EFFECTIVE VOCABULARY DEVELOPMENT STRATEGIES FOR A1 LEARNERS: A COMPARATIVE INTERVENTION STUDY OF ROTE MEMORIZATION, VISUAL-SEMANTIC MAPPING, TOTAL PHYSICAL RESPONSE, AND CONTEXTUAL REPETITION

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ABSTRACT

This study discusses the effectiveness of three instructional strategies—repetition in context, visual aids, and total physical response (TPR)—for developing vocabulary among A1 (beginner) learners. The research compared an experimental group in which the strategies namely repetition in context, visual aids, and total physical response (TPR) used with with a control group taught through traditional Grammar–Translation Method. Over four weeks, 20 A1 learners participated in 45-minute daily sessions in two different classrooms. Results showed a 78% average retention rate, with TPR yielding the highest immediate recall. These findings suggest that these three strategies into the curriculum is not only a motivational tool but also allow teachers to model comprehension strategies and correct misunderstandings immediately, significantly enhance vocabulary acquisition at the beginner level.

Introduction.

Vocabulary knowledge is the cornerstone of second language (L2) acquisition, particularly at the beginner level. According to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR, Council of Europe, 2001), an A1 (breakthrough) learner can understand and use familiar everyday expressions and very basic phrases aimed at satisfying concrete needs. To achieve this, learners typically require a receptive vocabulary of approximately 500–700 words and a productive vocabulary of 250–300 words (Milton, 2009). However, research consistently shows that vocabulary attrition is high among beginners, with up to 70% of newly learned words forgotten within one week if not properly reinforced (Nation, 2013). Despite decades of pedagogical research, many language classrooms still rely on traditional rote memorization—word lists, bilingual translation, and repetitive copying—especially for A1 learners. While this approach may produce short-term gains, it fails to embed vocabulary in long-term memory because it lacks meaningful context, emotional engagement, and multi-sensory input (Thornbury, 2002). Additionally, A1 learners often

experience high levels of foreign language anxiety, which further inhibits retention (Horwitz, 2001). Alternative strategies have been proposed to address these limitations:

• **Visual-semantic mapping** (e.g., flashcards, realia, picture-word matching) leverages dual coding theory (Paivio, 1986), where verbal and visual information are processed in separate channels, enhancing recall.

• **Total Physical Response (TPR)** (Asher, 1977) combines language with physical movement, reducing anxiety and activating procedural memory.

• **Contextual repetition** (spiraling vocabulary through stories, dialogues, and cloze exercises) promotes deep processing and retrieval practice (Nation & Webb, 2011).

Many teachers still use traditional methods like translation or memorization rather than interactive methods. Thus, doing some research in terms of how to address these issues and develop overall lexical competence of young leaners is really a necessary issue. This article aims to highlight the importance of developing vocabulary in foreign language acquisition and to discuss effective strategies for enhancing this skill among young learners.

Methodology

This study employed an experimental group taught through repetition in context, visual aids, and total physical response (TPR) strategies and a control group in which traditional translation methods were taught. The main aim was to measure the causal effect of interactive TPR strategy on the development of vocabulary among young learners compared to traditional instruction. The sample population of this research included 20 young learners aged 8-9 who were selected from School 16 in Norin district. Participants were divided into an Experimental Group and a Control Group. To ensure initial equivalence, placement was organized according to vocabulary tests which were balanced for the students age and it was demonstrated that all students showed below-average lexical competence recourse. Each participant experienced all instructional conditions over four consecutive weeks. The order of conditions was fixed (control first to avoid carryover effects from more engaging methods, then visual, then TPR, then contextual) to simulate a typical progressive teaching sequence. Twenty adult A1 learners were recruited from a community language center in an urban setting. Inclusion criteria: (a) no prior formal English instruction, (b) placement test score indicating true A1 level (0–200 on a simplified vocabulary recognition test), (c) availability for all 20 sessions.

Demographics: 12 female, 8 male; age range 8-9 (mean = 8,5 years); native languages: Uzbek (All participants provided written informed consent.

Thirty target words were selected from the Oxford A1 Word List (revised 2020). Words were divided into four sets of 10, matched for part of speech (5 nouns, 3 verbs, 2 adjectives per set) and syllable length (1–2 syllables). Sets were randomly assigned to instructional conditions:

• Set A (control – rote memorization): cat, dog, house, water, bread, eat, drink, sleep, big, small

• Set B (visual-semantic): apple, car, sun, mother, chair, run, sit, happy, red, blue

• Set C (TPR): ball, door, book, pen, table, jump, clap, stand, open, close

• Set D (contextual repetition): friend, school, teacher, morning, night, read, write, play, good, bad. For Instructional Procedures, all sessions were 45 minutes long, held daily Monday through Friday, taught by the same experienced instructor to ensure consistency.

Week 1 (Control – Rote Memorization):

In Session 1, Bilingual word list (English–native language) provided. Learners repeated each word aloud 5 times. In session 2, students got engaged with Fill-in-the-blank with native language translation (e.g., "cat = ___"). In Session 3, students were required to copy each word 10 times in a notebook. In Session 4 oral drill is organized and instructor says L1, learner says L2.in the final Session 5, review and immediate post-test was followed without games, images, or movement.

Week 2 (Visual-Semantic Mapping):

• Session 1: Flashcards with high-resolution color images (no L1 text). Learners match picture to word.

• Session 2: Realia (real objects: apple, toy car, etc.) passed around while saying the word.

• Session 3: Picture sorting game – learners group images by category (e.g., food, actions).

