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PLESIONYMS AS A VOCABULARY TEACHING TOOL: THE CASE OF ESTONIAN EFL LEARNERS

Summary. The present study investigated the effectiveness of using plesionyms, or near-synonyms, as a vocabulary teaching tool in the English as a foreign language classroom and attempted to determine at what level of proficiency this technique could be incorporated. 40 Estonian university students who were enrolled in three different ESP courses participated in the study. The students were divided into 4 groups according to their level of proficiency: one experimental and one control group consisted of B1 level students; and one experimental and one control group consisted of B2 level students. The experimental groups learned the vocabulary in plesionymic pairs by discussing the differences as well as the similarities between near-synonyms. Meanwhile, the control groups learned the same words non-adjacently, meaning that the words were taught independently and neither differences nor similarities between words were discussed. Based on the findings, it was concluded that teaching vocabulary through plesionymic pairs facilitates immediate recall and long term memory retention among B2 level students. This vocabulary teaching method could be considered more effective at more advanced levels of proficiency.

Keywords: EFL learners; near-synonyms; plesionyms; vocabulary learning; vocabulary retention.

Introduction

Many educators may agree that developing vocabulary may be of primary importance for increasing language fluency—as well as for increasing listening and reading comprehension. Nevertheless, despite the fact that educators have been discussing vocabulary teaching and learning for decades, until now there has been no common consensus on the number of words speakers of foreign languages (L2 speakers) need to know to be considered fluent; how vocabulary should be taught, or most effectively learned; or based on what principles target vocabulary needs to be selected by educators (Hazenberg & Hulstijn, 1996; Carter & McCarthy, 1988, p. 2013). Moreover, once a learner develops a working grammatical framework, expanding vocabulary in order to express and understand complex ideas becomes of paramount importance. As Schmitt (2000, p. 4) puts it, "the grammar of a language is made up of a limited set of

rules, but a person is unlikely to ever run out of words to learn." Wilkins expressed a similar idea: "There is not much value in being able to produce grammatical sentences if one has not got the vocabulary that is needed to convey what one wishes to say ... While without grammar very little can be conveyed, without vocabulary nothing can be conveyed" (1972, pp. 110–111). As a matter of fact, insufficient depth and range of vocabulary knowledge might be the main obstacle for non-native speakers in the process of becoming fluent in their second language as vocabulary range is frequently associated with increased reading and writing abilities (Staehr, 2018). For instance, a study conducted by Hilton (2008) among university students who spoke English, French, or Italian as their second language concluded that lexical competence plays a crucial role in fluency. Based on the findings of the study, the researcher specifically pointed out that it is "crucial for spoken production (and certainly for L2 listening as well), to encourage our learners to build up the biggest possible L2 lexicon" (Hilton, 2008, p. 163). Thus, vocabulary learning is an essential part of every EFL classroom.

The importance of language precision cannot be underestimated. In order to avoid being misunderstood it is important that not only grammatical rules are observed, but also that a speaker maintains awareness of various connotations attached to words (Sun, 2011). Finding the most appropriate word can be a complicated task since there are many factors that contribute to meaning creation. According to Saussure (1916, p. 121), signs, or words in the context of this study, gain their meaning based on their distinguishing features: "whatever distinguishes one sign from the others constitutes it. Difference makes character just as it makes value and the unit." When talking about synonymy, the emphasis is usually placed on the shared semantic features of synonymous words. In order to become a proficient language user, however, one needs to understand commonalities as well as differences between words. This is where the value of plesionyms lies. Plesionyms, or near-synonyms, are words that are "not fully inter-substitutable but varying in their shades of denotation, connotation, implicature, emphasis, or register" (Edmonds and Hirst, 2002, p. 107). Examples of plesionyms include judge vs. evaluate, vary vs. fluctuate, narrow vs. restrict, acquire vs. derive, evident vs. visible, ecology vs. environment, lie vs. misrepresentation, etc. While students

may know those words independently from one another, when asked to explain the difference between a pair of words, they might not necessarily be able to do so, and are forced to think on a more engaging level. Analyzing different degrees of meaning presents a number of challenges for students, but ultimately can be really rewarding as a learning process. The similarities between plesionyms are as important as their differences, and in the unique aspects of their interrelationship of meaning plesionyms might find their potential as pedagogical devices.

