

# **Efficiency of gap-fill exercises to 10th form students' vocabulary acquisition \ Hiệu quả của bài tập điền khuyết đối với sự tiếp thụ từ vựng của học sinh lớp 10 .M.A Thesis Linguistics: \ Nguyễn Thị Kiều Nga ; Supervisor : Ph.D. Lê Văn Canh**

## **1. Rationale**

Vocabulary is an important language element that links four language skills, namely listening, speaking, reading and writing together and makes communication flow smoothly. Reality shows that many students have fairly good knowledge of grammar but are hardly able to express themselves properly because of their vocabulary deficiency.

It is common knowledge that there are various techniques of learning vocabulary, mastering and using it in different contexts and one of the effective techniques to help students to reinforce vocabulary is giving them appropriate vocabulary exercises, namely, gap-fill exercises. This type of vocabulary exercises typically consists of leaving a gap or a blank space in a sentence or a passage which students have to fill in with the correct letter, word, phrase or whatever is missing.

Though vocabulary is vitally important to master any foreign languages, in reality, many grade 10 students' English vocabulary is still limited even though they have learned English for four years at the lower secondary school. It is their limited vocabulary that explains their poor performance in using English and in their test performance. All these have motivated me to conduct this quasi-experimental research on the topic given, namely *efficiency of gap- fill exercises to 10<sup>th</sup> form students' vocabulary acquisition*.

## **2. Aims and Objectives of the Study**

- To experiment gap-fill exercises and examine their effects on grade 10 students' English vocabulary acquisition.
- To investigate the students' attitudes towards gap-fill exercises., i.e. how effective they think doing gap-fill exercises is to their vocabulary learning.

### **3. Research Questions**

(1) What effect do gap –fill exercises have on students' vocabulary acquisition as measured by their scores in the pre-test and post-test?

(2) What are the students' attitudes towards gap-fill exercises after the experimental period?

### **4. Method of the Study**

A quasi-experiment with a pre-test- and post-test design was adopted in this study. In addition, a post-experiment questionnaire was also used as the supplementary instrument to elicit the students' evaluative attitudes towards gap-fill exercises after the experimental period.

### **5. Scope of the Study**

The experiment was conducted to examine the impact of one type of vocabulary exercises, i.e., gap-fill exercises on students' acquisition of vocabulary. The sample was a small group of grade 10 students who were non-randomly assigned to a control class and an experimental class (41 students for each). Therefore, no intention was made to generalize the findings.

### **6. Significance of the Study**

Although no generalization was intended, the findings of the study could inform teachers of the effectiveness of gap-fill exercises on students' vocabulary learning

### **7. Organization of the thesis**

This thesis is organized in three parts.

Part I is The Introduction.

Part II is The Development which consists of three chapters.

Part III is The Conclusion.

## **PART II: DEVELOPMENT**

### **CHAPTER ONE: LITERATURE REVIEW**

#### **1.1. What is vocabulary?**

Ur. (1996) defines *vocabulary* as the words we teach in the foreign language. The author also emphasizes that a new item of vocabulary may be more than a single word; for example, *post office* and *mother-in law*, which are made up of two or three words but express a single idea. There are also multi-word idioms such as *call it a day*, where the meaning of the phrase cannot be deduced from an analysis of the component words. Therefore, a useful convention is to cover all such cases by talking about vocabulary “lexical items” rather than “words”.

#### **1.2. The role of vocabulary in second language learning**

Wilkin (1972:110) states: “Vocabulary is one of the three dimensions of a language (phonetics, grammar, vocabulary). Without grammar, very little can be conveyed, without vocabulary nothing can be conveyed”. Wallace (1982) points out that “failure to find the words one needs to express himself is the most frustrating experience in speaking another language”.

#### **1.3. The vocabulary acquisition**

Rivers (1981: 463) recommends seven strategies for “learning how to learn vocabulary”. These strategies are:

- (i) Students need to learn how to commit vocabulary to long-term memory.
- (ii) Students must learn to discriminate variations in distribution and new boundaries of meaning.

