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Teaching the Academic Word List in Foreign Language Speaking Classes

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Abstract

This project describes the addition of a vocabulary-learning component to a mandatory English discussion course offered at a private university in Japan. The proposed course centrally focuses on improving learners' knowledge and use of vocabulary and formulaic speech to engage critically in English academic discussions. Following Nation's (2007) four strands, form-focused vocabulary teaching is one of several components of the course, balanced by opportunities for learners to develop their speaking fluency and to make independent, productive use of their vocabulary knowledge. While this paper describes a course designed specifically for intermediate university students in Japan, and focuses upon teaching the academic word list (Coxhead, 2000), the approach described here can be adapted for a variety of teaching contexts, to meet the specific vocabulary learning needs of distinct groups of learners.

Introduction

Japanese language learners often list their lack of English vocabulary knowledge as one of their primary weaknesses, and an aspect of language study they find especially challenging. Coupled with the type of English education generally offered at most Japanese high schools－which continue to focus predominantly upon the acquisition of receptive language knowledge, with few opportunities for L2 output and genuine English communication (Kikuchi &

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Browne, 2009; Nishino & Watanabe, 2008; Steel & Zhang, 2016) – productive use of receptive vocabulary knowledge is especially challenging for Japanese students of English, the gap between knowledge and output often particularly pronounced. Universities in Japan often attempt to address the shortcomings of the high school English education system by focusing more upon the types of skills students might require in future endeavors, where spoken and written communication are typically more important (Glasgow & Paller, 2016). However, while significant and substantial vocabulary learning does take place in Japanese high schools, the extent to which learners have acquired aspects of vocabulary knowledge beyond form and elementary meaning, and are taught vocabulary in order of frequency and with reference to their needs, is debatable, and may account for students' lack of confidence in their English vocabulary knowledge.

This proposed course seeks to address such issues related to Japanese learners' vocabulary knowledge and promote the productive acquisition of relevant L2 vocabulary within a communicative language teaching framework. Specifically, this project revises an existing course by adding a vocabulary-learning component, to facilitate students' ability to effectively participate in formal, academic discussions. The academic word list (AWL) was chosen as a target of instruction given its relevance to academic discussions and its frequency in academic texts (Coxhead, 2000). However, while vocabulary teaching is an aspect of this course, it remains so in pursuit of the course's primarily aim, namely, the goal of improving learners' academic speaking and listening skills, and their ability to effectively participate and critically discuss ideas in an academic context. Put another way, improving learner vocabulary knowledge is not an end in itself, but a means of assisting learners in developing their speaking, listening, and academic discussion skills. The design of this proposed course follows the principles outlined by Nation (2000a), beginning with an analysis of the teaching context and an overview of the course's goals, upon which lesson structure and assessment instruments are based.

Teaching Context

The discussion course is a year-long mandatory course that all freshmen students are required to complete, offered at a university in Japan. Students at this university also take other English language courses focused upon grammar, writing, and presentation skills. Although vocabulary is occasionally addressed in these courses (e.g. discourse markers, common lexical bundles) vocabulary learning is not a central focus.

The English discussion course complements the other three courses by providing learners with opportunities to communicate in English and develop their

speaking fluency. As an academic English discussion course, improvement of general English conversation skills is not its central aim. Rather, the course focuses specifically on discussing ideas in an academic context, in articulating ideas in depth, and in producing utterances of greater length and complexity. Utilizing a functional syllabus, learners are taught various function phrases (e.g. *In my opinion. . . , From the victim's viewpoint. . . . , Why do you think so?*) within several functional categories (e.g. *reasons, possibilities, examples*) and communication strategies (e.g. *paraphrasing, circumlocution, backchanneling*) to improve their ability to speak at length in small-group academic discussions. Classes are held weekly, 14 times per semester, and are 90 minutes in length. Attendance is typically high, and most students complete the required homework readings. The course currently contains no vocabulary-learning component.

