An Exploration of Creative Sentence Writing as a Means for EFL Vocabulary Acquisition

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EFL（外国語としての英語）の語彙力向上の手段として用いられるオリジナルの英文作成に関する調査

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要約
外国語としての英語（EFL）が適切に機能するための、語彙学習の実践における効果（Schmitt, 2008）として、豊富な語彙力が欠かせないとの見解が示されている。学生の語彙力向上させるための包括的プログラムにおける、一連の基本的な核となる授業でのアクティブ・ラーニング活動と、授業外での自習活動を利用することにより、語彙学習の実践における効果を調査し、詳細に説明する。調査するための手段と方法として、一週間毎の語彙練習、評価、そしてフィードバックを行う。同プログラムは、2014年4月に開始された英語のみを活用する集中プログラムの一環として行うこととする。また、本研究ノートは、語彙力の成績評価と学生の全体的な理解度に基づいた活動の初期所見とその調整も含まれている。そして、学生が積極的に学習できる環境を維持すると同時に、学生の語彙力を高めることが第一の目標とする。初期段階においては、学生の英語力のレベルに関わらず高い成績を示していない。また、現時点において、総合的効果に関しても正確に評価されていない。しかしながら、本研究ノートは、長期間に渡って継続される語彙学習研究プログラムの出発点であると位置づけることが可能である。

キーワード
アクティブラーニング、外国語としての英語、語彙獲得、テクノロジー学習ツール

Abstract
To function properly in English as a Foreign Language (EFL), reflections on vocabulary learning practices show that a large vocabulary is necessary (Schmitt, 2008). Using core set of in-class active learning activities and outside of class self-study activities in a comprehensive program for increasing student vocabulary abilities, reflections on vocabulary learning practices are explored and explained in detail. The procedures and methods include a weekly cycle of vocabulary practice, assessment, and feedback. The contents of this program are administered in an English-only intensive program which began in April of 2014. This research note also includes the initial findings and adjustments made to the activities based on resulting vocabulary assessment scores and student overall uptake. The primary goal is to increase vocabulary abilities in students while maintaining a positive learning atmosphere. Initial results are not showing a high percentage of success across all levels of language ability and the overall effects have not been accurately measured at this time. However, this paper is the launching point of a long-term continued study of vocabulary learning in the program.

Key words
active learning, English as a foreign language, vocabulary acquisition, technology learning tools
1. Introduction

Vocabulary acquisition is a challenging process for English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners. There are many methods and approaches used to give students the best opportunity to achieve success in growing a core set of known words. This research note focuses on the methodologies used in the Intensive English program at one university for vocabulary learning. In this English-only course, students are tasked with learning a core set of vocabulary in a series of three 15-week semesters. Running contrary to more traditional native language to English study methods, this program aims to grow student vocabulary abilities using an English-only approach. By giving students a clear, ordered set of active learning tasks focusing on creative sentence writing for the purposes of learning to use English vocabulary, vocabulary knowledge and abilities in the target language will increase.

Since the implementation of the Global Tourism course at Nagasaki International University in the spring semester of 2014, course designers and instructors have been working on the methods by which students acquire and master new English vocabulary. According to research cited by Schmidt (2008), belief of understandability of a second language moved from the idea of 95% coverage of the vocabulary researched by Laufer in 1989, but has since been amended to 98%–99% by Hu and Nation in 2000. Nation’s evaluation of the Wellington Corpus of Spoken English allowed him to calculate 6,000–7,000 word families are required to reach the 98% goal (Schmidt, 2008). Given this research, it is known that students acquiring a core set of commonly used vocabulary will therefore increase the level of understanding of both written and spoken language.

The main benefits of increasing the core vocabulary of each student include the hope of a more fulfilling experience when studying abroad as well as the opportunity to join not only English as a Foreign Language (EFL) programs but also increasing the possibilities for students to join pure academic programs when completing the overseas component of the course.

The secondary benefits of having improved vocabulary are focused on the English proficiency tests including TOEIC™ as well as IELTS scores which both connect to a wider array of study abroad options as well as potential benefits when entering the domestic and international job markets in the future. These secondary goals are supported by the available research, much of which is reported by Schmidt (2008).

2. Review of other Current Practices

In most current vocabulary studies, the focus is on contextual usage of vocabulary as well as frequency of use. In a study of EFL learners, Mizumoto et. al. demonstrated experimental groups of students given more focused and regular exposure to vocabulary term outperformed control groups over the course of a semester (2009).

