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SECOND LANGUAGE VOCABULARY ACQUISITION FOR YOUNG LEARNERS

Abstract

An increasing number of children around the world, including Bosnian children, are being educated in a second language (L2). This L2 learning in primary school settings raises interesting questions about developing L2 vocabulary. Investigating the nature of vocabulary knowledge in these L2 children is important particularly as they face the significant challenge of acquiring L2 vocabulary in order to handle school work. This is the case with the children who participated in this study. They attend the first grade at International Primary School in Sarajevo where key subjects are taught in English. In this research different approaches have been used to help young learners develop their vocabulary. There was a big improvement in acquiring new words after implementing all activities appropriate for young learners. I hope that this research may benefit teachers and pedagogues seeking to maximize their class time and their students' language learning potential.

Keywords: second language, vocabulary, acquisition, young learners, language pedagogy, methodology

Introduction

Based on most researchers, learning vocabulary is central to mastery of a language. "Without grammar very little can be conveyed, without vocabulary nothing can be conveyed." This is how the linguist David Wilkins summed up the importance of vocabulary learning (Thornbury, 2004:57). He pointed out that if you spend most of your time studying grammar, your English will not improve very much, but you will see most improvement if you

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learn more words and expressions. According to Nemati (2013), vocabulary learning is significantly noteworthy to English language acquisition. It is unfeasible for a learner to communicate without the required vocabulary. Gass (1999) states that learning a vocabulary item is a process that begins with the first meaningful encounter with a previously unknown word and continues through the successful integration of key features of that word into their mental lexicon. Studies conducted by Mizumoto and Takeuchi (2012), raises the issue of the role of self-regulation in vocabulary learning. Based on their findings, self-regulated learning links motivation and strategy in the vocabulary learning process. They suggest directions for future research to gain further insight into the role of self-regulation in vocabulary learning. Second language acquisition of new words never stops. Even in our first language we are continually learning new words and learning new meaning for old words. There are many degrees of knowing about a word. According to Nemati (2013), lexical knowledge is not only about knowing the simple form and meaning of the word, but also demands the learner to recognize, understand and produce a word together with scores of other words in different contexts and situations that are acceptable in the language. To conclude, one thing that all the researchers can all agree upon is that learning vocabulary is an essential part of mastering a second language. Acquiring vocabulary is a process and let's examine how it started with young learners in Bosnia.

Foreign language pedagogy

In a study by Crookes (1997), the researcher tries to find the connection between second language acquisition and second and foreign language teaching. It is asserted that the relationship is presently often weaker than it should be. He pointed out that second or foreign language teachers must be involved in a second language acquisition research to improve teaching. Therefore, second language acquisition has to have a positive relationship with a second language pedagogy. Needless to say, reflection on actual practices inside the classrooms is key to teachers' creativity and professional development (Jadidi and Keshavarz, 2013). According to Thornbury (2004), the teacher is a highly productive, although often undervalued, source of vocabulary input. Learners often pick up lot of incidental language from their teachers, especially words

and phrases associated with classroom process, such as “Let’s see”, “Whose turn is it?”, “Is that clear?”, “Have you finished yet?” Pavičić (2009) also pointed out that teaching strategies refer to everything teachers do or should do in order to help their learners learn. Which teaching strategy a teacher will employ depends on the time available, the content, as well as on its value for the learner. It becomes important to explore what a teacher can do to facilitate learning and to help students achieving high learning outcomes. If a teacher holds high expectations for students and challenges students to live up to high expectations by engaging them in meaningful learning activities, students tend to work harder, put more effort, and be more persistent in completing a learning task or project (Ketsman, 2012). On the other hand, if a teacher has low expectations for students and perceives students as not capable of completing challenging learning tasks, this teacher will design simplistic classroom instruction that corresponds with low teacher expectations. In a study Wright and Buckby (2006) provided insights about the role of expectations in foreign language classrooms and offered examples of foreign language pedagogical practices that reflect high expectations. The study concludes that expectations shape the learning process in Spanish high school classrooms and contribute to high student achievement. Research states that a teacher plays a tremendous role in making learning meaningful to students, and therefore, makes a difference in student learning choices and experiences. It seems likely that many authors are focused on studying teacher effect in a classroom and discuss behaviours and attitudes of effective foreign language teachers. Foreign language teachers are distinctive in terms of the nature of the subject, content of teaching, teaching methodology and teacher-learner relationships (Crosse, 2007). Foreign language teachers need to create an environment where they communicate in the language that they teach. Numerous studies revealed that teacher content knowledge and their ability to share knowledge are among the most important teacher qualities that contribute to high student achievement outcomes (Linse, 2005; McCardle and Hoff, 2006; Zimmerman, 2001). Some studies suggest that an effective foreign language teacher needs to be able to evoke and sustain interest and motivation of students and to be available for any questions and help (Zoltan, 2001). Other studies claim that effective teachers should have a student-cantered classroom, should be creative, and should teach outside the syllabus (Zimmerman, 2001). To

