

【原著】

# The Effects of Daily Practice Regimes on Vocabulary and Synonym Acquisition and Retention

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語彙と同義語の取得と保持に対する日常の練習方法の効果

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## Abstract

The foundation for this paper is receptive knowledge of synonyms. The concept for this small step toward improving vocabulary instruction is that English vocabulary range could be expanded through first teaching students strategies to use synonyms in solving reading comprehension questions. Students will then be better able to understand more texts with their expanded receptive vocabulary knowledge. Naturally, receptive knowledge is only one aspect of knowing a word. Therefore, this is not seen as the final goal. But if we cannot understand the small steps, we will not be able to supply our students a foundation from which to leap toward understanding. This study is an even smaller aspect of the receptive knowledge stage—testing a Daily Practice Regime of sentence unscrambling in relation to blank filling to see which leads to better acquisition and retention for low- mid- proficiency students. The results show that strongly engaging in either method is better than no or minimum engagement. And in the final analysis, this groups of students seemed to be better able to acquire and retain receptive knowledge of synonyms through sentence unscrambling. However, the results of vocabulary retention are more ambiguous because of two possible methods of measure. Nevertheless, the blank-filling activities led to an overall higher score for this group of students. Better methods examining differences in student's ability to learn and use synonyms need to be formulated. However, this may be a small light to aid researchers in finding a foundation for staged learning that introduces more difficult elements of vocabulary knowledge as learners become more proficient.

## Introduction

The literature for synonyms in vocabulary teaching are sparse. This is a missed opportunity considering the answers to reading comprehension test questions are often based on knowing synonyms or related words. From this starting point, I began my research on vocabulary retention. Most vocabulary researchers will be aware that there is lack of agreement of what constitutes vocabulary learning. As Schmitt and McCarthy point out in their editors' comments "There is no generally accepted theory of vocabulary acquisition, no standard vocabulary test

against which to validate other newer tests, and no consensus on the best way to integrate vocabulary into the syllabus” (2009, p. 104). I inferred this to indicate a call to simplify and narrow the focus of vocabulary research. Proper implementation, which would require repetition of imitable research, may make it possible to better define parameters of the vocabulary knowledge. Researchers should be able to make incremental improvements on each other’s research. This may lead to epiphanies toward better vocabulary teaching.

We need to start by defining vocabulary knowledge. In the 1988 Annual Meeting of the International Association of Teachers of English as a Foreign Language, Laufer makes a statement that “The knowledge of a word was taken to be the knowledge of its form, structure, syntactic behavior, meaning (referential, affective, pragmatic), and its relation to other words” (p. 7). Naturally, for full comprehension of a word, a myriad of understandings is necessary. However, this seemed a stark dichotomy of known and unknown words. It is too high an expectation for a student’s early encounters with a language. Naturally, I would not be the only one to recognize this, and in 2013, Laufer joined a group of editors to publish *L2 Vocabulary Acquisition, Knowledge and Use: New Perspectives on Assessment and Corpus Analysis*, which refined the concept. Now there is a large cohort of researchers in vocabulary knowledge. This is a double-edged sword as there are now more voices to debate the range of “knowledge” as well as the order in which learners can be expected to master vocabulary aspects. Perhaps, the first step before researching is deciding on the goal for which the vocabulary will be used based on the idea from Skills Acquisition Theory that states, “what you can do with acquired knowledge will be determined by the way in which you acquired that knowledge and how you have practised deploying it” (Boers, 2021, p. 118).

