

POWERPOINT AS A POTENTIAL TOOL TO LEARNERS' VOCABULARY RETENTION: EMPIRICAL EVIDENCES FROM A VIETNAMESE SECONDARY EDUCATION SETTING

By

TA THANH NAM *

LAP Q. TRINH **

** Teacher of English, Tan Hiep High School, Kien Giang, Vietnam.*

*** Language Teacher Educator and Researcher in Can Tho University, Vietnam.*

ABSTRACT

In Vietnamese secondary education, translation and visuals are traditionally used as major techniques in teaching new English lexical items. Responding to the Vietnamese government policy issued in 2008 on using IT for a quality education, the application of PowerPoint has been considered the most prevalent type of technology used in the classrooms throughout in Vietnam as Rickman (2000) stated. This paper reports the impact of implementing PowerPoint in teaching vocabulary in English classes in a Vietnamese secondary education setting. The study, with a two-group pre-test and post-test design aimed to test the effects of PowerPoint on learners' vocabulary retention and to investigate their attitudes towards the use of PowerPoint-based materials in teaching and learning vocabulary. 68 grade 10 students in an upper-secondary school in the Mekong Delta participated in the study. Three instruments were used to collect data: English vocabulary tests, questionnaire on students' perceptions toward the use of PowerPoint, and interview questions on teachers' evaluation of the contributions of PowerPoint to vocabulary teaching and learning. Results indicated that participants in the experimental group outperformed those in the control group in terms of vocabulary retention and their attitudes towards the use of Powerpoint in teaching and learning vocabulary were positive.

Keywords: Vocabulary Retention, Powerpoint, Perception, Impact.

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, information technology (IT) has significantly influenced the growth of many fields of businesses in Vietnam. Applying IT to learning and teaching vocabulary is a prerequisite for learners' success in learning a foreign language and in our context, mainly English. It can be clearly seen that vocabulary is integral to every language skill which learners need to acquire to be able to communicate effectively. Recognizing the role vocabulary contributes to learners' successful communication, more teachers have lately used PowerPoint (PPT) in their English vocabulary lessons. According to Rickman (2000), PPT has been used as a teaching tool in the classroom with the presumptions that teachers will find using PPT helps to facilitate teaching and learning processes".

A large body of empirical research investigated the effectiveness of PPT in teaching English. Studies by Fisher (2003), Al-toubat (2006, Zhao (2005) and Lin & Chen (2007)

observed that teachers could exploit many features of PPT to present various aspects of a new language. Regarding sounds, for instance, PPT-enhanced lessons can be used to teach pronunciation. Fisher (2003) confirmed that PPT presentations could be effectively used in many ways in all stages of a language lesson. PPT presentations can also be used for initial teaching, for practice and drilling, for games, reviews and tests (Al-toubat, 2006). Teachers can use PPT for teaching new vocabulary items, grammar points, oral exam preparation and creating slide shows for cultural awareness. Visuals, such as pictures, or video, have gained popularity in foreign and second language teaching for purposes of teaching reading comprehension (Lin & Chen, 2007). Zhao (2005) provided evidences for the effectiveness of implementing technology in teaching speaking skills. According to Zhao, implementing technology can help facilitate meaningful communication through stimulating students' talk around PPT-based activities. Schcolnik and Kol (1999) reported on two uses of PPT that they applied in the

language classroom: one as a presentation tool, and the other as a novel writing tool and they found that oral presentation through PPT improved meaningful interaction.

In Vietnam, the impact of application PPT has been addressed in several studies. For instance, Bui (2006) and Tran (2007) presented advantages and cautions of using IT and how-to design lessons with some common software programs Nguyen, 2006) and Le & Nguyen (2007)., Nguyen (2008) conducted a study in applying IT in teaching literature; Tran (2010) investigates PPT lesson plan in teaching literature at a high school; Nguyen (2008) and Dang (2009) investigates classroom interaction in PowerPoint EFL classes. Results from studies in different Vietnamese contexts confirm an important role which PPT plays in learners' L2 vocabulary acquisition. PPT makes the teaching and learning more effective thanks to the use a collection of text, sound, pictures, video and animated effects to provide meaningful contexts and "authentic" materials to facilitate comprehension and motion media and sequential still visuals facilitate students' practicing language skills.

