Examining learner vocabulary notebooks

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Most vocabulary teaching literature advises learners to keep vocabulary notebooks to help promote vocabulary acquisition as well as learner autonomy. Yet, there have been few studies of the vocabulary notebooks kept by students studying English as a foreign language. This study examined the vocabulary notebooks kept by 124 first year English majors at a Japanese university to determine: (1) the sources from which students choose words, (2) the types and frequency of words selected, and (3) the reasoning behind word selection. The study found that students draw the words for their notebooks overwhelmingly from textbooks, favour certain parts of speech, have difficulty identifying high frequency words, and view all words they do not know as equally important. These findings provide teachers and researchers with new information about vocabulary notebooks and show how standard notebook strategies do not always meet students' vocabulary learning needs.

Introduction

Acquiring a large and varied vocabulary is essential for communicative competence and one of the central tasks for second language learners. Writing new words in a vocabulary notebook can facilitate this challenging but crucial job. Vocabulary notebooks can take a plethora of forms from bound notebooks with fixed pages, to loose-leaf binders with movable pages, to small index cards small enough to fit into a pocket. While promoting the use of vocabulary notebooks is popular, there have been few serious investigations of the vocabulary notebooks kept by language learners. This study aims to start addressing this gap in the research by undertaking a detailed examination of the vocabulary notebooks kept by a group of first year university EFL learners.

Previous research

The vocabulary teaching literature focuses on giving practical advice and, to a far lesser extent, discussing theoretical issues. Most researchers and teachers collectively agree that the recording of new words in vocabulary notebooks of one form or another should be promoted (Carroll and Mordaunt 1991; Fowle 2002; Gairns and Redman 1986; McCarthy 1990; Nation 2001; Schmitt and Schmitt 1995). Similarly, experts generally concur with the recommendation that learners should record information beyond a word and its meaning including information such as example sentences, antonyms and synonyms, pictures, and pronunciation.
The role of vocabulary notebooks

Teachers normally encourage students to keep vocabulary notebooks for two main reasons. The primary aim is acquiring new vocabulary. Taking vocabulary notes of one kind or another and the resulting practice and memorization of words appears to lead to better vocabulary retention, especially in input deficient EFL contexts (Hulstijn 1992). However, there has been very little research into the role notebooks play in vocabulary acquisition.

The secondary aim for vocabulary notebooks is fostering learner autonomy. (Fowle, op. cit.; Schmitt and Schmitt, op. cit). As one element of this; it is often suggested that learners should choose the words for their notebooks independently (Gairns and Redman op. cit.; McCarthy op. cit.; Schmitt and Schmitt op. cit.). Unfortunately, the reasoning behind letting all students choose their own words remains unclear. According to Schmitt and Schmitt, letting students choose the words they want to study matches:

the general recommendation that teachers should not be too prescriptive when teaching learning strategies. Since students may have diverse learning styles or simply different ways they like to study, the best teaching plan may be to introduce students to a variety of learning strategies and techniques and let them decide for themselves which ones they prefer. (op. cit.: 136–7)

This advice unnecessarily blurs the distinction between learning styles and the content of what is to be learnt. Whether all students, even those at the beginning and intermediate levels, are capable of complete autonomy in selecting words remains to be seen.

Other authors argue for a more prescriptive approach and maintain that learners should consult frequency lists in conjunction with their personal needs (Nation 2001). Other authors reason that students should choose semi-familiar words to help receptive vocabulary to become productive vocabulary (Carroll and Mordaunt op. cit.).

Methodology

This study was designed to address gaps in the existing research by undertaking a detailed examination of the vocabulary notebooks kept by EFL learners. The examination focused on:

1 the sources of vocabulary notebook words;
2 the parts of speech and frequency of words selected by students; and
3 the reasons behind word selection.

An analysis of the vocabulary notebooks kept by first-year university students during an entire semester provides the data for this study. For the purposes of this research the term ‘vocabulary notebook’ refers to any form of notebook used for recording new and useful vocabulary and some additional information about the word.

The subjects came from five classes of first-year English majors at Kanda University of International Studies, a Japanese foreign language university. Students in each class studied together in required speaking, reading, and
writing classes for a total of six 90-minute classes a week and each student also took optional classes. A placement test streamed all students entering the university and the subjects' level can be described generally as low-intermediate to intermediate. Out of 132 students in the five classes, 124 completed the vocabulary notebook assignment. An examination of these 124 notebooks provides the data for this study.

