

Three Teachers' Approaches to Teaching Vocabulary: An Outline for a Planned Research Project

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Introduction

In response to guidance from the national government, all Japanese universities require their students to study English for at least one year. A majority of these compulsory English courses routinely focus on providing students with an opportunity to practice English they may have previously learned, and to acquire better proficiency in using this English conversationally. While this approach, which may include some incidental vocabulary learning, can be effective for students that have acquired some competency in English, it provides less support for weaker students. Furthermore, research indicates that more explicit vocabulary instruction is more likely to result in better vocabulary learning outcomes (Hulstijn, 1992, 2003). Helping students acquire more vocabulary knowledge has been shown to support both weaker and stronger students, and is closely linked to better reading and listening comprehension (Lepola et al., 2012; Cain and Oakhill, 2014; Daugaard et al., 2017) in L1 contexts and SLA contexts (Yamamoto, 2013).

The decision was thus made to include a discrete vocabulary component to first-year compulsory English classes. Currently, within the coordinated Eigo 1A and Eigo 2A program, students are required to study 15 words a week over 14 weeks. Students' vocabulary learning is measured through weekly formative tests and a final summative exam at the end of the semester. For a more thorough explanation of the current vocabulary program see Kemp (2021).

Teaching Vocabulary

Numerous methods for effectively learning vocabulary have been proposed by SLA researchers and educators over the past 30 years, which Schmitt (1997) groups into two broad categories: discovery strategies for the initial stages of learning, and consolidation strategies that improve recognition and understanding of words previously encountered.

Schmitt's 1997 overview of strategy use argued that this developed in order to give second language learners a more active role in the learning process. However, Nation (2001: 217) noted that even defining what a strategy is is a challenge. He argued that for a strategy to be worthy of consideration it would need to: 1. involve some degree of student choice (there is more than one strategy available to use) 2. have complexity (be a process involving more than one procedure) 3. require student knowledge and respond to training 4. improve the efficiency and efficacy of vocabulary learning and use. Many of these strategies focus on helping students consolidate previously learned vocabulary and, most of these strategies have been shown to be effective. Relying only upon the consolidation of previously learned words ignores the importance of providing students with an initial exposure and interaction with new or largely unknown vocabulary. Introducing such vocabulary effectively may be even more important for lower proficiency students who often lack the effective learning strategies and lexical knowledge. Both of these factors have been shown to strongly correlate with difficulties in comprehension and learning (Dong et al, 2020; Wong & Nunan, 2011; Zhang & Zhang, 2020).

Research indicates that multiple exposures to a word over time is much more likely to result in acquisition (Kornell, 2009). Presenting the target vocabulary in a range of formats can further support learning. In pursuit of better learning outcomes, teachers at Kyushu International University have begun to develop and use a wide range of activities and materials over the past year. A majority of the teachers conducted regular quizzes which used example sentences drawn from the provided on-line dictionary. The use of this dictionary eliminated many potential problems, such as alternative

translations and example sentences that might have arisen if no one single learning resource was cited.

Most teachers appeared to have used translation activities, although cloze exercises and dictation were also used to check receptive and productive knowledge, when students are not using a common reference. Cross-word, word-search, and word scramble type puzzles using cloze or L1 clues were also employed.

Independent Learning

With a goal of gaining an understanding of 15 words a week, in addition to other class requirements, the importance of exposing students to potentially useful strategies for independent learning is essential (O'Malley & Chomot, 1990), especially for Japanese students, who according to research, rely almost exclusively on repetition to acquire vocabulary (Nakamura, 2002). In order to ensure students were engaging with the weekly vocabulary, teachers either encouraged or required students to complete wordbooks or worksheets. Wordbooks have been widely adopted and discussed in the SLA literature (Schmitt & Schmitt, 1995). Wordcards have also been widely used in SLA contexts, both for spaced learning (Mondria & Mondria-De Vries, 1994), and creatively in games or activities that provide students with multiple opportunities to interact with and retrieve the meaning of targeted words (Noonan, 2010).

Teachers required students to complete wordbooks for a number of reasons: 1) To encourage a deeper engagement with, and systematic approach to studying the wordlists. 2) For use in a variety of vocabulary-specific and vocabulary related tasks. Wordbooks also provide an almost unlimited space for students to organize, interact with, personalize, study and ultimately acquire vocabulary. They provide an opportunity for students to experiment with different study techniques that may improve students' ability to study independently. Worksheets too, while less flexible, and require less engagement or time on task than wordbooks, do also allow teachers to monitor students' vocabulary study and progress.