Let's examine a pair of words which are similar yet different in terms of their connotations: vary vs. fluctuate. These two words may on the surface appear to be synonymic; however, looking at the complex relationship between the definitional concepts embedded in the meanings can lead to greater associations because they are in fact plesionyms, rather than true synonyms. While the words overlap in meaning in certain instances, and thus are related, it is in understanding their relationship of similarity in terms of difference that a memory map can be effectively formed. For instance, vary and fluctuate may look like synonyms to a beginner student. To fluctuate, however, is to move up and down or side to side, to vibrate in some cases, like a sound wave, or musical notes—there is a relationship of rhythm, like sea waves; however, to vary, which includes fluctuation in certain respects, can also take on a much broader scope, as in the sense of a mathematical variable. So, what fluctuates may vary, but what varies may not just fluctuate. The stock market fluctuates. Its numbers go up and down, but you can take a variety (vary) of numbers from that range, and how they fluctuate, and when the fluctuation occurs may vary. As one prepares to go on a vacation, there are several variables that must be taken into consideration: the weather, the season, your finances: these are variables, and the variables themselves can fluctuate, but they are also distinct from the idea of waves fluctuating or set rhythmic patterning. This is just an example of the types of complex associative connections that can be made into a network of memory connections between plesionymic concepts for vocabulary learning that paints abstract ecological frameworks of relationships that are more difficult to forget than more mechanical methods of memorization such as using flash cards for instance. In the fact that one must fully understand in what context plesionyms might be used interchangeably

and when one word would be more accurate than the other one might lie the power of plesionyms to create mental memory networks which could potentially facilitate long term memory retention. Both vary and fluctuate, for instance, can be used to describe a changing number (e.g., The number of students in class fluctuates/varies depending on time of year); however, when talking about diversifying or modifying a range of options vary would work better than fluctuate (e.g., Getting a cookbook can help you vary your diet by trying out new recipes).

Students who learn English as a foreign language often make mistakes associated with using synonyms (Shen, 2010; Mohammed, 2014; Khazaal, 2019). The study, for instance, conducted by Alanazi (2017) revealed that students at different levels of proficiency, including advanced students, experience difficulties using synonyms accurately, as they tend to "employ the same word to convey the same concept over and over again," (p. 59) rather than consciously making their speech more diverse by using related synonyms. Students who have not understood the diversity of synonymic vocabulary may produce grammatically or lexically wrong constructions when they attempt to incorporate more synonyms into their speech. As Thornbury (2002) pointed out, mistakenly treating synonyms as interchangeable and substituting one word in a collocational phrase with a near-synonym may result in the production of "non-standard" or unnatural expressions of English by EFL learners (p. 7). For example, a lesser understanding of the diversity of near-synonyms may result in a student saying "to evaluate a competition" thinking that to judge and to evaluate are synonymously adequate in the collocational phrase. This bears on the importance of not only increasing students' vocabulary, but also upon educating them about the nature of synonymic and plesionymic relations.

The present study is aimed at contributing to the research done on the subject of using synonyms in an EFL classroom and encouraging further research into the subject of plesionyms as a subtype of synonyms. Incorporating plesionyms as a vocabulary teaching methodology can benefit students who are trying to advance their English language proficiency. In order to use plesionyms effectively one must be aware of the overlapping features between them as well the subtle yet important aspects that set them apart.

That is why analyzing similarities as well as differences between plesionymic sets of vocabulary can increase students' understanding of semantic relationships between words. Even though vocabulary acquisition has been previously and extensively studied, the linguistic synonymic aspect of the current study is unique in that it goes beyond mere synonymic relationships. This study employs word contrasts and comparisons using plesionymic pairs for their potential to create more profound conceptual associations between words. Additionally, the study is useful for the academic community in terms of the sample being researched. Estonia is a country that can be described as multilingual and multicultural. In addition to the Estonian and Russian languages that are commonly spoken, a large part of the population has a command of Finnish due to historical factors. English is also widely taught in schools and universities. Studying foreign language acquisition in the Estonian context with multilingual practices may yield interesting insights into language learning and awareness. The study is also unique as it looks into EFL students who speak Estonian as their mother tongue which has slightly less than a million native speakers worldwide ("Estonian speaking," n.d.).

This study was carried out in an attempt to investigate the effectiveness of using plesionyms as a vocabulary teaching technique. The main goal of the study is to find out if teaching new vocabulary in plesionymic pairs can improve the learning process and contribute to long term memory retention. Also, one of the primary aims of the study is to determine at what language proficiency level this method should be introduced, as well as what role prior knowledge plays in learning vocabulary through plesionyms.

Based on the objectives of the study, the following research questions were formulated:

(1) Is there any significant relationship between teaching vocabulary through plesionyms and improvement of EFL learners' vocabulary retention?

(2) Is there any significant relationship between teaching vocabulary through plesionyms and non-adjacently at B2 and B1 level of proficiency?

(3) Is there any significant difference between

the students who knew one word in a plesionymic pair and those who did not know both words?

Based on the research questions above three null hypotheses were developed:

(1) Teaching vocabulary through plesionyms has no effect on learning new vocabulary at the B2 level of proficiency.