Class sizes are small and typically most classes contain between seven to nine students. Approximately 60% of students are female, and 40% are male. All students will have completed six years of English language courses in high school, generally focused upon developing receptive grammar and vocabulary knowledge. Typically, students' L1 is Japanese and most are between the ages of 18 and 20. Students are assigned to one of four levels of the course, based on their performance on the TOEIC test. Students come from a variety of different majors, though most study humanities or social sciences.

Instructors teaching English discussion courses generally have several years of teaching experience, and most hold graduate degrees in applied linguistics. All instructors are fluent in English, and instructors are encouraged to avoid using learners' L1 in lessons. The equipment available in classrooms varies, with some only containing a minimal amount, i.e., desks, chairs, markers, and whiteboards.

Goals and Objectives of the Course

The program proposed in this paper seeks to address a gap in the university's existing English language curriculum. Students have consistently listed the absence of vocabulary teaching as a central weakness in the curriculum, and voiced frustration at their lack of academic vocabulary knowledge. As adding an additional course to the mandatory English curriculum centered upon vocabulary learning seems impractical given students' heavy workloads, adding a vocabulary component to the English discussion course appears the most practical means of addressing the issue, and of ensuring that students are given opportunities to make productive use of acquired vocabulary knowledge. Academic vocabulary was specifically targeted for instruction to conform to the aims of the present course, i.e., the development of academic discussion skills, and to address the needs of the substantial number of

students who plan to study abroad, or pursue graduate studies, where the ability to understand and produce English scholarly texts may be necessary.

This proposed program is specifically designed for intermediate learners who constitute approximately one-third of the freshmen students enrolled in English discussion courses. To ensure that the specific vocabulary needs of learners are effectively addressed, all intermediate students will first be administered Parts 1, 2 and 6 of the New Vocabulary Levels Test (NVLT) prior to the start of the course, which assesses knowledge of the most frequent 1,000 word families, the 1,001-2,000 most frequent word families, and the AWL, respectively (McLean & Kramer, 2015). The NVLT was chosen in response to criticisms of the old Vocabulary Levels Test that McLean and Kramer outline and address－that it does not test knowledge of the 1,000 most frequent word families, is based upon an unrepresentative corpus, and utilizes a problematic item format. Only learners who demonstrate command of the first 2,000 word families－by scoring above 27 out of 30 on Parts 1 and 2 of the test－but not of the AWL－scoring less than 27 out of 30 on Part 6－will be enrolled in this proposed course. This is to ensure that learners' present vocabulary knowledge is suitable for teaching of the AWL.

Nation (2013) states that several weeks of intensive study, inside and outside the classroom, are needed for acquisition of the entire 570-word AWL. As the short duration of the course makes teaching the full AWL impossible, only Sublist 1 of the AWL is targeted for instruction in the Spring semester, which provides for 3.6% coverage of academic texts, and Sublist 2 in the Fall semester, which provides for an additional 1.8% coverage (Coxhead, 2000). Although the AWL is composed of word families, as this course seeks to develop productive as well as receptive vocabulary knowledge, lemmas are the focus of instruction (Nation, 2013). Given the differences in meaning between headwords and their derivatives in the AWL (e.g., *establishment, periodical*) this will ensure the vocabulary-learning component of the discussion course is not unrealistically ambitious and learners are given adequate opportunities to effectively acquire and make use of newly taught vocabulary (Chung & Nation, 2003). Multiword expressions will not be a focus of this program, although common collocations based on language concordances will be utilized, to introduce words in context and to avoid the negative transfer of L1 collocates (Yamashita & Jiang, 2010). To avoid interference (see Nation, 2000b), vocabulary items will not be introduced in lexical sets.

Course and Lesson Structure

The 14-lesson discussion course is divided into ten regular lessons, three review/test lessons (Lessons 5, 9, and 13) and a final, wrap-up/review lesson. Six

words (lemmas) from Sublist 1 or 2 of the AWL are introduced in each regular lesson (see Appendix A). No new vocabulary will be introduced during review/test or final lessons. To effectively assess learners' receptive and productive vocabulary knowledge, a variety of assessment instruments are utilized in this course (Fulcher & Davidson, 2007). Course grades are based upon the following: discussion tests (35%), regular class performance (20%), quizzes (10%), the final exam (10%), homework assignments (10%), and participation (15%).