Vocabulary knowledge is also directly related to listening abilities. Wang implies that listening scores are significantly influenced based on the amount of vocabulary in repertoire of a student (2015). However attention must be given to depth, literal meaning, lexical collocation, and other aspects of vocabulary study including diversifying materials and quantity of reading in the
3. Global Tourism Program Background

The Global Tourism program at NIU has four primary courses used for preparing students for their study abroad experience. The courses and their basic functions are specified as:

- Practical English A – Presentation Skills
- Practical English B – Academic Skills
- English Reading Skills
- English Writing Skills

Vocabulary studies play an important role in all four of these courses, however the process of acquiring and practicing new vocabulary is primarily managed in the Practical English B course which focuses on teaching students academic skills. Some of the academic skills taught in this course include time and schedule management, note taking skills, debate skills, online communication skills, and vocabulary study skills. In the other three courses, vocabulary is integrated implicitly within other activities including speaking activities, reading activities, and writing activities. The main focus of this research note will be on the Practical English B course which has an overt focus on a selected set of vocabulary.

4. Vocabulary Acquisition Methodology

Rather than focus on more traditional methods of studying vocabulary such as using Japanese to English and English to Japanese translation of words, the creators of this curriculum are focusing on a strictly English-only style of learning. It is hoped that by using a fully English immersion method that the students will not only learn English at a rapid rate but also learn to deal with unfamiliar concepts when they don’t have the resources in their native language available.

The main source of vocabulary in the program comes from a selected set of textbooks based on the “core 4,000” English words. The books, authored by Paul Nation and titled “4,000 Essential English Words” are a six-book series designed to focus on high-frequency words to enhance the vocabulary of learners. The activities in the books are designed to present the words in different uses so that learners can fully see how they can be utilized. Each unit includes a story containing the unit’s target words to give learners further examples of the words in use. The heavy focus on usage is the main theme of this vocabulary plan, not just the understanding of the meaning of the words.

Each of the 30 units in the textbook presents 20 words which are defined and used in sample sentences. Students study 2 units per week. At the end of a 15 week semester the students have finished a complete textbook and been shown 600 unique and commonly used vocabulary words.

This is a very high number of vocabulary words to expect students to master in one 15-week semester. To offset the heavy load, a number of supporting activities both for in class and outside of class have been designed. The activities are meant to help students focus on repeatedly accessing the words throughout the week. Some of the activities include:

- using both inside and outside of class the vocabulary textbook directly.
- assigning textbook assignments
made online as outside of class work.
&bullet; assigning Quizlet study sets for each unit as outside of class work.
&bullet; assigning student-built online vocabulary glossary of example sentences as outside of class work.
&bullet; having an in-class weekly vocabulary practice group game using Quizlet.
&bullet; having an in-class weekly sentence building group activity for new words.
&bullet; having an in-class weekly individual assessment.
&bullet; assigning individual assessment review activities as outside of class work.

Next, the main vocabulary study and assessment activities will be discussed in the phases in which they occur during any given week of the semester. These activities are the student-built online vocabulary glossary of example sentences, the weekly group sentence building activity for new words, and the weekly individual assessment and individual assessment review activities. Other supporting activities will be noted as well.

4.1 Vocabulary Glossary Phase

The students have the textbook which contains the English definition and an example sentence for every word in a unit. From this textbook, students are assigned a set of five words from each unit. Students choose these words themselves in a group of four students with the requirement that each student choose five words and that all words must be chosen by the group. Sometimes the group has more than four students in which case some words are chosen by more than one student.

The next step involves students creating an original sentence in a student-built online vocabulary glossary. The rule is that the sentence cannot be the same sentence as the one in the textbook and the sentence cannot be a definition. Students must also create a sentence which shows understanding of the word such that when the word is omitted from the sentence, another student can determine which word ought to go in the sentence.

Teachers assess the vocabulary glossary as a completed activity and don’t mark down points for grammar errors or spelling mistakes. As long as the student follows the guidelines of the assignment — an original sentence demonstrating understanding of the word — the student receives a point. The score for each glossary is a maximum of five points for five sentences.

Teachers also give feedback to the students in the glossary in the form of comments on the sentences. If the sentences are acceptable, no comments are given. However if the sentences are missing important information or have not met the minimum completion criteria, a comment is given. Students are able to see the entries of their peers for reference and study at their convenience.

4.2 Group Sentence Creation Phase

In parallel to the glossary activity, students also prepare four sheets of notebook paper containing the vocabulary words for the two units of the week. The students copy the terms, the type of word in long form (e.g. noun — not n.) and the example sentence given in the textbook. In general, students put 10
terms per page with spaces between the entries to allow room for the classroom activity. These papers must be prepared before the second Practical B class of the week in order to participate in the group activity.

When the class convenes, students are broken into three or four groups of four to five students each. Each group is assigned to one of the four sets of 10 terms prepared prior to the start of class. In the groups, students work together to make an original sentence to add to the paper. They work in lock-step not moving to the next word until the current sentence is approved by the teachers and each student in the group has finished writing the sentence on the paper.

In this activity, it is important that the students work in lock-step together to allow stronger students to indirectly support weaker students in the group. In this manner, when one group finishes the list of 10 words, they disperse the team members to the remaining groups to assist in the sentence creation on those teams. The last team ends up having the entire class assisting it to complete the sentences.

After this phase of the activity is complete, students must then receive copies of the other 30 words for which their classmates have made sentences. In this way, by the end of the activity each student has two example sentences for each vocabulary word in the two units assigned for the week. If the students have made further original sentences in the vocabulary glossary, there may be additional examples with which to study.

