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The Impact of Students` Needs and Interests on Vocabulary Acquisition in a Private University in Georgia (A Case of Georgian Higher Education Institution)

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Abstract

The aim of this research was to measure the impact of students` interest-based materials on vocabulary skills development through a two-tailed quasi-experiment. Contemporary classrooms with digital natives seeking 21st-century skills require many significant changes in the instructional process. Being put in a democratic, student-centered environment, students have to be granted the opportunity to personalize their learning process. The issue of adjusting and tailoring materials to learners` needs, demands, and interests is widely considered daunting for teachers all over the world. The presented article highlights the importance of designing contextualized materials and adjusting materials to learners` interests and needs to achieve desired learning outcomes. The statistical data were gathered using a two-tailed quasi-experimental design in two control and two experimental groups through pre, while, and post-tests, and analyzed by paired samples tests. The study revealed that vocabulary acquisition is influenced significantly when materials are designed according to students` interests and needs.

Keywords: Textbooks, materials design, vocabulary, learners` interests, contextualized tasks

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Introduction

Textbooks are considered a de facto syllabus for many teachers, especially for novice ones, as they feel more comfortable and secure while following sequenced materials (Ansary & Babaii, 2002). However, several problematic issues must be considered while following textbooks, as most materials in textbooks are based on irrelevant topics, neglecting learners` preferences and the appropriate level of input (Ur, 1996; Richards, 2001). It should be noted that teachers usually have to design or modify the materials related to language. Frequently, teachers have to adapt vocabulary materials and give a wide variety of tasks to involve the learners more in the learning process. It is notable that vocabulary is significant in the language acquisition process and should be the major focus in textbooks (Beck, McKeown, & Kucan, 2002; Chen & Chung, 2008; DeCarrico, 2001; Min, 2008).

Moreover, vocabulary is one of the main components in language learning as it helps comprehension skills become easier due to rich vocabulary (Rouhani & Purgharib, 2013). Lessard-Clouston (2013) stated that vocabulary helps learners comprehend easily, "without sufficient vocabulary students cannot understand others or express their ideas" (p.2). Vocabulary is the key point in communication while conveying information. As Wilkins (1972) stated, ". . . while without grammar very little can be conveyed, without vocabulary nothing can be conveyed" (pp. 111–112). That is why teachers have to design, modify, tailor or replace materials related to vocabulary in the textbooks and personalize the learning process accordingly. However, designing various vocabulary materials, which are adjusted to learners` needs, interests and demands is complex and challenging.

Theoretical Framework: Vocabulary and Material Design

The language learning process focusing on vocabulary acquisition involves multifaceted dimensions (Kim, Crossley, & Kyle, 2018; Pellicer-Sánchez, 2016). Frequently, learners find learning vocabulary daunting as they have to memorize the words. Frequently, the list of vocabulary is given without any context in the classroom. However, learning vocabulary and focusing on vocabulary development should include "moving beyond single words and direct first language (L1)" and second language (L2) equivalencies (Coxhead, 2015; Elgort, 2017). As mentioned above, vocabulary is multifaceted, as it is connected to the target language itself and lexis frequency in textbooks, de-contextualized, and contextualized words, and incidental language (e.g., unplanned language items incorporated in tasks) (Pellicer-Sánchez, 2016). The latter is not incorporated in the syllabus, but it usually is incorporated in teacher-tailored contextualized materials. Contextualization is vital in the learning process as it enables the learners to link schemes in the context (Qian, 2008; Tyler & Ortega, 2018).

