The Use of Sitcom Videos Subtitled in English to Increase the Vocabulary in a Group of Low-Proficiency Level Students

El uso de videos de comedias de situación subtitulados en inglés para aumentar el vocabulario en un grupo de estudiantes de bajo rendimiento

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Abstract

This study explores the effects of using sitcom videos subtitled in English to help students build their English vocabulary in a group of low-proficiency students from a B1 level course of the English major at a Costa Rican public university. Eight students from this course participated in the investigation. The participants were divided into two subgroups of four students each: the control group which received standard instruction and the experimental group which received the treatment. The results obtained from both the pre-tests and the post-tests indicate that the experimental group showed more substantial improvements in terms of lexical gains. Nevertheless, further evidence is recommended to establish with greater confidence the potential of using sitcom videos subtitled in English as a more effective resource for enhancing students' vocabulary compared to more traditional approaches to learn lexical items in the English as a Foreign Language classroom.

Key words: vocabulary acquisition, subtitles, sitcoms in language teaching, videos, technology

Resumen

Este estudio explora los resultados de usar videos de comedias de situación con subtítulos en inglés con el fin de ayudar a los estudiantes de bajo rendimiento de un curso de nivel B1 de la carrera del Bachillerato en Inglés de una universidad pública de Costa Rica a aumentar su vocabulario en el idioma meta. Ocho estudiantes de este grupo participaron en la investigación. Los participantes fueron divididos en dos subgrupos de cuatro estudiantes cada uno: el grupo de control que recibió instrucción estándar y el grupo experimental que recibió el tratamiento. Los resultados obtenidos en las pruebas previas y posteriores indican que el grupo experimental mostró una mejoría más sustancial que la del grupo de control en términos de adquisición de vocabulario. Sin embargo, se recomienda obtener más evidencia para establecer con más seguridad el potencial de utilizar videos de comedia de situación subtitulados en inglés como un recurso más eficaz para mejorar el vocabulario de los estudiantes en comparación con enfoques más tradicionales para el aprendizaje de elementos léxicos en un curso de inglés como idioma extranjero.

Palabras Claves: adquisición de vocabulario, subtítulos, comedias de situación en la enseñanza de un idioma, videos, tecnología

Introduction

Almost in any EFL classroom (English as a Foreign Language), it is common to find that groups are not homogeneous in terms of the students' language level. Thus, in an average class, there are students who have the expected level for the course, those who are above that level, and the ones whose level is lower than the one required to meet the objectives of the course. All these subgroups compete, according to their skills, for opportunities to use the target language in class. However, more advanced students are the ones who almost always monopolize the chances to participate. This is evident, for example, when they must work in groups or in whole class activities, in which students with a lower level than the one required (and being the ones who need to speak the most in order to improve their oral skills) miss opportunities to practice.

The reasons why these students do not speak as much as they should in class are varied. The causes might be motivational such as anxiety and little self-confidence often due to poor language skills, or linguistic, like the lack of vocabulary or grammar knowledge to put their thoughts into words. Regardless of the reasons, language learners who do not practice the target language often find themselves in a difficult-to-break vicious circle: they do not speak because they feel they lack the skills to do it well, but they will hardly develop their oral production skills because they are not practicing.

Some learners are fully aware of

their difficulty communicating in the target language and are able to attribute it to their lack of vocabulary. In fact, many silent students claim that they lack the necessary vocabulary to take part in conversations, discussions, or simply to provide answers. Therefore, it is common for them to look for ways to enhance their lexicon to increase their understanding and communicative skills in the target language. Indeed, knowing a lot of words and terms is not all these students need to maintain a conversation, but weaknesses in this area can significantly hinder their abilities.

Aware of this reality, and keeping in mind that the situation described above is typical of the first two courses of the major in English Language offered at the university where this study took part, we—as English professors and researchers—looked for ways to help this population to expand their vocabulary and to make it more meaningful for them. There are several ways in which a Foreign Language instructor can aid students to increase their lexicon, but the strategies used to achieve it have to be appealing to get the most benefit out of them. This is the reason why the use of popular subtitled sitcom videos might be useful for students to learn new vocabulary items. The purpose of this research study is to explore if using subtitled sitcom videos can help to increase the vocabulary of a group of low-proficiency level students from a B1 level course of the English major at a public university in Costa Rica, and to what extent the results obtained in the pre-tests and post-tests reflect such possible improvement.

Literature Review

The Acquisition of Vocabulary

The Importance of Vocabulary

Expanding lexicon is probably one of the most essential steps in the process of learning a foreign language (FL). In fact, Thornbury (2002) asserts that language comprehension and production can be hampered because of poor vocabulary. Many, if not all, EFL learners go through a stage where the lack of vocabulary hinders their communication abilities, something that can cause significant levels of anxiety and affect the development of language acquisition. These learners perceive that knowing grammatical and phonological rules is not enough to be capable of maintaining a conversation, to comprehend what one listens to, or to understand texts in a given language. However, Nation (2001) claims that vocabulary learning should not be seen as a goal in itself but as an interdependent language component meant "to help learners listen, speak, read, or write more effectively" (p. 362).

The relevance of expanding vocabulary when learning a second or foreign language—a process known as vocabulary acquisition—had already been recognized by Wilkins (as cited in Milton, 2009, p. 3) back in 1972 when he stated that "while without grammar very little can be conveyed, without vocabulary *nothing* can be conveyed." Nevertheless, and even when later researchers also agreed on the central importance of this component (e.g., Altman, Laufer, Long & Richards as cited in Coady & Huckin, 1997; Khoii & Sharififar, 2013; Min, 2008;

Zimmerman, 1997), this area of language learning was somewhat neglected in the past not only by investigators but also by teachers in the FL classroom. This lack of attention was possibly due to the approaches to learning a second language such as Audiolingualism and the Direct Method, which emphasized grammar over vocabulary or communication, keeping the teaching of new words to a minimum.

Little by little, with the introduction of the Communicative Approach in the 1970s, vocabulary acquisition started to stand out as a relevant component in the process of learning a language, and finally, in the mid-1980s, it gained the importance it deserved in the field of linguistics research with numerous studies that demonstrated how understanding the process of acquiring lexical competence is essential to achieve communicative, reading, listening, and writing skills (Elley, Ellis, Haynes & Baku, Hincks, Hinkel, Huckin & Bloch, Joe, Laufer & Nation, Lee, as cited in Folse, 2006). The results of many research studies carried out during the past 30 years have shown that vocabulary plays a key role in language learning and have helped to make clear that teaching it is essential in the FL classroom (Thornbury, 2002).