summarize, what teachers can actually do to increase their students' learning and develop their creativity is still in need of more focus in second/foreign language education research.

Research methodology

Central Research Question

The goal of this study is to evaluate children's English L2 acquisition. I want to determine whether English L2 vocabulary will be better acquired by implementing teaching methods which are appropriate for young learners. I assumed that using different methods suitable for young learners will increase their motivation in learning L2. I expect that all children would know almost all vocabulary words which are the focus of this study by the end of the semester. I want to explore the effect on the development of vocabulary learning by investigating the relationship between vocabulary teaching strategies employed by teachers.

Participants

There were nine participants in the study and all of them are Bosnian children. They attend 1st grade at International Primary School of Sarajevo. They have had two months of exposure to English in a school setting with 21 lessons where English takes place. The Bosnian children ranged in age from 6.1 to 7.9 years.

Tasks

The children were given a vocabulary test. The learners were asked to answer to some questions related to three topics which we did for the last two months. The topics were: my classroom, parts of the body, my family, verbs and nouns. I showed them some pictures and asked them to label the objects. The children were tested twice. The first time the test took place was at the beginning of November and the second time was after twenty days, when all activities were implemented.

Applied Activities in Order to Reinforce Vocabulary Acquisition

The biggest challenge in this research was to implement different activities in the classroom in order to help children to acquire the words. Generally I repeated exposure to the same words

in various collocations and situations. Here are activities which were implemented in the classroom:

Presenting a set of concrete objects

The use of realia, pictures and demonstration was a defining technique of the Direct Method (Thornbury, 2004). This approach was especially appropriate for classes where research was done. Translation was not an option because the class was of mixed nationalities. The classroom objects were presented as a set of concrete objects.

Flashcards

Flashcards were used to present and practice new vocabulary items. They were very useful at the beginning of lessons to introduce new topics. Here is one activity which was implemented using flashcards. I stuck a collection of picture cards (family picture) on the board and numbered them. I asked learners about the words they are familiar with. For example: What's number 4? I checked if someone else knew before giving the answer. Finally, I wrote the words on the board alongside each picture. Flashcards were used for elicitation as well.

Elicitation

A standard elicitation procedure is for the teacher to present the meaning of a word (e.g. by showing a picture, flashcards) and asking learners to supply the form. Here are five ways of eliciting:

- a) Wh- questions: What's this?
- b) Questions using intonation only: A father?
- c) Questions using inversion: Is this a father?
- d) Unfinished sentence questions with rising intonation:
This was a....?
- e) Either/or questions: Is this a father or a grandfather?

The rationale underlying elicitation is that:

- It actively involves the learning in the lesson
- It maximises speaking opportunities
- It keeps the learners alert and attentive
- It challenges better learners who might otherwise “turn off”

- It acts a way of checking the learners' developing understanding

Questions to prompt vocabulary development

The children were asked questions which help them to relate new words to their own lives. It has been assumed that this will help them to remember the words and hopefully help them to use the words in their own speech. Questions used to prompt vocabulary development have been carefully phrased to help learners develop their cognitive skills. Some of the questions were: What is the most important thing in your pencil case? When you are hungry, what do you do? Which part of the body is the most important?