Moreover, it should be noted that learners remember the context and story more and retrieve lexical items easily afterward (Qian, 2008; Tyler & Ortega, 2018). Frequently, learners guess the meaning of unknown lexical items from the context, as they "derive an idea of its meaning" (Gairns & Redman, 2006, p. 83). Teaching vocabulary in a meaningful context is vital, as a learner focuses on "not only linguistic knowledge of a word, such as phonetic, syntactic and semantic rules but also the knowledge of how to use the word properly in a context" (Amirian & Momeni, 2012, p.2302). It has to be detected here that context is of different types: a) vocabulary items in a list without context; b) vocabulary items in minimal context, chunks of sentences; c) vocabulary items in texts; d) vocabulary items in elaborated context (Laufer & Shmueli, 1997). However, elaborated context might not be enough if the topic of the text is not related to learners` interests, preferences, and needs. Trianto (2016) mentioned that needs-based context should link materials and the real world for learners. Thus, context without personalized interests and topics might not be helpful and productive for learners.

It is thought-provoking that textbooks consider the learners' interests but not for a particular group of learners with different educational and cultural backgrounds. Consequently, the teachers are granted the opportunity to personalize the context more and design materials based on the needs assessment. It is noteworthy that a plethora of scientists studied the impact of materials development on learners' academic performance and identified materials as one of the main factors of a successful language lesson (Castilo, Insuasty, Osorio & Fernanda, 2017; Harwood, 2013; McGrath, 2013; Richards & Renandya, 2002; Tomlinson, 2011a; Widodo & Savova, 2010). Brown (1995) mentioned that materials are "any systematic description of the techniques" that can be used in the classroom (p.139). However, some authors stated that materials can be any task designed by a teacher (Cakir, 2015; Tomlinson, 2011a). Tomlinson (2012) claimed that the task can be anything "videos, graded readers, flashcards, games, websites and mobile phone interactions" (p. 143).

According to Duarte and Escobar (2008), appropriate materials with interesting context can positively impact the learning process and encourage autonomous learning, as it "can positively influence students' motivation when learning a foreign language" (p. 63). However, materials should be adjusted to learners` interests and preferences focusing on relevant topics (Bao, 2008). Materials should "involve a variety of ideas about effective practices" (Byrd & Schuemann, 2014, p.381). Johnson (1989) stated that "designing appropriate materials is not a science: it is a strange mixture of imagination, insight, and analytical reasoning" (p. 153). Having a great emphasis on learner autonomy, motivation, and personalization, the teachers tend to create a democratic, student-centered environment for students.

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According to Tomlinson (2003), there are four broad types of materials: "instructional, experiential, elicitative or exploratory" (p. 2). *Instructional materials* are mainly based on coursebooks and are frequently used, in almost every lesson. Richards (2001) mentioned that "instructional materials generally serve as the basis of much of the language input that learners receive and the language practice that occurs in the classroom" (p. 251). Instructional materials, called coursebooks, follow the syllabus but are not always effective as they are not adjusted to learners` real life. *Experiential materials* focus on the experience of the language, usually seen as a top-down approach, holistic approach in the classrooms (Tomlinson, 2003). *Elicitative materials* can be seen as a task that pushes learners implicitly to use the language items. *Exploratory materials* are created to "help learners make discoveries about language for themselves" (Tomlinson, 2003, p.2). These materials are key components in inductive learning, as learners are guided to discover language themselves and have opinions about language and its rules.

Hutchinson and Waters (1987) stated that the process of materials designing includes four main pillars: input, content, language focus, and task. *Input* can be spoken or written, and it is divided into two sub-areas: target language and content. *Content* should be personalized and contextualized, focusing on the learner`s needs and preferences, encouraging communication, and activating schemata. Content can be subdivided into more components: knowledge, values, culture, skills, and subjects (McKimm, 2003). *The language focus* is related to the target language. Input should be linked to language focus, as they should encourage the recycling of language items.

But it should be noted that the aim of designing materials should be a natural language, as "the ultimate purpose of language learning is language use" (Pardo & Tellez, 2009, p.109). These four elements are interrelated and serve to design a task. The process of designing and creating a relevant task comprises the following techniques described in the table below.