- (iii) Students do not always realize that words are constructed of morphemes which share the burden of the meaning among them.
- (iv) Students should learn to penetrate disguises.
- (v) Students must learn how to discover new words for themselves.
- (vi) Students need to learn that vocabulary is elastic and that they can make much of the little they know by paraphrase, circumlocution etc.
- (vii) Students must learn how to augment their own vocabulary steadily and systematically.

What Rivers implies is that vocabulary needs to be taught in a systematic, reasonable and scientific way.

### **1.3.1. Vocabulary Teaching Techniques**

There are numerous techniques concerned with vocabulary presentation. However, there are a few things that have to be remembered irrespective of the way new lexical items are presented. If teachers want students to remember new vocabulary, it needs to be learnt in context, practised, and then revised to prevent students from forgetting. Teachers must make sure students have understood the new words, which will be remembered better if introduced in a “Memorable Way” (Hubbard, et. al. 1983: 50).

Gairns and Redman (1986) suggest the following types of vocabulary presentation techniques:

- (i) *Visual techniques.*
- (ii) *Verbal explanation.*
- (iii) *Use of dictionaries.*

### **1.3.2 Revising vocabulary**

The revision process aims at helping students acquire active vocabularies. Students need to practise regularly what they have learnt; otherwise, the material will be faded away. Teachers can resort to many techniques for vocabulary consolidation and revision.

Multiple choice and gap fill exercises will activate the vocabulary while students select the appropriate response. Teachers can use lists of synonyms or antonyms to be matched, sentences to be paraphrased, or just some words or expressions in context to be substituted by synonymous expressions. Visual aids can be of great help with revision. Pictures, photographs, or drawings can facilitate the consolidation of both individual words as well as idioms, phrases and structures. There is also a large variety of word games that are “useful for practising and revising vocabulary after it has been introduced” (Haycraft, 1978: 50). Numerous puzzles, word squares, crosswords, etc., are useful especially for pair or group work.

#### **1.4. Vocabulary activities and exercises**

Nation (2001) recommends the following exercises for vocabulary learning. These exercises are believed to help the students acquire all aspects of vocabulary learning: meaning, form, and use.

- (i) *Meaning* (Word and meaning matching, Labeling, Sentence completion, Crossword puzzles, Completing lexical sets)
- (ii) *Form* (Following spelling rules, Recognizing word parts, Building word family tables)
- (iii) *Use* (Sentence completion, Collocation matching, Collocation tables, Interpreting dictionary entries, Semantic analysis)

#### **1.5. Criteria of a good vocabulary exercise**

According to Nation (2001), a good vocabulary exercise:

- (i) focuses on useful words, preferably high frequency words that have already been met before;
- (ii) focuses on a useful aspect of learning burden. It has a useful learning goal;
- (iii) gets learners to meet or use the word in the ways that establish new mental connections for the word. It sets up useful learning conditions involving generative use;

- (iv) involves the learners in actively searching for and evaluating target words in the exercise;
- (v) does not bring related unknown or partly known words together. It avoids interference.

### **1.6. Gap-fill exercises and the acquisition of vocabulary**

Filling in a cloze exercise with target vocabulary words requires more elaboration by the learner than just looking at the list of target words. Gap fill exercises will activate the vocabulary while students select the appropriate response. Gap-fill exercises are an excellent way to reinforce vocabulary, and allow the student to encounter the vocabulary in a variety of contexts. The exercises can be worked on individually or in pairs in class, or can be assigned as homework to be quickly reviewed in class the next day. Doing cloze exercises will show students' understanding of a passage, its organization, and determine the choice of lexical items.

There are at least five main types of cloze tests available to language teachers: The fixed-rate deletion, the selective deletion (also known as the rational cloze), the multiple-choice cloze, the cloze elide and the C-test (Ikeguchi 1995; Weir 1990; Klein-Braley and Raatz 1984).

