Vocabulary notebooks: A tool to enhance memory or a memories notebook?

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Abstract

Over the last three decades the field of second and foreign language acquisition has seen the resurgence of interest in the vocabulary study as a key aspect of language learning strategies. This consideration towards vocabulary learning strategies has led to considerable research in this field, in particular on how vocabulary instruction contributes to learner autonomy.

This study replicates an original study by Walters, JoDee and Bozkurt, Neval (2009) The effect of keeping vocabulary notebooks on vocabulary acquisition, *Language Teaching Research* 13,4; pp. 403-423; on the effectiveness and classroom validity of the use of vocabulary notebooks as an efficient learning strategy for the EFL classroom with a school group of 13 Spanish learners of English.

The study examines the students' vocabulary retention through a vocabulary notebook programme implemented in a four week schedule which includes: (i) a vocabulary pre test to a control group and a treatment group (ii) notebook programme implementation in treatment group and incidental learning of vocabulary to control group through text reading and (iii) a vocabulary post test to both work groups.

Results suggest that whereas students from the treatment group performed slightly better than the control group in terms of vocabulary acquisition, none of the strategies seem to be totally successful in terms of positive perception by students regarding learning strategy validity or usefulness. Also, the use of a vocabulary notebook does not seem to have a significant impact on vocabulary retention by itself, and some variations to enhance its learning potential are recommended.

Resumen

Durante las últimas décadas el campo de la adquisición de una segunda lengua o de una lengua extranjera ha visto renacer el interés por el estudio de vocabulario como elemento fundamental dentro de las estrategias de aprendizaje. La atención en este área de estudio ha generado una gran cantidad de trabajos de investigación que tratan este aspecto de la lengua, y en particular, cómo el estudio de vocabulario puede contribuir a conseguir autonomía en el aprendizaje.

El presente estudio intenta replicar un estudio original de Walters, JoDee y Bozkurt, Neval (2009) The effect of keeping vocabulary notebooks on vocabulary acquisition, *Language Teaching Research* 13,4; p. 403-423; sobre la efectividad y validez del uso de cuadernos de vocabulario como estrategia de aprendizaje mediante su implementación en la clase de inglés de un grupo de 13 alumnos de lengua materna castellano. El estudio analiza la retención de vocabulario por parte del alumnado a través del uso de un cuaderno de vocabulario durante un período de cuatro semanas e incluye una misma prueba previa a un grupo de control y un grupo de tratamiento, la puesta en práctica de un cuaderno de vocabulario en el grupo de tratamiento y del aprendizaje de ese mismo vocabulario de modo incidental en el grupo de control, y una prueba posterior en ambos grupos sobre la lista de vocabulario tratada en la prueba previa.

Los resultados parecen indicar que, si bien el alumnado del grupo de tratamiento muestra ligeramente mejores resultados en cuanto a retención de vocabulario que los alumnos expuestos al aprendizaje incidental de ese mismo vocabulario, ninguna de las dos estrategias logran totalmente éxito a la hora de producir un gran salto cuantitativo o cuantitativo en el aprendizaje de vocabulario y no son percibidas completamente por el alumnado como estrategias útiles en su aprendizaje diario, por lo que se estima posible la necesidad de incluir e interrelacionar el cuaderno de vocabulario dentro del contexto más amplio del enfoque comunicativo.

1. Introduction

In the past years, the concept of learner autonomy has become a buzz-word in the context of language learning, shifting the attention from a teacher centred type of learning to a learning process focused on the second and foreign language learner.

As part of this change of roles, several studies have been conducted to determine how the actions of learners may have an influence on their language acquisition, and which learning strategies can teachers provide to these learners to help them take charge of their own learning process.

In terms of vocabulary learning, a way to develop autonomous learning is the use of a vocabulary notebook to enhance long term memory.

This study reports the results of a research conducted in the EFL classroom of Secondary Compulsory Education in order to assess the effectiveness of a vocabulary notebook programme in foreign language acquisition.

The document will first overview some definitions of autonomous learning and language learning strategies; it will then provide an overview on how the vocabulary notebook programme was implemented in the EFL classroom, discuss the results, analyze the obstacles faced during the implementation of the programme and describe the implications for teachers and possible good practice for the future.

So, where to locate vocabulary notebooks in the learning process? Vocabulary notebooks are seen as a cognitive strategy within the larger division of consolidation strategies. These serve to store the new words in long-term memory. It cannot be considered as a single learning strategy as it involves the practice and interaction of different learning strategies, such as determination strategies (use of dictionaries, guess from context) social strategies or affective strategies.

Keeping an own vocabulary notebook is a language strategy generated by the learner, as it is the student who takes the leadership in creating their own reference system and tailors the notebooks characteristics to suit their needs.