In the middle of the first semester the students took version one of Schmitt’s Vocabulary Levels Test (Schmitt 2000). The 124 students whose vocabulary notebooks were examined scored an average of 23.47 out of 30 at the 2,000 word level, 16.75 at the 3,000 word level, 15.91 at the 5,000 word level, 3.41 at the 10,000 word level and 5.66 at the academic word level. These scores mean that most students had not mastered the most basic word levels included on Schmitt’s Levels Test. For example, about 20% of words at the 2,000 level and more than 40% at the 3,000 level remained unknown when students began keeping vocabulary notebooks.

Learners started to keep vocabulary notebooks in the middle of the first semester. They received an explanation of the three main types of vocabulary notebooks (fixed page notebooks, movable page notebooks, and index cards) and a recommendation to keep some form of movable page notebook. However, each student decided which type of notebook they kept. Students also received instructions to record words they thought were useful and likely to use again, to write the meaning in the students’ L1 (Japanese) and to write an example sentence. Recording the meaning in simple English was optional. During this first semester instructors collected the notebooks twice to offer encouragement. These seven weeks served to train students how to keep notebooks.

In the second semester students continued keeping notebooks and received instructions to record two more pieces of information: the source of the word and the reason for recording it. Students received further instructions to try and write about twenty words a week. The instructors collected the notebooks halfway through the semester to check progress and after twelve weeks at the end of the semester.

Findings

Although they were instructed to try and record about twenty words a week (240 words over twelve weeks), the quantity of words recorded by learners varied widely. The notebook with the fewest words contained 71 and the notebook with the most had 247 words. The average number of words for all the notebooks was 141. The total of words recorded in all 124 notebooks was 17,483 but two or more students repeated 4,732 of them, giving a total of 6,013 individual words.

Sources

The sources students drew their vocabulary items from can be classified into five broad categories: (1) textbooks and class handouts, (2) other written sources (books, newspapers, magazines), (3) electronic media (music, TV, movies), (4) conversations, and (5) other (including signs, Internet, computer games, dictionaries). The breakdown for each category can be seen in Figure 1 below.
Not surprisingly, the majority of words (82%) came from textbooks and class handouts. Students also chose some words from other written sources (6.5%) and the electronic media (mainly music CDs) (5%). Only 2% of the words came from listening to or engaging in conversation. Finally, 4.5% of the words came from other sources.

**Parts of speech**

The examination of the notebooks also revealed how many words from each part of speech students chose. Refer to Figure 2 below for the percentage of words for each word class.

Nouns proved to be the most popular word class. Out of 17,483 words about 43% were nouns. Some students recorded even more nouns. The highest percentage of nouns recorded by an individual student was 54% and the lowest was 30%. The second most popular class was verbs at 28%. Again certain students recorded more verbs than others; the student with the highest percentage recorded 40% and the lowest 19%. Adjectives proved to be the next most popular at 22%. The student with the highest percentage of adjectives had 38% and the lowest 14%. Students recorded few adverbs (6%) and the student with the highest percentage recorded 11% and the student with the lowest only 1.5%. Other word classes such as prepositions,
conjunctions, and longer phrases proved extremely rare and made up less than 1% of recorded words.

In order to determine the frequency of the words selected by students the 6,013 individual words were examined using Tom Cobb’s Vocabprofile software. (This software is available on Cobb’s website The Compleat Lexical Tutor at http://132.208.224.131.) This analysis revealed that almost 8% of the words came from the 1–1,000 level, 12% from the 2,000 word level, 22% from the academic word list, and just over 58% from the 3,000 and higher levels.

Why words were selected

Difficulties surround any analysis of the reasons why students selected words. For example, sometimes students failed to record a reason for word selection and other students seemed to rely almost too heavily on a single reason throughout their notebooks. However, it is possible to gain some insight into the rationale behind word selection. Students provided the reason for selecting 15,132 words and the breakdown by percentage is shown in Figure 3.

The reasons can be broken down into eight broad categories:

1. Did not know the word (word was new). (34%)
2. The word is useful or important. (24%)
3. The word had been seen or heard a lot. (8%)
4. To know the word better or the word had been forgotten previously. (10%)
5. The word sounded nice or interesting. (8%)
6. Needed the word when speaking or writing. (2%)
7. Use the word a lot in L1 (Japanese). (5%)
8. Other (the word is difficult, found the word when looking in the dictionary for another word, the teacher said the word was important, etc.). (9%).

