Words to the Wise: the Search for Effective and Relevant Vocabulary Learning

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Abstract

Learning a foreign language can be a long process and an important part of fluency in a foreign language is attaining a large vocabulary. This paper examines whether one vocabulary study method is better than another. The two methods examined in this study were a tightly teacher controlled vocabulary list students were told to learn, and student generated individualized lists where the students had complete autonomy in the creating and content of their own vocabulary stock. Previous research would suggest that the students with more autonomy would be more motivated and invested in learning the vocabulary, and therefore more successful in their vocabulary acquisition.

Introduction

The author is sure that all EFL teachers would agree that a good grasp of grammar alone is not enough to communicate ones ideas clearly as well as to be able to easily comprehend both oral and written work. In fact, in the author's opinion, and Takahashi, (2011) would agree, a wide vocabulary is even more important than immaculate grammar. Takahashi concluded that, vocabulary size was directly linked to communication ability and reading comprehension. It is also necessary for attaining a good score on the TOEIC and TOEFL tests which are essential for employment and international study. The problem, however, is, what is the best way for students to learn vocabulary and expand their lexicon? For most students vocabulary learning is looked on as a very dry and boring activity; an onerous task seen as rote memorization of a long list of words and it's hard to get students excited about vocabulary learning. It brings back memories of high school, when students were given lists of words they should know for the test, with no real connection to anything else, especially their life outside the classroom, and completely beyond their control. The hypothesis investigated in this paper is that students will learn more and retain vocabulary more effectively if they are given the autonomy to choose their own vocabulary and study a small number of words regularly building up over time, rather than being given a list and told to learn it; cramming a few words for a test in a week and then not being required to reviewing them again.

Background

The author was looking for a way to improve the vocabulary learning experience as well as maximizing the gain-for-effort the students achieved. The traditional method of giving students a list of vocabulary and telling them to memorize it takes all control away from students and has several disadvantages. The first is that it means the students have no autonomy at all. This lack of autonomy will lead to a lack of motivation for students who have nothing personally invested in the task (Dornyëi, 2001). Intrinsic motivation, motivation which comes from students themselves, which can come from investment in a task that students have chosen for themselves. Since intrinsic motivation is the most enduring form of motivation (Dornyëi, 2001) and teachers in the EFL classroom would like to foster it as much as possible, anything teachers can do to facilitate students finding and maintaining intrinsic motivation would be of great value and have a positive influence on learning (Fukuhara, 2013). Chang and Dornyëi (2007) also stated that students need motivation to continue with study and this motivation aspect of autonomy will give students the motivation to keep going as they have chosen to put themselves in the

situation of learning this particular set of vocabulary.

Another disadvantage of traditional vocabulary lists is that there may be considerable variation between students' backgrounds, and their previous exposure to the vocabulary on the list given to students. Students may, in fact, not be learning 100 new words on a 100 word vocabulary list. Some students may know a significant number of words on the list whereas others may know none at all. As a result the actual increase in a student's lexicon may not be as much as you would expect given the size of the vocabulary list given to students at the start of the semester. Already knowing some of the vocabulary could also make the study and tests easier – giving some students high grades, when in fact they have not had to study much at all, and a false impression of a successful learning outcome. The method investigated in this study had students choosing their own personal vocabulary to make up their word lists. This meant that each individual student had a unique vocabulary set.

In this way the students should be learning words that are not only definitely new, but also useful, to them and, because the student chose the words themselves, they should be more invested in them（Dornyëi, 2001, Benson, 2000）. Meaningful learning, which has meaning for the student outside the classroom, should be possible to achieve here as students have control over the words they will study and are choosing vocabulary they have an interest in and consider useful outside of just taking a test. Study of vocabulary from the extensive reading books, chosen because of an interest in a certain topic or genre, means that students can continue an interest that does not originate in learning English language（Dornyei, 2001, Walsh, 2001 and Walsh, 2006）, or culminate in a test. Bergin（1999）also stated that perceived usefulness of the vocabulary lead to increased interest and therefore increased motivation. The author has seen this in action when a student's word list consisted of a great many complicated scientific terms. This was because the student's interest in reading was science fiction and therefore his interest in that genre lead to an interest in those words. He also read a number of science fiction extensive reading books, so the words were of use to him and he also had repeated exposure to the words which enhanced their learning（Nation, 2001）.