A vocabulary notebook can as well increase lexical competence, develop effective learning strategies, promote learner autonomy (Schmitt & Schmitt, 1995, Fowle 2002) and it can outlive the classroom, as it is a way to acquire a learning strategy that can be applied to other knowledge areas. In fact, explicit instruction on vocabulary learning via vocabulary notebooks helps the development of metacognitive awareness and promotes strategy transfer to other learning spheres. It represents a way for students to become aware of the learning skills they need to become effective and diversified learners. Additionally, these are seen as a way to help students to engage more meaningfully with the new words they are being exposed to in their usual language learning experiences, as they are involved in making choices about the organization of their notebook, think about the words, these words contexts', etc.

Several studies suggest as well that it increases learner's motivation and performance and provides with the knowledge and skills to continue learning on their own. Among these studies, Clyde Fowle, in reviewing the use of vocabulary notebooks (Vocabulary notebooks: implementation and outcomes. *English Language Teachig Journal,* 56(4), 380-388, 2002) argues for making vocabulary a central part of the teaching practice and advocates for the use of a vocabulary notebook as a complementing classroom element that helps to increase lexical competence. According to his study, it can also enhance the use of different cognitive techniques and provide opportunities for developing self-management strategies, developing thus learning autonomy. Notebooks are seen as an accessible tool to all students as it is not dependant on high technology or expensive resources.

Vocabulary is a principle contributor to comprehension, fluency and achievement. Norbert Schmitt and Diane Schmitt (Vocabulary notebooks: theoretical underpinnings and practical suggestions. *English Language Teaching Journal*, 49(2), 133-43, 1995) also emphasize the importance of learning vocabulary: 'in order for learners to be able to read an academic text, watch a movie or read a newspaper, they need more vocabulary' and the use of a vocabulary notebook as a successful strategy to help in this endeavor. They find it is a dynamic learning tool students in Secondary levels could

possibly feel interested in, as they are independent to choose the information regarding a specific new word they wish to learn and their design, making this learning technique more interesting than other traditional learning methods.

In the research that this study tries to replicate (Walters, JoDee and Bozkurt, Neval (2009) The effect of keeping vocabulary notebooks on vocabulary acquisition, *Language Teaching Research* 13, 4; pp. 403-423) the authors implemented a vocabulary programme to EFL students revealing satisfactory results in the learning of the target words considered in the study. It also had a positive impact on learner autonomy and in the development of positive attitudes towards this strategy both from students and teachers, so it could represent a very valuable learning tool for the EFL classroom.

The present study takes all the aforementioned research into consideration and tries to verify the applicability of this learning strategy in an EFL classroom in Secondary Education.

It is agreed that vocabulary represents one of the most important parts of a language. It is also true that focus on vocabulary acquisition during Secondary Education is essential to enhance language learning, as the learning occurs in a developing stage of the individual where their minds are being open to new criteria in their ways of life and also, from an educational point of view, they look for broadening their knowledge in different areas. In fact one of the challenges of middle school foreign language learners is their limited vocabulary and knowledge of the world. If they are confronted with vocabulary and concepts unfamiliar to them, or concepts that are misunderstood, they will not succeed in their educational goals and particularly in that of learning a new language.

It is widely accepted that to learn English as a second or foreign language, and to express oneself fluently, a student must systematically acquire a significant amount of the lexicon. However, students in Secondary Education levels are bombarded with loads of new information on daily basis that they need to organize and store. Vocabulary notebooks represent a simple way to apply this and a flexible one too. They also enhance two important concepts in the area of language acquisition as are 'learner autonomy' and 'learning strategies'. These areas will be further discussed in the

following sections in order to cast a light on additional notions related to vocabulary learning.

2. Learner Autonomy: 'Teacherless learning?'

One of the most important spin-offs in the area of language learning during recent years has been the importance placed on how learners succeed in the process of language acquisition (Wenden, 1998). During the 1970's, methodological approaches in foreign language acquisition moved towards a consideration of learners as capable to plan and organize their own learning. This meant the questioning of teachers being the only reliable guidance to language acquisition, and the need of methods that learners could use to carry out their self-directed learning.

A major outcome of this change in the mindset about learning a language, was the consensus that learners should be taught not only the language, but also moved towards strategies they could use to make their language learning more effective.

Recent research involving language acquisition also obtained data pointing out that the ability of a student to think and work strategically has an influence on motivation and confidence, and therefore, represents a key factor in developing the learner's language acquisition. This constitutes a valuable piece of information for the present study, as a reassuring element in the adolescent intimate wish for independence and determination in every scale of their lives.

Self directed learning empowers individuals in taking the initiative with or without the help of the others to diagnose their learning needs, formulating learning goals, identifying human and material resources for learning, implementing appropriate learning strategies and evaluating learning outcomes (Knowles, 1975). This last ability is related to factors such as personality and attitude. It involves certain personal autonomy, the willingness to conduct one's own education, having the control to organize instruction in formal settings and the search of learning opportunities in a natural social environment.

A challenge to consider in the goal of obtaining autonomous learners is an educational system where learners are used to be placed in their role of reactive learners, expecting that the teacher will make the learning happen and not seeing themselves taking an active role in the learning endeavour, or having confidence in their ability to do so. At present, pedagogical studies point out that there is evidence that individuals that

conduct their own learning, pro active learners, learn better than people that wait passively to be taught, or reactive learners, and retain information more effectively.