Teachers who chose to utilize worksheets instead of wordbooks questioned whether the time students invested in the use of wordbooks was worthwhile if students failed to use them for review. This is a worthwhile question, which only further empirical study can effectively begin to answer.

Some other teachers were less prescriptive in their use of the wordlists and gave students increased autonomy in choosing how to study the words, or adopted a more implicit approach to vocabulary instruction relying on reading or written production followed by discussion in order to improve students' English. As this vocabulary program is still relatively new for many teachers, most are still experimenting with a variety of different approaches to helping students acquire vocabulary.

Studies also indicate that teachers' approaches can have a significant effect on students' subsequent strategy use and learning (Trigwell & Prosser, 1996). Some studies indicate that the teacher may have a larger impact on learning than any particular strategy (Timperley & Alton-Lee, 2008). It is however, considerably more difficult to identify what makes a good teacher than a good task (Korthagen, 2004).

What would be beneficial in helping teachers develop better approaches to vocabulary instruction is a better understanding of how specific strategies or instruction approaches impact learning outcomes. This study is designed to measure the efficacy of three different teachers' vocabulary teaching approaches. It is hoped that this study may encourage the development of more empirically driven and pedagogically sound approaches to vocabulary instruction. Providing students with more effective and efficient approaches to acquiring vocabulary should also help support improved understanding and use of new vocabulary in English and other classes as well.

The Study Design

In order to assess the impact of specific approaches to vocabulary instruction the researchers realize it is important to control for other confounding variables such as homework requirements and the amount of class time reserved for vocabulary instruction. The decision was thus made to

limit weekly vocabulary homework to approximately 30 minutes and any in-class vocabulary instruction or activities to ten minutes per class. An additional 10 minutes of class time would also be used to administer the weekly ten-question vocabulary quiz.

Data Collection and Analysis

A pre-test will be administered at the beginning of the fall semester to gauge students' initial understanding of the targeted vocabulary. Short weekly tests will then be administered to monitor students learning over the semester, and a final post-test will be used to determine how much of the weekly vocabulary was retained over the semester. Data from students that failed to attend ten classes or complete at least ten of the weekly vocabulary tests over the semester will be eliminated from each teacher's data set. Upon completion of the final post-test, data from all tests will be used to evaluate the effect of each teacher's approach on student vocabulary learning. An additional short survey designed to capture student beliefs about the importance of vocabulary, students' study habits and preferences regarding vocabulary study methods will then be administered.

Three Teachers' Approaches

This paper will outline how three full-time native English teachers at Kyushu International University have attempted to assist students in the explicit learning of vocabulary within the compulsory English program at Kyushu International University. Each teacher's prior, present and future vocabulary teaching methodology and supporting research will be presented.

In order to make each teacher's approach understandable and replicable, each method and explicit approach will be outlined in detail and any relevant pedagogical research supporting the teaching approach will be cited.

Teacher 1

My current approach to helping students learn the target vocabulary

was initially a two step procedure. Students were first required to research and record the meaning, or multiple meanings, of each target word as well as example sentences that show how these meanings are used. Students were then provided with ten minutes of class time to review this research prior to completing the weekly test. I encouraged students to work in pairs and try to use the vocabulary actively to provide an opportunity to both review and monitor their learning. My reasoning was that this would provide students with an opportunity to say, hear, read and write the target words alone and contextualized in sentences. Research indicates that providing multiple opportunities to use and recall the target vocabulary is more likely to result in better recall of the target vocabulary (Nieuwenhuis-Mark, 2012). This unfortunately, has not been as effective as intended because students were reluctant to engage in pair review. Instead, students preferred to review the target vocabulary independently rather than in pairs. Another problem encountered was a reliance of surface as opposed to deeper approaches to learning (Ramsden, 1992); students attempted to memorize each example sentence instead of trying to understand the meaning of each sentence and the relationship of the target word to the sentence and meaning. This surface approach to learning proved to be largely ineffective or inefficient for a majority of students and may be responsible for the failure of most students to gain mastery over the meanings or use of the target vocabulary.

In an attempt to engage deeper and more efficient learning strategy I propose to provide students with visual representations of each word or example sentence as a review exercise. Research indicates that the drawing and use of pictures can improve vocabulary learning over more conventional, lexically driven teaching approaches (Jatmiko & Jauhari, 2018). Encouraging students to capture the meaning of words in simple pictures can be beneficial (Schmitt, 1997), but such an approach is dependent on students developing an effective visual meta-language to accurately capture the more complex meaning of words beyond simple nouns (See Anderson, 2012). And since requiring students to draw pictures for each of meaning of the target vo-

cabulary would require considerably more time on task than the ten minutes a week this research design has allocated for vocabulary study, I have decided to provide students with weekly worksheets that provide pictures that students can use as aids for understanding and recall of the targeted vocabulary. It is hypothesized that illustrations, similar to the keyword method (Nation, 2001), will improve recall by providing learners with visual mnemonics or cues, but unlike conventional mnemonics, pictures have the added benefits of requiring less training, and may be easier to understand and more readily adaptable for students.