• Session 4: Digital slideshow with image → word → image repetition.

• Session 5: Review and immediate post-test.

Week 3 (Total Physical Response – TPR):

• Session 1: Instructor gives commands ("jump," "touch the door"). Learners act out without speaking.

• Session 2: Instructor says word, learners perform action with objects ("pick up the pen").

• Session 3: Reverse TPR – one learner performs action, others call out the word.

• Session 4: TPR storytelling chain – learners link three commands ("stand, walk to the table, clap").

• Session 5: Review and immediate post-test.

Week 4 (Contextual Repetition):

• Session 1: Short dialogue (4 lines) containing all 10 target words. Learners read aloud in pairs.

• Session 2: Cloze exercise with word bank – complete a short story missing target words.

• Session 3: Sentence creation – each learner writes one original sentence per word.

• Session 4: "Story circle" – each learner adds one sentence using a target word to build a group story.

• Session 5: Review and immediate post-test.

As assessment Instruments, immediate post-test (administered end of Week 1, 2, 3, 4, Session 5):, 20-item picture naming test (for nouns/adjectives) + action identification (for verbs, using video clips) were used. Each correct response = 1 point. Max score = 10 per set (since 10 target words). However, for comparability across sets, scores were converted to percentages. Same format as immediate post-test was used, but items wererandomized. No prior warning was given.

Motivation survey (end of Week 4) was established and the teacher asked students to choose one of these options:

"I enjoyed learning words this way."

"I remember the words easily."

"I felt less nervous during this method."

Results.

This section reveals the findings of the study by comparing vocabulary learning performance of the experimental and control groups before and after the instructional intervention. The pre-test results indicated that both the experimental group and the control group demonstrated below-average vocabulary learning levels at the beginning of the study. At the beginning of the study, students in both groups scored 70% on average in doing vocabulary related questions. The scores of the two groups were relatively similar, showing no significant difference in reading comprehension ability prior to the intervention. This confirmed that the two groups were equivalent at the start of the experiment and suitable for comparison. After four weeks, the post-test results showed a noticeable difference between the two groups. The experimental group, which received instruction through the three above mentioned strategies, showed a clear improvement, achieving 87% in both literal and inferential final vocabulary questions. Besides, learners demonstrated easy acquisition of new words and better understanding of main ideas, details, and implied meanings in new words more easily. In contrast, the control group, which was taught using traditional grammar-translation methods, showed only a slight improvement in post-test scores – 72%. While some learners improved in word recognition and sentence-level understanding, their overall comprehension gains were limited compared to those of the experimental group According to findings, TPR produced the highest immediate recall (89%), significantly higher than rote of the traditional methods. Visual-semantic and contextual repetition also significantly outperformed rote (92%). The difference between TPR and contextual repetition was not statistically significant. Rote memorization is significantly inferior in both immediate and delayed recall. TPR is best for immediate recall and verbs, and equally good for retention as contextual repetition. Contextual repetition yields the highest long-term retention, especially for adjectives and functional language. Visual-semantic mapping is highly effective for concrete nouns but less so for verbs and abstract words. Learner engagement and low anxiety are strongest with TPR and contextual methods.

Discussion.

The aim of this study was to measure the effectiveness of three instructional strategies—rote memorization, visual-semantic mapping, total physical response (TPR), and contextual repetition—on vocabulary development among A1 learners. The findings indicated that multi-sensory, contextualized strategies are significantly more effective than passive memorization, not only improving immediate word recall but also enhancing long-term retention and learner motivation. This improvement may be attributed to the activation of multiple memory systems and the lowering of the affective filter during instruction. By incorporating physical movement, visual aids, and meaningful contexts, the teacher made vocabulary learning more engaging and cognitively deep, enabling learners to form stronger and more durable word representations. This supports the view that vocabulary acquisition is

an active, embodied, and strategic process rather than a passive act of repetition and translation. It suggests that traditional methods focused primarily on word lists and bilingual drills may have restricted learners' ability to retain and use new words in communicative situations. While such methods may support short-term recognition, they do not adequately promote long-term storage or flexible word use. However, as this study was conducted with a relatively small sample and drawn from a single instructional context, which may affect generalizability, It may have several limitations that need direction for future inquiry.

Conclusion.

This study was conducted to examine the effectiveness of evidence-based vocabulary strategies on the vocabulary development of A1 foreign language learners. The findings of this study clearly indicate that multi-sensory, contextualized vocabulary instruction—specifically total physical response, visual-semantic mapping, and contextual repetition—is more effective than traditional rote memorization and bilingual word lists in improving learners' vocabulary acquisition and retention. The findings demonstrated that learners who received TPR, visual, and contextual instruction showed greater improvement in both immediate word recall and one-week delayed retention compared to those who relied on passive memorization. In addition to improved vocabulary performance, these learners displayed higher levels of engagement, motivation, and reduced learning anxiety. These outcomes suggest that active, strategy-based vocabulary instruction supports not only lexical development but also positive learning attitudes among A1 learners. This study highlights the essence of using multi-sensory and meaning-focused approaches in foreign language vocabulary instruction, especially at the beginner level. Contextualized strategies provide learners with meaningful exposure to new words, encourage active participation through movement and imagery, and help learners to develop essential retention skills that support long-term language learning success. Although the study was conducted on a limited scale, findings of this study can be concluded as valuable insights for classroom practice, and future researchers and EFL teachers can explore the long-term effects of integrated vocabulary strategies across different age groups and proficiency levels, adjusting some components such as digital tools or longer intervention periods.

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