Researchers cannot create valid studies of vocabulary knowledge that test all possible aspects of knowing a word. We should focus on a narrow difference that can be tested. This could lead to creating a scheme for vocabulary knowledge in which learners are taught vocabulary elements in stages. That scheme is beyond the scope of this paper. But it may help shine a bit of light toward finding such a scheme. In this paper, I decided to make the focus of a reading strategies class on one specific lexical relation—synonyms. This may appear to be in opposition to the recent trend of corpus-based teaching because there are no expectations of student learning semantic nuance. However, this is not in opposition, it is simply an earlier stage. I believe that learning details such as the collocation of a word is a necessary end goal, but students cannot be expected to grasp that understanding early in their learning process. To reiterate, this does not mean it should not be taught. It means that it should be delayed until students have reached a degree of mastery that would allow them to better learn collocation. An exploration of what constitutes the levels of mastery is also beyond the scope of this paper. I posit that in the early stages, English vocabulary range could be expanded through teaching students strategies to use synonyms to solve reading comprehension questions. Students will then be better able to understand more texts with their expanded receptive vocabulary knowledge. Productive knowledge will be a later stage of their language education. In a study, Hasan and Shabdin found that there “was significant, positive correlation... between academic reading comprehension and paradigmatic (synonymous words) relation,” and they posit “that students who had more paradigmatic (synonyms) relation knowledge performed better in academic reading comprehension than those who had syntagmatic relation (collocations)” (2017, p. 99). Although understanding both paradigmatic and syntagmatic

relations would be an ideal long-term goal, for most low-proficiency learners, it may be better to start with paradigmatic relations.

### Synonym Research

Using synonyms to increase vocabulary is often used in instruction with native speakers of a language. (Bear, et al., 2004, Nilsen & Nilsen, 1978, Mountain, 2008, Otten, 2003, et al.) This usually involves games that require an extended understanding of synonyms that is beyond the range of non-native speakers. Or native speakers are given a thesaurus and allowed to pick up any synonym therein. This is like the use of Google Translate taught in this class, explained in the Methods section. However, the difference is that the outputs in this class were limited only to the words on the vocabulary lists supplied. Additionally, synonym games were used in the earlier iterations of this class with less than favorable results. Thus, word games for native speakers, or activities similar to said games, were abandoned, but may be revisited in the future if research reveals more suitable activities.

Several researchers are exploring additional methodologies of teaching students to discover synonyms. Other language researchers also make use of synonyms. Gala, et al., created “a graded lexicon for French synonyms where words account for a level of complexity calculated from frequency counts, intralexical and psycholinguistic features” (2015, p. 208). This is an ambitious project, and such an English lexicon would be useful, but it is too ambitious a goal at this stage of this research. If such a lexicon is found, it may be used to replace the Google Translate option, which does not factor in complexity. With better tools for finding synonyms, students may become better autonomous learners.

The idea of expanding vocabulary through synonyms early in the learning process is shared by several researchers. (Alharbi, 2015, Chen & Yeh, 2017, Smith, et al., 2016, Webb, 2007) Some researchers, however, speculate synonyms should be introduced to advanced learners because they “need more specific definitions in order to differentiate between near synonyms” (Zarei & Golami, 2007, p. 75). Yang also takes the stance of the necessity “of collocation and colligation, and their relevance to the study of synonyms” (2015, p. 209). Similarly, Liu points out that “without collocational information of the synonyms they were using, students frequently produce unidiomatic collocations” (2000, p. 482). However, their research goes well beyond only receptive knowledge, which would precede later stages of productive knowledge in vocabulary learning. Therefore, again, I recommend establishing staged vocabulary goals. High-proficiency learners can have higher goals of synonym differentiation and proper collocations, but low-proficiency learners can still benefit from learning synonyms in that it can expand their vocabulary. Other researchers take umbrage at resources that lack explanations of synonym nuance such as Maddalena who laments when a vocabulary list contains pairs of synonyms but does not “explain the sense in which one word may be different from another” (2001, p. 4). However, his conclusion also leans toward a stages approach to vocabulary knowledge. His viewpoint changed and he found “there is a need here for a combination of approaches introduced in carefully organized steps and guided at all stages by the teacher” (p. 9).