Learning autonomy also constitutes a main class objective for an important number of teachers today that are bound to curricula that dictate the kind of tasks undertaken in the language classroom and do not allow 'spare' time in their learning schedule to vocabulary and other language areas; teachers that would like to make their classroom learning more effective and teachers whose desire is to respond to the students' motivations and needs bearing in mind the limited exposure of those students to the target language outside the classroom.

The present learning environment in Secondary education levels underscores the need for strategic assessment and planning as complementing elements to be integrated into typical language learning tasks and materials. Although teachers are responsible for applying the strategies to their own curricular needs, and creating strategy-based materials to fit a given learner and learning context, it is true however that many of them encounter difficulties in implementing learner strategy instruction due to curriculum constraints, large classes, personal teaching style and preferences, or lack of knowledge in promoting strategies among others (Vieira 2003). To overcome these constraints, and instruct learners in strategy based learning, teachers should work first in acquiring knowledge and skill in the use of strategies first, although this is an area that unfortunately is not thoroughly studied in professional preparation programmes for foreign language teachers. It is advised then that, whenever taking the challenge to implement any strategy based instruction in a classroom for the first time, the teacher takes the endeavour of undergoing through self analysis on their own learning strategies, consider the ones they wish to apply in class and take sufficient time to practice them and consider how they would proceed to integrate them in the curriculum and in the classroom.

Nonetheless, it is agreed that the goal of creating effective language learning autonomy is not solely the teachers' responsibility. In an autonomous learner environment, the teacher would act as facilitator of appropriate strategies and techniques that allow students to acquire vocabulary retention and helps them to choose those that suit their abilities best. Teachers would as well identify those strategies that are beneficial and effective when learning a language and help their students develop an awareness of these. It is then the learner the one who needs to set a goal, to choose an adequate

learning method, like a vocabulary notebook, and a purpose in organising and carrying out a certain task. It is as well the job of a student to perform a self evaluation of their learning process to acquire a set of tools to self direct their language learning.

The learning environment, the preferred way of learning of students, and their attitudes towards language learning play as well an important role in the development of autonomous learning skills. These can only occur under certain conditions: cognitive and metacognitive approaches on the side of the learner, motivation and knowledge about language, certain metalanguage to carry out reflection on the own learning process and use of strategies, a teacher capable of adapting methods and resources to the learners' needs and an adequate learning environment. Becoming an autonomous learner is therefore an ongoing process where an individual progressively learns to learn, and identifies their needs and tools as learner. Learner autonomy in the EFL classroom of Secondary Education is indeed a goal that may only be achieved by the more skilled or at later levels, but it is something that, if acquired, certainly pays off in the rest of education stages and knowledge areas.

3. Language learning strategies: how many, how useful.

As it has been discussed, keeping a vocabulary notebook is a way of acquiring language autonomy, a tool to achieve the goal of self direction in learning. It is as well a language learning strategy. One important component of learner autonomy as defined by Holec (1981) consists in selecting the methods and techniques to be used when learning a language. Learning autonomy can be enhanced through a process of learner training or strategy training. This is defined as the set of procedures and activities that raise learners' awareness of what is involved in the process of learning a second language, encouraging them to become responsible of their own learning and helping them to strengthen their strategies for language learning.

The objective of strategy based instruction is to help foreign language students become aware of the ways in which they learn most effectively, ways in which they can enhance their own comprehension and production of the target language, and ways in which they can continue learning after leaving the classroom (Cohen 1996).

This learner training can be carried out with the help of language learning strategies. Research on this area first developed in the 1970s with the aim of identifying what

good learners did to succeed in learning. The learning strategies were thus the specific actions, behaviours, steps and techniques used by students to enhance their own learning (Scarcella & Oxford, 1992) also defined as any sets of operations, steps, plans, routines used by the learner to obtain, store, retrieve and use information. (Wenden and Rubin, 1987). Individuals use them to comprehend, learn, or retain new information (O'Malley and Chamot, 1990).

Learning strategies help to determine how and how well a student learns a second or foreign language. They encompass both foreign language learning and foreign language use strategies and they are selected by learners either to improve the learning of a foreign language, the use of it, or both.

Research has shown that there is a relationship between learning strategy use and learning outcomes: learners using in a continuous manner learning strategies have a higher level of self-efficacy and confidence in their own skills to conduct learning (Zimmerman & Pons, 1986). They also enjoy a greater ability to reflect on their own language learning processes.

However, very few students at Secondary levels are aware of using any particular learning strategy or they simply do not know what these are or how to use them for their benefit, and it is a fact that they may be willing to try new strategies if they are introduced to them and instructed in them.

Different researchers have attempted to establish different taxonomies for language learning strategies that try to devise how the individual strategies are selected and how they are categorized.

Language learning strategies can be differentiated according to whether they are cognitive, metacognitive, affective or social (Chamot 1987, Oxford 1990).