## **CHAPTER TWO: THE STUDY**

### **2.1. Context of the study**

For the 2010-2011 academic year, the school had over one thousand and two hundred students being grouped in 30 classes, with an average of 42 students per class. There were 10 teachers of English and 70 others in teaching staff. The school has a quite big library with plentiful sources of reference books, magazines and newspapers convenient for all students to make reference. Moreover, it has five well-equipped classroom with projectors, screens, computers, etc. available. In fact, it is considered to be one of the best schools in Ninh Binh in terms of teaching and learning facilities.

As for the students of the school, they are just students with average scores when entering the school. They are divided into two streams: stream A (students with higher scores in natural sciences) and stream B, basic one (all the other students.) The students of stream A receive 3 English periods a week, whereas students of the other receive 4 periods per week. However, the teaching materials for both streams are the textbooks and workbooks prescribed by MOEET and the supplementary exercises for the basic stream selected by the classroom teachers.

## **2.2. Rationale for using a Quasi-experimental method**

It is not always feasible to carry out a true experiment. This is because of the impossibility of randomly assigning subjects to experimental and the control groups in many educational contexts.

## **2.3. Variables**

The study was designed to examine the relationship between the independent (gap- fill exercises) and the dependent variable (the vocabulary test score).

## **2.4. Participants**

82 students all of whom were non-major English students from 2 classes: 10A1 and 10A3. Each class consisted of 41 students. All of the students were majored in natural sciences. They had been learning English since they were at grade 3. However, most of them were not really motivated in learning English and they didn't intend to take English as one of the subject in their entrance exam, their English knowledge was just at the average level, some were even bad at English.

## **2.5. Designing and applying gap-fill exercises on the experimental group**

Gap-fill exercises designed by the researcher were mainly adopted from *English Vocabulary in Use* by Michael McCarthy Felicity O'Dell, *Test Your Vocabulary Books* by Peter Watcyn-Jones and *Check Your English Vocabulary for TOEIC* by Rawdon Wyatt. All of these exercises were carefully chosen to ensure that they were appropriate to students' English proficiency and they contained the vocabulary taught during the experimental period.

## **2.6. Procedures**

- (i) Study the literature review underlying the study before carrying out the research;
- (ii) Establish the methodological framework for the study;
- (iii) Design and administer the pretest to both groups (experimental and control groups);
- (iv) Identify any difference in the pretest scores between the two groups;
- (v) Apply the gap- fill exercises on the experimental group;
- (vi) Design and administer the posttest (version of the pretest) to both groups;
- (vii) Analyze both groups' posttest scores to establish the difference in vocabulary acquisition between the two groups after four months;
- (viii) Deliver the questionnaire to the experimental group to get their ideas about gap- fill exercises;
- (ix) Collect and analyze all the data for the results of study;
- (x) Discuss the findings and draw out the conclusions and suggestions for further study.

## **2.7. Instruments for Data collection**

### **2.7.1. Pretest and Posttest**

The pretest consisted of 40 taught lexical items and divided into 4 parts. Each correct answer was rated one point, each score was the total number of correct answer and the maximum score that a student was able to get would be 40. The time allowance for each test was 32 minutes including the time of delivering the test paper. The posttest, the version of the pretest in which some changes were made to avoid the similarity in the question order and format of both tests. All the students' test scores were computed and analyzed with the assistance of the computer software (SPSS 15.0 version).

### **2.7.2. Questionnaire**



10 multiple –choice questions were carefully designed to draw their evaluative opinions of gap- fill exercises after the experiment. In the questionnaire, the students were asked to give their ideas to all the questions in three ways. If they agreed with the statement, they would mark in the *Agree-column* with a tick, if they disagreed, they would mark in the *Disagree-column* with a tick. In case, they did not know or have no idea about the issue mentioned, they would put a tick in the *No opinion-column*. The questionnaire was written in Vietnamese to assure that respondents did not have any language problems in understanding every statement item.

