Daily-Life Vocabulary: A Cinderella Component in Iranian High School EFL Textbooks

Yasser Aminifard
Islamic Azad University, Dehdasht Branch, Iran

Hamdollah Askari
Department of Education, Gachsaran, Iran

Hassan Khajehei
Islamic Azad University, Kazerun Branch, Iran

ABSTRACT

This study reports on investigating the difference between Iranian high school students' performance on Academic Word (AW) and Daily-Life Word (DLW) tests. To this end, a number of 120 male senior high school students were randomly selected from twelve high schools in Gachsaran to serve as the participants of the study. Two multiple-choice tests, each comprising 40 items, were administered to the participants in order to gauge their knowledge of AWs and DLWs. Then, using purposive sampling, fifteen high school English teachers were interviewed to explore their opinions about the treatment of DLWs in high school English textbooks. To analyze the data, a paired-samples t-test was carried out to compare the participants' gains on both tests and the interviews were transcribed to pinpoint important themes. Results of the t-test indicated that the participants performed significantly better on AW test than on DLW test. In addition, results of the interviews boiled down to the fact that English materials developed for Iranian high school students severely lack an acceptable coverage of DLWs.

INTRODUCTION

Traditionally, vocabulary teaching and learning were given only incidental attention in second language programs since it was widely assumed that lexical acquisition could be left to look after itself (Nation, 1990; Richards & Renandya, 2002). However, the field of ELT has recently experienced renewed interest in the significance of vocabulary when learning a new language (Griffiths, 2008). Richards and Renandya (2002) believe that "vocabulary is a core component of language proficiency and provides much of the basis for how well learners speak, listen, read, and write. without an extensive vocabulary and strategies for acquiring novel vocabulary, learners often achieve less than their potential and may be discouraged from making use of language learning opportunities around them such as listening to the radio, listening to native speakers, using the language in different contexts, reading, or watching television" (p. 255). Decarrico (2001, p. 297) maintains that

lexical competence is a central part of communicative competence and regards teaching vocabulary as a central part of teaching language. Likewise, Hinkel (2006) argues that word knowledge plays an essential role in language acquisition and second language learners need to acquire a substantial vocabulary in order to achieve competency in all L2 skills.

There is a good deal of research on the importance of developing academic vocabulary in ESL and EFL contexts (e.g., Coxhead & Nation, 2001; Ellis, 2008; Graves, 2006; Nagy & Stahl, 2006; Nation, 2001; Read, 2004). Lesaux and Siegel (2003) observe that as children progress through school and attempt to comprehend more challenging texts, academic vocabulary becomes increasingly important. Nation (2001) similarly states that for those students who want to do an academic study in English, learning academic vocabulary must be a high priority objective. He went on to claim that once learners acquire the academic vocabulary in addition to the 3000 high frequency words, they will have control over 90% of the running words which academic texts cover.

In a recent corpus-based study, Estaji and Adeh (2014) analyzed Iranian high school English textbooks against Coxhead's (2000) Academic Word List to investigate the frequency of academic words in these textbooks. They found that English One, Two and Three included 32, 35 and 78 academic words respectively, with the highest number (186) recorded for English Four. In terms of percentage, the textbooks accounted for 27% of Coxhead's (2000) Academic Word List, a limited coverage which, according to Estaji and Adeh, hardly guarantees students' success in approaching academic texts in future.

The pivotal role of DLWs has also been highlighted in the literature. According to Ontario (2005, p. 9) "beginner English learners need to acquire simple words such as those related to food, the human body, clothing, animals, and physical action. As well, they need to know the names of objects in the classroom (blackboard, desk, Bunsen burner), places in the school (washroom, cafeteria, office), and the names and job titles of the adults they interact with. As soon as beginners can recognize and produce these words orally, they can learn to read them".

The necessity for learning DLWs has been reflected in Japanese context. For instance, Mouri (2004) lamented that everyday words are not sufficiently covered in Japanese English textbooks taught in junior and senior high schools. Chujo, Hasegawa and Takefuta (1994) had reported this vocabulary gap in a study which compared the vocabulary coverage of both Japanese and American textbooks over eighteen specific language activities. In the same vein, Hasegawa and Chujo (2004) investigated a series of three Japanese textbooks used over the past three decades and found that while there had been improvements in each ten-year revision, there was still a lack of everyday words necessary for survival in English. According to Nishigaki, Chujo and Oghigian (2009, as cited in Chujo, Oghigian, Utiyama, & Nishigaki, 2011), Japanese students rarely learn words such as *drawer*, *refrigerator*, *trash*, and *glue* from English textbooks used in junior and senior schools.