Cognitive strategies allow students to generate thought processes that enable them to deal with new information, to know how to manipulate the new knowledge to retain it. They are employed directly in specific learning tasks. These usually involve the identification, retention, storage or retrieval of words and other elements of the foreign language; whereas metacognitive strategies are higher order skills that would allow reflecting on the self learning process to identify learning preferences and needs. They deal with pre planning, online planning and post evaluation of language learning tasks.

Cognitive and metacognitive strategies must be paired adequately in training or else students would not be able to 'direct their learning, monitor their progress or review their accomplishments and future learning directions' (O'Malley and Chamot, 1990). Affective strategies help learners to regulate emotions; self-encouragement and attitudes towards language and social strategies include the actions which learners take to interact with other learners.

To determine what makes a certain language strategy useful we need to perceive that certain conditions are present: (a) the strategy relates well to the L2 task at hand, (b) the strategy fits the particular student's learning style or learning approach preferences and (c) the student is able to employ this strategy effectively and relates it to other relevant strategies; making learning easier, faster, more enjoyable, more self directed, effective and transferable to new learning situations (Oxford, 1990). This last point holds a special relevance as learning strategies would also catalyse lifelong learning (Allwright, 1990; Little, 1991). However, if learning strategies are not contextualised we cannot consider whether they are helpful for a given learner. Their effectiveness will depend largely on different variables: task, text, background knowledge, context of learning and of course learner characteristics (Chamot and Rubin, 1994). In conclusion, there is no 'right' or 'wrong' strategy, but rather strategies that work for a given learner for the particular task and goal.

As mentioned before, there is a wealth of studies aimed to the identification of language strategies and their categorisation. Different criteria are used to classify these, causing inconsistencies across existing taxonomies. Many of these major strategies categories refer at the same time to a large number of related subsets of strategies.

One of the most known taxonomies is the one attempted by Oxford (1990). Although this is a more comprehensive and detailed description of learning strategies than earlier classification models, there is currently a strong disagreement among researchers about what exactly strategies are, how many strategies exist and how to categorise them. Having clarified this, and according to Oxford's classification, we can consider six major strategy categories:

- Cognitive strategies enable learners to manipulate the language in a direct way and involve, among others, reasoning, analysis, note-taking, summarising, synthesising, outlining, repetition, resourcing, translation or note-taking.

- Metacognitive strategies help learners to identify one's own learning style preferences and reflect about their own cognitive processes to gain knowledge (Wenden 1998), organising materials, evaluating task success and mistakes. Reflection on the use of learning strategies is essential: learners need to reflect on how they are learning and how they are managing the learning process and teachers need too to analyse how well they are facilitating this process to learners. In other words, in order to have metacognitively aware learners, there must be metacognitively aware teachers (Anderson, 2005).

- Memory-related strategies involve relating the new knowledge with previously learned knowledge. In order to do so, individuals would develop retrieval plans relating new material to existing knowledge. They do not always involve developing deep understanding, in fact, these are frequently used for memorising vocabulary in initial stages of language learning and learners are not aware of using a proper learning strategy as such when doing so.

- Compensatory strategies make up for the missing knowledge via guessing from context, talking around the missing word, using body language for speaking etc.

- Affective strategies involve learners' emotions towards the learning activity and help them to control their mood or anxiety.

- Social strategies help the learner interact with others and involve understanding the target culture and the language, as for example asking for clarification or help in doing a task or talking with a native speaker to explore cultural and social norms..

4. Research questions

The present study addresses the effect of keeping a vocabulary notebook as a valid language learning strategy and an effective tool to achieve vocabulary acquisition and retention in the EFL classroom in High School.

On the basis of the theoretical framework presented above, the following research question was formulated:

'Do vocabulary notebooks promote more learning and retention of previously unknown words?'

Additionally, and in an indirect way, the study aims to grasp an idea of how this learning strategy could be of interest in the present EFL classroom as a motivation feature.

5. The study

Context

The study was conducted during a period of 4 weeks at the Institute Nra. Señora del Puy in Estella, Navarre, with two groups of students in 3rd year of Compulsory Secondary Education. One group of 13 students belonging to 'diversidad' served as treatment group, and a second group of 21 students considered from a standard level served as control group.

Both groups are weekly exposed to three sessions of English as foreign language of 55 minutes each. The EFL programme for these students is mainly focused on grammar, this being complemented with different activities aimed to reinforce this particular aspect of language in a more communicative manner.

The greatest interest for these students is to acquire proficiency in academic language for reading, writing, doing homework and succeeding in exams. The motivation to learn a new language has therefore a clear academic character, and is not directly related to something students may identify themselves with, or as an element with a social character.

In addition, many students do not possess a good understanding of the structure of the L1 language to develop metalinguistic reflection on the L2, do not dedicate much time to reading, or do not enjoy of opportunities outside the classroom to learn or practice English.

Vocabulary learning is an area discretely managed by both teachers and students and most learning strategies used in class are restrained to note taking in the margins of their student's books and on post its, or referring to the lists containing vocabulary for each unit at the end of the book. Students showed little awareness on the importance of vocabulary or on how to learn new words, and on how to relate these with knowledge already acquired, or how to derive word meaning from context and other vocabulary learning strategies.