## CHAPTER THREE: FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

### 3.1. The Effectiveness of GFEs on students' vocabulary acquisition

#### 3.1. 1. Comparison of pretest and posttest performance

Before the experiment, there was a small difference (0.60) between the control and experimental groups. As compared to the control group's posttest score, it could be assumed that the experimental group made greater improvements (22.22 compared to 20.46).

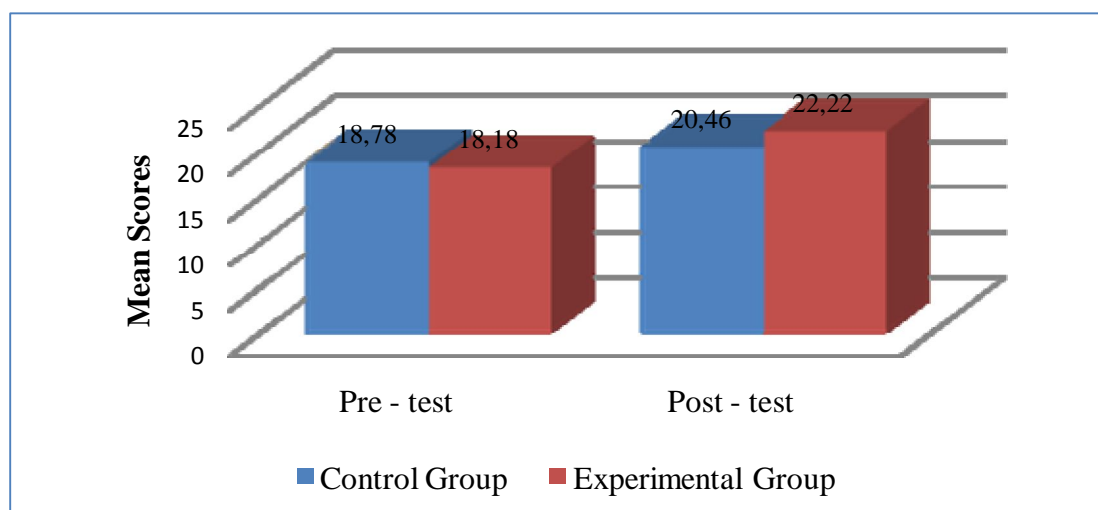


Figure 3.1: The differences between the means scores on the paired pretests and the paired posttests

### 3.1.2. Comparison of both groups' vocabulary gains after the experiment

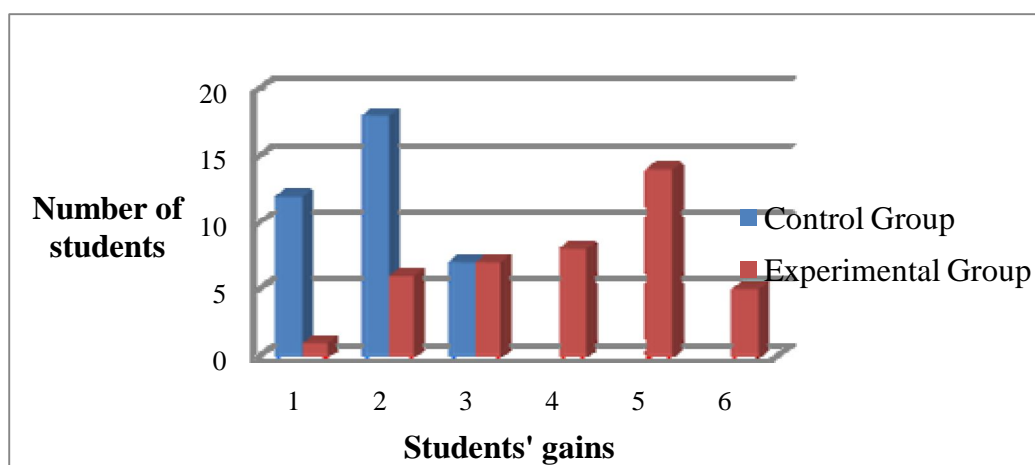


Figure 3.2: Differences in gain values obtained by both groups after the experiment

After the four-month experiment, there were significant differences existed between the two groups in terms of English vocabulary acquisition. Though both the experimental and control groups have made certain progress in their vocabulary enhancement at the end of the second semester, the improvement made by the experimental group who used gap-fill exercises was considerably greater than that made by the control group who followed the conventional teaching and learning of vocabulary.

