

【資料】

Evaluating the vocabulary level of Freshman English learners and the Freshman English Curriculum

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Introduction

Knowledge of vocabulary is integral in the acquisition of a second or foreign language. However, vocabulary knowledge is only one component of language skills such as listening and speaking. While it is not assumed that vocabulary knowledge is a prerequisite to the performance of language skills. Research has shown that vocabulary knowledge enables language use and language use enables the increase of vocabulary knowledge (Nation, 2001). While vocabulary knowledge is clearly important, research indicates that how much one actively uses the vocabulary may be the most important factor in successful language learning (Ellis, Tanaka & Yamazaki, 1994). As such, the rate and degree of language development may depend on how language learners participate in communicative tasks. Therefore, to better enable students to participate more in communicative tasks, students may benefit from a conscious and systematic approach to vocabulary through the use of flash cards, vocabulary reviews, the explicit teaching of vocabulary strategies and unit word lists. Such an approach is underscored by a vast body of research which has established that explicit teaching of vocabulary represents the most effective and efficient means of vocabulary teaching (Hinkel, 2006).

The Research Context

The Bunkyo English Communication Centre (BECC) aims to provide a learning environment that fosters the development of language proficiency and autonomy. Freshman English, a course for first year students, was developed in an effort to meet these objectives. The curriculum is structured into an Orientation Unit and four thematic units (Japan, Relationships, Travel and Music). All of these units are comprised of lessons that cover the four macro skills. The teaching methodology is primarily task-based focusing on communicative tasks which require students to communicate with each other in English, thereby developing learners' overall language ability. Much of the Freshman English curriculum was created on the philosophy that the classroom should be a social environment, in which students acquire language in ways that are interactive and meaningful. As Vygotsky (1978) notes, learning depends to a large extent on socially constituted collaboration between the learner and others. As such, collaboration either between learners or learners and their teacher is integral for development. In fact, Celce-Murcia (2002) suggests that it is not until, and unless, learners make active attempts at

comprehension and productive use of target forms, functions and lexical items that these become part of learners' growing internalized repertoires. Such active attempts on the part of learners are optimized when the context and imperatives of language use are authentic, that is, the target language is being used for genuine communication (Meskill and Anthony, 2007).

Aims and Objectives of the Research

As the Freshman English program is in its inaugural year, there has not been any research undertaken on the vocabulary level of Freshman English learners at Hiroshima Bunkyo Women's University or the vocabulary level of the accompanying Freshman English curriculum. As such, there is no knowledge about the current vocabulary level of Freshman English learners and how much vocabulary these learners need to know to comprehend the Freshman English curriculum. Anecdotal evidence suggests that vocabulary levels may be limiting student's willingness or ability to interact with the curriculum and participate in communicative tasks. To address this lack of evidence, this research project aims to assess students' vocabulary levels and the level of vocabulary contained in the Freshman English curriculum. This data will be used to identify wordlists which could be used to provide goals for instruction. Moreover, it will give an indication of the size of vocabulary that is needed to comprehend and interact with the curriculum. This data may also inform the pedagogy and the aims and future direction of the Freshman English curriculum.

Research Questions and Methods

Specifically, this study will attempt to answer the following questions:

1. What is the vocabulary size of Freshman English students at Hiroshima Women's Bunkyo University?
2. How much vocabulary do learners need to know to comprehend the Freshman English curriculum?

An analysis of the range and frequency of vocabulary in the freshman English curriculum was undertaken using Nation's 2005 range and frequency programs. Nation's range and frequency programs were selected because they have been widely validated in vocabulary literature. This program includes three base lists. The first base list includes the most frequent 1000 words of English, the 2nd base list includes the 2nd 1000 most frequent words, and the third base list includes words not in the first 2000 words, but which are frequent in upper secondary school and university. The sources of these lists are West's (1953) General Service List of English for the first 2000 words, and Coxhead's (1998, 2000) Academic Word List which contains 570 word families. All of these base lists include the base forms of words and derived forms.

Students' vocabulary levels were evaluated using an electronic version of Nation's (2001) vocabulary level test. 249 Freshman English students participated in the vocabulary

size research. The online, bilingual test consisted of 25 multiple choice questions. Questions 1-5 were concerned with administrative matters, questions 6-15 dealt with words from the 1000 base word list and questions 16-25 dealt with words from the 2000 base word list. Students were not tested on the 3000 word list.

Vocabulary Frequency

Although English makes use of a large number of words, not all of these words are equally useful. A small number of words occur very frequently in English; as such frequency is a practical means to measure the usefulness of vocabulary. The majority of frequent words in English are content words and knowing a sufficient amount of them allows learners a good degree of comprehension of a text. Table 1 shows what proportion of the entire Freshman English curriculum is covered by the most Nation's three base lists.