Table 1. Task Designing Process

TECHNIQUES	PROCESS	SUB-STEPS
Modifying	Modification serves teachers to make the task more appropriate in terms of **content** to make it more personalized, **topic** to link it to learner`s preferences, **culture** to avoid inappropriate input, **level** to make it relevantly challenging.	**Adding**- Generally, teachers add more input, sentences to the given task to make the task more appropriate for the particular group and level.
		Simplifying- Teachers have to grade their language to simplify materials and adjust the task to particular groups, individuals.

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		Deleting- This is used to make the task more appropriate for the learners; this is used to adjust the task more to learners` preferences and culture.
Re-ordering	To have the flow of the lesson, teachers have to re-order the tasks in coursebooks. Each system/body follows a particular methodology, and each teacher has to adapt coursebooks and tasks, according to the individual s/he is teaching and the system/ department demands.	
Designing an alternative material	Teachers design the materials themselves without using the coursebook. Sometimes materials are designed from scratch in order to make them more appropriate for particular learners. These materials/ tasks are adjusted to the learner's needs and interests.	

Moreover, McGrath (2002) stated that not only these elements should be taken into consideration while designing materials, but learner`s needs and their interests. The latter is linked tightly to needs analysis. Needs analysis is usually done by the teacher at the beginning of the course to identify learners' expectations, needs, background, and preferences. The task is appropriate if it motivates learners through content, personalized context, and makes learners use the target language. Moreover, needs analysis can act as a diagnostic test revealing learner`s strengths and weaknesses and serve the point of influencing the language input on the course as it "is the systematic collection and analysis" of data (Brown, 2006, p.102).

Research Methodology and Methods

The process of reviewing the professional literature has revealed a necessity of teachers' active engagement in identifying the teaching/learning context with all the peculiarities and then designing materials to promote learners' vocabulary acquisition stage. Conducting needs assessment, analyzing key factors, and then based on the obtained information designing proper materials, could be daunting tasks for teachers. Although teachers are motivated to have enjoyable and beneficial lessons, the deficit of ready-made materials and relevant materials for developing students` vocabulary skills in the classroom plays its role, and lessons become less productive. Based on the

problems mentioned above, the following research question was formulated: To what extent do contextualized, learner-interests-based materials impact vocabulary skills?. Moreover, the hypothesis that learner needs and interests-based materials will greatly impact students' vocabulary skills development has been devised. The study has been shaped in a two-tailed quasi-experimental nature. Several research instruments were used, needs analysis, surveys, and tests were used in a two-tailed quasi-experiment. To approve or disprove this hypothesis, the experiment was conducted. The experiment lasted for one semester in four groups, two control, and two experimental groups. Before the experiment, the learners filled in needs analysis as a part of the survey before the semester. Initially, 61 students were involved in the experiment, but due to their absences and maintaining gender equality and discriminating power in each group, the researchers decided to reduce the number of participants.

Consequently, 48 Georgian students were involved in the experiment, 12 students in each group. Convenient sampling was used as participants are assigned to groups using the system at the university. The administration provides some options: dates and lecturers, and the learners choose the classes themselves using the platform. All of them are from the same private university in Tbilisi, Georgia. All participants are 19 - 20 years old taking the English language course at university. All participants are at an advanced level (C1) using the same textbook, Keynote (Lansford, Dummett & Stephension, 2016). All participants are monolingual.

The research is beneficial for the learners and teachers, it did not harm learners/ teachers or any person involved in the research (non-malfeasance). To protect participants` anonymity and confidentiality, the participants filled in the informed consent before the beginning of the experiment.

To assign the groups to control and experimental status randomly and not subjectively, the researchers assigned colors to all groups in advance. On the first day of the class, the researchers provided a box of four strips of colored paper, and each group had to decide on one color. Consequently, the groups were assigned to control group 1, control group 2, experimental group 1, and experimental group 2.

All groups used the textbook Keynote advanced level (C1). First of all, learners did the TED talk activities in the textbook, focusing on comprehension. After these comprehension tasks, all participants in control groups did vocabulary in context tasks, multiple-choice tasks from the DVD using the projector in the classroom.