### 3.2. Students' attitudes towards GFEs

The results of the questionnaire have indicated that almost all the participants in the experimental group presented their positive attitudes towards the application of gap-fill exercises which was carried out for a period of four months. They acknowledged the positive impacts of gap-fills on their English vocabulary acquisition.

## 3.3. Discussion

### 3.3.1. Vocabulary gains as resulted from GFEs

The comparison of the posttest scores gained by the two groups revealed a significant difference since the experimental group obtained a higher means score than the control group (22.22 compared to 20.46). Although these figures may not assure that the identification of the whole situation of a matter would be always true in other contexts,

they almost indicated that the presupposition set up before the experimental became realistic and reasonable. The findings of the significant difference between the two groups' test scores suggested that gap-fill exercises could offer opportunity for most experimental students to acquire vocabulary. The main assumption behind the application of gap-fill exercises is that as students become aware of the efficiency of gap-fill exercises, they can gradually build up their habit of doing vocabulary exercises to reinforce their acquired vocabulary as well as other language skills.

### **3.3.2. Students' attitudes towards gap-fill exercises.**

Through the discussion on the results of the questionnaire, it was possible to conclude that feedback from the experimental students basically accorded with their test scores. Most of them acknowledged that their vocabulary as well as grammar and other language skills had been improved owing to gap-fill exercises. This conclusion also makes the second research question become clear-cut, i.e., students appeared to hold positive attitudes towards the effectiveness of gap-fill exercises for vocabulary acquisition.

## **PART III: CONCLUSION**

### **1. Summary of the main findings**

Applying gap-fill exercises was really an effective way to help grade 10 students at DTH high school acquire vocabulary. Moreover, most experimental students had positive attitudes towards gap-fill exercises. To put it in another way, they acknowledged that they were capable of acquiring a lot of English vocabulary through gap-fill exercises and that this type of vocabulary exercises became an effective way to fortify their vocabulary. In the context of this study, it should be remembered that only words chosen by the researcher were tested. It was possible that there were other acquired words were not accounted for.

### **2. Limitations of the Study**

Firstly, the research was carried out in a comparatively short period of time.

Secondly, the number of the participants was only 82 and the subjects were not randomly assigned because the number of students in a class was fixed at the beginning of the school year . Therefore, the results found out from the research could not be highly generated. Lastly, there may be some other factors influencing the subjects of the study which is out of my control such as the students' learning motivation, learning habit, physical setting, etc.

### **3. Recommendations for the application of GFEs**

Firstly, there should be more time for vocabulary revision during class hours.

Secondly, gap- fill exercises should be used more frequently as an effective way to help students not only extend their vocabulary but also know how to use it appropriately. It would be a better idea for English teachers to make their own gap- fill exercises by themselves.

Also, it is very common that the level of English knowledge of Vietnamese students in an intact group is varied. The fact that each student has his/ her own language acquisition channel(s) requires teachers to make use of different teaching methods, employ different vocabulary teaching techniques and practice which are workable to their particular students. It is also a strong suggestion that gap-fill exercises should be accompanied with other types of vocabulary exercises in order to produce a better learning outcome in general and better vocabulary learning in particular.

### **4. Suggestions for Further Studies**

It would have been better if further researches with the efficiency of gap-fills had been done on a larger sample size for a longer time. Also, more studies should be carried out to consider more impacts of gap-fill exercises on grammar or language skills. Further researches should be conducted on the students at other educational establishments so that teachers would be able to employ gap-fill exercises as an alternative way for teaching and learning English vocabulary effectively. Moreover, in order to bring the present study to higher reliability and validity, it should be carried out under true experimental conditions in the future.