Giving students autonomy and therefore control over the vocabulary they study, they have not just been handed a list but have made the choice of which words to include, makes students more motivated （Dornyëi, 2001）. Bruner（1996）also said that one condition for effective operation of the mind is freedom from excessive uniformity. Allowing students to choose their own vocabulary allows them to see themselves as individuals, not having to be just the same as everyone else. Cotterall,（2000）says something similar when she states that transfer of responsibility from the teacher to student is very important for learner autonomy, and that educators need to find ways of supporting the transfer of responsibility for decision-making. In the case of this study, responsibility for the words chosen to be studied was given over entirely to the student. However, this does not mean that the teacher is completely absent from the vocabulary learning process. Thanasoulas,（2000）states that autonomy does not mean no teacher control. Students will still need direction, it's just that they will have a degree of freedom with a task. In this study it is the teacher who sets the total for the number of words to be learned and the timings and form of the tests.

In addition giving the students a target of 100 words per semester, or 8-10 words per week, gives them a concrete goal to work for. This leads to a sense of satisfaction and achievement at having reached a goal（Parducci, 1995, and Diener, 2000）, and removes uncertainty as to exactly how much is required of them – How much is enough?

Although much of the vocabulary studied in both groups in this study was via a direct approach, decontextualized, in the form of lists or cards, it still has merit, according to Nation,（2001）. He said that not only is it efficient as regards results gained for the amount of time and effort put in, but also allows learners to focus on words to an extent not possible with in-context learning, and finally students can control how often they see（repeat study/exposure） a word. He added that the deliberate nature of the strategy results in substantial gains, and cards are a component in balanced vocabulary learning. Hunt and Beglar,（2005）also conclude that both explicit and implicit activities should be developed and are mutually beneficial. In fact, both groups in this study do also encounter the vocabulary in context either through the text in the case of the first group, or in text, extensive readers or the outside world, in the case of the second group.

Participants

Participants in this study were from two large private tertiary institutions in Fukuoka prefecture, Japan. Both institutions were co-ed and the students were non-English majors fulfilling their required language credits to satisfy graduation requirements. The ratio of male to female varied by class and major, though overall they was no large bias towards either sex. The majority of students were also in their first and second years of study, or 18-20 years old, though a few older, third and fourth year students, were also enrolled in the courses. The students were enrolled in either a TOEIC class or a speed reading class.

Method

Two different methods of vocabulary study were investigated and compared in this study to discover which, if either, proved to be a more successful method of studying vocabulary. Method one was used in classes looking to improve their TOEIC test scores and test taking skills, Group T. The text（Journey to Success: Departing for a Higher Score on the TOEIC Test, by Pearson-Longman）used in these classes had a list of 10 key words and phrases at the start of each of its 12 units. The students first encountered these words in a decontextualized context, where their meaning was explained in the target language. They then had to pair the words with their Japanese kanji equivalent. The words then appeared in context throughout the unit when the focus of study was not specifically on the vocabulary, but on some other language point. Students were asked to study the words more over the course of a week. The students were given no direction as to how they should go about the study and learning of the vocabulary. The students then had a short decontextualized test in the following class, which was one week later. The test consisted of the Japanese kanji form of the word on the test paper and students were required to write the English equivalent. If the spelling was not correct then no point was awarded. This routine of decontextualized study, in context exposure, followed by a test was repeated 12 times over the course of a fifteen week semester giving a total of 120 new words per semester. If a student was absent then their test was scored as zero. The students in this group had no choice at all as to what vocabulary was chosen to be studied.

