



Designing a Vocabulary Element in a Economics-focused Reading Program

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Abstract This paper will examine the vocabulary element of a business English reading class. The course is conducted on a semester system at a Japanese university in Osaka, Japan. The students are first and second year students in an undergraduate economics program. Many of the students hope to work for businesses in the future, such as banks, trading companies, etc. The paper will discuss the needs of the students, how to incorporate those needs in to a vocabulary teaching plan, and how to assess that plan at the conclusion of the teaching period.

Key words reading, English as a foreign language, vocabulary, syllabus
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INTRODUCTION

As a teacher of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) in Japan, I witness daily what a struggle it can be for students to attain quality input to further their language development. Without sufficient exposure to English, the learning process can be a series of daunting tasks. Consequently, many students turn to reading English as one way of gaining access to the language. Through books, magazines, newspapers, Internet material, and other sources of written input, students are given an open door to the English language. However, not all students capitalize on this opportunity. Regardless of the amount of written input available, it is all for naught if students do not hold a strong knowledge of vocabulary.

This paper will explore one way of introducing and sustaining vocabulary learning at the university level in classes which consist of non-English majors. In the paper, I will cover how to determine the needs of your students based on a pre-test. Once those needs have been identified, I will then explain how to initiate and sustain vocabulary learning. Then, finally, I will conclude with a section on assessing vocabulary acquisition.

Participants and Setting

The course is conducted on a semester system at a Japanese university in Osaka, Japan. The students are first and second year students in an undergraduate economics program. Many of the students hope to work for businesses in the future, such as banks, trading companies, etc. The reading classes meet each week for one, 90-minute lesson. The bulk of the class is reserved for reading strategy practice, but a vocabulary component is also included.

The purpose of the class is to help students become better able to understand the English written word (faxes, letters, emails, etc.) in the current international business environment. Class topics include such themes as: placing orders, confirming, expressing appreciation and gratitude, memos, etc. To accomplish the goals of this course, the students become familiar with a rather large amount of business

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technical vocabulary. Looking at this vocabulary, there are two important details to keep in mind when evaluating their implementation.

First, students will be asked to learn a vast amount of vocabulary words. What justification is there for wanting the students to learn these words? In choosing the words, it should be noted that the probability of a word being encountered in the future should match the degree of focus on that word (Nation, 2001). Since the students' current employment involves this vocabulary daily, business vocabulary can be considered to be high frequency in terms of the likelihood of their being met again.

Second, it is assumed that students have at least a basic knowledge of business concepts in their native language. Attention is therefore focused on receptive learning. That is, teaching students to take the L2 written or spoken form and to retrieve its meaning.

In this paper, the aspects of pre-testing, vocabulary introduction, activities, and post-testing will be examined. The main focus here is on why and how testing takes place, what resources are available for students to access needed vocabulary, and the effectiveness of course activities.

Pre-testing Methodology

One of the main starting points to any program is, of course, the pre-test. Two primary reasons for administering a pre-test are to determine what knowledge the students have coming into the class, and to find out what items need more attention (Nation, 2001). Measuring student knowledge at the beginning of the year will provide a basis of comparison to assess students achievement at the end of the year when the post-test is given. Finding out which test items the students know and do not know allows for class time to be used more efficiently, focusing on students' weaknesses.

After deciding to pre-test the students, attention is directed to exactly what is to be tested, the format to be used, and how to get the most reliable and valid results without making the test too difficult for the students.

While administering the pre-test can be justified, it is important to put together

an assessment tool that properly reflects what we want the students to learn (Brown, 1996). In this course, the primary goal is to enable student to effectively understand English in a business setting. Achieving this goal will require students to know the necessary English business vocabulary. In this case, “necessary” means all business-related words used in the textbook. For a complete list of those words to be tested, see Appendix A.