Total Physical response (TPR)

TPR was developed in order to reduce the stress people feel when studying foreign languages (Larsen-Freeman, 2007). A TPR lesson typically involves the teacher demonstrating actions, using real objects, and then getting the learners to perform the same or similar actions in response to commands. Learners are expected to respond non-verbally to commands before they are expected to speak. They follow along with the commands and only speak when they are ready. When they first begin to speak, they repeat the commands given by the teacher. According to Wright and Buckby (2006) TPR has several positive aspects. First, it utilizes the auditory, visual and tactile learning channels. The learners listen and watch as the commands are given. Later, the learners have a chance to use all three channels they listen, watch one another, and do the commands themselves. Second, TPR helps to teach children to follow directions and listen attentively – two important skills for academic success. Third, in keeping with developmentally appropriate notions or thoughts, children are allowed to listen and then choose when they feel comfortable to start speaking. Fourth, this method can be easily adopted in many different ways for young learners. In this study TPR was used practicing meanings for learning verbs and along with songs and chants. There is one example:

“Head and shoulders”

Head and shoulders, knees and toes, knees and toes,

Head and shoulders, knees and toes, knees and toes,

Eyes and ears and mouth and nose,
Head and shoulders, knees and toes, knees and toes.

Games

According to Wright and Buckby (2006) “game” is an activity which is entertaining and engaging, often challenging, and an activity in which the learners play and usually interact with others. In selecting and describing our games I have tried to minimize competition, with winners and losers, and to maximize challenge, where everyone feels inspired to ‘have a go’ and do their best. I used lots of games because they help and encourage many learners to sustain their interest and work. They also help me to create contexts in which the language is useful and meaningful. The learners want to take part, and in order to do so they must understand what others are saying, and they must speak in order to express their own point of view or give information. Games provide one way of helping the learners to experience language rather than merely study it.

Magic box

The magic box represents a box filled up with picture cards related to new words. It was used at the beginning and at the end of lesson. Each child will take out one picture and say appropriate word related to that picture. The name “Magic Box” aims to stress the emotional and pleasurable aspects of experiencing creativity.

Making their own picture dictionary

The children have made their first book – a picture dictionary. Every child stuck a picture of a word on the left side of their notebook, and on the right side they wrote the word which represents that picture. The pictures were related to new words. Many activities were implemented using the picture dictionary but my favourite one is in peer work. Each child takes the role of a teacher and asks the friend next to him/her to recall the name for each picture.

Power point presentation – slide show

Each word was presented on Power Point Presentation with a picture and a word which represent that picture. Using these slides children were given opportunities to acquire new English words.

Posters – my family – presenting their family members

Personalization makes the learning material psychologically real. It can be achieved by giving personal examples, by relating a word to real events or personal experience. Children generally like to talk about themselves, and to hear their classmates doing the same. They enjoy talking about their favourite things, families and so on.

Songs

Songs can provide the opportunity for vocabulary practice. They are usually based around a theme or topic that can provide the context for vocabulary learning. The song “Head, Shoulders, Knees and Toes”, for example, could be used to review body parts, or the song “This is my family” might be useful for reviewing family members. Most children’s songs are characterized by monosyllabic words, many of which are frequently repeated. This repetition offers greater exposure to these words and can help to improve vocabulary acquisition. Probably the most obvious advantage to using songs in the young learner classroom is that they are enjoyable. Most children enjoy singing and usually respond well to using songs in the classroom, but there are more significant benefits to using songs other than just being fun. First, songs can bring variety to the everyday classroom routine. This variety stimulates interest and attention, which can help maintain classroom motivation, thereby helping learners to reach higher levels of achievement. Secondly, songs, in particular choral singing, can help to create a relaxed and informal atmosphere that makes the classroom a nonthreatening environment. By reducing anxiety, songs can help increase student interest and motivate them to learn the target language. Students often think of songs as entertainment rather than study and therefore find learning English through songs fun and enjoyable.

Here are some of the things we might want to achieve by using a song:

1. Students have fun and are therefore motivated for the rest of the lesson and future lessons
2. Students learn quicker than with other methods
3. Students remember longer than with other methods
4. Students lose some of their inhibitions about speaking out, using rhythm and intonation when speaking, moving around and using gestures.
5. The songs maintain discipline in the classroom, teach kids to work together, foster learner independence.

Miming the actions

When children are familiar with vocabulary used for a particular topic, I introduced mime. Miming means acting silently, without speaking.

The children:

1. Have to listen carefully when you describe what they have to mime
2. Have to decide how to perform what you describe
3. May need some thinking time for this
4. Move and act but do not speak.

Miming is more complex than simple TPR activities. TPR involves children doing everything you say but mime gives the children more freedom to be creative.

Making posters around the classroom – word walls

Word walls are lists of words that the children have encountered in their vocabulary and that can be used in their writing.