While experimental groups did not do the vocabulary in context but after doing TED talk comprehension activities, they did the tasks on the paper related to their interests, topics they liked, and their needs. These interests were gathered in a survey, the needs analysis part indicated above, conducted at the

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beginning of the course. The tasks were contextualized and adjusted to their needs and interests. The tasks included both target language, the same language items as in the control group, and incidental language, the same items in the task in control groups. The difference between control and experimental group tasks was that experimental groups had their interest-based materials. The participants in the experimental group had a different context related to their interests.

As mentioned above, both tasks in the control and experimental groups included the same vocabulary items and the participants spent the same time on them (see samples 1 and 2). Moreover, both tasks were based on not only the same target language but also the incidental language. In control groups, in vocabulary in context activities are done through the multiple-choice task using the projector, the target language was highlighted while incidental language was in the marker sentence or in options. The researchers chose the same target language and incidental language from the marker sentence and multiple-choice options for experimental groups. Consequently, the tasks used in experimental groups included the target language in the box, from which students had to choose the target language items and insert in sentences, while incidental language was scattered in each story itself, but was not highlighted in order not to emphasize the incidental language as in control groups.

Sample 1. This sample was given to one of the participants, X, who indicated in the survey that her favourite topic is related to arts, paintings.

Task 1. Please fill in the gaps with the words from the box. You have 2:13 minutes.

Mesmerized	rippling across	
Shifted from	waterfront	bland

X is an outstanding painter, she got familiar with arts when she was young. She started painting power stations in front of the house using different colours in oil.
First, she discovered that she could differentiate shades of colours nicely but she was uncertain how to paint with water. In order to practice more, she started painting …….. of the Caspian Sea. X found that all artists painted water in a different way and she started painting waves ……the sea.

X states that the colours totally absorbed the waves without an intersection and it ……..the oil colours to lovely scenery. Nowadays X is a famous artist and supports new talented artists, she is upset that governments do not support artists. One day X found a painting of war, where bombs were to explode easily. X was ……when she looked at this painting. The most interesting part of the painting was that one half of the painting was ……..and boring but the other half was thrilling. She found the painter and now they are having a joint exhibition.

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Sample 2. This sample was given to one of the participants, Y, who indicated in the survey that her favourite topic is related to music or being a DJ.

Task 1. Please fill in the gaps with the words from the box. You have 2:13 minutes.

Mesmerized		rippling across
Shifted	waterfront	bland

Y is an outstanding DJ. She remembers she was…….by music for the first time when she listened to techno on the radio when she and her mum passed the power station by car. All sounds merged, and she found a unique rhythm. She closed her eyes and visualized …….of the ocean in front of her. At that moment, her feelings for techno …….., before she didn't think techno was her favourite type of music. Nowadays, some listeners are uncertain about the sound in her music for the first 20 seconds, but after that, they are absorbed, and most of them mentioned that they visualized waves……the sea. Y argues that music should not have an intersection between a human being and the location, all sounds should synthesize. Y is upset that techno is not the most popular type of music, and some people think it is……., but she thinks that this music with a unique rhythm can explode the best feelings inside a human being.

Each student in experimental groups received the sample adjusted to their interests. Each student had a different story in each unit after doing the TED talk comprehension tasks. The students were given the same time in control and experimental groups; for example, the task in control groups needed 2:13 minutes, and the participants in experimental groups had to do a gap-fill task in the same time. It should be noted that the teacher monitored the learners carefully without interference. In some units, when the learners in experimental groups asked what a particular word meant, the teacher gave a synonym or a definition from the task in control groups, the learners were exposed to the identical language items and language input. The teacher did not focus on words in-depth, the teacher only gave a synonym or a definition, i.e., focused on meaning. The form, pronunciation, and appropriacy were dropped since the task in control groups did not include any of these language foci except the meaning.