(2) Teaching vocabulary through plesionyms has no effect on learning new vocabulary at the B1 level of proficiency.

(3) When learning through plesionyms, knowing one word in a pair makes no difference as opposed to not knowing both words.

Literature Review

Synonymy

Studies that look at teaching vocabulary by specifically focusing on using synonyms demonstrate contradictory results: while some studies demonstrate the effectiveness of learning vocabulary using synonyms, others prove this method to be ineffective for long term memory retention. Some studies done on synonymy suggest that it can be a powerful tool to facilitate learning and help EFL students remember words better. A study of 84 Japanese students not only showed that using synonymy in the classroom can facilitate learning of vocabulary, but it also suggested that "learners may acquire knowledge of synonyms more easily than non-synonyms" (Webb, 2007, p. 130). Another study of 120 Iranian adult learners concluded that "the participants receiving instruction through synonymous sets outperformed the others" (Sotoudehnama & Soleimanifard, 2013, p. 40). This study also suggested that learning vocabulary with emphasis on semantic relations between words led to better memory retention.

In another study conducted by Liu and Shouman (2014) which involved 3 groups consisting of 42 native English speakers, 40 intermediate English proficiency level Chinese students, and 26 advanced English proficiency level Chinese students, the participants were asked to select the most appropriate synonyms from a list in order to complete the sentence and then to justify their

choice. Based on the data collected during the experiment, the researchers concluded that the responses given by the advanced group were the most similar to answers provided by native speakers. This implies that as a student's level of proficiency increases, usage of collocations and synonyms improves accordingly. The advanced group also demonstrated the ability "to adopt unique construals and usages required by unique contexts" unlike the intermediate group which experienced difficulties with salient usages of relatively low frequency (Liu & Shouman, 2014, p. 7).

On the other hand, there are many studies that have concluded the opposite: learning through synonyms can be useful in the short run; however, this method has not been shown to be as effective for long term memory retention of vocabulary (McGeoch & McDonald, 1931; Tajik, 2018). For example, the study conducted by Sotoudehnama and Soleimanifard (2013) among Iranian learners of English as a foreign language revealed that the methods of teaching new vocabulary through synonymous pairs is the best way of clustering for short-term retention. While the students who learned new words through synonymous pairs remembered the most words, the depth of their knowledge was not superior to the results of the students from two other groups. The study concluded that teaching vocabulary though hyponym categorization is the best way to encourage long term retention. If a student's goal is to remember as many words as possible in a short time span (e.g., studying for a test), then grouping new vocabulary into sets of synonyms would be the best approach.

Plesionymy

The concept of plesionymy has been discussed in the context of synonymic relationships among words for a couple of decades (Cruse, 1986; Hirst, 1995; Taylor, 2002; Murphy, 2003; Carter, 2012). Nevertheless, there remain a few challenges when it comes to categorizing plesionyms and developing a system of classification that would allow for distinguishing plesionyms from other types of synonyms. DiMarco, Hirst, and Stede (1993) define plesionyms as words that differ in terms of their semantic as well as stylistic aspects. They argue that words can be considered plesionyms when in the case of substitution, not

only the meaning of the message changes but the style as well. For example, in a sentence "I made {an error | a blunder} in introducing her to my husband" the word blunder is different from error not only semantically in that it implies for greater negligence, but also stylistically as the word blunder is stronger and more specific than error (DiMarco et al., 1993, p. 121).

In his book Cruse (2004, p. 56) points out that plesionymy is a special case because when we look at synonymous pairs of words the similarities between them are more notable than the differences; but in case of near-synonyms, their contrasting features might be more important than some shared characteristics. The most complicated part is that in order to be considered as a plesionym, the difference between words cannot be too substantial. The differences between near-synonyms have to be either "minor, or backgrounded, or both" (Cruse, 2004, p. 157). Cruse lists 4 differences which can be regarded as "minor": adjacent position of degree (fog: mist, big: huge); particular adverbial characteristics (chuckle: giggle, drink: quaff); aspectual differences (calm: placid); and prototype of centre differences (brave: courageous). The difference between pretty and handsome is characterized as backgrounded since pretty is used in reference to women and handsome is used to describe males. Cruse (2004) concludes that the subject of near-synonyms needs to be researched further.

Storjohann (2009) describes plesionyms as words that demonstrate a certain degree of similarity but at the same time show some differences—thus they cannot be categorized as absolute or propositional synonyms. The author argues that the focus of attention should be shifted from shared characteristics of plesionyms to their differences in order to establish "a relation of meaning equivalence" (2009, p. 2142). As a result of corpus analysis, Storjohann (2009) concludes that differentiating features of plesionyms are just as implicit and thus should not be regarded as subordinate.

