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Modeling Taiwanese adolescent learners' English vocabulary acquisition and retention: The washback effect of the College Entrance Examination Center's reference word list

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ABSTRACT

Compilation and utilization of second language word lists have the potential to positively or negatively affect curriculum design, materials development, instructional practice, and high-stakes assessments. This study firstly exemplifies this phenomenon by tracing the compilation of the "unauthorized" English language Reference Word List (RWL), the de facto list of words used for Taiwanese high school textbook and materials development compiled by the College Entrance Examination Center. Secondly, this study examines the influence of the RWL and word property variables (Polysemy, Part of Speech, Word Length, and Word Family Size) on non-English majors' (n = 566) vocabulary acquisition (VA). Results show medium to large correlations between RWL Level/Inclusion and VA as well as small to medium correlations between Polysemy, Frequency, Word Length and VA. An eight explanatory variable sequential regression accounted for 50% of the variance in VA, with RWL Level and RWL Inclusion adding the most explanatory power to the model. Next, washback effects of the RWL on Taiwanese high school English learners' VA are discussed and suggestions on compiling an empirically-informed new RWL are provided. Lastly, our critique and suggestions for revision of the RWL are discussed in connection to the creation and revision of word lists for other learning contexts.

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1. Introduction

Second language (L2) word lists are influential. The weight of this influence rests heavily on curriculum design, materials development, instructional practice, and high-stakes assessments. In other words, the compilation and publication of an L2 word list will have significant and lasting effects on the teaching and learning of the targeted L2, even more so when the list is backed by governmental entities and given an official status (Nation, 2016b). Powerful decision making occurs in connection with reference word lists. Therefore, before list compilation, it is paramount for word list compilers to consider a number of issues when deciding which words to include and thus which words to exclude from any L2 reference word list (RWL). These issues can be broadly grouped into two categories: contextual issues and objective issues. The issues are those contextual

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concerns relating to the targeted learners the list is being compiled for and the objective issues are those that deal more generally with the vocabulary of the targeted L2.

Word list compilers must consider contextual issues by taking into account the targeted learners' purpose for learning the L2. This will determine whether specialized or academic vocabulary should be placed on the list. In addition, the language proficiency of the learners will further determine word selection (i.e., whether high, mid, or low frequency words are to be included). Finally, targeted learners' ability to associate word meaning through morphological inflection and derivation will determine whether list compilers should select word types, lemmas, or word families as the head words on the list (Nation, 2016c; Reynolds & Wible, 2014). After contextual issues are dealt with, attention can be given to objective issues. For example, most researchers and English Language Teaching (ELT) practitioners would agree that the words that occur most frequently in a target language merit inclusion on a word list for beginning learners of the language. Decisions would also need to be made on the inclusion/exclusion of function words, acronyms, homonyms, polysemes, proper nouns, and multiword patterns. These issues and more should be taken into account to compile an effective and purposeful L2 RWL.

The publication and acceptance of a word list will result in a trickle-down effect, where the policy makers on the top that have implemented the word list will affect which words are adopted by curriculum and materials designers that will then be taught by language teachers and appear on assessments taken by the language learners. In practice, for any number of reasons, the previously mentioned recommendations may not have been considered by word list compilers, resulting in a word list that is methodologically flawed or outdated. In sum, word list compilation decisions have the potential to have a positive or negative washback effect on learners' language acquisition. On the one hand, if informed decisions have been made concerning word list inclusion, then beneficial language learning outcomes will occur. If on the other hand consideration of contextual and objective issues for word list compilation were ignored during the compiling process, a negative effect on language learning may occur. The present study was undertaken to provide empirical evidence that L2 RWLs affect learners' language acquisition and that RWLs should be meticulously compiled. In addition, it was with this overarching goal in mind that the authors further aimed to provide word list compilers suggestions for the creation of L2 RWLs while also encouraging others to critique L2 RWLs used throughout the globe to spark revisions or updates.

The present study traces the compilation of an English language RWL used in the Taiwan secondary education context. In doing so, we will show how involvement of educational authorities has affected how various stakeholders view this list and how the list has affected the vocabulary acquisition and retention of the targeted language learners. Furthermore, our critique and suggestions for revision of the RWL are discussed in connection to the creation and revision of word lists for other learning contexts. Prior to the main study, we contextualize our inquiry into the Taiwanese context by providing an overview of Taiwanese English education, high school textbook compilation, high-stakes examinations, the RWL background, and variables affecting vocabulary acquisition.

1.1. English language education in Taiwan

For decades, English instruction in Taiwan was delivered as one of the mandatory school subjects starting from the first year of junior high school (Chern, 2002). In accordance with the increasing international recognition of the English language (Nunan, 2003), parents' insistence on an increase in the amount of English instruction provided during elementary school years (Chen, 2011a, 2011b), and the implementation of a revamped Grade 1–9 Curriculum (MOE, 2008a), the starting point of English education was first changed from Grade 7 to Grade 5 in 2001 (Chern, 2002; Su, 2006) and then to Grade 3 in 2005 (Chang, 2006; Hsieh, 2012). Complicated issues have arisen from this policy change (Butler, 2004; Chang, 2006; Chen, 2011a, 2011b; Su, 2006).

Offered as a required course in senior high schools, English is taught according to the curriculum guidelines mandated by the Taiwan Ministry of Education (MOE) (Chern, 2002), with the gradual development of students' English proficiency and communicative skills as the ultimate objective (MOE, 2008b). The long-term goal of using English appropriately in specific contexts is nevertheless overridden by the short-term goal of passing high-stakes college entrance examinations (Chung & Huang, 2010), as evidenced by most senior high school students taking cram school courses to improve their grades on such exams (Chung, 2013). Despite the government's efforts to advance English learning, from some university professors' points of view, students at the tertiary level have shown a growth of listening and speaking ability but at the expense of reading and writing skills along with a declining English vocabulary size (Hsieh, 2012).

1.2. Vocabulary learning and senior high school textbook compilation

Where vocabulary learning is concerned, word frequency of occurrence has been proposed as the primary criterion in selecting vocabulary for senior high school English textbook compilation and English teaching. Specifically, lexical items that occur most frequently should be given the top priority; however, how frequency of occurrence has been determined is not specified in the curriculum guidelines (MOE, 2008b). The curriculum guidelines (MOE, 2008b) do, however, provide two classifications of textbooks used in senior high schools—Type A and Type B. Specifically, each senior high school can choose either Type A or Type B textbooks for their Grade 11 and Grade 12 students; however, for Grade 10 students, senior high schools have no choice but to use Type A textbooks. Type A textbooks consist of basic learning materials while Type B textbooks consist of basic and advanced learning materials. Curriculum guidelines further indicate that the most frequently used (basic) 4,500 English words are to be used for compilation of Type A learning materials whereas Type B learning

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