For method 2, the second group of students, Group SR, were taking a speed reading course. As part of that course they were required to read one graded reader, of their own choosing, every 2 weeks. Students were also required to make word cards of new words they encountered, not only through their reading, but also various other language classes, and everyday life, that they considered useful for them. Students were given a target of 8-10 new word cards per week, giving a total of a minimum of 104, and a maximum of 130, new words over the course of a semester. The important point was that the students themselves were choosing vocabulary that they wanted to learn, not a list handed out arbitrarily, and also did not need to include **every** new word they encountered. Students were expected to bring their vocabulary cards to class every week and were given 5-10 minutes at the start of each class to practice and test a partner on their vocabulary cards. The number of cars would increase each week, building up to more than 100 over the course of the semester. The vocabulary was tested twice over the semester, once at the midway point and again at the end. The students were advised to shuffle the cards when they studied and tested their partners, to avoid rote memorizing of the words in order rather than fully understanding the word. Because each student's card set was individual and different from everyone else's, they had to be tested individually. This posed a huge time management problem for the teacher to ensure that students were adequately tested in the minimum amount of time. To do this the teacher called each student to the front of the class, one at a time, and took the vocabulary card set from the student. First the cards were briefly checked for the words to ensure that they were not padded with very simple vocabulary and that the required number of cards had been made, then the teacher selected 10 words from the set at random and asked the students to identify the word by explaining its meaning or using it in a sentence. If the students could identify the word without hesitation they were given 1 point. If students could confidently identify all 10 random words from the list then it was assumed that they had an excellent grasp of the vocabulary in their set. As students could not predict which words they would be tested on and consequently had to know them all well, it was not necessary to test every word in the card set.
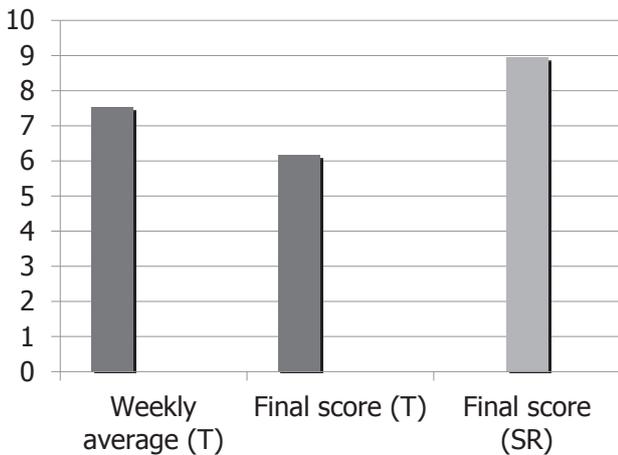
Results

Figure 1. Average vocabulary test scores.

As can be seen from *figure 1* we can see that group T had an average weekly test score of 7.51 out of a maximum of 10. This score dropped, however, when the final test's average score, testing a selection of all the words on the vocabulary list, was calculated. The final average score for Group T was 6.16 points, a drop of 1.3 points, or 13%, from the weekly test. Group SR did not have a weekly test so there is no score for that group. The final average score for Group SR was 8.94 points out of a possible 10. That is a difference of 2.78 points, or 27.8%, between the 2 groups for the final test, covering more than 100 words for each group. It can be seen then that Group SR has a considerably higher vocabulary memorization and retention, 89.4%, than Group T, 61.6%.
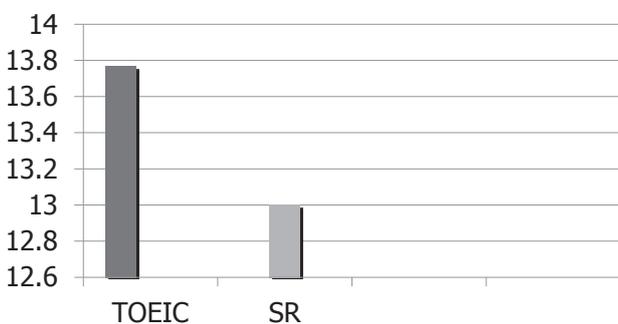

Figure 2. Average attendance rates.

Attendance was also examined, *figure 2*, to see if there could be any connection between attendance and score. It was found that although the average attendance rate was higher in group T with an average of 13.77 classes attended out of a possible 15, compared to 13.0 for the SR group, the average test score was less. Only students who qualified to take the final test were counted in the attendance results. Students with an attendance rate of less than 75%, or 10 out of 15 classes were not eligible for course credit.

Discussion

The results showed that group SR, the group which chose their own vocabulary, had a higher average score on the final test than those from group T, who were given a set list. This would appear to show that if students are given the opportunity to have autonomy in vocabulary selection, they have more motivation and better recall for vocabulary – furthermore the weekly review in class and encouragement to study between classes may also have helped. In addition to this Brookfield（2009） found that adults seem to thrive in situations where they have some autonomy, which is exactly the case in this study, where the participants were university students, and considered adults.