Ways of Learning Vocabulary

Perhaps, because the process of vocabulary acquisition is a very complex one or because this is a relatively new area of study, it has been difficult to put together one single theory that explains the most effective way to approach it. Some authors (File and Adams, 2010; Folse, 2006; Khoii & Sharififar, 2013; Lugo-Neris, 2007;

Min, 2008; Nation, 2007) have tried to understand how vocabulary items are learned and what the best ways to teach and learn them are. Their findings are of remarkable importance, but they also acknowledge the need to continue doing further investigation on the topic since several key issues remain unresolved. As research continues, two main approaches to vocabulary acquisition have been described and adopted by instructors in the SL (second language) or the FL classroom (Richards, 2000; Nation, 2007). The first one is *explicit learning*, a process in which the target vocabulary is taught, as its name suggests, explicitly through direct instruction, helping students to focus their attention directly on the terms to be learned. The other approach is known as *incidental learning*, and it makes reference to the acquisition of vocabulary items by means of meaningful contexts such as reading or listening passages.

Deciding which of these two ways leads to more vocabulary gains has been the subject of several research studies. While some authors have concluded that students learn more words through *explicit learning* (File & Adams, 2010), some others have found that *incidental learning* is the most effective approach to help students learn new lexicon (Coady & Huckin, 1997; Huckin & Coady, 1999). A third group of researchers claim, based on their investigations, that mixing both approaches—explicit and incidental—is the most efficient method for students to learn and to retain new lexicon for a longer time (Karami & Bowles, 2019; Min, 2008; Paribakht & Wesche, 1997). In their research studies, they were able to demonstrate that those learners

that received both explicit and incidental instruction performed better in post-tests than those who had been exposed to only one of the two approaches to teach and to learn vocabulary.

Sources of Vocabulary

There are many possible sources of vocabulary that an EFL instructor can use to encourage students to expand their lexicon. The most obvious—and used—are course books, lists, and vocabulary books. The instructor and even other learners can also work as suppliers of new words. However, a teacher who is really interested in helping students to learn the most should look for more appealing resources such as reading passages and videos.

Reading articles, stories, magazines, and other types of texts has always been claimed to be one of the most important sources of new vocabulary; nevertheless, it must be taken into account that not all people enjoy reading. According to Elley (as cited in Nation, 2001), interest is essential to encourage learning and students who are not interested in what they are reading or who do not find reading pleasant, are probably not going to gain as much in terms of new knowledge.

In contrast, learners who find activities motivating (namely reading, listening, or watching,) can obtain greater benefits from them. In a study, Elley (as cited in Nation, 2001) demonstrated how interest played a significant role in terms of vocabulary learning: students showed different amounts of vocabulary gains which seemed to be related to the degree of involvement of the learners with the stories they listened to. For this researcher, students can increase their lexicon by reading or listening to texts if they are really involved in the task because vocabulary is closely related to the main idea of those passages. Hence, it is necessary that teachers choose texts, whether written or spoken, that arouse the interests of the students, and since reading might not be appealing to everyone, the use of videos becomes a relevant source to consider.

Nowadays, there are many sitcoms that are popular among students, especially those who are in their teens or who are young adults. The topics developed in these series are current, funny, and entertaining. Many people identify themselves with the characters, and—if not—they really enjoy the everyday situations portrayed in the programs. Sitcoms are also a great source of vocabulary used in context and can aid in enhancing receptive skills (Hložková, 2013). For these reasons, utilizing sitcoms appears to be an effective means of vocabulary acquisition as they have the potential to engage students in their listening experience, a crucial factor in promoting learning.

Listening Comprehension

Defining Listening

How could listening passages help EFL learners in their vocabulary acquisition process? Before we attempt to give a possible answer to this question, it is necessary to define what *listening* is in order to discuss the topic with accuracy. According to Richards and Schmidt, *listening* can be understood as "the process of understanding speech in a first or second language" (as cited in Helgesen & Brown, 2007, p.3). For them, language

knowledge—vocabulary, grammar, sounds—and content knowledge—general knowledge based on life experiences—are both necessary for the study of listening comprehension in second language learning. This means that EFL learners need not only to know about the target language but also to use the background knowledge to be able to interpret the input obtained from listening texts. Rubin, on the other hand, conceives *listening* "as an active process in which listeners select and interpret information which comes from auditory and visual clues in order to define what is going on and what the speakers are trying to express" (as cited in Helgesen & Brown, 2007, p.3). As can be inferred, both authors agree on the fact that *listening* is an active process rather than a passive one. *Listening* implies paying attention to what is being heard, decoding the language, selecting what is relevant in each specific situation, relating that selected chunk of information to previous knowledge, interpreting it, and making sense of it. All these mental processes make *listening* an engaging and complex process which has only recently begun to be studied more in detail.

Types of Listening Texts

Listening texts can be classified in various ways: they can be monologues or dialogues, they can be taken from spoken or written sources, or they can be categorized according to their authenticity. Widdowson (as cited in Lynch, 2009), for instance, makes the difference between *inauthentic* texts—those recorded with teaching purposes— and *genuine* texts—the ones that resemble genres used in real-life communication. He saves the term *authentic* to describe tasks when they elicit the type of responses from the listeners that one would expect to obtain in a real communicative situation. Helgesen and Brown (2007), on the other hand, claim that authentic materials are not created with language teaching purposes such as radio and TV programs, movies, and songs. A further classification based on authenticity is the one given by Brown and Menasche (as cited in Helgesen & Brown, 2007) who identify five types of listening texts: (a) *genuine text authenticity* or listening texts that are created for real-life purposes and not modified for classroom use, (b) *altered text authenticity* or listening texts that are slightly altered for classroom use, no changes in meaning but in length are made, (c) *adapted text authenticity* or listening texts that are created for real-life purposes adapted by the instructor in order to simplify—in most cases—the grammatical structures or the vocabulary, (d) *simulated text authenticity* or listening texts that are created for classroom purposes but that resemble real passages, and (e) *inauthentic texts* or listening texts that are created specifically for classroom purposes with no intention to resemble genuine material.

It is relevant to point out that no type of text is better or worse than the others because all of them can be useful depending on the type of task instructors have in mind and the objectives they plan to achieve. However, when it comes to learning vocabulary, experts recommend the use of more authentic materials because they contain the sort of language that learners of a foreign language are more likely to encounter in real situations.

The Relation between Listening and Vocabulary Learning

EFL learners can pick up new vocabulary from different sources and one of them is by listening to texts. As a matter of fact, this kind of input is an essential means for vocabulary expansion. If listening tasks are planned in a way in which students can notice the new lexical items, have several encounters with them, become engaged in tasks, and make use of the new words in post-listening activities, word retention is more likely to happen. Regarding this, Nation (2001) asserts that it is feasible to help our students to improve their vocabulary with the use of listening texts by increasingly exposing them to tasks that generate interest and attention. Just a few years ago, it was thought that reading (for those who favored incidental learning) or vocabulary lists (for those who favored explicit learning) were the best sources of vocabulary. Now, it is known that, despite the transitory nature of listening, listening texts are a great source of new words and, if they come in the form of films, television programs, or videos, they can have better results because audiovisual media helps students not only to listen but also to "visualize" the message.

Use of Subtitled Videos

Beyond the grammatical structures that students learn from the input provided by teachers and classroom materials, they need to acquire vocabulary that helps them express their ideas and interact with others to promote authentic communication. In this sense, videos are an extremely useful resource for students who are learning a language and who want to improve their skills and competence. By watching videos in the target language, students can find an excellent source of real-life discourse such as colloquial language, slang examples, and idiomatic expressions. They can also get acquainted with the body language and gestures that accompany those words or expressions. These benefits are enhanced if the videos have subtitles, especially when this resource is used with beginners or low-proficiency level students.