Although it may be controversial, for this paper, the focus is on determining if a different Daily Practice Regime can increase receptive knowledge of synonyms for low- middle- proficiency

learners. This means that the learners were only required to learn vocabulary-word/synonyms sets with no focus on differences in usage or nuance. Comprehension questions on reading tests do not draw attention to the differences, because knowing synonyms is ample for finding correct answers. This is true not only in this research, but in reading comprehension tests across the board. Accordingly, in the class in which this research was conducted, time was spent teaching students to explain why their answer is correct based on words in the text and their synonyms in the questions and answers. This focused their attention to the synonyms in the hope of expanding the students' vocabulary.

### Student Subjects

There were 33 students in this cohort eligible to take part in the research. All agreed to allow for their data to be shared for this research. The entire cohort was streamed into two classes based on GPA and TOEIC score (19 students and 14 students). All students were given the same instruction and materials. The vocabulary instruction began with teaching how to search for synonyms on Google Translate to match vocabulary words and synonyms on the words list supplied and progressed through to how to use synonyms to find answers in reading comprehension questions. They were instructed to study the vocabulary-word/synonym sets and both streamed classes had the same exposure to the text flooded with instances of the vocabulary-word/synonym sets. Since all students used the same text and had the same instruction it is not possible to research how the text-flooding or other aspects related to vocabulary or synonyms affected retention. Additionally, teaching the lower stream or higher stream in a different way or with different materials would not give a true representation of the effects of said difference. Therefore, a different research question had to be formulated. Research on flooding and other text enhancement methods, for those interested, is covered well in Part II: Improving the Chances of Incidental Acquisition in Evaluating Second Language Vocabulary and Grammar Instruction by Boers.

### Research Questions

The research questions were loosely informed by the ranking of “relative effectiveness (for vocabulary retention)” by Boers which used the “following ascending order: reading a glossed text for comprehension < blank filling < sentence writing < composition writing” (2021, p. 129). It was hypothesized that filling in blanks would be more effective in promoting vocabulary acquisition and retention than an activity requiring students to unscramble a sentence containing the same word.

RQ 1: Blank-filling activities will improve student vocabulary acquisition over sentence-unscrambling activities.

RQ 2: Blank-filling activities will improve student vocabulary retention over sentence-unscrambling activities.

Data for all 33 students was collected regarding participation in either of the blank-filling or

sentence-unscrambling activities as well as test data in a pre-test and three post-tests (short-term (three-week period), mid-term (end of term test) and long-term (nine-weeks after term end)) to track vocabulary acquisition and retention. The period of time for the mid-term post-test is vague. Since it took place at the end of the term, the words from Chapter One had been studied 12 weeks prior and the ones from Chapter Four were only completed the week before. Therefore, the long-term post-test taking place nine weeks after the final class is a better indication of retention.

## Method

### Study Background

Over one semester, students cover four chapters of a reading text. Each chapter takes approximately three weeks. At the start of the three-week period students are given a vocabulary list with 15 words to study. Each word has a sample sentence, and the students are required to select the L1 (Japanese) meaning and two additional L2 (English) synonyms of the word from word banks. As mentioned in the introduction, the synonyms are sourced from Google Translate and students are shown how to use Google Translate to find synonyms at the beginning of the semester. The other study material for studying vocabulary words are Quizlet sets, which require students to match synonyms. The Quizlet sets remain open for the entire semester. It is made clear that some words are repeated in future chapters, so students should continue to study the words even after a chapter is completed.

To check student vocabulary acquisition and retention, a pre- post-test was used. Due to factors of time, the Pre- Post-test only contained 30 words: 15 chosen at random from the reading text and 15 chosen at random from TOEIC test materials. The pre- post-test reaches an acceptable internal consistency with a Cronbach's alpha of 0.70. Therefore, it is a reliable test.

To prevent interference caused by additional unknown words or the students being able to deduce the meaning from context, each question is multiple-choice and uses the same format with four answer choices.

Which word is synonym of WORD? · L1 of the word : 1 correct answer & 3 distractors

Each chapter of the reading text is 11 pages long. Each page has one content question. Students are taught how to use synonyms to find the answers to these questions. This is an example of a question from the text:

Neal sat next to Nan at dinner. They talked about the dolls at the Otamura's house. "The Japanese can certainly make dolls that are very realistic," said Neal. "There was a doll so realistic that it ran out of a house when the house caught fire. You must read the story about that doll. In the story, a Japanese girl loves her doll so much that it comes to life."