4.3 Assessment Phase

At the start of the next class period, students are given an in-class timed individual assessment which includes 20 of the 40 terms for the week. An additional 10 terms are selected at random and included from the previously completed units. This 30-question assessment is timed for 30 minutes allowing for 1 minute per question. The examination is created using original example sentences selected by the instructors. Each question has four example sentences with the word left out of the blank.

The test is an interactive assessment which allows students to check the answers as they move from question to question. If they miss the word on the first try, a hint of the first letter of the word is given and a 50% deduction of points is taken from that particular problem. A second miss and the answer is marked wrong. When the test completes, students can see their score and the feedback for their answers.

4.4 Assessment Feedback Activities Phase

To support the students in this type of assessment, there are two follow-up feedback activities. The first activity is that students are given the same assessment as homework. The second time the students do this assessment, they have no time limit and are able to make use of the answers from the first assessment. The purpose of this second assessment is to give students a chance to reflect on the incorrect answers and to get those answers correct. The goal is to receive a 100% on the second assessment. The final score for both assessments is the average of the two.

The second follow-up activity is a 20-word online crossword puzzle randomly generated using all assessment questions from the previously studied units. Students can work
through this review crossword checking their answers repeatedly until they achieve a perfect score. This activity serves as an addition 10-point bonus added to the average of the two assessments. In this way, there is a positive outcome based on student effort which enables students of all levels to be successful each week.

4.5 Additional Study and Support Activities

In addition to the main vocabulary activities, students are also given the weekly sets of vocabulary in the popular Quizlet application. Quizlet groups the vocabulary words in handy Flashcard sets which students are able to review from any computer or handheld device. Quizlet also includes several activities which drill the students on the basic textbook meanings and example sentences. One of these activities is called “Learn” which requires students to type in the correct word for each example from the textbook.

Quizlet allows the teachers to track the day and time the students complete the Flashcard and Learn activities. Teachers give completion points to the students for finishing both activities. By requiring the completion of these activities, it is hoped that students will get further exposure to the words and will act as incentive for students to review the entries.

Quizlet also contains a group game activity played on tablets to support additional practice with the vocabulary words. This is sometimes used during in-class sessions. Based on the Flashcard sets stored in the Quizlet online library, the game randomly groups students in the classroom together using tablets. Students must work together in groups to answer the Learn-style questions in a group as their avatar advances on the projection screen in the room. The winning team is the team to answer all 12 random questions first. After the game, Quizlet offers a summary of terms that were difficult for the class and terms that students know well.

The vocabulary textbook also contains several activities to encourage additional study of the words. These activities have been turned into online practice assignments which students are also required to complete. The activities include standard cloze activities, finding the vocabulary word with a similar meaning in a sentence, choosing the sentence that makes sense from a set of two sentences, finding the opposites of particular words in a list, and completing sentences by choosing the correct phrase containing the vocabulary word.

The textbook also contains a themed reading passage which includes some comprehension questions. The students read the passage and answer the comprehension questions online where they receive feedback on their understanding. In this passage, the students can see the words used again in context as another example.

5. Initial Results

In the early phases, an in-class creative writing session for students was not conducted and the student-created vocabulary glossary was the primary means for students to get exposure to these terms in original sentences. However, with only the highest level students receiving a modest amount of success on the assessment, it was apparent that more student support was needed.

The institution of the in-class group
creation of original sentences activity allows students to work together to formulate and share sentences of their own making. Although the activity is still in the early phases, students appear more focused on the vocabulary during that period. An initial effect on the assessment scores is at this point only minimal and more study is needed.

The other area where students are struggling is in the transition of more traditional means of vocabulary study to the English-only learning methods which require students to dig into meanings more carefully. Students are unable to use their native language to support understanding of the new vocabulary, so it is likely that this also serves as a detractor.

Adding the review assessment and the bonus point crossword puzzle is expected to remove the strain on poor scores from student motivation. However it is still too early in the process to identify any positive trends.

6. Future Directions

One area that is currently lacking in the vocabulary acquisition process is the building of good study habits for the students. Students are relying too much on the directions from the teacher and taking very little initiative by students to spend time with the weekly terms. It is found that students report a relatively low ratio of time spent studying vocabulary outside the general homework assigned by the teachers. If possible, building effective and regular study habits for this type of learning could be one way of improving student uptake. This area needs more research and planning.

Another area which has not been deeply investigated is the connection between the textbook passages and deeper comprehension of the terms themselves. It might be useful to create more activities to support the understanding of these passages as a way of helping students to comprehend the new terms more completely.

Additionally it may be necessary to reduce the number of vocabulary words students are required to master in a week. By slowing the pace down to one unit per week instead of two units, it may allow for a deeper focus on the vocabulary at an expense of reducing the total number of words students learn during a term. It may be that 40 terms per week is simply too great an obstacle for students at this level.

References