Recently, technology has taken a leading role when learning a foreign language. Dwayer (as cited in Harji, Woods, & Alavi, 2010) acknowledges that multimedia technology— television, computers, networks, emails, videos, and compact discs— adds an extra channel of media to improve communication and comprehension by integrating real-life situations with the target language into the class.

Subtitles, which according to Cambridge Online Dictionary (n.d.) are "words shown at the bottom of a film or television picture to explain what is being said," can be used in videos to improve word recognition and vocabulary acquisition skills in an EFL class. According to Talaván (2007), subtitled videos allow students to receive new input through three different channels: written text, oral text, and images. The combination of the previous channels allows a greater retention of new and old lexical items due to the associations that the students can make; in other words, the power of images is here enhanced by the presence of sound and text together.

Types of Subtitles

There are different possible combinations between audio and subtitles. Talaván (2007) classifies them in: (a) *standard subtitles,* which are foreign language audio with mother tongue captions; (b) *bimodal subtitles,* which are foreign language audio with foreign language subtitles; and (c) *reversed subtitles,* which are mother tongue audio with foreign captions. Regarding all these groups, Nagira (2011) summarizes them into "L1 audio with L2 subtitles; L2 audio with L1 subtitles; and L2 audio with L2 subtitles" being L1 the student's native language and L2 the student's target language (p. 95). It is important to mention that the selection of specific combinations between audio and subtitles depends on the goal that the instructor intends to achieve with the material.

Advantages of Subtitled Videos

Today, multimedia resources combine spoken information and visual context into subtitles to teach a foreign language. Paivio (1971) proposes a dual-coding theory that states that "when pictures are added to the meaning, the number of signals connected with the message increases" (as cited in Harji, Woods, & Alavi, 2010, p. 38). Hence, viewers will keep the messages that they see in their minds for longer time because videos are able to activate words and pictures processing at the same time. Another advantage of using subtitled videos in class is that students tend to be more attracted and interested in them because learning is carried out in a way that differs from the traditional process of acquiring

new vocabulary (Danan (2004), as cited in Yuksel & Tanriverdi, 2009). For example, because vocabulary is presented in a specific context, videos can bring into the classroom a wide range of communicative situations by exemplifying word use and cultural aspects.

The lack or scarcity of vocabulary of some learners can severely interfere with their language competence, so, most of the time, simple tasks could become too difficult to accomplish. Çakir (2006) mentions that subtitled videos make meaning clearer by illustrating relationships in a way that is not possible with words, which proves a well-known saying that a picture is worth a thousand words. This is extremely useful when students are learning a language in a foreign setting because videos represent an easy and accessible way to be exposed to target lexical items and their usage, especially considering the few opportunities many of these students have to be exposed to the target language outside the classroom (Yuksel & Tanriverdi, 2009). In this sense, videos can be incorporated into many instructional settings that take the learner's needs and realities into account. For instance, as Talaván (2007) states, they can be used from a scenario inside the classrooms to online classes at distance educational institutions.

Disadvantages of Subtitled Videos

As with any other resource that is part of the learning experience, subtitled videos also have some disadvantages. Çakir (2006) points out that fear of technology by some instructors can compromise the effectiveness of this resource. Teachers should also have

some experience in how to use videos and subtitles for educational purposes, so they can exploit the material appropriately by making it purposeful and appealing for the students. On some occasions, instructors forget that if they work with authentic videos in a foreign language class, they have real language that, in the words of Talaván (2007), "is not graded nor simplified, and spoken at a normal speed" (p. 25). Hence, students might feel frustrated that they do not understand some idioms, colloquial expressions, and even vocabulary. In this aspect, Çakir (2006) highlights the importance of taking into consideration the needs and interests of the students and the objectives of the syllabus when choosing subtitled videos.

Some instructors avoid working with videos because it is common to experience technical problems occasionally. Çakir (2006) mentions that, in some cases, it can be difficult to find a source that provides high quality videos because aspects such as sound and certain characteristics of the copies or home-produced materials may not be ideal. Additionally, "cost, inconvenience, and maintenance" of subtitled videos can also affect their implementation as part of the classroom materials (Çakir, 2006, p. 68). Working with subtitles also requires more time and effort from instructors because they have to corroborate that they fulfill the requirements and, if necessary, make adjustments.

In the same fashion, instructors should evaluate when the use of videos is appropriate and when it is not, just as they would do with any other resource that is introduced as part of the language classroom to enhance the learning process. Taylor (2005) states that past research has found that for beginners, subtitles are more a distraction than an aid because students might be confused and overwhelmed by the high cognitive load required to process all the information (as cited in Winke, Gass, & Sydorenko, 2010). When working with learners from other levels—intermediate or advanced—subtitles sometimes might be considered distractors. Danan (2004) claims that their use leads students to a comfort zone in which they only rely on the written text and forget about the spoken language. Hence, if the students' attention is deviated in the wrong way, they might focus on specific aspects that might diminish the great potential that subtitled videos have. Therefore, it is necessary to plan video activities appropriately.

The Use of Subtitled Videos in the EFL Classroom

When using subtitled videos as part of a foreign language class, it is key to include them as part of the lesson plan, with well-designed and meaningful activities and (if possible) with a script of the video. In this way, the instructor knows how to implement and take advantage of the material, and the students know the purpose and benefits of working with videos. For this, Stempleski (1990) advises teachers to prepare video clips—sitcoms, soaps, series, films, short films, TV commercials, or documentaries—in advance and design the necessary pre-viewing, viewing and post-viewing activities (as cited in Talaván, 2007). In addition, Stempleski suggests that the videos—or clips as he calls them—should

be at least two or three minutes long, so the instructor and students have time to take advantage of them in class through a series of activities that focus on the target objectives (as cited in Talaván, 2007). Allan (1985) (as cited in Hložková, 2013), on the other hand, recommends starting with short extracts of videos, especially with less advanced students, and then watching full episodes.

According to Hložková (2013), when choosing videos with learning purposes, the first consideration is to choose material that the instructor knows well. Second, it must appeal to learners, so they can make the most of it. To meet this purpose, it is advisable that the material be interesting, useful, and updated. On the other hand, Sherman (2003) (as cited in Hložková, 2013) claims that it is not necessary that instructors avoid sitcoms that contain difficult language since they can adapt the activities in a way that students can perform them successfully. Finally, for these clips to be effective in helping students acquire new vocabulary, they must be clear, concise, self-explanatory, and interesting to motivate students and to stimulate discussion.

Bearing in mind the inevitable link between vocabulary acquisition and the use of technology, the following questions arise: Can sitcom videos subtitled in English increase the vocabulary of a group of low-proficiency level students from a B1 level course of the English major at a Costa Rican public university? And if they can, to what extent do the results obtained in the pre-tests and post-test reflect such possible improvement?