Inspired by Japanese government's initiative in 2002 to teach English at the elementary level, Chujo, Nishigaki and Utiyama (2005) created a list of DLWs to be taught in elementary school classes. Using twenty picture dictionaries published outside Japan and ten picture dictionaries published in Japan, they collected a total of 5,259 words relevant to Japanese students' daily lives. After checking the frequency of each word in the picture dictionaries and comparing how often the words appeared in both a children's corpus of spoken data (Child Language Data Exchange System) and an adults' corpus of spoken data (British National Corpus), they came up with a core of the most essential 500 words for Japanese EFL elementary students.

Interestingly enough, of all books and book chapters which have been devoted to teaching and learning vocabulary in a new language, the importance of using English picture dictionaries has received literally no attention. This issue, in an EFL context like Iran where English textbooks mainly revolve around reading, grammar and to some extent AWs, could bring about a failure on the part of high school students to develop a satisfactory repertoire of DLWs. To fill this gap, the current study aimed to assess Iranian high school students' knowledge of DLWs and compare it with their knowledge of AWs. It also explored teachers' opinions about the treatment of DLWs in Iranian high school context to shed some light on the results of the study.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This study investigated the following questions:

1. Is there any difference between Iranian senior high school students' performance on AW and DLW tests?
2. What are teachers' attitudes about the treatment of DLWs in Iranian high school English textbooks?

METHOD

Participants

The participants for this study included 120 male senior high school students who were randomly selected from twelve high schools in Gachsaran, Iran. The average age was 18. Thirteen participants out of 120 were attending English institutes. None of the participants had the experience of visiting a foreign country. Also, fifteen high school teachers were interviewed. All the teachers had an MA in ELT and had more than 15 years of teaching experience at high school.

Instruments

The instruments used in the present study were two multiple choice tests of DLW and AW. Each test consisted of 40 items. For DLW test, forty words commensurate with the themes covered in English textbooks for Iranian high school students were selected from *Longman Photo Dictionary of American English* (2006). The categories from which DLWs were selected included *the kitchen*, *jobs*, *the office*, *food*, *vegetables, fruit, at the supermarket* and *Animals*. For AW test, forty words from Coxhead's (2002) academic word list were randomly selected to serve as answers to the forty questions. Semi-structured interviews were also employed.

Procedure

We used a mix-method design (Dörnyei, 2007), combining quantitative and qualitative approaches to obtain an in-depth picture of the topic in question. Quantitative data was collected through AW and DLW tests. First, the participants took the AW test. The test consisted of 40 questions, each carrying one mark. Each question contained a stem followed by four options for students to identify the correct one. Then, the participants took the DLW test. This test also included 40 items and the participants were awarded one point for each correct response. Each item (photo) was followed by four options (words) and the participants were asked to choose the right word for each photo. A paired-sample *t*-test was performed to compare the participants' scores on both tests. Finally, the teachers were

interviewed and the interviews were transcribed to identify important themes and emerging insights. The teachers' real names were changed for privacy reasons.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

As can be seen in Table 1, we have carried out a paired samples t-test to compare students' scores on AW and DLW tests. This comparison evidenced a statistically significant difference in scores for AW test ($M = 16.60$, $SD = 7.24$) and DLW test ($M = 6.88$, $SD= 7.33$), t (119) = - 15.58, p < .05. Also the magnitude of the difference between the means was very large (d = 1.33). Therefore, it can be said that the students' performance on AW test was substantially better than their performance on DLW test. This is clearly depicted in Figure 1 below.