Participants

To carry out the study, two groups of students were selected, a group of 21 students in 3rd of ESO that according to feedback from the Institute conformed a 'standard' group, and a group of 13 students that belonged to 'diversidad'. A group classified as a group of 'diversidad' is integrated by students having special education needs or having been diagnosed with specific learning issues that can have an impact in their knowledge development, organization of tasks and in their academic results. This particular feature brought the opportunity to test whether motivation and adequate instruction can succeed as effective learning tools and eliminate learning obstacles, with the idea that all people have the ability to be self-directing if given the right environment and support (Head & Taylor 1997)

Procedure

To address prior knowledge about any strategies to acquire vocabulary, and then help students to identify their current learning strategies for this purpose, the study began with two weeks of observation to both study groups and also to other groups pertaining to different education levels, in order to determine the weight of strategy based instruction in the Institute, and in particular related to vocabulary learning. These two first weeks served as well to find out the level of motivation towards English, how they treated vocabulary and their particular beliefs on how their learning occurred, whether as result of effort, systematic study, luck or others.

The study was then introduced to students of both groups in a way to raise their interest, explaining its stages but not providing them with information that could interfere with their perception of the task.

During the presentation stage to the treatment group, this was encouraged to use in their vocabulary notebooks whatever strategies that worked better for them for the specific task of acquiring new vocabulary, as after the observation period and the exchange of views on the task, it was agreed that students differed on their opinion about learning strategies and presented preferences in the strategies they liked to use. Some expressed that they worked better if no visual help such as drawings or pictures were to be included in the vocabulary notebook, some worked better associating the target words to antonyms, some preferred to write down the translation and additional information as to when that word was used in the L1, etc.

To enhance motivation on the task, and create a sense of ownership on the vocabulary notebooks, these were presented as a tool they could use independently and that would help them on that area of English, so to let students identify these with immediate success, and be more willing to use them (Chamot & Rubin, 1994).

The introduction of the notebook programme also tried to exercise a correct appeal on students, as if they perceived that the task was going to be too easy, they would not need any strategy to succeed, and think therefore that the use of a learning strategy would not be of any use.

Motivation was also enforced by the fact that the students in the treatment group felt 'important' as they were going to be the object of this study, and their reaction from the very first moment was that of responsibility and interest.

On the teacher's side, an attitude of excitement and interest in English and in vocabulary was displayed, as it is agreed that teachers who show passion about language and words can inadvertently share this feeling to learners. This motivational framework also played an important role in the outcome of the study, as it will be later observed in the present document.

The first stage of the study involved gaining feedback on vocabulary knowledge from both control and treatment groups using a pretest (Annex 1) containing two lists of vocabulary of 30 words each (60 in total) from units 4 and 5 from their students' book 'Voices' (McMillan 2011). Care was taken in selecting words with a low frequency of appearance, in order to ensure having enough unknown words to carry on with the second stage of the study. At the same time, the selection considered relevant to estimate those words that, not having a high frequency of occurrence in the units, were frequent enough in daily English.

From that initial feedback, a definitive list of vocabulary was designed with a total of 15 words:

Arrangements	Expensive	Tent
Awful	Frightened	Tired
Bridge	Low	To forget
Dry	Same	Trip
Enough	Several	Weather

The criteria followed to select these words envisaged different aspects, among others, not selecting words very similar to be taught at the same time, as they could interfere and result in counter-productive teaching (Schmitt & Schmitt 1995). Also, a greater amount of adjectives than nouns was selected, as in previous teaching sessions a 'shortage' of this word category in their knowledge of English was detected during class exercises and games. In this way, the study searched to engage the students in a deeper mental processing when learning a word in order to recall it in an easier way (Craik & Lockhart 1972). Final selection criteria took in consideration how useful the learner would find these words in various contexts.

This list of target words was introduced through incidental learning of vocabulary in the control group and through the implementation of a vocabulary notebook programme in the treatment group.

The last stage of the study involved a post test to both groups with the initial list of 60 words used in the pretest phase. Results from both groups were analysed and compared.

6. Implementation of the study in the control group

As explained above, feedback on vocabulary knowledge was gained from a pretest containing 60 words and a total of 15 words were selected as target vocabulary. Then, the instruction phase consisted in the incidental learning of this vocabulary during class time. In order to do so, a text was selected to read in class, following the usual methodology used in the Institute for reading comprehension: different students read the text paragraphs separately and proceeded to translate them and to raise questions regarding meaning. No explicit instruction was made available on the teacher's side regarding the target vocabulary and no particular vocabulary learning strategy was perceived on the students' side, with the exception of meaning inference from context when translating.

This text (Annex 2) was specially tailored for the study purpose; and it had the usual length of the texts contained in the students' book, around 250 words, the text concretely had 279 words. The text presented the form and style of a familiar story

describing aspects that could be personal to students in order to raise their interest in the task, as a text containing familiar features that students may identify themselves with could constitute a motivation element that the study also wished to consider.