Storjohann argues that in addition to systematizing plesionym variation, linguists need to study the information that is stored in speakers' memory as "conceptual knowledge," as well as how this knowledge is being used when deciding which plesionyms are more suitable in certain contexts (Storjohann, 2009, p. 2143). Speakers must be aware of how certain words might be interpreted differently depending on context and they need to be able

to use the words meaningfully in accordance with their intentions. When communicating, speakers activate shared or distinct features of words based on the context in order to get their message across. It was not cheap, but it was affordable. Since both common and differentiating features of words are important, Storjohann (2009) suggests that the term near-synonyms should not be used as an alternative one to plesionyms. The concept of near-synonymy implies that shared features are more important than the contrastive ones, as they are usually viewed as a "minor or accidental discourse occurrence" (p. 2145). It should not be argued which aspects of plesionyms are of more importance: common or differing. Instead, they should be viewed as "equally present as implicit conceptual and lexical knowledge" (Storjohann, 2009, p. 2155). The complex nature of plesionyms and the fact that this aspect needs further researching makes this linguistic phenomenon an interesting subject to be investigated, not only by means of corpus analysis, but in the context of applied linguistics as well.

In summary, recently generated studies on the subject of plesionymy in the context of EFL roughly fall into three categories. The studies that analyze students' mistakes (Alanazi, 2017; Krebt, 2017) associated with the use of near-synonyms constitute the first category. The second category includes studies with a focus on learners' ability to discriminate between near-synonyms (Miso, 2020; Wongkhan and Thienthong, 2020). Finally, the third largest category includes corpus-based studies of plesionymic pairs or sets (Petcharat and Phoocharoensil, 2017; Wang, 2019; Islamiyah and Muchamad 2019). This study, unlike others, investigates how presenting new vocabulary in plesionymic pairs may not only aid students in their ability to choose the right plesionyms, but also how plesionymic-based teaching may influence students' immediate recall vs. long term retention of newly acquired words.

Methods

The current research is based on experimental data obtained though intervention. 65 university students who were enrolled in 3 different English for Special Purposes (ESP) classes took part in the following study. In consideration of the demographic situation in Estonia—where 24.8% of

the population, as of January 2019, identified themselves as Russians—the students were asked to complete a short questionnaire aimed at learning about their linguistic background (Statistics Estonia, 2019). In addition to this, the students took the Oxford Placement test to ensure the homogeneity of the study participants. Based on the questionnaire and the results of the placement test, those students who spoke Russian as their native language, as well as those at C1 and A2 level of English proficiency, were removed from the study, giving a total of 40 students. All of the remaining participants were native speakers of Estonian. The participants were predominantly female with only a quarter of the students being male. The age of the participants ranged from 21 to 50, with roughly half of the students aged from 21–35 and the other aged from 36–50. Slightly more than half of the participants had obtained a bachelor's degree prior to taking the ESP course. Additionally, a third of the study participants were in the process of completing their BA program; while a couple of them had already received a master's degree, and one student had a PhD at the moment of taking the ESP course.

The 40 students were divided into four groups based on their level of proficiency: B2 level plesionymic group B2PG (N = 13), B2 level non-adjacent group or control group B2CG (N = 11), B1 level plesionymic group B1PG (N = 8), and B1 level control group B1CG (N = 8). The experimental groups B2PG and B1PG received the target words in plesionymic pairs. Meanwhile, the control groups B2CG and B1CG were learning the target words non-adjacently (not in plesionymic pairs).

In the questionnaires distributed prior to the treatment stage of the experiment, most of the students (63%) marked that English was very important for them. 28% of the participants considered English moderately important, 6% not very important, and 3% not important at all. The results of the questionnaire also revealed that most of the students (53%) use English the most at school or in their studies, which implies that most of them do not use English outside of the university. 28% of the respondents use English the most at work, and 19% in their free time. To the question "Have you lived abroad continuously for three months or longer?" 66% of the respondents answered "No" and 34% answered "Yes."

Prior to the treatment phase, the students were asked to sign consent

forms and to fill in a background questionnaire. The initial 65 students took The Oxford Placement Test (OPT) which consisted of grammatical tasks to ensure that students met the criteria for the assumed levels and to safeguard the accuracy of the study results. Based on the results of the test, 15 students were discarded from the study as their level was nonconforming. The purpose of the background questionnaire was to gather information about the students that would help understand their linguistic profile. The questionnaire covered such aspects as what native language students speak; how they use English outside of the classroom; whether they have lived abroad, among others.

In addition, the students took a pre-test which included the target vocabulary (plesionyms). The goal of the test was to determine how familiar the students were with the words at the outset. By gauging the level by which students were familiar with the study words prior to the exercises, the learning outcomes could be classified in relation to prior knowledge. The students were given a list containing all of the target words in alphabetical order. They were then asked to put a check mark next to any of the words they fully understood and to write a brief definition or explanation in their native language. Another alternative was to make a sentence using the word. If a student was not able to explain or define a word in their native language, or if a student mistranslated the word, it was inferred that this word was unknown to the student.