Methodology

Research Design

The method chosen was the mixed method approach because it aligned with the objectives of the present study. Employing a mixed-methods design allowed the researchers to collect both types of data, qualitative and quantitative, which gave them the possibility to explore the extent of the students' outcomes and to hypothesize on the reasons of those results.

Participants

The participants of this study were selected using a convenience sampling approach. They were eight male Spanish speaker students aged from 18 to 21 learning English as a foreign language, whose only previous formal instruction of the language had taken place in a public high school. They were enrolled in the second course of the English major at a Costa Rican public university, and the course was taught by one of the researchers in charge of the study. At the moment of the study, all the participants attended classes at the main campus of the university located in San José, Costa Rica. The participants volunteered willingly and gave their consent to participate in the investigation.

The students enrolled in this course were expected to communicate in written and spoken form at an intermediate level (B1+ CEFR) at the end of the course. However, the participants of this study were struggling to meet this objective as was evidenced by their grades and the professor-researcher's observations of their performance in class.

The participants are required to attend 13 fifty-minute lessons a week in which the four macro skills—listening, speaking, reading, and writing—and the micro skills—vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation, and culture—are integrated using a holistic approach. They use a textbook that emphasizes the study of content-related topics such as globalization, medical breakthroughs, education and student life, business and money, jobs and professions, lifestyles around the world, among others.

Setting

The setting of the present study is a course of English that belongs to the first year of the English major from a public university in an urban area in San José, Costa Rica. The main objective of this course is to help students develop and improve their language skills. To achieve this objective, the students are expected to take part in discussions; analyze information critically; comprehend lectures and informational videos; improve their vocabulary and reading strategies by working with authentic reading passages; use grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation to discuss different topics; and acquire several techniques that will help them develop their writing skills.

This course is taught by two instructors who are mainly facilitators of the learning process. It means that students are required to actively participate in the activities that are carried out during class time. Even though the book is the basis of the course, the professors also prepare extra activities that promote the practice of the different skills. The students are encouraged to work in pairs, in groups and individually depending on the activities carried out. Students must attend ten regular class lessons and three lab lessons a week.

Procedure

Before this study began, one of the two researchers (the one responsible of this course) held a meeting with eight of the students whose characteristics suited the purpose of the research project. The students were asked to participate in a research study that sought to look for ways to help students improve an aspect of their language skills. Nevertheless, students were not told about the specific objective of the investigation in order not to bias or influence their performance. The eight students expressed their disposition to be part of the project and seemed to be very interested in participating.

The group of eight participants was subdivided randomly into two subgroups of four students each: the control group which received standard instruction and the experimental group which received the treatment. By standard instruction we mean giving the students a reading text that contained the target vocabulary words and expressions whose meanings they had to understand from context or to look up in a dictionary. On the other hand, the treatment consisted of giving two episodes from two sitcoms (episode 2, "The Benadryl Brownie" from *Curb Your Enthusiasm* and episode 23, "The Lunar Excitation" from *The Big Bang Theory*) for students to watch at home and two handouts (one for each video) to complete with the target vocabulary items that they had to understand from context.

The selection of the two videos was made considering the following criteria:

Content: For the researchers it was crucial that the main topic of the videos was related to the contents of the units from the book used in the course (Sleep Deprivation and The Moon Effect on Human Behavior), so it would be easier for the students to create connections with the information they studied in class by activating their background knowledge.

Suitability: The videos had to be appealing and appropriate for young adults, and the sitcoms chosen addressed this population.

Motivation: It was also important that the students were interested in watching the videos selected, and the comic aspect was helpful to achieve this objective. Watching funny videos can be a rewarding experience that can help to engage and to motivate people to learn.

Authenticity: Exposing students to real-life language was one of the goals of this study, and sitcoms offer a rich source of everyday language and cultural understanding, making learning more enjoyable and insightful.

Length: Although some authors recommend starting with short video clips, especially with less advanced students before progressing to watching complete episodes, these students were already exposed to short video passages in class. Therefore, the researchers considered that they were ready for longer videos. The videos used lasted between 20 and 25 minutes.

The study consisted of two main stages carried out in two different weeks. In the first week, we tested both groups using the same pre-test (see Appendix A) with the purpose of finding out how much of the target vocabulary they knew before the control group did the vocabulary exercises and before the experimental group watched the video. Then, the control group received a handout (see Appendix B) that contained the words and expressions they had to read and understand from context. We also gave the experimental group a CD which contained the two videos they had to watch for this project and the first handout (see Appendix C) with a task they had to solve once they had watched the video. After each subgroup worked on the provided material, the professor administered the same post-test (see Appendix D) to all the participants in order to measure if they were able to recall the vocabulary items. It is relevant to point out that the target items that were used in the pre-tests were the same as the ones used in the post-tests. The only difference was the type of exercise because in the pre-tests the participants had to match the words with their meanings, and in the post-tests the students had to complete sentences with the vocabulary provided. We did not want to use the same type of task because we wanted to avoid the *practice effect* which is a threat to research validity. According to Dörnyei, if a study requires students to complete a repeated task, "the participants' performance may improve simply because they are gaining experience in taking the particular test" (2011, p.53).

We followed the same procedure for the second video: first we gave both subgroups a pre-test (see Appendix E); then we gave the control group the handout with the words to be understood from context (see Appendix F), and we instructed the experimental

group to watch the second video and gave them the video guide (see Appendix G); finally, we administered both groups the same post-test (see Appendix H).

After implementing the two stages of the project, we compared the results obtained in each of the pre-tests with those obtained in the corresponding post-tests for both groups to determine if the use of sitcom videos subtitled in English helped students to increase their vocabulary more than the traditional approach to teaching vocabulary, that is, understanding meaning from context.

Data Collecting Instruments

Four instruments were used to collect the required data:

Two Pre-tests

Two pre-tests were administered to both the control group and the experimental group. Each test consisted of a matching exercise where the participants had to match the word or expression to its corresponding definition. Each test had 10 vocabulary items (see Appendices A and E).

Two Post-tests

Two post-tests were administered to both the control group and the experimental group after the intervention. Each test consisted of a completion exercise where the participants had to fill in the blanks with the word or expression that best fitted each sentence. Each test had 10 vocabulary items (see Appendices D and H).

Results

Pre-tests

This section details the most salient results obtained from collecting the data according to our study's purpose. The data yielded from the two pre-tests were used to determine how many of the target vocabulary items the participants knew before we asked the experimental group to watch the video and the control group to read the handout to understand the words from context. In the first pre-test, the results show that only one participant out of eight obtained a passing grade which means that he successfully matched seven out of ten words. One matched six words, three matched four words, and three matched three words correctly.

In the second pre-test, once again only one student—the same participant that did it in the first pre-test—obtained a passing grade. This student matched eight words out of ten correctly. Two students matched five words successfully, two of them matched four words, two matched three words, and one matched two words.

Post-tests

As explained earlier, two post-tests were administered after the implementation of the tasks designed for both groups.

Experimental Group

In the first post-test, from the four students who watched the video, one participant obtained a perfect grade in the fill-in-the-blanks exercise, and

the other three students obtained different results: from the ten sentences, one student completed eight, another student completed six, and the last one completed five sentences correctly.