Table 1 Paired Samples *t-test* of the Students' Performance on AW and DLW Tests (N= 120)

	Mean	SD	df	T	Sig.	Effect size
Tests			119	-15.58*	.000	1.33
AW	16.60	7.24				
DLW	6.88	7.33				

* P < .05.
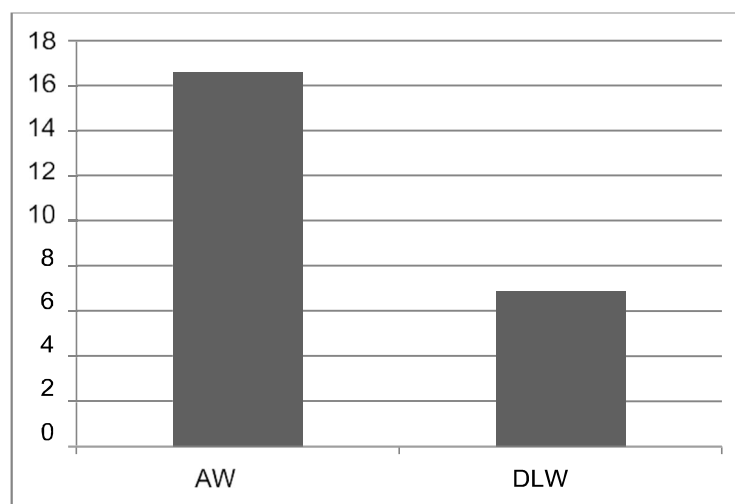
Figure 1 Students' performance on AW Test and DLW Test

The students' poor performance on DLW test in comparison to AW test could be attributed to a couple of reasons. First, the nature of English textbooks being taught at high school level in Iran is fundamentally flawed since there is a mismatch between students' real language learning needs and what these textbooks offer. Among the criticisms that Yarmohammadi (2002) eloquently leveled at these textbooks are their lack of authenticity and ignorance of communicative aspect of language. It goes without saying

that when communicative aspect of language is noticeably overlooked in these textbooks (Azizfar, Koosha, & Lotfi, 2010; Dahmardeh, 2009; Razmjoo, 2007), the number of DLWs which are truly useful for successful communication in target language situations tends to dwindle accordingly. It is necessary to note that among four English textbooks taught at high school level throughout four academic years, only book *Four* has undergone some passage and grammar revisions; however, the remaining three textbooks have been left untouched in terms of the least possible revisions since 1985. This sense of disenchantment with these textbooks has been overtly expressed by other Iranian English teachers as well. For instance, Azizifar (2009), analyzing high school English textbook taught in Iran since 1970 to 2009, noted that "these textbooks cannot meet the learners' and the teachers' needs within the Iranian educational system, and it is a bit strange that they still emphasize structural methods and ignore the communicative role of the language" (p. 77).

Apart from the failure of materials developers to increase the number of DLWs in high school English textbooks, the "appearance of the textbooks" (Ur, 2012, p. 201) is not conducive for this purpose. In fact, one of the chief reasons that has rendered Iranian high school English textbooks inappropriate for the vivid presentation of DLWs is the low- quality paper that these textbooks are characteristically made of. Therefore, students would end up having a slim chance of learning these first-need-to-know words during their high school years. This argument is consistent with the findings of Moghtadi's (2012) study. In an evaluation of English high school textbooks in terms of visual aspects, she found that 95.71 percent of all visuals were drawings and only 4.29 percent were photos. She also mentioned that "an overwhelming proportion of the visuals (87.45%) was devoted to the grammatical aspect of the language and these black and white textbooks were increasingly devoid of real life pictures" (2012, p. 52).

A further main reason accounting for the students' low scores on the DLW test could be the negative washback effect of the university entrance exam on the Iranian high school students' English language study habits. As a matter of fact, none of the twenty five English language items on the university entrance exam assess the students' knowledge of DLWs. This normally makes students very inclined to ignore DLWs no matter how hard their teachers try otherwise. This contention is partly in line with Kheirkhah and Ghonsooli's (2014) study that analyzed the last three versions of the Iranian English university entrance exam in the hope of finding traces of positive washback. They found that there was a preponderance of grammar, academic vocabulary and reading comprehension items all being assessed in an obviously discrete-point fashion, regardless of a tiny touch of communicative language testing principles. It seems axiomatic that there remains virtually no room for DLWs in Iranian high school English textbooks unless test developers begin to take the important role of these words into consideration. In a nutshell, "what is assessed becomes what is valued, which becomes what is taught" (McEwen, 1995a, p. 42)

Semi-Structured Interviews

In the second phase of the study, fifteen teachers were interviewed to provide greater insights into the very subject of DLWs in high school English textbooks. The interviews were conducted in Persian so that the informants could express their opinions clearly. Three main themes were derived from the interview data: negative washback effect of tests; inefficient textbooks; and teachers' failure to be a good source of vocabulary input.