The study took place during the second half of the fall semester. There were 4 treatment sessions (40 minutes each). During each session the students were introduced to 3 pairs of plesionyms for a total of 12 pairs taught (the list of plesionimic pairs can be found in Appendix 1). In both experimental groups B2EG and B1EG the plesionymic pairs were taught simultaneously by discussing similarities and differences between the words. The target words were demonstrated on a big screen using a projector and discussed in different contexts through various sentences. Each word came with a definition and 3 example sentences containing the target word. Plesionimic pairs were presented side by side and the differences as well as similarities were discussed orally with the group. In the control group (B2CG and B1CG) each word of a plesionymic pair was taught separately, or non-adjacently. The students in the control group studied the same words with definitions and the same

example sentences as the experimental groups, with the only difference being the fact that the target words were not presented in pairs— moreover, neither the similarities nor differences in meaning were discussed.

Over the period of the experiment, a total of 24 words (12 pairs) were taught. Based on the design of the study, the students were tested twice for every session that new plesionyms (3 pairs) were taught. The first test, or the immediate test, was performed in order to check the students' initial recall of the words, or their short-term memory retention. The second test, the delayed post-test, was given two weeks after the target vocabulary had been taught to study long term memory retention. The content of the delayed and the immediate tests was the same. The test consisted of two parts: the first exercise required the students to match the words with their definitions, and the second exercise involved filling in the gaps. Each test consisted of 18 gaps which needed to be filled in with the target vocabulary. Each word had to be used three times in the test.

The sentences as well as definitions used during the treatment sessions and in the tests were taken from the Cambridge Dictionary available online (Cambridge, n.d.). A number of studies have proven monolingual dictionaries to be an effective tool for intentional methods of vocabulary teaching and acquisition (Ahangari & Dogolsara, 2015; Yazdi, 2014). Another study conducted by Ansarin and Khojasteh (2013) demonstrated that the context method was superior to learning through synonyms or definitions alone in terms of students' short term and long term memory retention. The current study incorporated dictionary definitions in addition to providing the context for each target word as a way of teaching vocabulary. Plesionymic pairs used in the study were selected from a book called Check Your Vocabulary for Academic English written by David Porter (2007). The book is specifically designed for university and college EFL students at upper-intermediate level of proficiency and above to help them "learn a common core of vocabulary which will be useful for almost any subject" (Porter, 2007, p. 2). David Porter used Nation's book Teaching and Learning Vocabulary, which was published in 1990 and included a compilation of lexical items retrieved from various academic texts, as the main source for vocabulary selection (Porter, 2007, p. 3). A number of exercises presented in Porter's book incorporate plesionyms and

require learners of English to choose the most suitable word from a pair or set of three near-synonyms. Porter's book was used to select near-synonymic pairs to be taught in the current study for two primary reasons: the target audience of the textbook resembled the sample of the current study and certain exercises utilized plesionyms as a vocabulary building technique (examples of exercises which incorporate near-synonyms can be found on pp. 5, 11, 14, 18).

Data Analysis

The results of the immediate and delayed tests were entered into the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) version 23. SPSS datasets were used for descriptive statistics. In order to investigate whether the difference between experimental and control groups was statistically significant, a Kruskal-Wallis test was performed followed by the Wilcoxon Rank Sum post-hoc comparison test.

A Chi-square test was administered in order to determine whether there was a statistically significant difference between those students from the B2EG who knew one word in a pair and those who did not know both words. This test is aimed at determining whether students' prior knowledge of vocabulary influences their performance on immediate and delayed tests.

Results

The Kruskal-Wallis test was conducted to determine if the relationship between groups B2EG, B2CG, B1EG, B1CG was statistically significant. The results of the Kruskal-Wallis test for the immediate test indicate a statistically significant difference between the four groups, $H(3) = 16.4$, $p < .001$. The Wilcoxon Rank Sum post-hoc test was conducted to determine which groups were significantly different. The results revealed that the difference between the B2EG (Mdn = 17.3) and the two B1 level groups, B1EG (Mdn = 15) and B1CG (Mdn = 13), was statistically significant, U(NB2EG = 13, NB1EG = 8,) = 11.50, $z = -2.97$, $p = .002$; U(NB2EG = 13, NB1CG = 8,) = 4, $z = -3.5$, $p < .001$. However, the difference between the B2CG (Mdn = 16) and the two B1 level groups, B1EG and B1CG, was not statistically significant, U(NB2CG = 11,

NB1EG = 8,) = 30.50, z = -1.12, p = .27; U(NB2CG = 11, NB1CG = 8,) = 23.50, z = -1.7, p = .09.

