

PRACTICAL LOW-TECH WAYS TO AID VOCABULARY ACQUISITION

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ABSTRACT

Over the years, one of the most-frequently voiced concerns of learners I have heard relates to their progress - or perceived lack of it - in the acquisition of vocabulary. This paper considers the amount of review and revision necessary to fully remember and be able to use a word productively. Additionally, the paper will look at a way of recording vocabulary that students seem to find motivating, and a practical, low-tech way to review vocabulary will be introduced. The paper will conclude with my observations of these techniques in the classroom.

INTRODUCTION

In 20 years of teaching English a very common concern I hear expressed is the feeling that students cannot acquire vocabulary at a rate that feels satisfactory. My advice has varied very little since doing research into this in 2004/2005 during my HDip in TESOL: students need to review the vocabulary they have encountered *a lot*. Though the reasons for this are so self-evident they encounter no resistance from learners, nonetheless taking action – doing the required work – can prove a challenge, and often a demotivating one.

While much of my career has been teaching students for relatively short durations (from a single week to 2 or 3 months, usually) my current context is one where I teach in a 4-year university in Japan, and so have students for a full academic year. So, when I heard the students voice their lexical worries yet again, I saw a clear opportunity to implement measures to help students with their vocabulary, this time without the distractions of constant student turnover, and with the chance to really drill down on the issue of successfully acquiring vocabulary. Accordingly, the following paper explains two simple methods I have found to be effective in aiding vocabulary acquisition and allaying learner concerns.

LITERATURE REVIEW

How Much Vocabulary Does an L2 Learner Need?

The difficulties in learning and retaining new vocabulary are well-documented. The amount of words necessary for comprehension can seem daunting if the average NES university graduate has a lexical store of between 18,000 to 24,000 words (Goulden, Nation, & Read, 1990, p. 353), and while a core vocabulary of 2,000 high-frequency words is a necessary first goal for an L2 learner (Nation & Newton, 1997, p. 239), between 3-5,000 word families are required for students to be able to understand 95% of an unsimplified text (Laufer, 1992, p. 24).

Receptive Versus Productive Knowledge

Schmitt (2000, p. 130) showed how vocabulary knowledge is much less stable than grammar knowledge, with a process of both learning and forgetting occurring during acquisition. For example, Cohen and Olshtain (as cited in Schmitt, 2000) showed words known *productively* (i.e. that can be used to express meaning through writing or speaking) are especially prone to attrition – forgotten due to lapsed use or study.

Words known *receptively* (i.e. when a word's meaning can be retrieved while reading or listening) are vulnerable to backsliding – short-term forgetting (Schmitt, 1998). Additionally, the likelihood of learning and retaining a word from a single exposure is as low as just 5-14% (Nagy, 1997, p. 74), with between five to sixteen exposures required before a word can be learned (Nation, 1990, pp. 43-45). Recycling vocabulary, clearly, is vital then. Schmitt and Schmitt (1995) suggest a method of “expanding rehearsal” whereby students “review new material soon after the initial meeting, and then at gradually increasing intervals” (p. 136).

Practical Implementation of the Literature

From counseling sessions with the students, and by tallying it with my experience, the main issues were that though the students accepted they needed to spend more time reviewing new and old vocabulary – here Nation's (1990) five to sixteen repetitions really made an impression – a number of factors hindered this. Firstly, even the most motivated students complained of being too busy, a common and understandable complaint given how heavy their class load is. Secondly, if left solely up to the student, fatigue, boredom and a corresponding drop in motivation tended to set in. Finally, and in tandem with the previous issue, the students wanted an element of coercion, of it being required by the teacher, to help maintain their motivation. Based on the above research and negotiation with students, the following two approaches were agreed on.

METHOD

Vocabulary Notebooks

Students are instructed to keep notebooks, which are graded at 10% of the overall grade for a semester. This figure was arrived at to incentivize the students to take the task seriously – in reference to the students wanting to be pushed.

Based on the research cited above, and from consultation with the students, we agreed a good notebook should have, at a minimum:

1. Notes on meaning (translation, L2 definition)
2. Grammatical use (e.g. adjective)
3. Example sentences

Additionally students are encouraged to add, when feasible, features such as:

4. Different forms (e.g. word family: happy, happily)
5. Collocations (e.g. Happy birthday)

6. Related words (e.g. antonyms, synonyms: sad, glad)
7. Pictures

Students are tasked, as part of their homework, with making sure to put all new lexis that comes up during each lesson into their notebook. The notebook must only contain vocabulary from our class, and they are encouraged to have a spare, clean style, with no more than 7 or 8 lexical items to each page. The notebooks are inspected twice during each 15-week term, with advice and feedback being given, and one final inspection at term's end, where a grade is assigned. Feedback is typically verbal and could include suggestions like using fewer words per page, being careful of the spelling, or adding more example sentences.