Discussion

Student reasoning behind word selection

These findings help illustrate some areas where learners probably need to receive more guidance from instructors as well as some of the potential drawbacks of vocabulary notebooks. Many of these problems relate to the selection of words by students. Intermediate students swim in an ocean of unknown words so it is important to examine the reasoning behind their word selection. Learners selected most words for the nebulous reason that they ‘did not know the word’ (34%). The next most popular rationale was
because the word is ‘useful’ or ‘important’ (24%). However, students received instructions to record only words they thought to be useful. These findings suggest that students select many of their words for no good reason or that students are unable to clearly articulate the reasoning behind their word selection. The findings also suggests that students view all words they do not know as equal and have trouble identifying high frequency, valuable words. Further evidence for this weakness is the fact that students recorded only 8% of the words because they had been seen or heard frequently. Therefore it seems necessary for teachers to do more training with students to help them choose words they encounter repeatedly in different texts and are thus likely to be high frequency, valuable words.

Reliance on textbooks and written sources

Another possible pitfall is the heavy reliance on textbooks for words. Most students studying English as a foreign language in school receive the majority of exposure to the language in the classroom. Therefore it is not surprising that students drew words primarily from textbooks and handouts. However, an overwhelmingly majority of the words (82%) came from textbooks or handouts and 48 students found 90% or more of their words in textbooks or handouts.

This reliance on texts is a concern since many textbooks may not be particularly effective at selecting vocabulary (Ljung 1990; Carroll and Mordaunt op. cit.). One researcher who examined textbooks designed for high school found that 204 of the 1,000 most frequent words in textbooks did match the 1,000 most frequent words in the Birmingham Corpus (Ljung op. cit.). Part of the reason for this discrepancy is that textbook vocabulary tended to focus on concrete objects and acts and neglected vocabulary related to more abstract and mental processes (ibid.: 44–5).

In addition to relying on textbooks, students chose, on average, a further 6.5% of words from other written sources. Choosing so many words from a limited variety of written sources is a concern because fluent listening and speaking requires fewer and different words than reading and writing (Schmitt, op. cit.: 156). Teachers may want to spend class time explaining to students some of the skills and strategies that would enable them to become aware and record vocabulary from spoken texts.

Focus on certain parts of speech

The findings also show that students tend to neglect certain parts of speech when choosing vocabulary items. For whatever reason learners often seem to favour one part of speech at the expense of others. Most students recorded more nouns than other parts of speech but some learners carried this to an extreme; 27 learners had nouns comprising 50% or more of all the words they recorded. Of course in almost any text there are more nouns than any other word class. However, it may also reflect student reliance on textbooks since texts have been found to concentrate on concrete concepts (Ljung, op. cit.). It may also be possible that students find notebooks most useful for learning nouns and similarly tangible concepts.

Difficulties with word frequency

Also problematic is the fact vocabulary notebooks do not seem to help the students in this study learn enough high frequency words. The
literature advises recording high frequency words in vocabulary notebooks (Nation 2001: 303; Schmitt and Schmitt op. cit.: 140). Arguably the most important word levels for EFL learners are the 1,000, 2,000, and even 3,000 word levels. A reader needs requisite knowledge of about 3,000 word families to achieve 95% coverage of a general text and this 95% coverage is generally required to guess meaning from context (Nation 1990). The scores on Schmitt’s Vocabulary Levels Test show most students participating in the study had not even mastered the vocabulary at the 2,000 word level. However, relatively few words recorded in the vocabulary notebooks came from the 2,000 word level. A sizable percentage came from the academic word list, probably a result of relying on textbooks and handouts, and the majority came from the 3,000 and higher word levels.

Vocabulary notebooks then are not an efficient method to help students acquire the vocabulary at the most frequent and essential word levels. This shows that educators may have to do more work with students at the most basic word levels than they realize. Ensuring students learn the most common words in the English language should be a key goal for educators and it would appear that allowing beginning and low-intermediate students to choose their own words may not be appropriate without first extensively training them to critically evaluate their word choices. Of course, vocabulary teaching and learning cannot be manacled to frequency lists. However, even if it is not the only criterion for word selection, frequency should be an important consideration. Educators should help students understand their vocabulary level and encourage them to consult with word frequency lists or appropriate dictionaries. If required to keep vocabulary notebooks, learners should receive guidance from teachers to help them make informed choices not just arbitrary decisions.