Since the course focuses almost entirely on receptive learning of word form and meaning, it makes sense that the test should focus on receptive knowledge (Baddeley, 1997). The test format decided on is the matching test with minimal context. Using minimal context allows the student to see how the word can be used in everyday speech, and where it fits grammatically within a sentence. Students at to choose the best definition for each underlined word from a list of options. The matching format is good for testing a large number of items, and also best reflects receptive learning in that students will be tested on L2 items with L1 definition options. As Nation (2001) states,

...to provide learners with the greatest chance of showing the vocabulary knowledge they have, it seems appropriate to use matching items with a sentence context (p. 353) (see also Joe, 1998).

Having chosen the test format, one modification to be made is the addition of distracters. Distracters are important, due to the fact that if the number of options matches the number of test items, then students can simply narrow their choices until all options are used. Distracters will help to eliminate this problem, thereby increasing test reliability (Haladyna, 1994). In this test, distracters have been chosen by simply taking two answers from one section and adding them to another. Care has been taken to ensure that they are not too far removed from those being tested. In doing so, there is less chance of students recognizing them as distracters (Brown, 1996; Haladyna, 1994; Nation, 2001).

While it is important to make the test challenging in order to get a true assessment of student knowledge, it is equally important to make the test as accessible as possible.

Since the vocabulary words being tested are, for the most part, technical in nature, offering L2 definitions to students would bombard them with an array of words, not to mention grammatical structures that would far surpass those items being tested. Nation (2001) supports this reasoning, “Although there is no research yet demonstrating this, it is highly likely that a multiple-choice or matching test would be much easier for learners to do, and more valid, if the definitions were in the first rather than the second language (p. 351).”

Taking Nation’s statement into consideration, it could also be inferred that if a test were easier to take, then the students’ anxiety might be lowered, thereby allowing the students to relax and give us a true reading of his/her knowledge. This idea of learning the affective filter of a student has been touched on time and time again by Krashen in reference to the classroom setting, but I think that it would almost definitely also play a major role in testing procedures as well (Krashen, 1985).

Vocabulary Instruction

As we move from the pre-test to the main bulk of instruction and learning, we step to the textbook. The textbook introduces and demonstrates how vocabulary is used in context. By seeing the vocabulary in context, students can become aware of the parts of speech, collocations, and how the vocabulary functions in natural speech and written form. Since students will be using the textbook every class, it is perhaps their main resource in accessing vocabulary. However, while the textbook is a useful resource to be used by the students, it is important that they be aware of other ways to gain access to vocabulary.

In addition to the textbook, I often use business English videos that highlight the vocabulary that will be taught in a certain lesson. In preparation for each class, I prepare a list of 15–20 words which will be focused on in the lesson. I offer the words, first, out of context. I usually have the students read them to themselves first and then I check their pronunciation by chorusing the words. Then at the bottom of the handout, I have included the words in context, including any common collocations. Students are asked to review and ask questions about words which

they do not understand.

Both the textbook and the videos serve to break down a large number of vocabulary items and present them in a more manageable manner. In addition to this, I often assign homework of reading passages (usually from a newspaper) that include words that they already know and that use a rather small amount of new terminology. I assign this homework as a review mechanism that will hopefully allow the students to remember the words better and also as an additional opportunity to exposure to certain vocabulary, enriching the schema of individual words.

Now that students have access to the new vocabulary, we must choose and develop ways to increase their knowledge and retention. Vocabulary activities in the classroom consist of asking and answering questions about readings assigned in class, matching words and definitions, completing writing assignments in class, and keeping a vocabulary log.

In determining which activities to use and how to use them in class, one might turn to Nation (2001, p.6-113) for a structure of guidance:

1. What is the learning goal of the activity ?
2. What psychological conditions does the activity use to help reach the learning goal ?
3. What are the observable signs that learning might occur ?
4. What are the design features of the activity which set up the conditions for learning ?