Allied to these considerations, any complex language structures, or grammar aspects that the students might not yet manage, were avoided, to impede any heavy burden on students' cognitive processes capabilities (Harris & Prescott 2005).

Finally, the last stage involved the completion of a post test, consisting in the same initial 60 words list, to observe whether there had been any successful vocabulary retention in comparison to the pretest phase.

7. Implementation of the study in the treatment group

As proceeded with the control group, feedback was gained from the treatment group using a pretest containing 60 words from units 4 & 5 from the student's book.

In this scenario, some personal traits of the students were taken into account when evaluating their knowledge and their performance, as in the group of 13 students there were 2 of them presenting diagnosed special learning needs and one student was dyslexic.

Then, during a second stage, a vocabulary notebook programme was implemented.

Students were provided with a notebook each to personalize and to keep for vocabulary. Notebooks selected had an attractive design and were handy and easy to carry around with the aim of motivating the students and raise their interest in the task. It was also impressed that the notebook was their property and they were responsible for deciding how to use it. The assumption underlying this activity was that learners would become more receptive to an autonomous approach of learning and also be more aware of what the vocabulary learning process would entail.

Students were presented with the list of 15 words to learn and include in their vocabulary notebook.

They were asked to record the new vocabulary in their notebooks in alphabetical order, as organised material is easier to learn. Also, they paired the word together with the native word, as learning based on using word pairs does not wear off quickly and it is a good way to give initial exposure to new words (Nation, 1982)

During the first week of the notebook programme, students were asked to include in their notebooks a part of speech, a sentence, an antonym, a picture, something they had to come up with that would enable them to identify the word and recall it in an easier manner later on. In this way, students learnt as well to use the context to obtain clues to get to the meaning.

Students were allowed to use and put in practice any technique or way of work that they would consider useful to retain vocabulary, promoting this way their learner autonomy.

Vocabulary notebooks were handed to the teacher-researcher at the end of the week for 'correction'. The request was presented to the students this way, whereas in fact it was a manner to indirectly oblige them to perform the activity and not to forget about their notebook. It was as well a way to impress the importance of the study process and to maintain their motivation level.

The notebooks were then returned to students together with a reward system, marked with star stickers. Each individual was however rewarded in the same way to avoid special interference or influence of the rewarding system in the retention by students.

During the second week of the implementation, the students were asked to make a common exercise in class where they were asked to write a little story describing an awful day in the life of an imaginary character (Annex 3)

The students worked in group and received guidance from the teacher: they needed to start the story explaining what happened in the morning of that day, writing sentences where they were to use 5 words of the target words list. Then, to describe what happened in the afternoon, another 5 words from the list were going to be included, and finally at night, the final remaining 5 words.

The aim of this exercise was to incorporate the new words into language already known by students, so that they would associate the new words to a network already controlled by them and therefore be able to recall them in an easier way. Students would as well develop a deeper mental processing as they had to create a mental image of the story and the words' meanings, and this was seen as a manner to help students engage more meaningfully with the vocabulary. They were given the freedom to choose the actions of the character in order to motivate them by creating a story of their own.

The students were asked to write the story in their notebooks and during the following class session they were asked to hand the notebooks to the teacher-researcher for control, again with the purpose of keeping them active and interested in the study.

As a final stage of the implementation of the vocabulary notebook programme in the treatment group, the selected students were asked to complete a post test consisting in the original vocabulary list of 60 words.

8. Results and discussion

Table 1 features pretest test results and post test results of target words in treatment group:

Treatment group	Pre test results	Post test results
Student 1	7	9
Student 2	2	5
Student 3	2	4
Student 4	1	0
Student 5	0	1
Student 6	1	2
Student 7	3	3
Student 8	1	1
Student 9	1	8
Student 10	3	6
Results	**21**	**38**

Table 2 features pretest test results and post test results of target words in control group:

Control group	Pre test results	Post test results
Student 1	6	7
Student 2	4	5
Student 3	6	6
Student 4	8	8
Student 5	2	2
Student 6	5	8
Student 7	4	3
Student 8	7	4
Student 9	4	3
Student 10	8	8
Student 11	11	12
Student 12	9	8
Student 13	6	6
Student 14	4	5
Student 15	1	1
Student 16	8	7
Student 17	4	5
Results	**95**	**98**

As it can be derived from the results obtained, the treatment group showed slightly better performance in vocabulary acquisition than the control group, which may indicate that a notebook programme, when adequately integrated in the curriculum, adapted to the learner's needs, and implemented from an early stage in the academic year, can help students develop a useful vocabulary learning habit and improve the confidence in their ability to learn a foreign language.

Students are able to transform and adapt this specific tool to their personal preferences and needs and therefore seem to perceive it as a 'backup' system they can always refer to when confronted to learning a language.

The group exercise put in practice in the treatment group to integrate the 15 target words was perhaps an extra feature that is not usually envisaged in a vocabulary notebook programme, but it served correctly to the purpose of exposing students meaningfully to new knowledge.