It should be noted that after doing each task, the learners had to check in pairs or groups (depending on the number of students while doing the task). Moreover, they micro-taught while working in pairs/ groups, as the participants saw that they had different answers in some gaps. The teacher monitored carefully and provided support using the definitions or synonyms if needed. The teacher saw that sometimes they smiled when doing peer assessment as they read different stories about each other`s interests and after each task different students mentioned that they found the tasks very interesting. Peer assessment and tasks, as they shared their interests, encouraged micro-teaching, enhancement of autonomous learning, and a more

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friendly atmosphere, as sometimes the learners continued speaking about the topic as they got interested in the topic.

In the experiment, in all groups, an observation sheet was used as the tracker of their absences while doing the tasks or tests. Consequently, some participants did the tasks but their result was not used in data analysis due to absences.

In this experiment, the learners completed one pre-test, two while tests, and one post-test. After two units of Keynote, two TED talks, and two tasks, they completed one test. A part of their final exam from the previous semester was taken as a pre-test.

Findings and Discussion

To test the hypothesis a dependent samples t-test (i.e. paired samples t-test) was conducted. Prior to conducting the analysis and collecting the data, tests were designed: a pre-test, two while-tests, and one post-test. Each test, except the pre-test (because it was a part of the final exam not designed by the researchers), was piloted in groups, with 5-minute intervals to check reliability. In the same university of the same age group, 10 people were taken to pilot the tests. They did the tests in the morning, and after a 5-minute break, they did the same test to check reliability. Mostly they had similar answers but to prove the reliability of the test, Cronbach's Alpha was calculated using SPSS 16.0. While-test one result was 0.979, which is more than 0.8, and the significance p=0.000, which was less than 0.01. It means that the first while test was reliable (See Table 2).

Table 2. While-test One, Cronbach's Alpha result

Correlations

		VAR00001(First attempt)	VAR00002(second attempt)
VAR00001	Pearson Correlation	1	.979**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
	N	10	10
VAR00002	Pearson Correlation	.979**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	
	N	10	10

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

While-test number 2 result was 0.996, which is more than 0.8, and the significance p=0.000, which was less than 0.01. It means that the second while test was reliable (See Table 3).

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Table 3. While-test Two, Cronbach's Alpha result

Correlations

		VAR00001(First attempt)	VAR00002(second attempt)
VAR00001	Pearson Correlation	1	.996**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
	N	10	10
VAR00002	Pearson Correlation	.996**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	
	N	10	10

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

The post-test result was 0.991, which is more than 0.8, and the significance p=0.000, which was less than 0.01. It means that the post-test was reliable (See Table 4).

Table 4. Post-test, Cronbach's Alpha result

Correlations

		VAR00001(First attempt)	VAR00002(second attempt)
VAR00001	Pearson Correlation	1	.991**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
	N	10	10
VAR00002	Pearson Correlation	.991**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	
	N	10	10

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

There is a strong correlation between the two results for each test, the result is statistically significant and all tests are reliable. After receiving learners` scores for all tests, mean, median, mode, standard deviation, skewness, and kurtosis were calculated to have data for the *t*-test. The mean results were used to calculate the *t*-test (See Table 5 and Table 5.1.).

 ISSN: 1857-7881 (Print) e - ISSN 1857-7431

Table 5. Mean, Median, Mode, Standard Deviation, Skewness, and Kurtosis Result of Control Groups

Groups	**Control Group 1**				**Control Group 2**			
Tests	Pre-test	While-test 1	While-test 2	Post-test	Pre-test	While-test 1	While-test 2	Post-test
Mean	14.66	15.41	14.83	16.16	14.33	14.83	15.00	14.41
Median	14.50	16.50	14.50	17.50	16.00	15.50	14.00	15.00
Mode	12.00	17.00	10.00	19.00	18.00	15.00	10.00	15.00
Std. Deviation	5.44	6.05	5.44	5.32	4.99	4.60	4.51	3.20
Skewness	.590	-.718	.247	-.302	-.940	-.186	.378	-.912
Kurtosis	.303	.513	-1.08	-1.30	-.530	-.631	-1.21	.721

Table 5.1. Mean, Median, Mode, Standard Deviation, Skewness, and Kurtosis of Experimental Groups