Results

Twelve words related to parts of the body were taught in September. The words are: eye, nose, ear, mouth, face, head, hand, leg, arm, foot, girl and boy. The first time when the children were tested (TIME 1) four children were able to label all words. All of them scored above the 50th percentile. Second time (TIME 2) when the children were tested, eight children were able to label all the words. Table 1 shows a great improvement in acquiring new words.

Table 1. Words related to the parts of the body

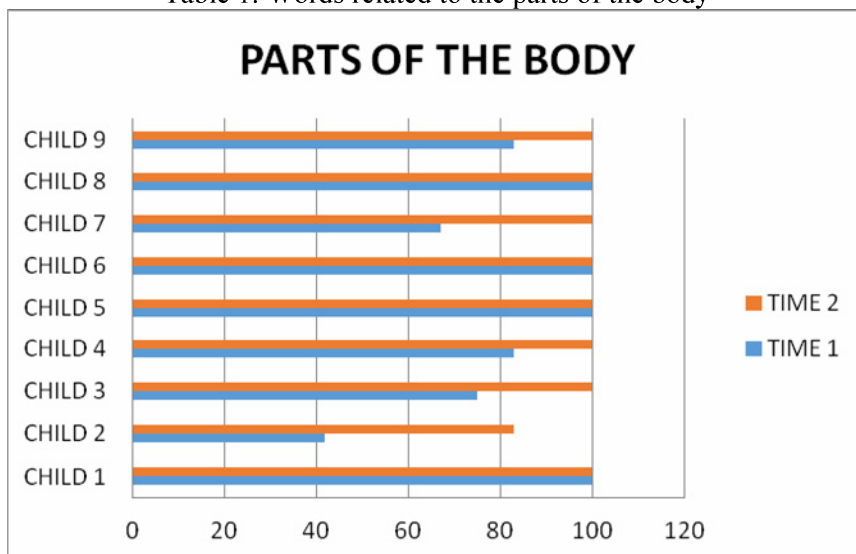
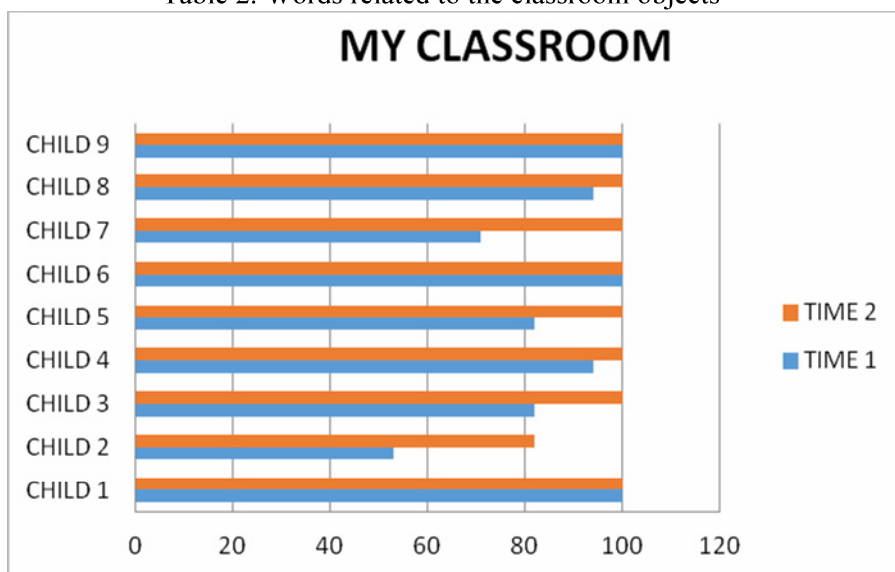