More importantly, the B2 level experimental group (Mdn = 17.3) outperformed the B2 level control group (Mdn = 16) on the immediate tests. A Wilcoxon Rank Sum test indicate that the difference between the groups was statistically significant, U(NB2EG = 13, NB2CG = 11,) = 33.50, z = -2.25, p = .026. Nevertheless, there was no significant difference between B1EG (Mdn = 15) and B1CG (Mdn = 13) despite the fact that the experimental group outperformed the control group on the immediate test, U(NB1EG = 8, NB1CG = 8,) = 26.50, z = -.57, p = .57.

The results of the Kruskal-Wallis test for the delayed test illustrate that there is a significant difference between the four groups, H(3) = 14.2, p = .003. The Wilcoxon Rank Sum test indicated that the difference between B2EG (Mdn = 17.2) and B2CG (Mdn = 15) was significant, U(NB2EG = 13, NB2CG = 11,) = 12, z = -3.5, p < .001. Similarly to the results on the immediate tests, the difference between the B2EG (Mdn = 17.2) and the two B1 level groups, B1EG (Mdn = 15.8) and B1CG (Mdn = 13.7), was statistically significant, U(NB2EG = 13, NB1EG = 8,) = 24, z = -2.05, p = .045; U(NB2EG = 13, NB1CG = 8,) = 13.5, z = -2.8, p = .003. Nevertheless, the difference between the B2CG (Mdn = 15) and the two B1 level groups, B1EG and B1CG, was not statistically significant, U(NB2CG = 11, NB1EG = 8,) = 35.50, z = -.71, p = .49; U(NB2CG = 11, NB1CG = 8,) = 38, z = -.49, p = .65.

As the results above indicate, B2EG outperformed B2CG in both the immediate and delayed tests and in both cases the difference was statistically significant. On average the experimental group knew 3.5 words out of 6, while the control group knew 3.6 words. This indicates that there is sufficient evidence to reject the first null hypothesis which states that teaching vocabulary though plesionyms has no effect on learning new vocabulary at B2 level of proficiency. This finding demonstrates that the initial recall as well as long term retention of the words is significantly different between the students who learned the words in plesionymic pairs and those who learned the vocabulary non-adjacently.

At the B1 level the findings were quite different. The experimental

group outperformed the control group on the immediate test; however, the difference was not significant. Similar to the results of the immediate test, there was no significant difference between the two groups based on the results of the delayed test despite the fact that the experimental group (Mdn = 15.8) did better than the control group (Mdn = 13.7), U(NB1EG = 8, NB1CG = 8,) = 24, z = -.85, p = .44. In both cases, there was no sufficient evidence for the second null hypothesis which states that teaching vocabulary though plesionyms has no effect on learning new vocabulary at B1 level of proficiency to be rejected. The control group knew slightly more words than the experimental group on average: 3.31 as opposed to 2.71. Nevertheless, the median number of correct answers given by the students from the experimental group is higher than the average number of the correct answers in the control group thus further studies need to be conducted in order to confirm or reject the findings of this study at the B1 level of proficiency.

Unlike B1EG, whose performance was not significantly different from the performance of the control group, the advanced experimental group outperformed the control group significantly. Based on this fact, the decision was made to look closer into the B2EG in order to investigate whether prior knowledge of vocabulary made a difference in the performance of the advanced learners on the immediate and delayed tests. The results of a Chi-square test, comparing the frequency of responses between the students who knew one word in a plesionymic pair and those to whom both words were new, demonstrated that the difference was not statistically significant on the immediate tests, X2 (1, N = 246) = .551, p = .458 (see Table 1).

Table 1

Results of the Chi-square test

	Chi-score	*P value*
Immediate Quiz	.551	.458
Delayed Quiz	35.25	**.000**

Consequently, the third null hypothesis which states that knowing one word in a pair makes no difference, as opposed to not knowing both words, when learning through plesionyms cannot be rejected. On the other hand, the results of the delayed tests displayed in Table 1 were different and indicated

a statistically significant difference between the students based on their prior knowledge of the vocabulary items, $X2$ (1, N = 246) = 35.246, $p < .001$.

The results of the delayed tests showed that those students who knew one of the words in a pair outperformed those students who did not know both words and made fewer mistakes, meaning that in this case the fourth null hypothesis can be rejected. To be specific, only 5 responses out of 138 were wrong. Meanwhile, the students to whom both words were new made more errors using the target words in context: 34 wrong answers out of 108 responses.