The descriptive numbers of the first pre-test and the first post-test results obtained by the participants of the experimental group are reported in *Figure 1*.

Figure 1

Comparison of Results of First Pre-test and First Post-test of Experimental Group
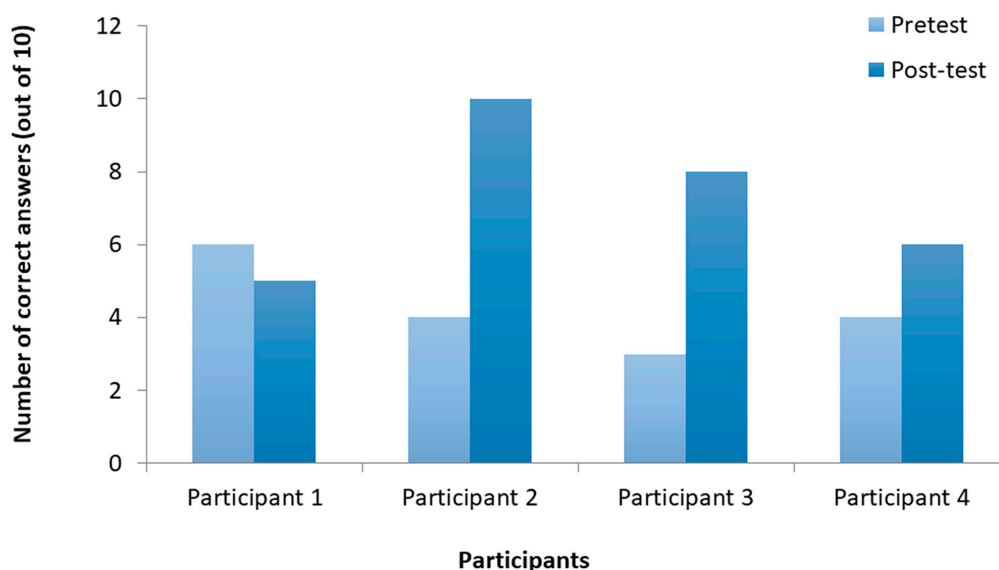

Note. This figure shows that, after watching the first video, three students improved their knowledge of the target vocabulary words while one did worse in the post-test than in the pre-test.

In the second post-test, one participant—the same who did it in the first post-test—obtained a perfect grade, two completed eight sentences correctly, and one completed only six.

The results of the second pre-test scores and the second post-test scores obtained by the participants of the experimental group are reported in *Figure 2*.

Figure 2

*Comparison of Results of Second Pre-test and Second Post-test of Experimental Group*
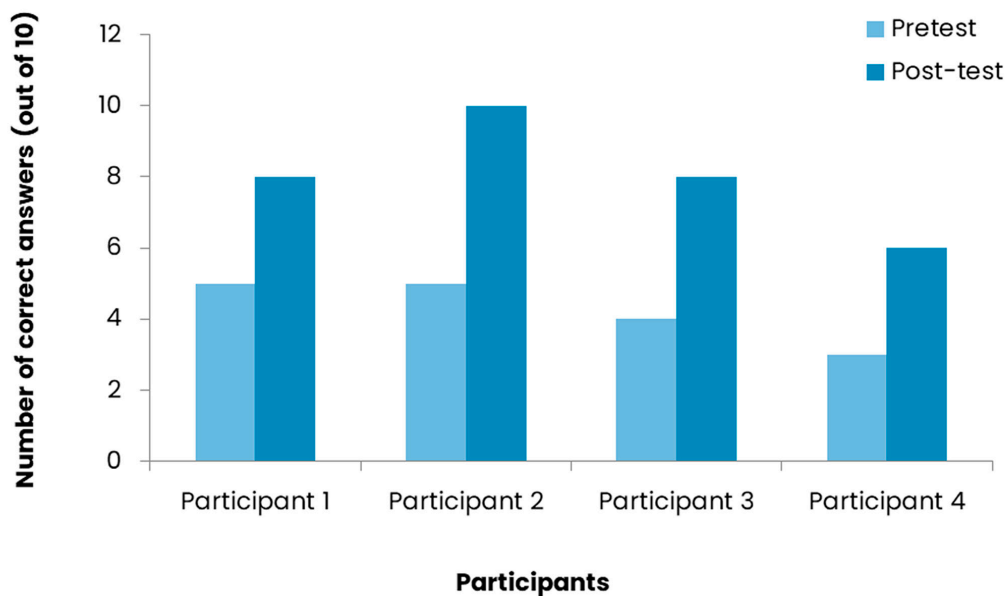
Note. The data displayed in this figure reveals that the four participants significantly improved their grades in the post-test.

Control Group

In the first post-test, from the four students who read the handout, one participant could successfully complete the ten sentences. It is worth noticing that this student was the only one who had obtained a passing grade in the first pre-test. Another student completed four sentences and two completed three sentences correctly. A comparison of the results achieved in the first pre-test and the first post-test of the control group are displayed in *Figure 3*.

Figure 3

*Comparison of Results of First Pre-test and First Post-test of Control Group*
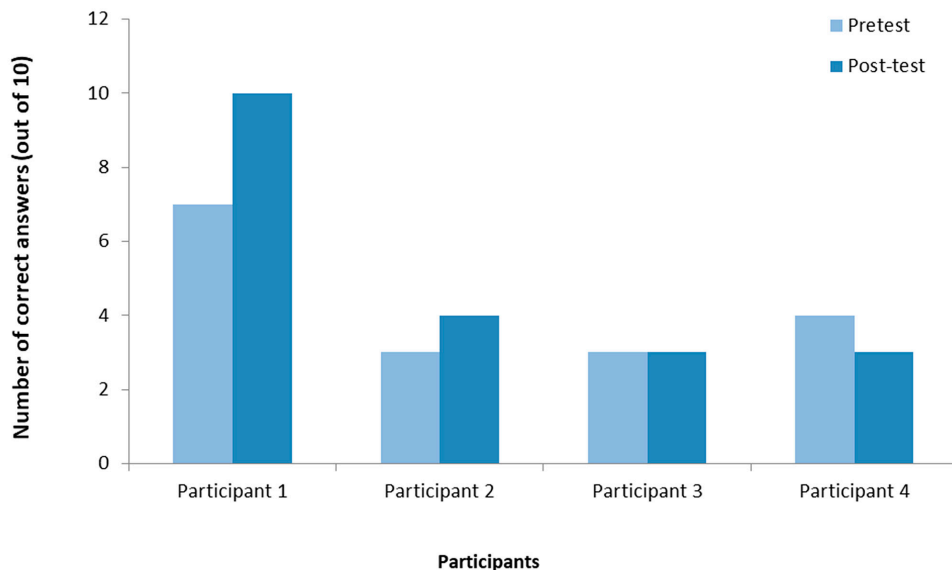
Note. According to the previous figure, two students improved their knowledge of the target words while one did not show any progress. Still, one did better in the pre-test than in the post-test.