In the first activity, asking and answering questions about a reading passage or video clip, firstly a meaning-focused goal is set. The goal is to clarify and strengthen spoken and written words to meanings. Do the students comprehend the vocabulary and can they ask and answer questions using the terminology in the reading ? The psychological conditions used here are noticing and retrieval. When answering questions and possibly even more when asking questions, students are required to thoroughly notice the vocabulary and if previously learned, to retrieve it. Learning becomes apparent through student negotiation and repetition.

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Through negotiation of meaning as shared by the teacher or classmates, students are allowed to mull over the meanings of words and have several exposures to the various vocabulary. Questions that are asked by the teacher should be rephrased to use slightly different nuances and collocations that may be characteristic of a certain word. This allows the students to increase the quality of their concept of a certain term. As far as design features of the activity which assist learning, the activity offers meaning-focused input, highlighting, underlining, repetitive opportunities for retrieval, etc.

Matching is also a useful tool in the EFL classroom. At the beginning of each class, students are given twenty words and their translated meanings in the form of a quiz. When matching words and definitions, the goal once again is to connect written form to meaning. Since students are reviewing words studied in past lessons, repetition occurs and, depending on which vocabulary is found to be problematic, retrieval can be quite high. This idea also takes into consideration spaced retrieval which is integral for students to really move schema from working memory to long term memory. This repetition reminds (forces noticing) the students once again that these words are important to learn. The fact that it is a quiz makes students aware that they need to focus on word meanings in order to finish the task.

Retention of Vocabulary

The written task encompasses the goal of meaning-focused output (Nation, 2001, p. 2). When the students are forced to write something, they are forced to really notice the difference between their writing and that of a native English speaker. They are forced to notice the gap. This will aid them in truly grasping the meaning of a word. This can be accomplished of course, through negotiation and repetition again. They will be forced to really analyze meanings and words to come to a clear understanding of the terminology.

Then finally, students will be required to keep a vocabulary log. This log can be kept in a small notebook. Each week these notebooks are collected and checked by the instructor while the students are completing their writing tasks. In the

log, students are asked to select at least 5 words, write their definitions, and give an example of each word used in context. This allows students to take responsibility for their own learning. Writing the definition of each word strengthens the form-focused meaning connection, and writing a sentence helps them to become more aware of how the word can be used in context.

When planning activities, it is important to consider the learning goals of the activity. It is equally important to ensure that aspects of the activity are conducive to achieving those goals. Thorough evaluation can draw a path from activity implementation to goal accomplishment. The activities used in this class are focused mainly on students achieving a strong form-meaning connection. As a teacher, it is important to help facilitate student learning, but at the same time care should be taken to make sure students become more involved in their own learning (Newton, 2001).

At the end of the class year, students are given a final test of achievement. This test is given in order to evaluate student learning, but it also helps to evaluate the effectiveness of the class curriculum (Brown, 1996). In this case, it is not only the students who are being tested, but the teacher as well. Although it is basically the same as the pre-test as far as form and content, the reasons behind administering the post-test are different.

Post-test Methodology

Whereas the pre-test measures what students know, the post-test measures what they have learned. It is this information that allows the teacher to assign each student an evaluation based on his achievement. Given the fact that testing is done using a criterion-referenced based test, Brown suggests that it is conceivable for all students to receive the same grade, assuming they all learned the same amount of material. In this way, all students will be fairly evaluated on their own level and not as compared to their classmates.

The post-test is a critical tool to measure student learning, especially if it follows the same format as the pre-test. It is also useful to the teacher in assessing what changes might be needed to maximize student learning.

In the end, implementing a vocabulary element into a course design requires

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the teacher to focus on a number of areas. Here, those areas have included pre-testing, the materials which will be used to introduce these words, activities to encourage the learning and retention of these terms, and testing. It must be remembered that no course design is perfect, and changes will always be needed. Answering these questions will help to implement a vocabulary element that is both effective and reliable, and allow the instructor to learn as much as the students.

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