In Vietnam, innovating teaching methods so as to meet the government's call for enhancing quality education has been responded to. However, the reality is not satisfactory. Some English teachers, from secondary schools, use the new teaching method only when the lessons are observed by other teachers or inspectors As for other classes, the traditional method is applied as usual. The rapid growth of PPT implementation in educational settings does not guarantee students' positive perception of the Negative attitudes towards PPT based instruction could be a deterrent to using PPT as an effective tool to language education. It is essential to let the students have their saying over the effectiveness of PPT use because they are directly affected by the lesson. Lowry (1999) also agrees that it is always worth obtaining student feedback on the impact of PPT on their learning.

PPT- Enhanced Lessons Versus Traditional Lessons

In this study, "traditional lessons" are defined as textbook-based lessons with teaching aids such as blackboard, chalk, and printed pictures, PPT lessons include the same elements but are designed to include multimedia.

Bushong's (1998) study in which non-PPT lessons include an oral explanation with simple visual aids, whereas PPT lessons include the same elements but add a computer generated audio-visual demonstration.

Ptaszynski (1997) mentioned the term "technology-enhanced" education. In this sense, "enhanced" means to improve the quality of something under construction. Iwanski (2000) used the term "Computer-Enhanced Instruction" (CEI) in his study. He defined this term as the use of computers to enhance or enrich instruction in lectures or demonstrations. Bushong (1998) suggested that PPT should be used as a potential measure to enhance the instructional process. This view is supported by Wilmoth and Wybraniec (1998) who suggested that computers would be an innovative vehicle to reinforce instruction. In high school English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teaching in Vietnam, teachers have already provided visuals in the forms of pictures and drawings; PPT does not necessarily change the content of the visuals but it may enhance their impact significantly. English teachers often use PPT accompanied by blackboard and textbook in one lesson. This kind of lesson is referred to as PPT-enhanced lessons in this study.

Advantages and Disadvantages of using PPT in Teaching and Learning

Many researchers have investigated the advantages of using PPT in education. Most of the researchers found that PPT could facilitate student comprehension of lessons, encourage classroom interaction, heighten student interest, provide a structure and organization to a lesson and help teachers to refine and reuse PPT lesson plan (Mayer, 1997; Gilroy, 1998; Moody, 1998; Wilmoth and Wybraniec, 1998; Mantei, 2000; Frey and Birnbaum, 2002; Keefe & Willett, 2004; Wang, 2005; Daniels et al., 2008).

One of the problems related to PPT use is teachers' designing lessons presentations (Wilmoth & Wybraniec, 1998). The problem involves using too many slides and too much information in a lesson. As a result, the PPT lesson moves too quickly for most students (Frey & Birnbaum, 2002). Moreover, time investment is also a problem that teachers often complain when using PPT lessons. Searching for visual materials such as pictures, videos and audios and

converting notes into slide presentations can be a time consuming task. Technical infrastructure such as equipment and room requirements are factors that most teachers feel concerned about (Wilmoth & Wybraniec, 1998). Before teaching a lesson using PPT, teachers are advised considering the equipment and room requirements necessary for the implementation of their plans. In terms of equipment, out-of-date computers can slow down a lesson, especially PPT lessons with many images. The lack of electricity, projection screens such as data projectors or Liquid Crystal Display (LCD) panels may limit PPT lessons to certain rooms.

The researcher of this study assumes that it would be beneficial to investigate the effect of PPT vocabulary lessons on learners' vocabulary retention. The case study to this field would contribute insights into the effect of IT, namely PPT on learners' learners vocabulary retention and learners' perception of using PPT to teach vocabulary. For this reason, the present study was conducted to examine the use of PPT on learners' vocabulary retention of the tenth graders in a secondary school in the Mekong Delta of Vietnam. This study attempts to find out the answers to the questions below

- To what extent does the use of PPT enhance high school students' learning vocabulary?
- What are students' attitudes towards the use of PPT in vocabulary lessons?