Regular Lessons

Table 1 shows a sample lesson plan for a regular lesson. Excluding Lesson 1, all regular lessons begin with a five-minute quiz. Quizzes include six multiple-choice questions, testing comprehension of the homework reading (to ensure learners complete the readings and are able to generate content to effectively participate in discussions), four multiple-choice questions testing vocabulary knowledge (following the structure of NVLT items) and two written productive items in which students write a meaningful sentence using a specific AWL item (see Appendix B). Five of the vocabulary items on the quiz assess knowledge of content introduced in the previous regular lesson; one item tests knowledge of vocabulary introduced in any of the previous lessons, to prompt learners to study and recall all

Table 1 *Sample Lesson Plan*

Section	Description	Time
Quiz	The quiz contains 12 items: six questions assessing comprehension of the homework reading, four multiple-choice vocabulary questions, and two sentence writing items	5 min.
Fluency Activity	Students will conduct a shortened version of Maurice's (1983) fluency activity (2 min.−1.5 min.−1 min.), as both listeners and speakers, based on two question prompts (e.g. *Do most people in Japan have good manners? Is there, in general, a difference between the manners of younger and older people?*)	11 min.
Vocabulary Presentation	Six vocabulary items from the AWL will be introduced to learners, verbally drilled, and explained using examples based on concordances	5 min.
Vocabulary-Focused Activities	Learners will complete matching and fill-in-the-blank activities to foster receptive knowledge of the new vocabulary items	10 min.
Function Phrase Presentation	Learners will be presented with the lesson's target formulaic function phrases (e.g., Examples -*For example. . . , For instance. . . , Can you give me an example [of...]? Such as?*)	5 min.
Function Phrase Practice	Learners will practice using the function phrases by discussing three questions with a partner (e.g. *Is it okay to walk while using your smartphone? Do people exhibit good manners on the train? Is it okay to sleep at cafes/restaurants?*).	10 min.
Discussion 1 Preparation	Learners will be given two cards with target vocabulary language that they must try to use while participating in a discussion preparation activity	4 min.
Discussion 1	In groups of three or four, learners will participate in an extended discussion addressing a specific topic (e.g. *What should the punishment be for behaving badly on the train? Should the government pass new laws regarding behavior on the train?*). Students are permitted to refer to instructional materials containing the new vocabulary items and function phrases during this discussion	8 min.

Feedback	Learners will receive feedback on their use of function phrases and vocabulary use in Discussion 1. They will also complete a self-assessment task	4 min.
Discussion 2 Preparation	Learners will be given two new word cards that they must try to use while participating in a discussion preparation activity	4 min.
Discussion 2	In groups of three or four, learners will participate in an extended discussion addressing a specific topic (e.g., *What news rules regarding public behavior are best to introduce to Japan? Does Japan need more laws regarding behavior in public places or more severe punishments?*) They will not be permitted to refer to instructional materials containing the new vocabulary items and function phrases during this discussion.	12 min.
Feedback	Learners will receive feedback on their use of function phrases and vocabulary in Discussion 2.	4 min.
Vocabulary Strategy Training	Learners will be taught, and given the chance to practice, a vocabulary-learning strategy. For example, in practicing the keyword method, an example provided to students could be that *evidence* sounds somewhat similar to *ebi-don,* so students could imagine a police officer looking at a bowl of shrimp and rice. Students will practice using the strategy to acquire new vocabulary items with a partner.	8 min.

vocabulary introduced throughout the course.