"That is a charming story," said Nan. "We enjoyed seeing them this afternoon. Indeed, they really were lifelike, but we did not have time to look closely at them all. Maybe one of them was really alive?"

"Maybe." said Neal.

What do Neal and Nan think is convincing?

- A) They simply think the Japanese girl loves her doll.
- B) They simply think the story of the doll is proper.
- C) They definitely think that dolls are realistic.
- D) They definitely think that one of the dolls is alive.

This text/question included the following vocabulary-word/synonym sets from previous chapters:

certainly (definitely · indeed), simply (just · only), proper (suitable · acceptable), charming (pleasant · delightful),

It also included following vocabulary-word/synonym set from the current chapter:

realistic (convincing · lifelike),

By this point in the class, students had to explain all the synonym connections, a process they learned by example from the instructor in the previous chapters. The following is an example of the expected answer:

The answer is C: They definitely think that the dolls are realistic. The proof is on lines 5 to 6: it says, "Indeed, they really were lifelike..." Lifelike is a synonym of convincing and realistic. Also, indeed is a synonym of definitely.

Also, as an aside, the students are taught to follow the pronouns back to the original noun. Therefore, students also would point out that "they" goes back to "them" and all the way back to the first line with "...the dolls at the Otamura's house."

Often, two students had a different answer and would debate their answers to ascertain who had the correct answer. This prompted students to think about other synonyms. When this did not occur, the instructor asked questions about the other synonyms from the incorrect answer to prompted them to consider the other synonyms included in the text.

### Words Researched

Over the 15-week class student cover 60 vocabulary-word/synonym sets. However, as mentioned above, due to time constraints only one-fourth of the 60 vocabulary-word/synonym sets studied by the students were tracked in this research. (15 words) Table. 1.1 is a list of the 15 vocabulary-word/synonym sets used on the pre- post-test and the number of times those words appear in text and in the questions at the end of each page.

**Table 1.1** Vocabulary Occurrence

Chapter	word (two synonyms)	text occurrence	question occurrence	total occurrences
1	attempt (try · aim)	14	15	29
	joke (prank · trick)	6	3	9
	uneasy (anxious · worried)	9	6	15
	prevent (forbid · stop)	8	6	14
2	unpleasant (ugly · horrible)	4	3	7
	suppose (assume · expect)	12	7	19
	pretend (act · play at)	2	6	8
	elegant (graceful · refined)	5	2	7
3	reserved (restrained · distant)	1	2	3
	proper (accept · suitable)	2	2	4
	adore (fond · like)	6	3	9
4	adequate (enough · plenty)	3	1	4
	remain (continue · last)	4	2	6
	realistic (convincing · lifelike)	4	2	6
	appetite (hunger · desire)	2	2	4

### Study Content

This study was designed to research if student acquisition and retention of the vocabulary (synonyms) could be improved with Daily Practice Regimes of a one vocabulary-word/synonym set from the vocabulary list. Students were instructed to complete a six-question Kahoot activity every day for a period of 60 days. For the last question of the six, two different styles of questions were assigned to two different groups of students to research if one style was more efficient at fostering vocabulary acquisition/retention.

The first two questions were formatted like the questions on the pre- and post-tests. Thus, students were required to select the correct synonym for the vocabulary word from four choices. The next three questions tested spelling by using, fill-in-the-blank style questions of an example sentence. Students were given four possible answers for each question. The choices on each of the questions were the vocabulary word and each of the other two synonyms with the three other choices being misspelled versions of those words. As much as possible common Japanese spelling mistakes were taken into consideration. On the last question, one group of students (Practice Synonyms (PS) group) had to unscramble a sentence that contained either the vocabulary word

or one of its synonyms. The other group (Synonym Practice (SP) group) had to type the correct spelling for the vocabulary word or one of the synonyms in a copy of one of the fill-in-the-blank questions copied directly from questions three to five. In many cases, the collocation of the vocabulary word and the two synonyms was the same, so student were free to type in any of the three words from the vocabulary-word/synonym set. Naturally, there were cases in which the sentences containing the synonyms had to be changed to match the different collocation for that synonym. If one of these sentences was used in the last question, students had to remember which word corresponded with which collocation. As mentioned in the introduction, since reading is reliant on receptive knowledge, no time was spent focusing on the collocation differences. However, correct collocations were used.