Discussion

Using synonyms as a vocabulary teaching method yields contradictory results in terms of retention of words. There are, however, different types of synonymic relationships between words, and the current study specifically focuses on the linguistic phenomenon of near-synonyms. Unlike other studies which presented synonymous words as mostly interchangeable to EFL students, this study presented words to students in a variety of contexts which would highlight the differentiating features between near-synonyms. It was crucial for EFL students in this study to understand similarities as well as differences between plesionymic words in order to use them effectively in a variety of contexts as the words taught in the classroom could not be used interchangeably in the contexts discussed in class.

The results of the study revealed a statistically significant difference between the B2EG and B2CG but not between B1EG and B1CG support the findings of the study conducted by Liu and Shouman (2014). Liu and Shouman's study suggested that students' awareness and usage of collocations and synonyms improve as they become more proficient. The answers given by the advanced learners resembled the lexical choices of native speakers of English. This could explain why learning through plesionyms was more successful among upper-intermediate students than among intermediate learners in the current study. The level of proficiency may be an important factor which could determine whether the students can fully understand the underlying differences between plesionymic words and whether they can

take full advantage of the benefits which arise from comparing and contrasting plesionyms in pairs. Intermediate level students might feel overwhelmed by all the intricacies of using plesionyms effectively as they are not as experienced and comfortable with foreign language as advanced users usually are.

The fact that advanced learners from the experimental group who knew one word in a plesionymic pair outperformed the students for whom both words were unfamiliar confirms the findings of the study conducted by Webb (2007). Webb's study demonstrated that "words with known synonyms are easier to learn than those without," which can be attributed to Nation's idea of "learning burden" (2001, p. 131). It implies that having pre-existing knowledge about a new word in a foreign language can facilitate learning and retention of a new lexicon. Pre-existing knowledge can come in the form of another known word which is synonymous with a new word being learned or it could be an equivalent of the new word in a learner's native language or any other language a student speaks. In the current study students who learned new words which were paired with near-synonyms they already knew resulted in them making fewer mistakes on the delayed tests. The results of the delayed tests suggest that prior knowledge makes a difference in how well students are able to retain the new words. This is a useful finding as it can help EFL teachers with developing techniques for teaching new target words effectively. Even for advanced users of English, learning new words in plesionymic pairs when both words are unknown might be slightly too overwhelming as it requires them to be able to comprehend all the features which constitute similarities and differences between the words. If teachers introduce new words in relation to the words students are already familiar with, however, it could make it easier for students to understand and retain a new lexicon.

The performance of the intermediate groups and the fact that there was no statistically significant difference between the experimental and the control groups at this level can be attributed to their English proficiency, which apparently was not sufficient for delineating complex relations between plesionimic pairs. This outcome resembles Sotoudehnama and Soleimanifard's study's conclusion, which stated that "language proficiency played a significant role in learning target words […]. Thus, high proficient learners from all groups having different semantic relations outperformed the low proficient ones"

(2013, p. 51). Thus, when choosing to incorporate plesionyms in their classrooms, EFL teachers should be aware of the possible implications of students' proficiency level for how successfully they will be able to use and retain the target words. Alternatively, a challenge for intermediate students may lie not in level of fluency, but rather in their understanding of synonymic relations. As was discussed above, similarities between synonyms are often emphasized over differences between them. Viewing synonyms as essentially similar words might mislead students into confusing the synonymous with the interchangeable. This type of thinking, as pointed out by Thornbury (2002), may have resulted in the intermediate groups underperforming.

Limitations

The present study has two main limitations. First of all, the sample size of the experimental and control groups was rather small and unequal which might have affected the outcome of the study. Second of all, as mentioned previously, the study involved students of different age groups, with different levels of education, studying at different levels. In the light of those limitations, future studies which would test the effectiveness of plesionyms with groups of the same size and a more homogenous background are needed in order to test the findings of the current study.

Conclusion and Pedagogical Implications

Taking into account how important developing and expanding vocabulary is for EFL learners, this study attempts to shed some light on the implications of using plesionyms as a vocabulary teaching tool. Learning vocabulary through plesionyms proved to be effective for immediate recall and long term memory retention at the B2 level of proficiency. This finding may suggest that plesionyms as a vocabulary teaching tool might best be introduced at higher levels of language proficiency since students may need to have more of a foundation to appreciate various shades of meaning between similar yet different words. What this implies is that the proficiency level that a learner begins with will influence how effective plesionymic pair learning will be.

Further studies, however, need to be done in order to further investigate the effectiveness of this method, including similar testing on C1 level or native speakers. Also, some further studies into the role of prior knowledge for learning new words with plesionymic or synonymous relations would expand on the subject of the current study.