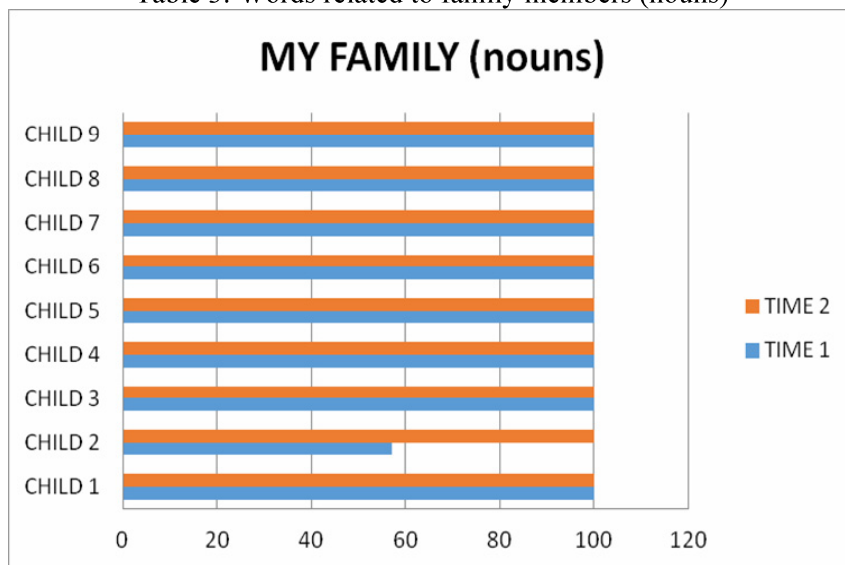
Table 2. Words related to the classroom objects



The words related to the classroom objects were: school bag, book, pencil case, water bottle, scissors, glue, pen, sharpener, eraser, pencil, ruler, window, door, desk, chair, table and computer. The first time when the children were tested three children were able to label all words. All of them scored at or above the 50th percentile. All children were able to recall following words: school

bag, book, pencil case, water bottle and computer. Second time when the children were tested eight children were able to label all the words. Table 2 shows a great improvement in acquiring new words related to my classroom.

Table 3. Words related to family members (nouns)

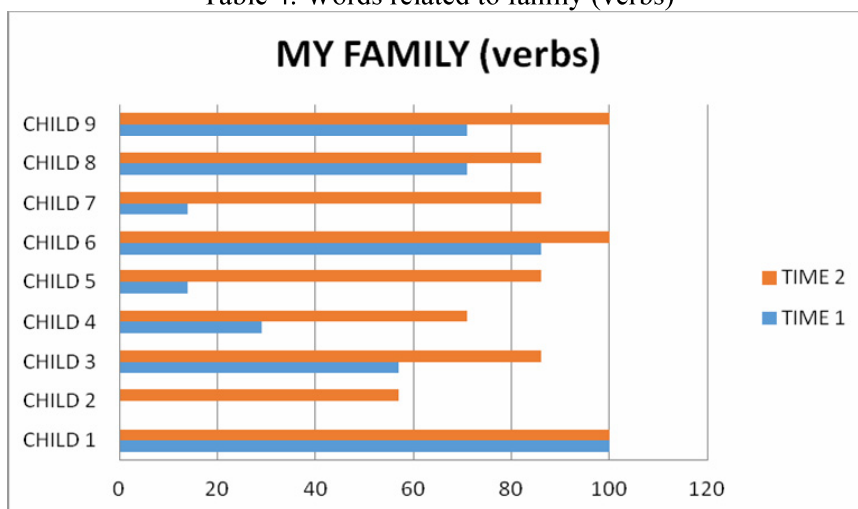


The words related to family members are: family, mother, father, sister, brother, grandfather, grandmother. First time when the children were tested eight children were able to label all words. Second time when the children were tested nine children were able to label all the words. The nouns related to family were acquired the fastest.

The verbs which were related to family are: eat, work, shop, laugh, cry, play and fall down. The first time when children were asked to reproduce verbs, results were not promising. Most of the children weren't able to recall even the 50th percentile of verbs. It seems that children were having difficulties in remembering verbs. I assumed that this is case because verbs are abstract, especially the verb work. According to Ois Pichette and Lafontaine (2012) the nature of a word plays a role in its retention. They suggest that concrete words have a higher potential for retention due to the higher number of connections they allow. This is exactly a case with a verb play. Actually, the most successful recalling verb was play because children were familiar with this verb and it has been used in many songs and games. The second time three children

were able to recall all verbs, four children recalled more than 80th percentile of the verbs and the rest of the children are still having difficulties with remembering. To conclude, there is a great improvement in acquiring verbs but results still needed to be improved.

Table 4. Words related to family (verbs)



Conclusion

In order to prepare students to be global citizens in the 21st century, knowledge of a foreign language is of prime importance. The current trend of lowering the age for compulsory English education around the world has created a huge demand for teachers of young learners.