Aims of the Study

This study aims to test the effects of PPT on students' vocabulary retention and investigate learners' attitudes towards the use of PPT in teaching vocabulary lessons. The study also aims to make contributions to the improvement of vocabulary retention of learners from empirical evidences. The findings of this study would provide the teaching staff, researchers, and English language policy makers with an insightful look into the role which PPT plays in enhancing the impact of vocabulary lessons in a Vietnamese context.

Methodology

Participants

In this study, 68 participants, 33 females and 35 males,

grouped into two classes, were randomly chosen from a population of 440 grade 10th students at a secondary school located in a remote area in the Mekong Delta of Vietnam. All are 16 years. Among them, 51.5% were males. The subjects in the study were taught English, using the textbook of English 11 edited by Hoang et al., 2007, which is used in all high schools throughout Vietnam. The study was conducted at the beginning of the second semester of the academic year 2010-2011.

Instruments

Vocabulary Tests

Vocabulary tests were used to measure participants' vocabulary retention before and after the research. Both pre and post test consist of 25 items with 18 items of multiple choices with four options: A, B, C, D and 7 items of matching the word with its definitions. The pre-test and post-test are similar in form but different in content. They are similar in format, numbers of items, allotted time, and level of difficulty. The tests were achievement tests which are commonly used in English classrooms in Vietnamese secondary schools. Participants were asked to complete the tests in 45 minutes.

Questionnaire

To collect data on participants' attitude when PPT is used to teach vocabulary, the questionnaire consisted of 24 close-ended questions. The items were adapted from the questionnaire in studies by Parker et al. (2008), Lin, V. C. S. (2006), James et al. (2006) and Chang (2005). All items were categorized into four clusters concerning attitudes towards cognitive (items 1, 4, 5, 6, 7, 17, and 21), students' interests (items 2, 3, 8, 10, 16 and 18 and 22), classroom interactions (items 9, 11, 12, 13, 19 and 20) and students' difficulties studying vocabulary lessons with (items 14, 15, 23 and 24). Each item includes a statement about learners' attitude towards the use of PPT in teaching vocabulary followed by Likert scales. The questionnaire was designed in English and translated into Vietnamese in order to ensure that students could understand all items exactly.

Data Collection and Analysis

The pre-test on vocabulary was organized to the participants in the two groups in the first week of the study to

evaluate participants' vocabulary knowledge before the study. In the last week of the study, the vocabulary post-test was administered to both groups. Gained scores of the post-test were analyzed to check for the differences between the experimental and the control group.

The Vietnamese version of the questionnaire was distributed to the participants at the end of the study. When participants had any difficulties understanding a certain item in the questionnaire, the researcher explained it to them. The software SPSS 11.5 version for Microsoft Windows was used to analyze quantitative data. The Descriptive Statistic Test, the Paired Samples T-Test and the Independent Sample T-test were run to analyze and compare the mean scores of participants' vocabulary retention.

Results

Participants' Vocabulary Retention at the Two Points of Measurement Between the Two Groups

The researcher used the Descriptive Statistics Test to examine the results of the participants' vocabulary retention of the two groups before and after the study. Next, he used the Independent Samples T-Test to compare the mean difference in the participants' vocabulary retention of the two conditions. The results of these tests are reported in Table 1.

Table 1 shows that after the study the mean score of the participants' vocabulary retention of the experimental group (M = 8.92) is higher than that of the control group (M = 7.53). The Independent Samples T-Test showed that the mean difference (MD = -1.39) in the participants' vocabulary retention after the study was statistically significant ($t = -8.86$, $df = 66$, $p = .00$). This means that after the study the participants' vocabulary retention was significantly different: The post level of the experimental group is higher than that of the control group; the

Vocabulary Tests	Conditions	N	Min	Max	Mean (M)	MD	SD
Pre-test	Control	34	5.20	8.00	6.82	-.05	.94
	Experimental	34	5.60	8.40	6.87		
Post-test	Control	34	6.40	8.80	7.53	-1.39	.73
	Experimental	34	8.00	9.60	8.92		

Table 1. Result of Descriptive Statistics Tests of participants' Vocabulary Retention between Two Groups before and After the Study

participants in the experimental group gained more in their vocabulary retention.