Consistent review has been shown to lead to better learning, with a higher percent of retention. Ebbinghaus（1885）looked at how memory works and the Ebbinghaus forgetting curve tells us that without review we will forget what we learned over time. But, if we review regularly, we can re-learn what we have studied and remember for a longer period, with a slower loss of information, than if we had not reviewed. A typical representation of the memory curve can be seen in *figure 3*. The author would therefore like to do a more long-term follow-up, testing students at 6 months and a year after the initial study. If we consider the Ebbinghaus forgetting curve, and Khajah, Lindey, and Mozer's（2014）research, then long-term retention should be better for the SR group as they have had regular review of their vocabulary over the semester, allowing it to move from short-term memory to long-term memory.
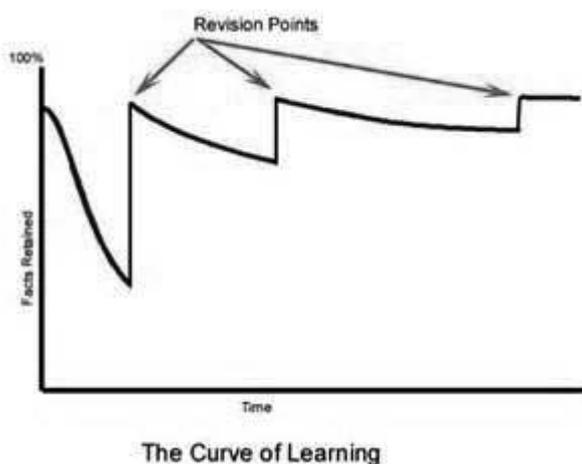
Figure 3（Sourced from the internet – Bing free images）

The weekly vocabulary list tests would seem to give students less pressure as they had a limited pool of words to be tested each week. It would be possible to assume that it might be easier to remember only 10 words at a time rather than the weekly cumulative bank of words for group SR, the word card group. And indeed the results showed that the average weekly score was found to be higher than the final score when all words were to be studied for the test. It would appear, therefore, that because of the consistent study and review and slow buildup of vocabulary, and the fact that the students in group SR had some investment in their task because of having autonomy in the choice of words, their scores were higher. In addition to this, because students were asked to select words that they thought would be of use to them individually, they would see a value in the words they chose and therefore be motivated to study and learn them as they could see an application outside of the classroom situation. Also because some of these words were from graded reading books which were chosen by students according to their personal interest, it would be reasonable to expect that they may encounter these words repeatedly in their reading, increasing the chance of memorization/learning, Takahashi,（2011）. Nation（2015）, also discussed this stating that repeated "meetings" with words through extensive reading would aid learning.

As stated in the results section, although the average attendance rate was higher in group 1 with an average of 13.77, 91.85%, classes attended out of a possible 15, compared to 13.0, 86.6%, for the SR group, the average test score was less. The higher attendance rate in the Group T may be accounted for by students not wanting to miss the weekly test which contributed to their final grade. Group SR did not have weekly tests and therefore the attendance did not impact their vocabulary grade unless it was a specific test day, which was usually held in class 15. The difference in attendance between the 2 groups was not great however – 0.77 of a class, or a 5.13% difference.

Retention over time was not as good in Group T as the average score in the final test was lower than in the weekly tests. The students were given no instruction on how to study, nor were they encouraged to regularly review previous week's vocabulary sets.

There were some problems encountered with the 2nd method of study and testing. One problem is that some students did not remember to bring their cards to class every time. This meant that if they were not keeping up with their study they have no way of checking their progress or studying in class. There was also a small number of students who also forgot to bring their cards to class on test day, meaning that they could not be tested on the correct day. Whether this was due to genuine forgetfulness or because students didn't feel they were ready to take the test and wanted more time to prepare, cannot be known. Another problem was that there was not a sufficient number of cards. Students in this situation were still tested but the reduced number of cards means that they had fewer words to remember and could be at an advantage over other students. It should be noted that this was rare and that the number of cards that were lacking was not large.

Conclusion

Giving students the opportunity to have some autonomy over the selection of vocabulary to be learned and tested, can have measurable advantages. It would be useful to employ the technique laid out in this paper for students who are interested in increasing their lexicon. Further research is necessary to investigate the long term retention of vocabulary studied using both methods. According to Ebbinghaus （1885）and Khajah et al（2014）it would be reasonable to expect that students in group SR would have better long-term retention, but this is still to be investigated. Unfortunately the author's current teaching situation does not allow for this long-term follow-up.

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