Groups	**Experimental Group 1**				**Experimental Group 2**			
Tests	Pre-test	While-test 1	While-test 2	Post-test	Pre-test	While-test 1	While-test 2	Post-test
Mean	12.83	16.50	20.58	24.16	13.50	15.16	21.00	24.75
Median	10.50	15.00	19.50	24.50	13.00	14.50	20.50	25.00
Mode	8.00	13.00	16.00	19.00	10.00	10.00	25.00	25.00
Std. Deviation	4.93	4.60	4.99	3.45	4.71	4.54	3.66	2.66
Skewness	.725	.735	.464	-.342	.439	.378	.080	-.783
Kurtosis	-1.32	-.78	-1.10	-1.13	.024	-1.417	-1.732	-.043

The tables above show that the mean result in control groups in each test was very close to each other. However, the data change when it comes to the experimental groups. The pre-test data for each group were close to Control Group 1 and Control Group 2 and Experimental Group 1 and Experimental Group 2. The data changed dramatically in while-tests, especially the second while-test. According to the tables, the experimental groups had a higher mean in while-tests. The dramatic change was visible statistically. Mean results were collected for statistical purposes. A paired-samples t-test (SPSS 16.0) was

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conducted to compare the interest-based task usage and vocabulary skills improvement with traditional teaching. The results showed that there was a significant difference between the scores of control groups (M=16.75, SD=3.72) and experimental groups (M=1.50, SD=0.12); t=17.44, df=15, significance p=0.000<0.05, which means that the results are statistically different and important. The confidence interval of the difference was 95%. In other words, the null hypothesis that the suggested treatment does not have an impact on the students' vocabulary skills is denied, as T=17.44>1, the higher the T, the more the null hypothesis is denied. It should be noted that correlation is also significant as it is 0.49 and it is greater than 0.05 (See Table 6).

Table 6. Paired Samples Test Result

Paired Samples Statistics

		Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Pair 1	VAR00001(scores in control groups)	16.7569	16	3.72771	.93193
	VAR00002(scores in experimental groups)	1.5000	16	.51640	.12910

Paired Samples Correlations

		N	Correlation	Sig.
Pair 1	VAR00001 (scores in control groups) & VAR00002(scores in experimental groups)	16	.500	.049

Paired Samples Test

		Paired Differences					t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
		Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference				
					Lower	Upper			
Pair 1	VAR00001 (scores in control groups) - VAR00002(scores in experimental groups)	1.52569E1	3.49845	.87461	13.39268	17.12107	17.444	15	.000

The data showed a significant impact. Thus, the mean result in the experimental groups was significantly higher than in the control groups. It can be interpreted that the tasks in experimental groups helped learners to memorize and retrieve vocabulary items more than the multiple-choice task done using the projector. The experiment was successful because visually and statistically, the difference is significant; the difference is statistically important.

The hypothesis was proved; learner needs and interests-based materials impact vocabulary skills.

Research Limitations

Some students missed some days when the vocabulary tasks were done and they were excluded from the experiment.

Future Research Prospects

Personalized and contextualized tasks will be used to develop the students` grammar usage.

Conclusion

In conclusion, it can be claimed that contextualized input is beneficial, as learners connect their interests to the language items provided in contextualized tasks. Vocabulary acquisition is successful if the items are contextualized, but the context should be related to learners` needs and interests, not to the outside world but their inner world. This experiment and collected data showed that interest-based materials impact the learners` vocabulary skills significantly. The results revealed a statistically significant difference between the scores of control groups (M=16.75, SD=3.72) and experimental groups (M=1.50, SD=0.12); t=17.44, df=15, significance p=0.000<0.05. Therefore, the null hypothesis that the recommended treatment does not have any effect on vocabulary acquisition is denied. Using this approach led to the enhancement of vocabulary acquisition in experimental groups as the learners could easily retrieve vocabulary items and write tests more effectively. Interests and needs-based materials help the learners to develop vocabulary acquisition.

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