Of course, frequency does not automatically equal usefulness and deciding a word’s usefulness is difficult. However, low-intermediate students’ judgement of usefulness appears suspect. For example, one student recorded the words ‘effluent’, ‘heretofore’, ‘twixt’, ‘larynx’, ‘sediment’, ‘prognosticator’ in their notebook. Other students recorded similarly low-frequency words in their vocabulary notebook believing they would be ‘useful for conversation’. This helps demonstrate how learners view any unknown word as potentially useful. Furthermore, the fact that students selected 8% of words because they ‘sound nice’ should also concern teachers. Of course, teachers should never dismiss out of hand learner desires to remember certain words. Yet, encouraging students to consult word frequency lists or dictionaries that specify frequency information and specifically teaching words from the 1,000–3,000 word levels seems desirable and even necessary.

Words selected because they had been seen or heard a lot proved to be less problematic than words selected for other reasons. Of the frequently encountered words recorded by students 19% came from the 1,000 word level, 16% from the 2,000 word level, 30% from the academic word list and 35% were not included on any of the above lists. These results compare favourably to the frequency of words selected
for other reasons. However, it would also appear that room remains for improvement. Despite the fact that the learners studied nearly identical material only six words were selected by more than one student because they had been frequently encountered. Furthermore, the usefulness of some of the words remains questionable as more than a third of the words recorded because they had presumably been encountered frequently did not appear on any frequency lists. It seems that students often recorded words that appeared several times in a single text rather than across different texts. Students will need to receive specific instructions to record words they see often in different texts and to critically examine whether a word that appears often in a single text is truly valuable and likely to be encountered again.

Lack of collocations

It should be remembered that words normally work in conjunction with other words as collocations such as ‘half past five’ or ‘freezing cold’ (Schmitt 2000: 76–7). Some vocabulary teaching literature advises students to record collocations in their notebooks (Schmitt and Schmitt op. cit.). However, out of 17,483 words students recorded only 99 such collocations. Students viewed words in isolation so their notebooks will not help them acquire these collocations. Of course students cannot be expected to automatically record collocations without instructions and guidance from their teachers. The finding that students failed to record collocations helps demonstrate the need for teachers to train students to view words not as individual units but as pieces of a jigsaw puzzle.

Errors in example sentences

An examination of the errors in the example sentences written by students in their notebooks reveals another potential drawback of vocabulary notebooks. The example sentences were examined for serious errors in word usage. Small grammatical mistakes were ignored; the focus was on finding how many times the meaning of the new word did not match the sentence. Thirty-two students who obviously relied heavily on the example sentences from a dictionary made serious mistakes about 1% of the time. The average number of sentences with serious errors for the students who produced their own sentences was 11.8%. However, one student who wrote their own sentences made serious errors 16% of the time. There are many different ways the classroom teacher can address this difficulty but they should be aware of the problem. One possible solution would be to have students write down the sentence or expression where students originally saw or heard the word. Other possibilities include requiring students to look up sentences in a learners’ dictionary.

Student opinions of vocabulary notebooks

Students themselves seem to recognize at least some of these difficulties with word selection and notebooks in general. A study comparing 267 students who chose their own words for vocabulary notebooks with those who received word lists from their teachers found students prefer more teacher input (Joyce and Sippel 2004). The study investigated student attitudes towards vocabulary learning and found that 80% of all students wanted to be provided with word lists by their teacher. Students who had to record their own words spent less time studying the words and felt that they did not learn as much as their counterparts who received.
word lists from teachers. Obviously, students themselves realize the problems in choosing words for vocabulary notebooks. This attitude further illustrates the need for teachers to provide more instruction on how to choose words and study from notebooks, as well as the role notebooks play in vocabulary learning.

Conclusion

This study of student vocabulary notebooks contains a number of findings relevant for classroom teachers.

First, in students' minds all unknown words are created equal. It appears that many students up to the intermediate level seem to have difficulty selecting words on their own. Students below the high-intermediate level have difficulty determining the frequency or usefulness of words. Second, the overwhelming majority of words selected by students originates from their course textbooks and class handouts. Given the generally poor job textbooks perform in selecting and teaching vocabulary, teachers must ensure that their students are guided to learn words at the proper level. Third, there is a danger that students will over-represent certain parts of speech and neglect others. Fourth, teachers should realize students need training in the identification of appropriate collocations. Finally, a large percentage of example sentences written by students will contain serious errors.

This study shows that teachers need to spend more time guiding their students in the proper use of vocabulary notebooks. Notebooks have the potential to be a valuable tool for vocabulary learning but it seems that most students need more extensive and frequent training than they probably receive. Vocabulary learning is a massive task and vocabulary notebooks can be useful tools; however, to maximize their potential, students require more guidance in word selection and more explicit vocabulary instruction than most teachers realize.

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References

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