One of the recurring themes in the interview data was the undesirable impact of English section of the university entrance exam on teaching and learning English in high schools:

"If my memory serves me right, university entrance exams have seldom had items on DLWs. A lot of items in the vocabulary section of this high-stakes test belong to AWs. So, we cannot swim against the tide and give students questions on DLWs in our own tests. Believe it or not, when I encourage my students to bring English photo dictionary along with their textbooks to the class, they pay no attention whatsoever. Even, some of them mischievously say it's impossible we'd be given questions in which knowledge of vocabulary for fruits, animals, foods, and vegetables helps us get those questions correct". (Saeed)

It seems that the students' reluctance to learn DLWs might be due in part to the never-changing policy adopted by English materials developers in the Iranian ministry of education:

"When we have English textbooks that have not been changed for ages, with a regrettably limited number of DLWs, how could you expect students to feel a need to learn these words? How can teachers generate interest in students to learn them? For instance, of all fruit names in English, nearly all of my senior students just know apple, orange and banana, you know- the same ones they picked up in junior high school. When it comes to vegetables, animals, birds, and supermarket, they get stuck on the first words. I think it's high time the materials developers revised these textbooks." (Sam)

Interestingly, six of the informants believed that it is not fair to keep putting the blame just on materials developers, textbooks and students:

"Unfortunately, many teachers turn a blind eye to DLWs. Teaching the same English textbooks which they themselves studied in their high school years has made most of them extremely laid-back. They routinely teach the same lessons without looking up a new word in a dictionary." (Rose)

One of them amusingly summed up this concern as follows:

Four years ago, when my colleague and I were en route to India to attend a TESOL conference, she went to buy some pistachio ice-cream on our short stay at Sharjah airport. However, she didn't know the word pistachio. There was actually a long queue for ice-cream and the diversity of flavors made it difficult for her to point at the one she wanted. Luckily, I knew the word and helped rescue the situation. Upon arriving in Mumbai, she made a beeline for the bookstore and bought an English photo dictionary". (Hussein)

This last quotation highlights the important role of teachers in English classes as Thornbury (2002, p. 48) believes that "the teacher is a highly productive source of vocabulary input and learners often pick up a lot of incidental language from their teachers."

CONCLUSION

From the outcome of our research it is possible to conclude that Iranian high school students' knowledge of DLWs is in desperate need of improvement. Furthermore, teachers' opinions during the interviews clearly showed that it is highly unlikely that the present high school English textbooks will lead to communicative competence in general and acquisition of DLWs in particular; therefore, the immediate revision of the textbooks is necessary. Findings of this study are particularly applicable to English materials developers in the Iranian ministry of education. For instance, they can append a section called *Mini-Photo Dictionary* to the end of all high school English textbooks so as to inculcate a love of learning DLWs in students. It is also recommended that test developers include some DLW items in the university entrance exam to make both teachers and students fully aware of the importance of these words for survival in English. Future studies could investigate how well Iranian English teachers themselves perform on DLWs, an interesting research topic which inevitably requires teachers' open cooperation.

Yasser Aminifard, MA, is a lecturer at Islamic Azad University of Dehdasht, Iran. His research interests include L2 pragmatics, teacher and learner identity, and teaching English to young learners.
Email: yasser.aminy@gmail.com

Hamdollah Askari has an MA in TEFL. He has been teaching English at Iranian high schools for 23 years. His research interest areas include reading, vocabulary learning and teaching, pragmatics and materials development.
Email: hamdollahaskari@yahoo.com

Hassan Khajehei, PhD, is an associate professor at Islamic Azad University of Kazerun, Iran. He is mainly interested in second language acquisition, reading and writing.
Email: hkhajeie@yahoo.com

REFRENCES

Azizifar, A. (2009). An analytical evaluation of Iranian high school ELT textbooks from 1970 to 2010. *The Journal of Applied Linguistics, 2(2), 52-79.*