Learners next complete a condensed version of Maurice's (1983) 4-3-2 speaking fluency activity. The time lengths used in Maurice's original activity will be halved, to adapt to the limited amount of available class time. In this activity, learners are divided into speakers and listeners. Relying on question prompts based upon the homework reading and lesson topic, speakers must continue speaking for 2 minutes without stopping, as best as they are capable of doing. They then change partners and repeat the same content for 1.5 minutes. Last, speakers move on to a third and final partner and once more repeat the same content for 1 minute. As the central aim of this activity is to develop students' speaking fluency, learners are welcome to use any vocabulary they wish to communicate with interlocutors. Beyond actively listening, students participating as listeners are encouraged to use rejoinders while their interlocutors speak. Upon completion of the three rounds of this activity, students switch speaker and listener roles.

Following this activity, learners are introduced to the lesson's target vocabulary. At least three example sentences of each item, obtained from Tom Cobb's language concordance (www.lextutor.ca/conc/eng), are provided to ensure that learners are introduced to vocabulary in context, are exposed to several commonly used collocations, and acquire the various aspects of word knowledge necessary for effective vocabulary learning (Laufer, 2013). These same sample sentences are also provided to students online in advance of the lesson, to encourage self-study prior to class. Students then complete several vocabulary-focused tasks, such as fill-in-the blank and matching activities, to develop and deepen knowledge of new vocabulary (see Appendix C). Afterwards, learners are introduced to the lesson's formulaic function phrases and participate in 10 minutes of practice activities, as is the current practice in the discussion course. During these practice

activities, students are encouraged, though not required, to use the lesson's target vocabulary items.

Students next complete a discussion preparation activity with a partner－an opportunity to generate content to use in subsequent discussions (see Appendix D). During this activity, each student is given two cards, each of which feature a target vocabulary item. Learners are required to productively use both words during this speaking activity, to promote the type of pushed output that Swain (1985) argues is necessary for promoting effective language acquisition. Students then participate in their first, eight-minute, extended discussion, typically in groups of three or four. Learners are permitted during this discussion to refer to instructional materials containing the lesson's target language. Following the first extended discussion, learners receive feedback on their performance from the instructor. They also complete a short checklist worksheet in which they identify the function phrases and vocabulary items they used, and did not use, to promote independent assessment of performance, which has been shown to facilitate autonomous learning (Oscarson, 2014). Students then participate in a second discussion preparation activity where they are again given two different word cards containing target vocabulary items to use, following the structure of the previous discussion preparation activity. Next, students engage in a second, 12-minute, extended discussion during which they are not permitted to refer to instructional materials, to further promote acquisition of target language. Finally, after receiving feedback regarding their performance in Discussion 2, learners are taught and given the opportunity to practice one of four vocabulary learning strategies: the keyword method (Pressley, 1977), the word-part method (Zheng & Nation, 2015), how to guess words from context (Clarke & Nation, 1980), and instruction on using monolingual, bilingual, and *bilingualized* dictionaries (see Laufer & Hadar, 1997). Several paper and electronic dictionaries will be available for use in the classroom, which learners can refer to at any time, except during fluency activities and extended discussions, so as to ensure the flow of discussion is not interrupted and that learners primarily focus upon generating meaningful output.

For homework, students must complete a short reading, in order to help develop ideas and content to use during class discussions. The homework readings will be submitted to RANGE for analysis of vocabulary load (Nation & Webb, 2011). At least 95% of vocabulary must fall within the first two thousand most frequent word families, so that learners can gain adequate comprehension of the text (Webb & Nation, 2008). Excluding some off-list items, the remaining words in the text are from Sublist 1 or Sublist 2 of the AWL, to provide learners with appropriate meaning-focused input and to increase the number of encounters students have with vocabulary items, which remains essential to learning new words

in a second language (Loewen, 2015).

In addition to quiz scores and class participation, regular-lesson assessment is based upon learners' use of target vocabulary and formulaic functional language during the lesson's two extended discussions using a five-point partial-credit scale: 4 (superior use), 3 (good use) 2 (mediocre use) 1 (poor use) and 0 (did not use). Learners who effectively use five out of six new vocabulary items relatively successfully and meaningfully during any of the two extended discussions receive full points for vocabulary use.