Participants' Vocabulary Retention at the Two Points of Measurement within Two Groups

The Descriptive Statistic Test and the Paired Samples T-Test were conducted to analyze and compare the mean scores of participants' vocabulary retention within the control group and the experimental group before and after the study. The results of these tests are reported in Table 2.

As shown in Table 2, the participants' vocabulary retention in the control group changed after the study. The mean score of the participants' vocabulary retention of the control group after the study (M post = 7.53) was higher than that of the same group before the study (M pre = 6.82). Besides, this mean difference (MD = -0.71) was statistically significant ($t = -3.35$, $df = 33$, $p = .002$). It could be observed that the participants' vocabulary retention in the control group had been improved.

Table 2 also shows that participants' vocabulary retention in the experimental group changed after the study. The mean score of participants' vocabulary retention of the experimental group after the study (M post = 8.92) was higher than that of before the study (M pre = 6.87). In addition, the Paired Samples T-Test gives statistical evidences that this mean difference (MD = -2.05) was statistically significant ($t = -14.31$, $df = 33$, $p = .00$). The result indicated that there was a significant change in participants' vocabulary retention in the experimental group after the study; the post level (after the study) was significantly higher than the initial level (before the study). It could be concluded that after the study the participants' vocabulary retention in the experimental condition had been significantly improved.

To measure the participants' attitudes towards the use of PPT in teaching vocabulary, the researcher used a twenty four item questionnaire on participants' attitude towards

Conditions	Vocabulary Tests	N	Min	Max	M	MD	SD
Control	Pre-	34	5.20	8.00	6.82	-0.71	.94
	Post-		6.40	8.80	7.53		
Experimental	Pre-	34	5.60	8.40	6.87	-2.05	.74
	Post-		8.00	9.60	8.92		

Table 2. Results of Descriptive Statistic Tests of participants' Vocabulary Retention within Two Groups before and After the Study

the use of PPT in teaching vocabulary. The scale test was run to check the reliability of the questionnaire. The result shows that the reliability coefficient of the questionnaire is high ($\alpha = .81$). The result indicated that the questionnaire on participants' attitudes towards the use of PPT in teaching vocabulary was reliable.

The Descriptive Statistics Test was used to analyze Participants' attitudes towards the use of PPT in teaching vocabulary. The mean score of the questionnaire is high ($M = 3.42$, $SD = 0.40$) in comparison with the scale 3 in the five-point scale. This result reveals that students had positive attitudes towards the use of PPT in teaching vocabulary.

Conclusions and Implications

The current research was conducted to investigate the effects on participants' vocabulary retention in a Vietnamese secondary context. The research results show that tenth-grade students who were taught with PPT do score slightly higher vocabulary tests than those who did not receive the same treatment. Additionally, using PPT to teach vocabulary is substantially beneficial in promoting students' motivation, engagement and participation when learning the target language in classroom. The majority of students showed positive attitudes towards vocabulary lessons that employ PPT. The results from questionnaires revealed that PPT gets students more involved in the lesson by bringing the outside world into classroom, making students feel more comfortable, giving them more initiative in their own learning, enhancing their confidence and sticking the class together.

Implications

This study provides some proposed solutions for teachers to overcome the problems arising when applying PPT in teaching vocabulary in high schools.

First, it is important for the teacher to prepare the lesson carefully beforehand. A well-prepared lesson means it is equipped with sufficient knowledge and materials, and has clear aims and objectives. This demands a lot of efforts on the part of teachers as they should be knowledgeable and creative when choosing PPT to present new vocabulary. As compensation, the lesson could become more interesting but still fits the time allotted.

Vocabulary teaching is the first stage of skills and grammar each lessons. Thus, the teacher should find a way to balance the time between vocabulary presentation and other activities such as warm-up and skill practice. Specifically, vocabulary lesson should not take up more than 15 minutes for each period. Within that amount of time, all the selected lexical items should be presented in the quickest and most comprehensible manner.