In the second post-test, three of the participants who worked with the traditional approach to learning vocabulary showed an improvement: one completed all the sentences correctly, one completed six, and the other completed four successfully. Only one student obtained the same result achieved in the pre-test. It is important to mention that the student who filled in all the sentences with the correct words is the same who did it in the first post-test. The results of the second pre-test and the second post-test are displayed in *Figure 4.*

Figure 4

*Comparison of Results of Second Pre-test and Second Post-test of Control Group*
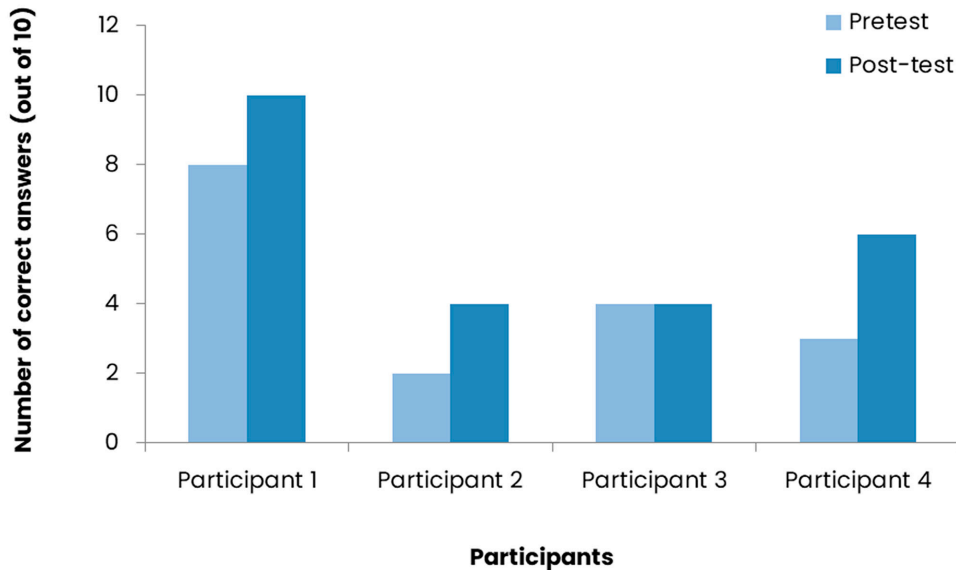
Note. This figure shows that three students improved their knowledge of the target words while one did not show any progress.

In general terms, the experimental group showed a better understanding of the target words than the control group in both post-tests. In the first one, the participants in the experimental group correctly completed an average of 7.5 sentences while the students from the control group successfully completed five sentences. In the second post-test, students from the experimental group used an average of eight vocabulary words correctly, and the participants from the control group used six words rightly. The overall improvement of both groups is displayed in *Figure 5*.

Figure 5

Comparison of Average Grades of the Two Post-tests Obtained by the Experimental and the Control Group
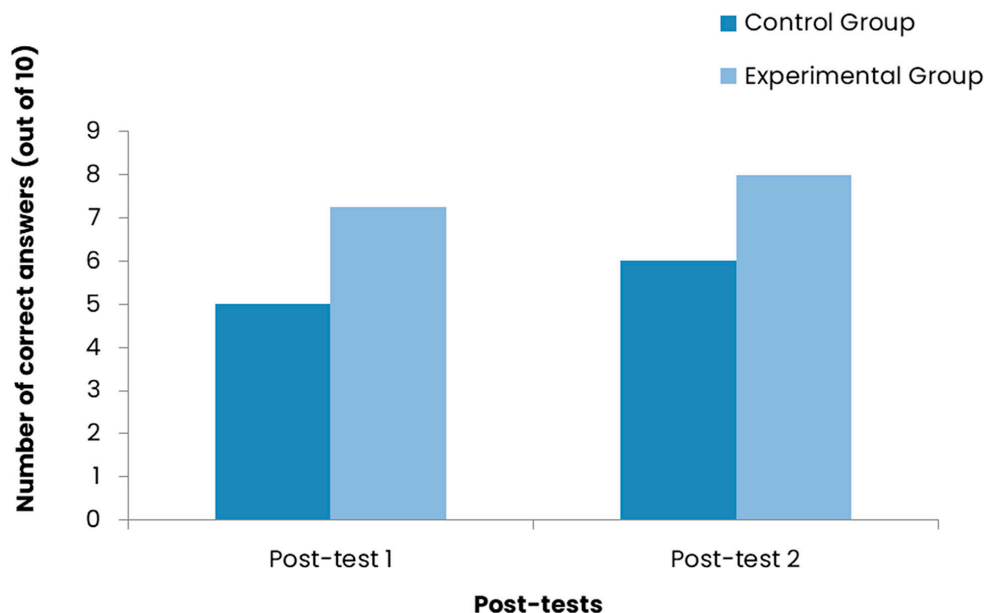
Note. As can be seen in this figure, the experimental group and the control group showed improvement in the post-tests compared to the results they obtained in both pre-tests; however, the participants in the experimental group showed more comprehensibility of the words after doing the activities with videos.

Discussion

Studying grammar and pronunciation is not enough to communicate in English or in any other foreign language. Communication really improves when one learns words and expressions and can use them correctly, and that is why acquiring new vocabulary is central to the process of learning a second or foreign language. Aware of this reality, many instructors try to help their students to learn new words and phrases, but not all the activities designed with this purpose are equally effective. This seems to be the case of the use of sitcom videos subtitled in English, which appear to have produced more lexical gains than the use of a more traditional approach to learn vocabulary such as reading to get meaning from context. Although this exploratory study evidences an emerging pattern in the acquisition of new vocabulary as yielded by the instruments applied, the results are not yet conclusive, and more and deeper investigation is needed.

The two pre-tests administered to both the experimental and the control group revealed that the participants had little or almost no knowledge of the

target words. After the intervention, the two groups show improvement; nevertheless, the experimental group— the one that worked with the videos— seems to have gained more lexical knowledge than the control group (see Figure 5). Because motivation is key in the process of learning a language, the improvement could be the result of the students' level of interest in the story. This conclusion is in line with what Elley (as cited in Nation, 2001) found regarding involvement. According to her, the more interested students are in a task, the more vocabulary they can learn. The participants in the control group might not have been as interested as the ones in the experimental group; consequently, their performance in the post-tests was affected.

The previous results might also confirm the fact that EFL learners not only need to be presented with new words explicitly but also incidentally. If students see and hear the new lexical items in their typical contexts, they can notice their meaning, register, and use. The participants from the control group read the words in context, but they were not able to really "feel" their meanings, their register, or their syntactic environment. If they did not understand a word, they could have looked it up in a dictionary, but they missed a lot of information that, on the other hand, was available for those who had the opportunity to watch the videos.

Another reason that can explain why the participants in the experimental group obtained better results is given by Herron et. al. (1995) (as cited in Danan, 2004) who claimed that watching videos allows students to be in contact with authentic oral language input because visual media are similar to real life in the sense that visual clues and context make understanding more straightforward. It can be inferred that, for students, it is easier to remember words that can be associated to mental images and situations that resemble the real world than to recall words they looked up in a dictionary or read in a text.