Students can earn an A-grade if they have the first three criteria listed above, done with enough care and detail. An A+ can be earned by incorporating criteria 4 to 7 above.

Briefly, a note on why I insist they be paper notebooks, rather than digitally on their iPads: research suggests the "visual attention of the writer is strongly concentrated during handwriting" (Mangen & Velay, 2010, 1. Introduction section, para. 2) and that the movements the hand makes while writing "may thus contribute to memorizing the shape and/or orientation of characters" (7. From Pen and Paper to Keyboard, Mouse and Screen section: para. 6).

Vocabulary Flashcards

An average class can have between 4 to 10 new lexical items put on the whiteboard (although some days will have fewer or none, depending on the class content of the day). This vocabulary might be words that had been pre-taught prior to a task or reading or had maybe come up organically from a student's query. At the end of every class, small blank cards of cut-up, recycled paper are distributed. The card size is slightly smaller than a business card. By this point the students would be in groups, typically five groups of four. In their groups the students have to decide which words to write down on their cards. Each word should only be written down once in each group, so, for example, student one would write the first two words on the board, while student two does the next two words and so on. One side of the paper has the word and its grammatical use, for example "tidy (adj)"; the other side has the Japanese translation. Before the flashcards get collected, the students have to check all the cards together, making sure the English spelling is correct, that the type of word has been annotated (for example: adj/vb/n) and – crucially – that they agree on the translation. A certain amount of training is necessary here, as in the beginning students can default to the first definition they find in their dictionary, which may not be the target meaning that day. As an example, "flat" in the British English sense of "apartment" may have been taught, but a student might mistakenly put down the adjectival meaning of a level surface.

The cards are then collected from each of the five groups and are added to previous, larger piles which accrue day by day. These cards stack up rapidly; in a class that meets for four 90-minute sessions a week, we typically have more than 250 distinct lexical items by the end of an academic year.

The flashcards can be put to a variety of uses: for example in a table quiz (where the teacher takes cards and explains the meaning and the students, in teams, try to write down the corresponding words), or in a story-telling activity (where students take turns adding to a story and have to incorporate a word from a flashcard into each new sentence), but the one that has proved most popular and effective is the following.

As a 15-minute warm-up activity, groups of students are given a stack of flashcards. The most recent cards are at the top of the deck, and students are instructed to take cards from the top so they can reacquaint themselves with the new lexis quickly as part of the “expanding rehearsal” of Schmidt and Schmidt (1995), cited above. Taking turns, a student draws a card and has to explain it. She can use gestures and give examples, synonyms or antonyms, and can check the translation on the back to jog her memory if necessary. As an example, the flashcard says “optimistic (adj)”. The student says it is an adjective, and means someone who is positive. Perhaps she says it is the opposite of pessimistic. The first student to correctly guess the word wins the card, and the winner at the end of the warm-up is naturally the person with the most cards. I offer a brief recap if any words prove difficult to explain or understand.

This activity is done at least twice a week and while the stack of words grows and grows over the year, meaning words will necessarily come up with lesser frequency; nonetheless, the students are exposed to these words many times over the course of two semesters. This goes a long way towards meeting – and even exceeding – the five to sixteen repetitions Nation (1990) posits as necessary for a word to be learned.

CONCLUSION

Notebook-keeping and flashcards are of course far from revolutionary, but the effect of these simple, low-technology methods has been dramatic and gratifying. The standard of notebook has been very high, with the average grade being an A. Many students go above and beyond and adorn their pages with lavish illustrations and color-coding. They talk positively about their notebooks and see the utility in it. In my class, motivation for the notebook generally remains very high throughout the year.

With the flashcards – which, again, are hardly breaking new ground – motivation remains similarly high. Students never seem to get tired of using them, finding it a social, enjoyable way to learn. Again, the utility of it is clear and they can perceptibly feel their vocabulary getting better. Perhaps most significantly – and gratifyingly – that concern I used to hear expressed so often – that they didn’t feel their vocabulary was improving – I don’t hear anymore.

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