Review and Test Lessons

Discussion tests are held in Lessons 5, 9, and 13. The tests are conducted towards the end of the class, with the first part of the lesson focused primarily upon review activities. Learners are provided with discussion topics in advance of the test, but are not permitted to refer to any instructional materials during the test. Following vocabulary and function phrase review activities, learners take the discussion test－a 16-minute extended discussion. Similar in format to the second extended discussion in regular lessons, learners are placed in groups of three or four and are provided with a set of questions based upon the topics studied in the course. Students awaiting their turn to take the test will be given vocabulary learning instructional materials to study and complete. At the beginning of the test, learners are given three word cards that they must use during the test. Additionally, to receive full points for vocabulary use, learners must also successfully use three additional AWL vocabulary items taught in the previous three or four classes. Tests are not cumulative, focusing instead on recently introduced vocabulary: Test 1 focuses upon 24 AWL words, Test 2 on 18 words, and Test 3 on 18 words. This is to ensure that the amount of vocabulary learners are expected to make use of during the test is manageable and reasonable. Assessment is based upon a 5-point partial-credit scale, similar to the rubric used to evaluate regular class performance. To ensure that assessment is fair and accurate, all tests are video-recorded and can be viewed at a later time by instructors and learners wishing to discuss and reflect upon their performance.

The final lesson of the course, Lesson 14, begins with a 45-minute summative test to assess learners' overall knowledge of Sublists 1 and 2 of the AWL. The test contains 30 items: 10 multiple-choice questions, 10 fill-in-the-blank items, and 10 sentence-production items. The format of test items is similar in structure to the materials used for vocabulary-learning activities and regular class quizzes. Following the test, for the remainder of the final lesson, learners review the topics, vocabulary, function phrases, and content introduced in previous lessons and complete self-assessment activities to reflect upon the strengths and weaknesses of their

performance over the course of the semester.

Conclusion

The course described in this paper shows how vocabulary-learning can be integrated into an existing language course, coupled with the promotion of speaking and academic discussion skills. Too often, vocabulary teaching focuses solely upon the acquisition of receptive knowledge, and largely upon the meaning of words, rather than their use, as the many and various facets of vocabulary knowledge are not given due heed (Nation, 2013). This proposed course is an attempt to remedy such issues, and to directly connect vocabulary knowledge to L2 output. This can aid students in developing a deeper knowledge of vocabulary items, and encourage learners to promptly use newly gained vocabulary knowledge in a practical, communicative manner.

While the course described in this paper centers specifically around the acquisition of the AWL, the activities and approach described here can easily be adapted to meet the needs of learners in various different contexts. The NVLT can be used to assess learners' overall vocabulary knowledge, and for learners who have not acquired the most frequent 2,000 word families, instruction could focus on more immediate vocabulary learning needs. In cases where technical vocabulary is of more importance to learners than the AWL, vocabulary lists based on appropriate corpora can be used to target the specific needs of particular groups of learners, and ensure that courses focus upon language that is of practical importance to students. Discussion topics can, and should, be chosen to align with the specific interests and majors of students, and to more effectively integrate English language courses with the broader university curriculum.

Vocabulary development remains central to effectively improving L2 proficiency, and one of the most common goals stated by language learners is to improve their vocabulary knowledge. However, the selection of relevant vocabulary and the design of courses typically falls to instructors who benefit, not only from their teaching experience, but their understanding of SLA theory and recent research finding in the field. Part of this responsibility includes helping learners gain a deeper understanding of the various aspects of vocabulary knowledge, and of the importance of practice and actively using newly acquired language in a communicative context (DeKeyser, 2007; Nation & Webb, 2011). Doing so can aid learners in attaining their goals of developing their L2 speaking skills, improving their vocabulary knowledge, and gaining confidence in their ability to effectively communicate in a second language.