Using pictures also potentially supports vocabulary learning through repurposing existing L1 learning strategies: personalization, elaboration, deeper semantic and lexical understanding as well as meta-cognitive approaches to study. These are strategies many low proficiency students lack (Mochizuki, 1999), but can develop provided they are given an opportunity for practice.

In summary, students will, as a minimum, be required to use the supplied on-line dictionary to complete a weekly wordbook that notes the multiple meanings of each target word, and the key phrase contained in the first example sentence for each meaning. Students will also be provided with a visual representation of each word for study and review. These pictures will be also be used for a 10-minute review prior to the administering of the weekly test.

Teacher 2

Initially, my approach to preparing students for the vocabulary tests was simply to provide them with the list of words they needed to learn along with a worksheet that required them to write in both the Japanese translation and the example usage sentence found in the specified online dictionary. It was made clear to students that successful completion of this task would be rewarded with points that counted towards their final grades for the course. Whilst this had the desired effect of ensuring that the majority of students completed the worksheet, performance in the tests was disappointing, suggesting that the homework assignment did not significantly facilitate or

enhance comprehension and retention of the vocabulary words. It is suspected that many students simply wrote down the translations and example sentences as a matter of course without much or any real processing of the information taking place.

I have since modified my approach in an effort to make the vocabulary items more salient and, hopefully, memorable. Now, after handing out the following week's vocabulary lists, I read out each word and encourage students to repeat after me in the hope that some students may have heard the word before but not be familiar with its spelling. I also provide a quick explanation or translation of the less common or familiar items on the list. I am certain that some students respond better to this oral input than to purely textual input. On the day of the test, I check whether students have completed the worksheet and commend those who have. Before the test, I am trying to activate students' ability to recall the vocabulary via a brief review-type worksheet. To date, I have tried the five following types of tasks:

- 1) Students must match the English vocabulary items to their respective Japanese translations.
- 2) A crossword puzzle with clues in Japanese and target vocabulary words are the answers
- 3) Anagrams where the Japanese translation is provided and English letters must be rearranged to spell the target word.
- 4) A cloze type task where the dictionary example sentence is presented with the target vocabulary omitted. In terms of format, this task is the most similar to the test itself.
- 5) A task in which the target vocabulary is matched to the most appropriate picture. This type of worksheet was challenging to make for more abstract words.

Having studied five foreign languages and now living and working in an environment where I must use my second language on a daily basis, I am no stranger to learning vocabulary. However, I am conscious that methods that worked for me may not be as effective for my students. For students with lower ability levels in particular, methods such as inferring meaning from context may not be practical (Paribakht, & Wesche, 1999). Therefore, as we proceed with this investigation, my intention is to focus on translation to and from the students' first language (Cook, 2010). Students will be required to thoroughly learn the Japanese translations for up to the first three meanings of each vocabulary item. Furthermore, they will be encouraged to also translate the dictionary example usage sentences in order to better understand how the words are used in context and the parts of speech they belong to. It is with some trepidation that I embark on this approach as I have always conducted my classes entirely in the target language. However, I have to accept that most of my students are not familiar or comfortable with such an approach. Despite efforts on the part of Japan's Ministry of Education to make English education more focused on developing oral fluency and communication, the majority of compulsory classroom instruction continues to be carried out in Japanese. While I will continue to teach my classes without resorting to using Japanese, I feel it appropriate to make an exception for vocabulary study. As these tests are conducted on a weekly basis that limits the amount of time students have to learn vocabulary and as the results of the tests count towards the students' end of term grades, I have a responsibility to help students gain the highest scores possible.

In summary, students will be required to learn the vocabulary items and focus on translating to and from Japanese (Cook, 2010; Laufer & Girsai, 2008). Additionally, a priming task utilizing the first of the five approaches listed above will be administered at the start of every class before the actual tests.

Teacher 3

Learning vocabulary is obviously a fundamental aspect of language learning. However, it is surprisingly challenging for English teachers to

teach, and students struggled with the weekly vocabulary tests. It was not uncommon for students to fail to select the correct word from seven distractors in the weekly cloze style test. What then to do to encourage correct responses and retention?