Students also had fun while making up the story, which may as well have had an impact on their vocabulary retention and on their motivation towards the task.

The fact that the treatment group achieves to recall the words, but then commits mistakes in assigning meaning by phonological and spelling mistakes is surprising, given that in the pre test stage such mistakes were not revealed. However, it is not considered to be a concern as it holds no significant relation with the way the study was carried out.

The control group does not display significant differences in the pre and post test results regarding vocabulary knowledge or acquisition, as there is not any variability in their knowledge of both target and non-target words.

From the results in the control group it may be asserted that, explicit vocabulary instruction and follow up on students' vocabulary retention progress by teachers, proves to be essential in developing a vocabulary learning habit. Teachers should act as facilitators of strategies and correct approaches to vocabulary, particularly at early implementation stages, facilitating reflection on language, possible connections with other related words and allowing constant practice so that the new words are reactivated regularly allowing memory retention and permitting real-time retrieval in language production.

While both groups demonstrated very slight improvement on both target and non-target words both in the pre and post test, the most marked improvement seems to appear in the treatment group performance on target words.

It must be considered the treatment group condition of being a group of 'diversidad', many times erroneously perceived as 'underachievers', thus being a group of students that usually do not display any particular or outstanding learning skill in any area, and sometimes presenting special learning and personal support needs. The vocabulary notebook, though not having been implemented for a significant period of time as a learning strategy in class, succeeds to achieve some vocabulary retention, which under these circumstances can be considered a successful result.

Also, a variable that is not shown in pre and post test results is the effect of keeping a vocabulary notebook on students' motivation to learn. I am positive that this strategy was very well welcome among students in the treatment group.

Although the results do not seem to reflect satisfactorily how the motivation worked positively on the treatment group, we can ascertain that the vocabulary notebook works effectively as learning strategy. These results suggest that it improves confidence and self reliance of the students' ability for self management, which could invite students to initiate their path to explore learner autonomy if not via this particular strategy, raising their interest in ways they can conduct their own learning and becoming autonomous in their election of other learning strategies that work best for them.

This motivation could be perceived in the care they put in carrying out the task and completing their vocabulary notebooks, in the fact that they did not forget to bring it to any of the class sessions and in the enthusiastic class participation in the exercise of building up the story, bearing in mind their limited vocabulary knowledge.

9. Issues encountered during the implementation of the study

The study was very positive in terms of students' perception on their capability to direct their own learning; however, it has several limitations.

The study required constant monitoring of the students' progress on the teacher's side, as it was estimated that, given the students characteristics of the treatment group, they would probably not continue to use the vocabulary notebooks if the teacher would not collect and check the notebooks.

Time constraints on the academic schedule made it difficult to fit the notebook programme in the required curriculum for 3rd of ESO. It is clear that this type of strategy based instruction and this particular learning strategy need that sufficient time is set aside in the curriculum to allow vocabulary notebooks to be included into classroom routine.

Students need to be offered extensive practice opportunities to put the new vocabulary in context and be able to retain it easily. Practice is also essential to allow students to become autonomous and use this vocabulary strategy without teacher prompting which given the present classroom reality may not be feasible.

The four week implementation period had an impact on its scope, and a larger-scale study would certainly obtain more reliable results.

The inclusion of a standard group also as treatment group may have contributed to a more suited type of students to carry out comparability.

The length of this study did not allow students to have a clear idea of whether they were making progress or not, so even if they were very highly motivated it was not possible to evaluate any improvement on their confidence about learning English.

Additional factors that are important in the promotion of learner autonomy such as the role of feedback, the learners' sense of self-efficacy, their knowledge about learning strategies or their learning methods that may have had an impact on the promotion of autonomy during the implementation stage should also have been analyzed comprehensively, which was not possible given the time constraints to carry out the study.

Nevertheless, the findings of the present study would suggest that a vocabulary notebook programme is a valuable tool to increase students' self esteem and enables them to value their individual strengths as learners. During the implementation of this study their opinion on how to carry out the programme was listened to and taken into account and this recognition was particularly important as this age group are generally dependant and concerned about securing peer and teachers recognition.

10. Final considerations on the study

This study was conducted in a learning context that promotes learners' dependence on the teacher and leaves students ill-equipped to apply their knowledge and learning skills outside the classroom.

In order to achieve a shift from a teacher centred type of learning to an autonomous learning, or to achieve a right balance between both, teachers must enhance learners' awareness on the learning process and prepare them to accept responsibility on their learning (Gardner 1999).

From the study we can conclude that a series of complementing activities should encompass the implementation of a vocabulary notebook programme: reading a series of texts related to a specific topic, being exposed to comprehensible text in their extensive reading tasks (Krashen 2004) or having repeated contextualised vocabulary exposure. As experienced during the implementation phase, the knowledge acquired from a single encounter with a new word is expected to be forgotten unless soon followed by another concurrence. It is also necessary to provide students enough time to adjust to new learning strategies.