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Appendix   A-List of Headwords from Sublists 1 and 2 of the Academic Word List (Coxhead, 2000)

Sublist 1   Headwords

analyze	constitute	establish	indicate	occur	role
approach	context	estimate	individual	percent	section
area	contract	evident	interpret	period	sector
assess	create	export	involve	policy	significant
assume	data	factor	issue	principle	similar
authority	define	finance	labour	proceed	source
available	derive	formula	legal	process	specific
benefit	distribute	function	legislate	require	structure
concept	economy	identify	major	research	theory
consist	environment	income	method	respond	vary

Sublist 2   Headwords

achieve	community	design	institute	potential	restrict
acquire	complex	distinct	invest	previous	secure
administer	compute	element	item	primary	seek
affect	conclude	equate	journal	purchase	select
appropriate	conduct	evaluate	maintain	range	site
aspect	consequent	feature	normal	region	strategy
assist	construct	final	obtain	regulate	survey
category	consume	focus	participate	relevant	text
chapter	credit	impact	perceive	reside	tradition
commission	culture	injure	positive	resource	transfer

Appendix B-Sample Vocabulary Items from Short Quiz

1) INCOME: He had a large **income**.
   - a. job
   - b. salary
   - c. home
   - d. dream

2) THEORY: Her **theory** was very unique.
   - a. clothing
   - b. friend
   - c. idea
   - d. painting

3) CONTRACT: He decided it was a fair **contract**.
   - a. sentence
   - b. official
   - c. judgement
   - d. agreement

4) AUTHORITY: He was in a position of **authority**.
   - a. power
   - b. difficulty
   - c. vertical
   - d. confusion

5) Write a meaningful sentence of more than six words that demonstrates you understand, and can accurately use, the following word: *POLICY*

   _____

   _____

6) Complete the following sentence to demonstrate you understand, and can accurately use, the following word: *FINANCE*

   After he quit his job at Sony . . . _____

   _____

Appendix C-Sample Vocabulary Learning Activity

Match the following words to their meaning.

   1. policy   a. an explanation of how something works

   2. legal   b. an abstract or general idea derived from specific instances

   3. theory   c. related to the law or an official set of rules

   4. economy   d. to take to be true

   5. concept   e. a plan of action

   6. assume   f. a system of producing and using goods and services

Fill in the blanks with a word from the box.

policy	legal	theory	economy	concept	assume

1. It is reasonable to _____ that most students will pass the exam.

2. It is the _____ of the government to try to reduce the number of smokers in Japan.

3. Politeness is a highly important _____ in Japan.

4. A common _____ is that chopsticks were introduced to Japan from China 1500 years ago.

5. People in Japan had better manners in the 1980's, when the Japanese _____ was much stronger than it is today.

6. Although it is still _____ to ride a bike while using your smartphone, this might change if the number of accidents increases.

Appendix D-Sample Discussion 2 Preparation Activity and Discussion Task

Discussion 2 Preparation: Punishing Criminals

Below are three examples of crimes and some possible punishments. What is the best punishment for each crime? Put check marks in the boxes below, and add additional information regarding the punishments you've chosen.

Crime	Time in Prison (How long?)	Pay a Fine (How much?)	Other?
Drunk driving	☐ _____ years	☐ _____ yen	☐ _____
Stealing a car	☐ _____ years	☐ _____ yen	☐ _____
Arson	☐ _____ years	☐ _____ yen	☐ _____

Discussion 2 Task

You are judges in a criminal trial. Decide on the best punishment for these three criminals.

1. Rinako was driving drunk on a busy road. She crashed into another car, and caused an accident. The other driver was injured. This is the second time she has been caught driving drunk.
2. Akira is 16 years old. He stole a car together with his friends. This is his first crime. He says he has been under a lot of stress recently and has many problems with his family at home.
3. Junichiro set fire to a tall office building in Shinagawa, Tokyo. No one died, but 20 people were seriously injured. He says he is addicted to arson and loves seeing buildings burn. This is his fourth time committing arson.

Discuss your opinions with your partners, explain your ideas