## Results

### General Improvement

The first thing evident in the data is that all students had improved short-term retention on the 15 vocabulary-word/synonym sets tracked in this study. On the pre-test, students identified the correct synonym 34% on average. On the chapter test given at the end of three weeks, this increased to 75%. Naturally, this comes as no surprise as these were words that the students were instructed to study, and they were also covering these words in class during the three-week period. Student retention of these words is reduced in the mid-term, as evident by the end-of-semester-post-test which was an exact copy of the pre-test. For those same 15 words, on average the students only retained 67%. On the long-term post-test they only retained 56%.

For the other 15 words on the pre- post-test, not covered in class, the percentage of students' correct answers started higher: at 46%. But the improvement was minimal: at 51%. This only a 12% improvement. Again, this is only naturally since students were being exposed to the first set of 15 vocabulary-word/synonym sets through various means throughout the semester. The other sticking point is that 67% and 56% are not laudatory scores considering the repeated exposure to those words.

### Daily Practice Regimes (DPR) Improvement

At the start of the study, for the Daily Practice Regimes, the students were assigned to either the SP Group or the PS Group randomly and they were evenly distributed between the two class streams. Accordingly, students from across the spectrum of proficiency were included in both groups. The DPR activities were not mandatory, nor were they incorporated as part of the students' grades. Students were encouraged to do the activities in so far as they would help them to pass the chapter tests. Based on participation on the Kahoot activities containing the 15 vocabulary-word/synonym sets used in the research, the students formed four groups: 1) Students who attempted none of the Kahoot activities (5 students); 2) Students who attempted the activities between 2 and 10 times (<80%) (12 students); 3) Students in the PS group who attempted the Kahoot activities 12 to 15 times (>80%) (9 students); 4) students in the SP group who attempted the Kahoot activities 12 to 15 times (>80%) (7 students). Advantageously, the students in the PS and SP groups remained evenly distributed between the two class streams with the majority of

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the engaged students in the higher streamed class. In table 1.2, the students are divided into group according to their degree of participation in the Daily Practice Regimes.

**Table 1.2** Test Results by Group

Group #	Group 1	p	Group 2	p	Group 3	p	Group 4	p
Student count	5 students		12 students		9 students PS Group		7 students SP Group	
DPR attempts	0		< 80%		> 80%		> 80%	
pre-test	37%		33%		26%		43%	
Chapter	60%	P = 0.02	67%	P = 0.00	84%	P = 0.00	89%	P = 0.00
Mid-post	57%	P = 0.03	61%	P = 0.00	70%	P = 0.00	80%	P = 0.00
Long-post	50%	P = 0.03	64%	P = 0.00	73%	P = 0.00	70%	P = 0.00