There was one student from the control group who was able to complete the two post-tests correctly. Therefore, it can be asserted that both approaches to learn vocabulary are equally successful for him. Nevertheless, it must be taken into account that this participant was the only one who obtained passing grades—7 and 8—in the pre-tests from that group, hinting that he probably knew most of the words before reading the handout. The rest of the participants from the control group showed little improvement compared to the pre-tests (see Figures 3 and 4) while the members of the experimental group demonstrated more improvement.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The purpose of this research study was to explore if using sitcom videos subtitled in English could help low-proficiency level students from a B1 level course of the English major at a Costa Rican public university to increase their lexical knowledge, and to what extent the results obtained in the pre-tests and post-tests reflected such possible improvement. After collecting the necessary data and analyzing the results from the pre-tests and post-tests, it is appropriate to affirm that our questions have been partially addressed. The experimental group demonstrated noticeable improvement;

however, the difference in performance in the post-tests between both groups showed a moderate level of significance.

The improved results obtained by the experimental group could be attributed to two factors. First, students who watched the videos were more motivated than participants from the control group because watching sitcoms might be more entertaining and appealing for some than just reading a text. Interest might have helped students create better connections to the words they were supposed to remember. Second, the use of visual media is known to help students to enhance vocabulary retention because learners not only listen but also "view" the word. Consequently, the input comes from two sources: acoustic and visual, helping, in this way, to consolidate knowledge of lexical items. Furthermore, images and context, which can be found in videos, help viewers understand meanings of unknown words in the same way we do it in authentic situations.

The present investigation has theoretical and practical implications. Firstly, research in the use of subtitled videos in English in the EFL classroom is scarce as could be attested when looking for the theoretical background to support the study. This can be attributed to its relatively recent emergence as a research area. As such, this project can serve as a valuable resource for those who are interested in exploring topics related to the use of technology as a tool to enhance language learning, and it also has the potential to contribute to the expansion of the existing literature in this field. Secondly, this study holds practical significance for language instructors. While the results may not be definite, they do suggest that using subtitled videos can positively impact the instructors' ability to reshape class dynamics and facilitate students' acquisition of new vocabulary in a different and more engaging way. It is worth noting that motivated students are likely to approach the learning process more positively, which can help them to improve their language skills.

Future research on this area could consider using two complete groups to have a larger sample that might make results more reliable. Working with the two groups would also allow the teacher to use the activities as part of the classroom routine, which would help them to avoid the problem of asking students to do extra work after class. Moreover, further research may be implemented for a longer period so that there is time to work with more videos, which in turn would yield more data to analyze.

Limitations

As happens with other research studies, this investigation had some limitations. The main drawback we had to face was students' unpunctuality at the time of completing the assigned tasks—e.g., filling in handouts, watching videos, replying to emails. There were also problems with absenteeism, which delayed the data collection process. The project was also affected by technical issues because copies of DVDs had to be made more than once since some students claimed that neither their computers nor their DVD players read the discs provided. We do think that it would have been better to have the video sessions as an in-class activity in order to have more control over the tasks, the students, and the time.

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Appendices

Name: _____ .

Pre-test # 1

Instructions:

- Match the following words or expressions to their corresponding definition by writing the numbers inside the parenthesis.
- Please, do not look up any unknown words in the dictionary.

Fair	( )	1. to watch or take care of something or someone
Peep	( )	2. very bad
Dump	( )	3. light in color
Keep an eye	( )	4. to deceive someone by making them think either that you are going to do something when you really have no intention of doing it, or that you have knowledge that you do not really have, or that you are someone else
Play nice	( )	5. not to say rude comments
Naked eye	( )	6. to make an explosive sound by forcing air quickly up or down the nose
Lousy	( )	7. to discard or reject
Snort	( )	8. something that can be seen without the help of an instrument
Position	( )	9. to put something or someone in a particular place
Bluff	( )	10. to secretly look at something for a short time, usually through a hole

Appendix B

Vocabulary Guide #1
Summary of Episode 23, "The Lunar Excitation" from "The Big Bang Theory"

Instructions:

- Read the following summary of an episode of the sitcom "The Big Bang Theory."
- Note the words in italics and try to guess their meaning by context.
- If you do not understand a word, click on the link below and look up the word in the dictionary.
- http://dictionary.reference.com/

Questions:

Leonard, Sheldon, Howard, and Raj are on the roof of their apartment building trying to bounce laser beams off the moon. Sheldon makes a joke about getting moon burned because he has really *fair* skin. Meanwhile, Howard thinks that Raj doesn't have to *peep* through windows to see naked women, but Raj is actually using the telescope to watch someone's TV. Leonard thinks that Penny would like to see the experiment, but he is a little afraid of telling her. Howard says that the reason why he doesn't ask her is that she *dumped* him. However, Leonard says that she didn't really dump him, and that they were just in different places in the relationship.

Finally, he goes to look for Penny, but she is with a new friend, Zack. Leonard invites them both to see the experiment, and they go to the roof where Sheldon is really worried about a dirty sock they found on the roof. He asks Howard to get rid of the sock, and then asks Raj to *keep an eye* for the other one. Leonard explains the experiment to Penny and Zack, and Zack thinks that they can blow up the moon. Sheldon makes fun of him, and Penny asks him not to do that, to *play nice*.

Leonard explains to Penny and Zack that the astronauts of the Apollo 11 *positioned* reflectors on the moon and that they expect to hit the reflectors with the beam. They perform the experiment, but Zack is disappointed because he doesn't see anything because, as Leonard explains, they are able to see the beam when it leaves, but it won't be strong enough when it comes back to be seen by the *naked eye*. Then, they leave for the party.

Later that night, Penny comes back and looks for Leonard to complain about Zack. She says that Leonard has ruined that relationship because she cannot tolerate stupid people anymore. Then, she goes to bed with Leonard. After this, he thinks that they are going back together, but she regrets what she did and asks him to forget about it. He is very sad. Howard asks Raj to find out what happens to Leonard, but when Raj questions him, Leonard says that he doesn't want to talk about it. Raj thinks that the suggestion of asking him was **lousy**.

Meanwhile, Raj contacted dating site that matched a woman with Sheldon. When they tell Sheldon, he snorts at the idea of using one of these sites. After **snorting** and refusing to meet the woman, Raj tries to make him go on the date by telling him he has hidden the dirty sock on his apartment. Sheldon thinks he is **bluffing**, but then he accepts to go. There, he meets Amy Farah Fowler.

Appendix C

Video Guide to "The Big Bang Theory" – Episode 23: "The Lunar Excitation"

Instructions:

- Before you watch this episode, read the questions below. As you watch it, think about the possible answers.
- Please, do not look up any unknown words in a dictionary. If there is something that you do not understand—a question or a word—just continue with the next question.

