



Multidimensional vocabulary acquisition through deliberate vocabulary list learning



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ABSTRACT

Previous lexical studies have been predominantly quantitative, and thus have lacked the understanding of what is happening during the acquisition process. This study provides not only quantitative analysis of the learners' vocabulary knowledge change through deliberate vocabulary list learning, but also supplements such analysis with qualitative data through semi-structured interview data to discover their vocabulary learning processes and strategies which lead to lexical changes. The results showed that the advantage of doing list learning should not be viewed in terms of gaining only receptive vocabulary knowledge. Instead, the benefits of list learning also include gains in productive vocabulary knowledge and in the depth of overall vocabulary knowledge. Despite the importance of using a vocabulary list, however, in order to make the most out of list learning, this study suggests that the strategies used by learners to learn vocabulary are important. Results showed that a structured approach by developing a systematic routine of monitoring and reviewing vocabulary words were important factors in the outcome of these participants' vocabulary learning. Thus, in terms of practical pedagogy, for further lexical growth and better retention, teaching vocabulary learning strategies and employing systematic learning is crucial.

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1. Introduction

No one denies the importance of vocabulary for foreign language learning, yet it is widely believed that not much time is actually spent teaching and learning vocabulary, especially in university classes in Japan. Recent studies (Okamoto, 2007) have shown that Japanese students' vocabulary knowledge is at its peak in the final year of high school and declines rapidly after entrance to university. Studies have also shown that there is a large gap between students' receptive and productive vocabulary knowledge (Okamoto, 2007). Thus, the loss of students' receptive and productive vocabulary knowledge needs to be stemmed in the most effective and efficient way. Furthermore, students need to understand that lexical knowledge includes not simply understanding a word's meaning, but also includes the actual use of vocabulary with correct spelling, pronunciation, grammatical form and collocation. In order to accomplish these goals, the breadth of vocabulary knowledge (i.e., how many words a learner knows), and the depth of vocabulary knowledge (i.e., how much a learner knows about a particular word) should be addressed simultaneously.

Word knowledge has been often ignored as a multidimensional construct. Even though several experimental studies have been done to compare L2 receptive and productive vocabulary growth in learning contexts (e.g., Lee & Muncie, 2006; Min, 2008; Paribakht & Wesche, 1997), earlier work was predominantly on the breadth of vocabulary knowledge, rather than the depth of vocabulary knowledge. Therefore, this study contributes to the understanding of deliberate vocabulary list learning by taking a holistic approach to examine the effectiveness of different learning conditions. Deliberate vocabulary

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learning is the attempt to intentionally commit new words to memory (Hulstijn, 2003). In intentional learning, learners try to commit new information to memory by using strategies, such as mnemonic devices (Paradis, 1994). That is, it is learning vocabulary directly and out of context by using, for example, word cards or word lists.

This study is also significant because it follows a sequential mixed-methods design. In short, this study provides not only quantitative analysis of the learners' vocabulary knowledge change (Phase I), but also supplements such analysis with qualitative data through student interview data to find out how they approached the vocabulary learning process and which strategies led to lexical changes (Phase II).

2. Literature review

There are many aspects and degrees of knowledge to define what it means to know a word, and it is important to recognize word knowledge as a multidimensional construct including the breadth and depth of vocabulary knowledge as well as receptive and productive vocabulary knowledge. Most studies have been based upon isolated learning conditions, such as receptive and/or productive learning, incidental or intentional learning environments, and how the learning condition was related to lexical acquisition (e.g., Joe, 1998; Min, 2008; Mondria & Wiersma, 2004; Webb, 2005, 2009).

2.1. Dimensions of vocabulary knowledge

Nation (1990) defined three dimensions with nine components for lexical competence which consists of form (spoken form, written, and word parts), meaning (form and meaning, concept and referents, and associations), and use (grammatical functions, collocations, and constraints on use). For each component, he made a clear distinction between the aspects of receptive and productive vocabulary knowledge. Receptive vocabulary knowledge is related to the skills of listening and reading (known as receptive skills) and the ability to retrieve the meaning of input. That is, it is the ability to "recognize a word and recall its meaning when it is met" (Nation, 1990, p. 5). Productive vocabulary knowledge is related to the skills of speaking and writing (i.e., productive skills) and the ability to retrieve and produce the meaning one wants to express through the means of speech or the written form of language (Laufer & Goldstein, 2004). Nation (1990) stated, "productive knowledge of a word includes receptive knowledge and extends it"; for example, being able to pronounce a word, to use it with syntactical correctness, spell it correctly, not to use the same word repeatedly, to use it in appropriate situations, and to be able to provide synonyms (p. 32). Thus, productive knowledge is much more challenging and takes a considerable amount of time and effort to acquire (e.g., Laufer, 1998; Nation, 2001).

Meara (1996) categorized a learner's lexical competence into the following three dimensions: (1) breadth to express how big a learner's lexicon or mental dictionary is, (2) depth to express how much a learner knows about a given word, and (3) accessibility to express how automatically a learner can access vocabulary items when they want to use them, and organization to represent how rich of a lexical structure they have. Henriksen (1999) also proposed three dimensions: (1) partial to precise knowledge, (2) depth of knowledge, and (3) receptive to productive vocabulary knowledge. Bogaards (2000) divided word knowledge into six aspects: (1) form (spoken and/or written), (2) meaning, (3) morphology (derivation and compounding), (4) syntax, (5) collocates, and (6) discourse.

Even though researchers have categorized lexical knowledge differently, the breadth and depth of vocabulary knowledge, and receptive and productive vocabulary knowledge are common dimensions among them.

2.2. Vocabulary learning strategies

In order to make the most out of deliberate vocabulary learning, what steps need to be taken by language learners to acquire new English words? Vocabulary learning strategies can lead them to learn vocabulary more effectively and efficiently. Strategies are techniques to learn words, to understand them in texts, and to maintain them in learners' learning memories (Coxhead, 2006). Vocabulary strategies are especially important for EFL learners because most vocabulary learning takes place outside of classroom with students studying independently. As Klapper (2008) stated, "a lot of vocabulary is, after all, learnt independently of the classroom" (p. 161).

A number of studies have explored the best strategy for vocabulary learning, and thus, conclusions have been made with regard to the strategy use of successful and unsuccessful students. Studies showed that successful learners tend to use more strategies in combination than less successful learners (e.g., Gu & Johnson, 1996). Research has also shown that students who are aware of and monitor their strategy use generally outperform those who are less cognizant (Coxhead, 2006; Nyikos & Fan, 2007; Sanaoui, 1995). Not only did successful learners use a variety of strategies, but they also took a structured approach by engaging in self-initiated learning activities, keeping records of new words, and reviewing them (Kojic-Sabo & Lightbown, 1999; Mukoyama, 2004; Sanaoui, 1995). Students who used a variety of vocabulary learning strategies and practiced repeatedly outperformed the students who used limited strategies and spent less time on reviewing (e.g., Horst, Cobb, & Meara, 1998; Nation, 2001; Saragi, Nation, & Meister, 1978; Waring & Takaki, 2003).

Such results led to a number of studies focusing on the number of repetitions needed to learn a list and the frequency of repetitions (Horst et al., 1998; Horst et al., 1998; Waring, 2010). Waring and Takaki (2003) showed that learners need to encounter a word at least eight times in order to have a 50% chance of recognizing it after three months; words that were met fewer than five times had a 0% chance of being recognized. Waring (2010) suggested a range of word encounters to be between five to 16 times. In the Clockwork Orange Study, Saragi et al. (1978) concluded that in order for words to be acquired,

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