EFL teachers could incorporate plesionymic pairs in their classroom to challenge their advanced students by encouraging them to articulate the differences between the pairs of words. By providing students with a set of sentences which incorporate plesionymic words in various contexts, teachers could try to elicit the differences and similarities between the pairs from their students. This activity could work well with more proficient users of English as demonstrated by the findings of the current study. Discussing plesionymic pairs could also be an interesting alternative to the routine "fill in the gap" or "matching" exercises prevalent in the teaching field. Additionally, teachers could resort to using corpora (e.g. The Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA), British National Corpus (BNC), or The International Corpus of English (ICE)) in their classrooms. A corpus is a valuable source of up-to-date authentic texts that can be used to contextualize vocabulary being taught in the classroom. Students could be asked to explore similarities and differences between plesionymic pairs of words based on sentences taken from a corpus. The sentences could be either pre-selected by a teacher prior to the lesson or more independent students could do their own research once taught how to use a corpus. Students could also be encouraged to come up with their own dictionary-like definitions of target words based on clues they discover in the corpus. While planning and preparing such activities requires additional teacher time and effort, incorporating plesionyms into the classroom can facilitate vocabulary learning and ultimately allow students to become more accurate and discerning speakers of English.

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Appendix 1

1. eloquent vs articulate
2. attitude vs perception
3. include vs involve
4. obsolete vs antique
5. concentration vs focus
6. judge vs evaluate
7. visible vs evident
8. fragrance vs odour
9. remove vs withdraw
10. violate vs breach
11. lucid vs obvious
12. range vs variety

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PLESIONÜÜMID KUI SÕNAVARA ÕPETAMISMEETOD: INGLISE KEELE ÕPPIJATE JUHTUMIANALÜÜS EESTI NÄITEL

Annotatsioon. Artiklis uuritakse plesionüümide ehk peaaegu-sünonüümide kui sõnavara õpetamise meetodi tõhusust inglise keele keele tunnis. Eesmärk on selgitada, millisel inglise keele oskustasemel on selle meetod kasutamine kasulik. 30 eesti üliõpilast kolmest erinevast erialase inglise keele rühmast osalesid uuringus. Üliõpilasi jagati nelja gruppi vastavalt inglise keele oskustasemele: üks eksperimentaal- ja üks kontrollgrupp B1 tasemel ning üks eksperimentaal- ja üks kontrollgrupp B2 tasemel. Eksperimentaalgrupid olid õppinud sõnavara plesionüümipaaride kaudu, arutades peaaegu-sünonüümide erinevusi ja sarnasusi. Samas kontrollgrupp oli õppinud samu sõnu suvalises järjekorras ning erinevusi ja sarnasusi ei arutatud. Tulemuste põhjal võib järeldada, et sõnavara õpetamine plesionüümide kaudu soodustab sõnavara meeldejätmist pikaajalisse mällu B2 tasemel üliõpilaste hulgas. Seda sõnavara õpetamise meetodit võib pidada tõhusamaks pigem edasijõudnud keeletasemega õppijate puhul.

Võtmesõnad: sõnavara õpetamine; plesionüümid; peaaegu-sünonüümid; erialane inglise keel.

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PLEZIONIMAI KAIP ŽODYNO MOKYMO PRIEMONĖ: ANGLŲ KAIP PIRMOSIOS UŽSIENIO KALBOS BESIMOKANČIŲ ESTŲ ATVEJIS

Santrauka. Šiame tyrime buvo analizuojamas plezionimų, arba artimų sinonimų, vartojimo kaip žodyno mokymo priemonės veiksmingumas anglų kaip pirmosios užsienio kalbos mokymo klasėje ir buvo bandoma nustatyti, kokiame kalbos žinių lygyje galima šią techniką taikyti. Tyrime dalyvavo 40 Estijos universiteto studentų, lankiusių tris skirtingus specialybės anglų kalbos (angl. *English for specific purposes*, ESP) kursus. Studentai buvo suskirstyti į 4 grupes pagal jų kalbos žinių lygį: B1 lygio studentų viena eksperimentinė ir viena kontrolinė grupė; B2 lygio studentų viena eksperimentinė ir viena kontrolinė grupė. Eksperimentinės grupės mokėsi žodyno pagal plezionimų poras, aptardami jų skirtumus ir artimų sinonimų panašumus. Kontrolinės grupės tuos pačius žodžius mokėsi pateiktus atskirai, t. y. nebuvo aptariami žodžių panašumai ir skirtumai. Išanalizavus rezultatus buvo prieita prie išvados, kad mokant žodyno ir pateikiant plezionimų poras B2 lygio studentams buvo lengviau juos atsiminti. Šis žodyno mokymo būdas gali būti laikomas veiksmingesniu mokantis kalbas aukštesniu lygiu.

Pagrindinės sąvokos: anglų kalbos studentai; artimi sinonimai; plezionimai; žodyno mokymasis; žodyno išlaikymas.