Table 1: Vocabulary range in the Freshman English Curriculum

Vocabulary size	Text coverage
1000	81.28%
2000	6.03%
3000	4.24%
Not in the lists	8.46%

The Freshman English curriculum is compromised of a diverse range of texts covering a wide range of topics. As such, only 91.55% of the Freshman English curriculum is covered by the 3000 most frequent words. However, looking at the Freshman English curriculum in its entirety presents a different picture to looking at the individual units within the curriculum (see tables 2-6). In the Japan Unit (see Table 2), for example, there is a wide range of texts that focus on Japanese culture, customs and attractions. As such, the number of high frequency words in that unit (77.65%) is notably less than other units. However, this does not indicate that the vocabulary in the unit is too demanding for the learners, rather it shows that Nations' base lists do not include words from a Japanese origin. In all the Freshman English units, except the Japan unit, the first 1000 most frequent words cover over 80% of the unit. It is assumed that high frequency words are known before lower frequency words and therefore knowing the first one thousand words gives near to 80% coverage of the Freshman English curriculum.

Table 2: Vocabulary range in the Japan Unit

Vocabulary size	Text coverage
1000	77.65%
2000	7.57%
3000	4.21%
Not in the lists	10.56%

Table 3: Vocabulary range in the Orientation Unit

Vocabulary size	Text coverage
1000	82.42%
2000	5.69%
3000	5.36%
Not in the lists	6.53%

Table 4: Vocabulary range in the Relationships Unit

Vocabulary size	Text coverage
1000	82.20%
2000	5.63%
3000	4.04%
Not in the lists	8.13%

Table 5: Vocabulary range in the Music Unit

Vocabulary size	Text coverage
1000	82.44%
2000	7.76%
3000	2.35%
Not in the lists	7.45%

Table 6: Vocabulary range in the Travel Unit

Vocabulary size	Text coverage
1000	80.82%
2000	6.16%
3000	4.26%
Not in the lists	8.76%

What is the level of Freshman English learners' vocabulary?

The results of the vocabulary levels test are summarized in Table 7. The results highlight that students were able to identify 64.3% of the words found in the first 1000 word base list. This means that nearly two words in every 5 words are unknown to students. Moreover, students were only able to identify 35% of the words from the 2000 word base list. This means that students do not know 3 of every 5 words that they encounter. Research by Liu Na and Nation (1985) and Laufer (1989) indicates that 80% coverage is not sufficient to allow reasonable comprehension of a text. They indicate that at least 95% coverage is needed. Freshman English students therefore clearly lack sufficient vocabulary knowledge to successfully comprehend the Freshman English curriculum.

Table 7: Vocabulary Level of Freshman English Students

Vocabulary size	Results
1000	64.3%
2000	35%

Conclusion and Implications

An immediate priority for the Freshman English curriculum is to ensure that learners know the 3,000 high frequency words of English. This may not be achievable in Freshman English and this aim may have to be extended to the Sophomore English program and even beyond. Knowledge of these words however, should be a priority for teachers and learners. In order to enhance students word knowledge and exposure to the most frequent and useful words, the results from this research suggest that there needs to be more class time spent on developing vocabulary learning strategies such as guessing from context, using word parts and mnemonic techniques, and using vocabulary cards and word lists.

The Freshman English curriculum needs to develop word lists based on frequency and the use of word cards. Learning from lists or word cards is only an initial stage of learning a particular word (Schmitt and Schmitt, 1995) and it is not assumed that this means that all knowledge of a word has been learned or that the word will always be known. Extra exposure to the words on these lists through reading, listening and speaking is also required. The Freshman English curriculum provides learners with a range of incidental learning opportunities, including problem solving group work tasks and formal classroom tasks where vocabulary is not the main focus, however in these situations learners are given the opportunity to have extra exposure to the vocabulary.

The suggestion that learners should directly learn vocabulary from cards and word lists, to a large degree out of context, may be criticized as being incongruent with a communicative approach to language learning. However, in the past two decades, a vast body of research has established that explicit teaching of vocabulary represents the most effective and efficient means of vocabulary teaching (Hinkel, 2006). Moreover researchers have also voiced caution that incidental learning leads to significantly lower rates of vocabulary retention and that a word needs to be encountered 12-20 times to be learned from context (Coady, 1997). According to Nation (2005) and Hulstijn (2001), research has not supported the contention that meaning-focused use and encounters with new words in context are the best way to learn vocabulary. This should not be seen as an argument that learning from context is not worthwhile. It is an important vocabulary learning strategy and an essential part of any vocabulary learning program. However, deliberate attention to de-contextualized words is far more likely to lead to learning, although new vocabulary should be reinforced in the context of other L2 skills.

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—平成21年10月29日 受理—