Questions:

1. What are the friends doing on the building's roof?

2. What does Sheldon say he needs an umbrella for?

3. What is Raj doing with the telescope? What does Howard tell him not to do?

4. According to Raj and Howard, why would it be difficult for Leonard to invite Penny to see the experiment?

5. What is Penny's new friend occupation?

6. What do you think Sheldon means when he asks Raj to "keep an eye" on the dirty sock?

7. When Leonard explains to Penny and Zack that the astronauts of the Apollo 11 *positioned* reflectors on the moon, what is a synonym for the word *positioned* in this context?

   located_____   placed_____   found_____

8. According to Penny, is Sheldon *playing nice* at Zack? Why or why not?

9. Leonard explains that "the beam won't be strong enough when it comes back to be seen by the *naked eye*."

   To see something with the *naked eye* means to see it…
   * with no clothing ____
   * without the help of an instrument ____
   * with glasses____

10. When Raj tells Howard that asking Leonard what was wrong with him was a *lousy* question, does he mean that the question was good or bad?

11. Look at Sheldon snorting when he was told about a blind date. What is *snorting*?
    * A sound
    * An expression
    * A dance move

12. Raj *bluffed* Sheldon into believing that he had hidden a _____ in his apartment.

Appendix D

Name: _____.

Post-test Video # 1
"The Big Bang Theory" - Episode 23: "The Lunar Excitation"

Instructions:

- Use the word bank to complete the sentences below
- Please, do not look up any unknown words in the dictionary. If there is something that you do not understand – a question or word – just continue with the next question.

> fair – peep – dump – keep an eye – play nice - naked eye – lousy – snort – position – bluff

1. Molly _____ his boyfriend because he had no money.

2. His _____ skin turns red very easily when exposed to the sun

3. I saw her _____ through the curtains/into the room.

4. He did an impression of a horse _____.

5. Would you _____ on my suitcase while I go to get the tickets?

6. Is he going to jump or is he only _____?

7. The army had been _____ to the north and east of the city.

8. Please _____. You do not have to make him feel bad.

9. I am disappointed because the movie was _____.

10. This organism is too small to be seen with the _____.

Appendix E

Name: _____.

Pre-test # 2

Instructions:

- Match the following words or expressions to their corresponding definition by writing the numbers inside the parenthesis.
- Please, do not look up any unknown words in the dictionary.

downside	( )	1. to be or feel ill
thrilled	( )	2. to enter or leave a place in a way that shows that you are angry
fire	( )	3. a disadvantage of a situation
dropout	( )	4. treachery or disloyalty
under the weather	( )	5. to take or swallow (pills), esp. in excess or habitually; take orally in a compulsive or addictive way
betrayal	( )	6. offensive, extremely ugly, or shocking
pop in	( )	7. to remove someone from their job
entrust	( )	8. to make someone responsible for someone or something
hideous	( )	9. extremely pleasant
storm out	( )	10 a momentary loss of signal in a magnetic recording medium as a result of an imperfection in its magnetic coating

Appendix F

Vocabulary Guide #2
Summary of Episode 2, "The Benadryl Brownie" from "Curb Your Enthusiasm"

Instructions:

- Read the following summary of an episode of the sitcom *Curb Your Enthusiasm* called "The Benadryl Brownie."
- Note the words in italics and try to guess their meaning by context.
- If you do not understand a word, click on the link below and look up the word in the dictionary.
- http://dictionary.reference.com/

Story:

Larry goes with his friend, Richard Lewis, to buy a new cell phone. It is a very fine cell phone, but it has a ***drawback***: Larry has to learn how to use it. Larry plans a dinner to meet Richard's new girlfriend, Deborah, and calls his wife to tell her that Deborah is allergic to peanuts. Thanks to Larry's Cell phone ***dropouts***, Cheryl does not get the message and Lewis' girlfriend succumbs to peanut allergies a week before they are supposed to go to the Emmy Awards. Because Deborah is a practicing Christian Scientist, she does not take any medicine, and soon she is completely swollen and looking completely ***hideous***. She also feels ***under the weather*** because of the allergy. Richard and Larry try that Deborah ***pop in*** some Benadryl pills to make her presentable for the walk down the red carpet at the Emmys, but she refuses to do so because that would be a ***betrayal*** to her beliefs. When she says no to pills, Richard tries to convince her not go to the Emmys, but she is absolutely ***thrilled*** about the idea of going and affirms that she is still going. Therefore, Richard and Larry devise a plan to cook up some brownies laced with medicine. They asked a friend to give them the recipe for brownies, but she refuses because her grandmother ***entrusted*** the recipe to her, and it is a family secret. They have to buy a package of brownies and ask Cheryl to bake them. Like all things Larry does, the plan backfires, and Deborah does not eat the brownies.

Meanwhile, Larry has another issue: the guy who repairs his TV is not doing a good job and Cheryl asks him to ***fire*** him. Larry meets with him at a cafeteria, but the guy does not take it well. He thinks Larry is firing him because he is black, and that is the reason why Larry does not want him to work in his house anymore. The TV guy ***storms out*** of the cafeteria leaving Larry shocked and feeling bad, especially when his friend Wanda—who is also black—complains about the way in which he treated the black TV guy. At the end, an embarrassed Richard has to go with Deborah to the Emmys.

Appendix G

Video Guide to "Curb Your Enthusiasm" – Episode 2: "The Benadryl Brownie"

Instructions:

- Before you watch this episode, read the questions below. As you watch it, think about the possible answers.
- Please, do not look up any unknown words in a dictionary. If there is something that you do not understand—a question or a word—just continue with the next question.

Questions:

1. What is the downside of having a new telephone, according to Larry?

2. Why would Richard's girlfriend be thrilled?

3. Why everybody thinks that Larry should fire the guy who repairs the TV?

4. What problem did the dropouts in Larry's telephone line cause?

5. When Deborah's mother says that she feels "under the weather," do you think she is feeling good or ill?

6. What do Larry and Richard tell Deborah to pop in?

7. Why does Deborah think that taking medicine for his food allergy would be a betrayal to her religion?

8. What did the woman who made the brownies say his grandmother entrusted to her?

9. Larry says that Richard's girlfriend is hideous. How do you imagine her?

10. When Larry fired the guy who repairs TV's, he stormed out of the cafeteria. What do you think storm out means?
    _____ Exit a place angrily
    _____ Exit a place quietly
    _____ Enter a place noisily

Appendix H

Post-test # 2

Instructions:

- Use the word bank to complete the sentences below.
- Please, do not look up any unknown words in the dictionary. If there is something that you do not understand – a question or word – just continue with the next question.

---

downside – thrilled – fire – dropouts – under the weather –
betrayal – pop in – entrust – hideous – storm out

---

1. She was _____ after she was caught stealing money from her employer.

2. We _____ our dog to a neighbor when we went away on a trip.

3. I was _____ that so many people came to my party.

4. He _____ of the house, slamming the door as he went.

5. Deborah thinks that taking medicines will be a _____ to her religion.

6. Telephone _____ are often caused by poor signal.

7. If he _____ all those pills, it will land him in the hospital.

8. I'm feeling a bit _____ because I think I›ve caught a cold.

9. The bathroom was pink and green and silver; it was absolutely _____.

10. The _____ of living here is that it is expensive.