As possible good practice we can consider that it is essential for teachers to let students think about how their learning occurs, and allow them to choose the method that works best for them in order to acquire vocabulary. A simple way to draw class attention to this is having the teacher asking to a learner that succeeds on any vocabulary task, to share with the rest of the classroom how they managed to obtain that satisfactory result, making the process available to others and opening the class to awareness on learning processes.

In order facilitate learning to students; vocabulary could be organized in the vocabulary notebooks according to subjects, as this would help the contextualization of new words. The learner could then organize the different vocabulary studied in relation to a particular subject and then use it when they come to speak and write about the subject. These subjects tend to reappear throughout different academic years (family, environment, travelling...) If students have already studied a subject in prior years, and recorded the vocabulary in a notebook, they could return to their notebook and add new words as well as review the old ones.

This is not a comprehensive description of what all the groups of students may think about the validity of a vocabulary notebook as a learning tool, also, the length and thoroughness of this study generates possible gaps in the research that are surely addressed in other studies on the matter.

Also, the influence of this strategy to verify whether students have engaged in further practice could not be monitored.

Nevertheless the study suggests that keeping a vocabulary notebook is an effective learning strategy if given the adequate learning context and the correct length and amount of time to work on it.

If students were to maintain a vocabulary notebook throughout the academic year and on to further education levels, they could dispose of a long-term strategy for dealing with vocabulary. Keeping a record of their work would let them see that their learning does not just stop and start as each academic year starts and finishes, but continues as they keep their notebook.

It is as well important to consider that teachers need to guide and secure the students before they start to become autonomous learners, and a first step to achieve this is to become aware of what it takes for them to become effective and successful learners. Hence, when they start noticing language and writing down words on their notebooks they are becoming self-sufficient and autonomous and the more autonomous learners become, the much more likely it is that they will become better language learners.

Vocabulary learning is considered as an accessible area of any language, but it is as well a complicated process that demands providing students with different opportunities to link new knowledge to related words, understand multiple meanings and use these words adequately in a given context.

From the study we may assert that the aim of vocabulary instruction should be helping students in their endeavor of acquiring language strategies that will enable them for lifelong learning. This demands as well dedicated teachers who make language approachable to students and provide direct instruction that is varied, thoughtful and meaningful.

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Annex 1

Take a look at the following vocabulary lists. Please indicate which words you don't know by making a cross in the right column. Try to translate the meaning of those words you think you know.

learn		magazine	
across		expensive	
crossing		To greet	
bridge		chart	
weather		massive	
tent		sell	
watch out		company	
awful		frightened	
to miss		media	
crazy		annoying	
same		challenge	
extinct		nowadays	
to travel		mainly	
unbelievable		who	
to become		free	
enough		often	
bathing		since	
climbing		own	
amazing		talented	
road		tiny	
through		headlines	
freezing		lucky	
low		several	
country		gossip	
dry		disadvantage	
allowed		quite	
to forget		though	
trip		arrangements	
so		to be worth	
because		tired	

Annex 2.

Activity proposed to conduct incidental vocabulary learning in the control group.

Highlighted in orange are the 15 words selected as targeted words for both treatment and control group.

Finally the good **weather** seems to be arriving to our country.

According to the latest news, the **awful** rainy days and **low** temperatures will be over in a couple of weeks time. The spring is greeting us and our agenda will be full of amazing sunny days and **dry** weather.

So, get ready **to forget** about your boring afternoons, and start making some exciting **arrangements**!

Where to start? **Frightened** to lose great opportunities? Nowadays, there are quite a lot of alternatives you can choose to make your own plans. Many of them are for free: visiting an exhibition at the cultural centre, a picnic in the park, a city **trip** to Pamplona with a stop on the road to take some pictures of Puente la Reina and its beautiful **bridge**, a weekend in a **tent** in Alloz or a walk through Artajona, Olite or Ujué to learn a little bit of history are some examples.

But if you are someone who is already **tired** of visiting the **same** places over and over again, you may miss some exciting challenges in this offer. You can then take a look to tourism magazines and books in your local library. There are **several** day trips you can plan and you will only need around 10 euros for them: a walk on the beach in San Sebastian, a visit to Tarazona to take some pictures of its beautiful and recently restored cathedral or a day in Logroño. Some of these offers will be a little bit **expensive** for your pocket money, but if you are lucky **enough**, you will find several plans to put in your agenda and enjoy of an amazing spring.

Annex 3.

Story written by the students of the treatment group describing an awful day using the target words:

An awful day in the life of Pocoyo

Pocoyo is making some **arrangements** to go on holidays. Unfortunately, all **trips** in the magazines were really **expensive**, and he did not have **enough** money to pay. Not even a **low** cost trip

In the afternoon he goes for a walk in the park but it starts to rain. He decides to return home but he needed to cross a very high **bridge**. He was really **frightened**. His mouth was **dry.**

When he got home he could not enter the house. He was very **tired**. He had **forgotten** the keys and had to sleep in a **tent** outside. It was impossible to sleep because there were **several** bugs inside the tent. When he fell asleep he had the **same** nightmare again and again: he was crossing a bridge. What an **awful** day!