Azizfar, A., Koosha, M. & Lotfi, A. R. (2010). Telling ELT tales out of school: an analytical evaluation of Iranian high school ELT textbooks from 1970 to the present. *Procedia Social and Behavioral Sciences*, *3, 36-44.*

Chujo, K., Hasegawa, S., & Takefuta, Y. (1994). Nichibei eigo kyoukasho no hikaku kenkyuu kara [A comparative study on English textbook vocabulary in Japan and the U.S.]. *Gendai Eigo Kyouiku, 29 (12), 14-16.*

Chujo, K., Nishigaki, C., Utiyama, M. (2005). Selecting 500 essential daily-life words for Japanese EFL elementary students from English picture dictionaries and a children's spoken corpus. Proceedings of Inaugural International Conference on the Teaching and Learning of English in Asia, Penang, Malaysia. Retrieved from http://mastarpj.nict.go.jp/~mutiyama/pdf/chujo-nishigaki-utiyama.pdf

Chujo, K., Oghigian, K., Utiyama, M. & Nishigaki, C. (2011). Creating a corpus-based daily life vocabulary for TEYL. *Asian EFL Journal, 54, 30-58.*

Coxhead, A. (2000). A new academic word list. *TESOL Quarterly, 34(2), 213-238.*

Dahmardeh, M. (2009). Communicative textbooks: English language textbooks in Iranian secondary high schools. *Linguistik, 40 (4), 45-61.*

Decarrico, J. S. (2001). Vocabulary learning and teaching. In M. Celce-Murcia (ed.), *Teaching English as a Second or Foreign Language* (pp. 285-299). Boston: Heinle and Heinle.

Dörnyei, Z (2007). *Research Methods in Applied Linguistics.* Oxford: OUP.

Ellis, N. (2008). Phraseology: The periphery and the heart of language. *Phraseology in foreign language learning and teaching.* Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Company.

Estaji, M. & Adeh, A. (2014). Academic word list frequency: a corpus based analysis of high school ELT course books in Iran. *Roshd FLT, 21(4), 46-57.*

Graves, M. (2006). *The Vocabulary Book: Learning and Instruction.* Newark, DE: International Reading Association, 69-70, 90-93.

Griffiths, C. (2008). Lessons from good language learners. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Hasegawa, S. & Chujo, K. (2004). Vocabulary size and efficacy within three serial JSH English textbook vocabularies created in accordance with revised Course of Study guidelines. *Language Education & Technology*, *41, 141-155.*

Kheirkhah, H. & Ghonsooly, B. (2014). Qualitative study of Iranian English university entrance examination in the light of positive washback strategies. *Study in English Language Teaching, 2(1), 38-66.*

Lesaux, N.K. & Siegel, L.S. (2003). The development of reading in children who speak English as a second language (ESL). *Developmental Psychology, 39(6), 1005- 1019.*

Longman Photo Dictionary of American English (2006). Harlow, England: Longman.

Moghtadi, L. (2012). Visual elements within Iran EFL high school textbooks. *International Journal of Foreign Language Teaching and Research, 1(1),* 45-55.

McEwen, N. (1995). Educational accountability in Alberta. *Canadian Journal of Education*. 20, 27-44.

Mouri, K. (2004). Teaching English vocabulary: This way and that. Hiroshima: Keisuisha.

Nagy, W. E., & Stahl, S. A. (2006). *Teaching word meanings.* Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

Nation, I.S.P. (1990). *Teaching and Learning Vocabulary*. Boston, MA: Heinleand Heinle.

Nation, I.S.P. (2001). *Learning vocabulary in another language.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Ontario. (2005). *Many roots, many voices: Supporting English language learners in every classroom: a practical guide for Ontario educators*. Toronto: Ontario Education.

Razmjoo, S. A. (2007). High schools or private institutes' textbooks? Which fulfill communicative language teaching principles in the Iranian context? *Asian EFL Journal*, *9(4), 126-140.*

Richards, J. C. and W. A. Renandya. (Eds.). 2002. *Methodology in language teaching: an anthology of current practice*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Thornbury, S. (2002*). How to Teach Vocabulary.* London: Pearson Educational Limited. Ur, P. (2012). *A course in English language teaching.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press*.*

Yarmohammadi, L. (2002). The evaluation of pre-university textbooks. *The Newsletter of the Iranian Academy of Science*, *18, 70-87.*