

## Abstract

Since the undergraduates learning English as a Second Language (ESL) at the Faculty of Technology in the University of Colombo find it challenging to achieve the outcome of improving academic vocabulary in the traditional Face-to-Face (F2F) mode of learning, this study explored and compared the effectiveness of the two modes of delivery, Virtual Blended Mode (VBM) and the F2F mode in improving their academic vocabulary drawing on the theoretical assumptions from Richard Anderson's (1977) Schema Theory and the Self-regulation concept of Vygotsky's Socio-Cultural Theory (1978). The study adopted a case study in experimental study design and the participants were 174 undergraduates learning ESL. The duration of the intervention was three months. Data sources included a literature survey to explore commonly used vocabulary strategies at the tertiary level followed by receptive and productive vocabulary tests based on Nation's (2003) Vocabulary Level Test. The academic vocabulary for the intervention was chosen from the Coxhead's (2000) Academic Word List (AWL). Out of the 120 words used for the intervention, 36 were chosen for receptive and productive vocabulary tests. Same words in two different formats were used for the two tests. Productive Vocabulary Level Test (PVLVT) representing all ten sub lists in AWL was conducted to investigate the participants' ability of using both the high and low frequency words equally well in new contexts. The most commonly used strategy, Semantic Mapping strategy (Graves, 2008) was used for vocabulary development. Data analysis focused on the receptive and productive levels of improvement in academic vocabulary of the participants. The study employed 96 participants with limited prior knowledge and 78 participants with higher level of prior knowledge in ESL, selected as two purposive samples from the total population. One sample t test was used in the version 22.0 of the SPSS in analyzing the test scores. The results showed a better improvement in the

outcome of the receptive vocabulary knowledge of the participants in the VBM groups in both samples (Mean scores= 46.56 and 52.03) who had better collaborative experience online compared to their F2F counterparts (Mean scores = 43.77 and 50.36) supporting the Vygotskian Socio-Cultural Theory (1978). However, it was observed that the ability of applying the receptive vocabulary knowledge in new contexts is poor amongst the participants with limited prior knowledge in ESL (Mean = 40.56 for VBM, 43.77 for F2F) compared to the participants with higher level of prior knowledge in ESL (Mean = 53.79 for VBM, 53.10 for F2F) proving the Schema Theory of Richard Anderson (1977). Based on these findings, it is recommended that there should be more involvement, strategically or pedagogically, in enriching the academic vocabulary of the students with limited prior knowledge in ESL regardless of the mode of delivery being utilized in the Faculty of Technology of the University of Colombo. This study, with further confirmatory evidence in socio-cultural factors of the participants can have implications for teaching academic English in the context of teaching ESL in Universities in Sri Lanka.