Young learners are talkative, spontaneous, have lots of physical energy and they are easily distracted. They need to have their interest, imagination and curiosity sparked to keep their attention in the classroom. Therefore, English teacher education programs need to have a specific focus on methods for teaching children to prepare new teachers to apply developmentally appropriate approaches to the English as a foreign language classroom. It is of extreme importance to encourage learner's active participation in vocabulary learning and cooperation with their peers and the teacher. It is necessary to include vocabulary items that are part of the curriculum as well as provide learners with opportunities to work with items they find meaningful.

Furthermore, the second or foreign language teachers must be involved in a second language acquisition research to improve teaching. There must be a positive relationship with second language pedagogy and a second language acquisition. In this case study different approaches have been used to help young learners develop their vocabulary. Working with this age group is demanding because we need to plan lots of resources, ideas and changes of activity to match their short attention span. We need to remember play is the young child's natural way to learn and that is a reason why many different games were implemented. As we could see there was a big improvement in acquiring new words after implementing all activities appropriate for young learners. This case study emphasized the role of teachers as the practical link between second language acquisition research and classroom practice. This is because much of what actually happens in many second or foreign language classrooms depends on the teachers' views of pedagogy and teachers' knowledge. In future research I assume that we need to address the matter of "how" to teach young learners. It is very important to encourage classroom teachers to investigate their classroom teaching in order to develop more ideas for teaching. Future research should include further testing and improvement in a significant database of child vocabulary acquisition and develop strategies for coping with gaps in word knowledge, including coping with unknown words, or unfamiliar uses of known words.

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USVAJANJE VOKABULARA STRANOG JEZIKA KOD OSNOVNOŠKOLACA

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Sažetak

Sve veći broj djece širom svijeta, uključujući učenike u Bosni i Hercegovini, školuje se na stranom jeziku. Ovakvo usvajanje znanja na stranom jeziku postavlja zanimljiva pitanja o usvajanju novih riječi u stranom jeziku. Istraživanja o prirodi usvajanja novih riječi kod ovih učenika posebno su važna jer učenici moraju da usvoje što veći broj riječi kako bi uopće mogli pratiti i razumjeti nastavu. To je slučaj s djecom koja su učestvovala u ovom istraživanju. Oni su pohađali prvi razred Međunarodne osnovne škole u Sarajevu, gdje se ključni predmeti uče na engleskom jeziku.

U ovom istraživanju korišteni su različiti metodski postupci kako bi se pomoglo učenicima da brže usvajaju gradivo.

Postignut je veliki napredak u usvajanju novih riječi nakon implementacije svih predviđenih aktivnosti.

Nadamo se da će rezultati ovog istraživanja koristiti nastavnicima i pedagozima koji traže nova metoda rješenja kako bi se povećala efikasnost usvajanja novih riječi u stranom jeziku.

Ključne riječi: strani jezik, vokabular, usvajanje novih riječi, pedagogija, metodologija

لاريسا جابو- جامعة البرج الدولية- سراييفو

اكتساب الكلمات باللغة الثانية للمتعلمين الصغار

الخلاصة:

عدد متزايد من الأطفال في جميع أنحاء العالم, بما في ذلك الأطفال من البوسنة والمهرسك, الذين يجرى تعليمهم باللغة الأجنبية. واكتساب العلوم بهذا الشكل يطرح تساؤلات مثيرة للاهتمام في اكتساب الكلمات الجديدة في اللغة الأجنبية. الدراسات حول طبيعة اكتساب الكلمات الجديدة لدى هؤلاء الطلاب مهمة جداً لأنّ على الطلاب تعلّم العدد الأكبر من الكلمات حتى يستطيعوا متابعة الدراسة. هكذا الحال مع الأطفال الذين شاركوا في هذه الدراسة. فقد كانوا طلاباً في المدرسة الدولية في سراييفو حيث كانت المواد الأساسية تقدّم باللغة الإنجليزية. وفي هذا البحث تمّ استخدام طرق تدريس مختلفة لهدف المساعدة للطلاب في اكتساب دروسهم على الوجه الأسرع. وقد تحقق تقدّم كبير في اكتساب الكلمات الجديدة بعد تطبيق الأنشطة المخططة. ونأمل أن تكون نتائج البحث مفيدة للمعلمين والمربين الذين يبحثون عن الحلول المنهجية لتحقيق أقصى قدر من الكفاءة في اكتساب الكلمات الجديدة في اللغة الأجنبية.

الكلمات الأساسية: اللغة الثانية - الأجنبية, المفردات, اكتساب الكلمات الجديدة, التربية, المنهجية.