate knowledge of the subject matter?  
Comments:
4. Does the instructor demonstrate appropriate and meaningful interaction with students?  
Comments:
5. Does the instructor utilize technology and/or materials appropriate to the purpose of the class or activity?  
Comments:

#### Part II: Students' participation and interaction

Please underline the related group and put a (+) sign in the space provided under each topic for every activity of the student involved.

If not applicable, or not observed, please note.

GROUP: HANDOUT / DICTIONARY

| Student's name | St-T interaction | St-St pair interaction | St-St group interaction | Number of times student responds to teacher's question | Student's participation in general classroom activities |
|----------------|------------------|------------------------|-------------------------|--|---|
| 1              |                  |                        |                         |  |   |
| 2              |                  |                        |                         |  |   |
| 3              |                  |                        |                         |  |   |
| 4              |                  |                        |                         |  |   |
| •              |                  |                        |                         |  |   |
| •              |                  |                        |                         |  |   |

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