More importantly, before choosing a technique, teachers should consider the interests and expectations of students in each class, anticipate problems that can occur during the vocabulary presentation stage. The teacher should choose suitable techniques for different students who have different learning styles and attention spans.

In addition to traditional techniques used in high schools, PPT can be a good alternative in teaching vocabulary. Nonetheless, students' making noise might be a problem of PPT teaching. Hence, it is essential for a teacher to handle the noise tactfully. There are some simple suggestions such as closing the doors and windows or, at the beginning of the lesson, reminding students that it is a must not to get too excited, or else they will get minus. Another solution is that the teacher should make use of individual work to cut down the noise made by choral outcry. In this way, the teacher can also pay more attention to weak or timid students, making them participate more actively in the lesson.

Another implication is that the teacher should try to modify the content of the skill practice in the textbook. For instance, they should adapt and choose suitable tasks to save time for vocabulary presentation.

By and large, high school students nowadays have been too familiar with the translation method. This accounts for the fact that most of the students are shy and passive. All they do in a vocabulary lesson is to listen, repeat and take notes. They are not motivated at all. Therefore, it is the teachers' duty to motivate their students, making them more active and independent in their own learning. This objective can be fulfilled by bringing PPT into classroom and, step by step, familiarize students with this new method of teaching vocabulary.

If a teacher is able to apply all these implications successfully in classroom, he or she will, for sure, get the new

vocabulary across to students effectively. Consequently, students will be benefited a lot from the teacher's efforts and the lesson will be regarded as successful.

To sum up, there is no single ideal method of teaching vocabulary. The researchers' strongest implication is that the teacher should apply PPT in teaching vocabulary. I am not suggesting that PPT is the solution to all our problems or that flashcards and big books should not be used. What I am confident of, though, is that, when used thoughtfully, PPT can engage learners' interest and thus help make English lessons more memorable. In order to have an effective lesson, the teacher should take into consideration many different factors before planning any vocabulary lesson; those are, the nature of each lexical item, students' proficiency in the target language, class size, and most importantly, the teacher's competence.

Limitations of the Study

Although the study achieved its' goals, there were some unavoidable limitation. One limitation of the study is that only the ten grade English basic students who were studying the English basic book were concerned in the study, not including students who were studying the advanced English in other classes. In addition, the sample groups of the study is quite small with 68 tenth-form students in a Vietnamese secondary school, so it can not clarify the whole view of PPT in teaching vocabulary to different types of students.

Another limitation is that the interpretation of the results depends on the questionnaire, pre-test, and post-test at the English class, and the interview with some of the teachers in a Vietnamese secondary school. It does not mean that the results are the same if the study is conducted with other samples in other schools.

Suggestions for Further Research

Future studies should be conducted in a wider scope. Future study on the use of PPT in teaching vocabulary should not be restricted to tenth-form students in a secondary school only. Last of all, research on teachers' displays for PPT lessons should be continued to conduct in the future to investigate the effective ways of using PPT lessons in teaching vocabulary.

Time constraint is one of the problems in this study, which apparently was rather short to allow learners to improve their vocabulary without assistance. In future research, the duration of the study could be extended to administer a delayed post-test to gain more insights into learners' vocabulary retention.

More instrumentation could be used to collect data. Apart from using a questionnaire and interview, other data collection approaches like gathering field notes by conducting a classroom observation, documentation techniques like asking the learners to keep a journal during the research study, and audiovisual materials like videotaping the real situation in the classroom are also possible.

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Mr. Ta Thanh Nam is currently working as a Teacher of English in Tan Hiep High School, Kien Giang province- Vietnam. He earned his Master degree in English Language Education at Can Tho University- Vietnam. His research interest includes learning styles, EFL material development, and IT in education.



Dr. Lap Q. Trinh is currently working as Language Teacher Educator and researcher in Can Tho University, Vietnam. He earned his Master degree in Applied Linguistics at UMass Boston, USA and his Ph.D in Language Education at the University of Amsterdam, The Netherlands. He teaches courses on applied linguistics, research methods in education and data analysis for Master students. His research interest includes learner autonomy, language curriculum development/ evaluation, writing and speaking in foreign language pedagogy and teachers' professional development.