An initial observation can be made based on participation in the DPR. There is a grouping of 17 students in Groups 1 and 2 who had no or minimum engagement (< 80%) in the Daily Practice Regimes; and 15 students in Groups 3 and 4 who had heavy engagement (> 80%). Thus, it was possible to ascertain if heavy engagement was more beneficial than no or minimum engagement. This reveals that students who engage in Daily Practice Regimes show greater acquisition and retention than students who do not. There are two sticking points regarding this data, which prevent it from being a research question: 1) naturally the act of studying a word will result in improved acquisition and retention. 2) it is impossible to understand why some students were motivated to do the Kahoot activities while others were not. Thus, it follows that students with strong intrinsic motivation will be motivated to study more. I followed up with a short survey see if there was a difference in the students' perceived ability and motivation. Naturally, the self-reported nature of these findings should be taken with a grain of salt. However, it will come as no surprise that only 43% of the minimal or non-engaged students self-reported as being competent students whereas 73% of the engaged students felt competent. Accordingly, the engaged students identified the Kahoot activities as one more opportunity to study. Therefore, it is highly probable that the improved results on the chapter and post-tests reflected in Table 1.2 are based more on intrinsic motivation than engagement in the activities. In additional, unfortunately, there is a sharp decrease in long-term retention for all the students. However, the scores of the highly engaged students were still an average of 15 points higher than those of the minimal or non-engaged students. This is a positive sign, yet there are too many variables to ascertain the cause of acquisition and retention. Additionally, the students were asked if they studied the vocabulary words over the summer break. The results were that 44% of the minimal or non-engaged students self-reported studying and 66% of the engaged students did so. However, the figures do not appear to be statistically significant, so it is difficult to quantify the influence on the long-term post-test results.

### Daily Practice Regimes Improvement Refined

The results of the research questions are isolated to heavily engaged students. Since the students were placed in the groups randomly, and their degree of engagement was self-determined, the differences in Group 3 and Group 4 results should indicate if one style of Daily Practice Regime

is more effective than the other for vocabulary acquisition and retention. The randomness of the groups resulted in the initial pre-test scores being 17 percentage points higher in the SP group. This was completely arbitrary. Still, this large gap no doubt influences the outcome. Future iterations of this study should be conducted to determine if similar results can be replicated.

Nevertheless, the following claims, for this population of students, can be made:

1) in the long-term, unscrambling-sentence activities increase vocabulary acquisition and retention more than blank-filling activities. (Table 1.3)

**Table 1.3** Percent Increase in Compared to Pretest

	Group 3 PS Group	percent increase from pre-test	Group 4 SP Group	percent increase from pre-test
pre-test	26%		43%	
Chapter	84%	223%	89%	107%
Mid-post	70%	169%	80%	86%
Long-post	73%	182%	70%	61%

However, the idea of retention can also be looked at from the opposite side: How much loss occurs between the short-term, and mid-term, and long-term post-tests. If students truly learned the vocabulary, they would experience less of a loss between each retake of the test. On the short-term post-test, blank-filling activities are better for retention. However, this retention is not maintained on the long-term post-test.

Therefore, for this population of students, the following claim can be made:

3) in the long-term, unscrambling-sentence activities have a stronger positive influence on preventing vocabulary retention reduction than blank-filling activities. (Table 1.4)

**Table 1.4** Percent Decrease between Long- and Mid-terms from Short-term

	Group 3 PS Group	retention reduction from chapter test	Group 4 SP Group	retention reduction from chapter test
pre-test	26%		43%	
Chapter	84%		89%	
Mid-post	70%	17%	80%	10%
Long-post	73%	13%	70%	21%

Both results are opposite to what I had expected. Sentence unscrambling was more effective in improving vocabulary acquisition and retention. However, if not based on comparisons to the pre-test, the students in both groups remember approximately 70% of the 15 words researched.

## Conclusion

Focusing solely on receptive knowledge when first learning synonyms may be a valid stage in vocabulary knowledge. Research possibilities were limited by the streaming of students into two

levels. Thus, the research focused on testing the difference in acquisition and retention produced by two different vocabulary drills. Since this is the first, to my knowledge, testing of sentence unscrambling in relation to blank filling, I am cautious to state that it categorically leads to better outcomes. I can only paraphrase Boers in that the apparent improved vocabulary acquisition and retention achieved by sentence unscrambling may only be interpreted as such in this study with this group of students. (Boers, 2021, p. 197). The receptive knowledge of vocabulary is not the end goal, but unless we find ways to delineate stages toward a well-defined goal of word knowledge (i.e. meaning, form, structure collocation, colligation and all other relations of a word) we may not adequately understand the depth or breadth of the foundations of vocabulary knowledge.

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