I relied heavily in my instructive approach on *Your Memory: How It Works and How to Improve It* (Higbee, 1996). Based on ideas from this book I implemented a six-step process to enhance retention: scan reading, questioning the material read, reading slowly with intent and focus, applying critical markers as one reads (underlining, question marks for material not well understood, exclamation marks for surprises, etc.), rereading the material with critical markers, and then finally, and most importantly, using the target vocabulary actively following its study. I have found that this works well for reading material, but struggled with applying it to vocabulary learning. Psychology reveals that short-term memory lasts 7-10 days. So, within that time period if students do not make use of the learned material, it will essentially be beyond active recall.

We have all had the experience of studying for a test, and then mostly forgetting said learning soon after. Basically, it has not become embedded in our long-term memory and is then not available for ready production. The challenge we face in the classroom then, is how to provide opportunities to embed this learned material in students' long-term memories; to make it a tool for their lives rather than just data which is soon "lost" to ready access.

Returning to Higbee's six-step process of engaging in the learning environment with a curious, attentive and meaningful way, but while maintaining another of Higbee's essentials- a relaxed and imaginative environment. This, taken all together (focus, meaning making, imagination, larger relationships and agency) is known as "deep play" in anthropology. I have employed a variety of techniques to provide a constructive environment for this embedding process - with varying degrees of success. These include games such as the well-known spelling game hangman, scrambled words (the students scramble the spelling of the vocabulary word and then present the scrambled "word" to their peers in either a paired, or small group environment), and what I call the "guessing game" wherein the students select re-

cent vocabulary and then describe those words (not translation, nor interpretation) in Japanese, as their classmates proceed to guess the words in English. After a few repetitions of this, the students are then challenged to provide their hints and descriptions in English. The students enjoy this activity and having a classroom of students who are smiling and laughing as they review and then seeing that expression of satisfaction when they finally guess the correct word is rewarding to watch. It also develops three skills, which are often overlooked, or at best undervalued in English education in Japan: paraphrasing, guessing and making mistakes.

Paraphrasing is essential as a communication skill. Good paraphrasing allows one to navigate around unknown words and still get one's point across. Good paraphrasers don't need a vast vocabulary of jargon, but can "make do" with what they already know and can readily employ. Guessing is undervalued in the standard Japanese classroom where rote learning and precision are stressed. Students are engrained to produce the correct answer to a query. But this is ineffective and prohibitive in a communicative environment, since flexibility and difference of understanding and perspective are natural. Which leads to the third skill: making mistakes. I encourage my students to get comfortable with making mistakes because this, too, is part of human interactions and only natural in a discovery process. So as the students are engaged in the three "games" mentioned above, they are making mistakes and feeling challenged. But the mistakes are constructive in that they help students narrow the route to, and gradually zero in on, an answer. Thankfully, the textbooks that we began using in the 2021 school year provide exercises for both paraphrasing and guessing, and by extension, many opportunities for constructive mistakes.

Therefore, relying on these principles and processes I will use the "guessing game" described above during the fall semester of 2022 for weekly vocabulary test review and preparation. Taking the first 10 minutes of each weekly class, students will pair up and proceed with the guessing game. Student A will provide hints and explanations from the first half (approximately 8 words) of the weekly list of vocabulary and then Student B will address the latter half. This should be a refresher type exercise since the students

should have prepared as instructed (i.e., looking up and writing down the example sentence/s for each word). Hopefully this will provide a quick “jump start”, so to speak and give the students some mental preparation for engaging more fully with the vocabulary test to follow. After the ten minutes of pair work, the students will take the on-line test on their cell phones. This approach should lead to a more significant engagement with their study of English for the students. I will continue to advise the students to study in short periods, take breaks, separate the vocabulary lists into chunks (which is to say five or so terms at a time) when studying, and to read the example sentences out loud a minimum of three times as recommended by learning experts (Higbee, 1996; Semp, 1993). And, since I am collaborating with two other colleagues on this research who are implementing different approaches to the teaching of vocabulary for the same course and to students of relative academic parity, I will be able to more clearly assess the effectiveness of a variety of learning methods. My goal remains focused on providing students with the experience of deep play and developing the three communication skills addressed above.

Results

Once the final post-test has been conducted, all the test data will then be statistically analyzed to see how each teaching approach impacted on students' vocabulary learning. Students will then be asked to complete a survey to capture their beliefs about vocabulary study and their vocabulary study method. Collected data from tests and survey will then be published and used within the department with the goal of encouraging more productive vocabulary teaching and learning.

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