

In Pursuit of Better Vocabulary Teaching: As Based on the Learner's "Elasticity" in the Use of Set Phrases

Hiroshima University Graduate School Yoshifumi Mikuma

1. Introduction

Vocabulary and the teaching of vocabulary in the second- or foreign-language teaching gives top priority to the selection of items to be incorporated into the syllabus for the sake of economy. An upsurge in interest in vocabulary selection, the leading figures of which are E. L. Thorndike, M. West and H. E. Palmer, was witnessed in 1910's, and this concept has had to undergo some adjustments over time. For example, the period 1945-1970 was marked by the sway of audiolingualism and was, as Carter and McCarthy (1988, 41) term it, a "limbo" for vocabulary. This is when the teaching of vocabulary had to condescend to consist of only basic entries and was included in decontextualized syntactic structure practice only. In the 1980's much thinking centered on the learner and his/her needs as well as on how vocabulary is learned and what it means to "know" a word. These seem to be what the communicative approach of language teaching is based on.

The importance of vocabulary in syllabus design was highlighted above, however, as important as the vocabulary selection per se pertaining to syllabus design may be, teaching methods are no less important. Now in an age when the selection business is becoming more and more sophisticated with the advent of the LOB Corpus or the Brown Corpus, which can provide such useful lexicological information as the frequency of phrases and expressions, a search for effective methodologies to teach vocabulary deserves just as much attention.

2. Outline of the Study

This study attempts to probe for an effective form of vocabulary teaching, with a special emphasis on set phrases. There have been two conflicting attitudes over the years toward the handling of school textbooks, which are the whole corpus of vocabulary to be memorized. These are "In order to be good at English Conversation, all you have to do is memorize your junior high school textbooks from cover to cover," versus "We have to make an exodus from the dominion of sterile memorization work." While the issue is still being debated, how can one activity be so favorably endorsed and vigorously resisted at the same time?

One possible assumption follows: so molded by the popular attempt at one-to-one correspondence observed in foreign language explanations, the ordinary learner, even if brimming with English words, phrases, sentences and grammatical knowledge, often cannot

extract the one immediately needed. This could be attributable to the ring of a familiar Japanese phrase, possibly never heard used in explaining any English phrase in class, first coming to mind. The learners automatically assume that they are devoid of the English counterpart that would best describe their feelings, when they actually do know the phrase. As a result, they are ultimately filled with a sense of disappointment, grunting, "After all I went through, what I've memorized doesn't work!" The foregoing has encouraged the author to examine the depth of the average learner's semantic field.

3. The Experiment

To verify the above assumption, a test was administered. The subjects comprised ninety-one first year students (girls: 48, boys: 43) at Mihara Higashi High School. In this test, the subjects were asked to translate two kinds of Japanese sentences, ten in all, five of which were natural-sounding Japanese, and the rest, while they required exactly the same answers as the first five, were obviously affected by English and did not sound like normal Japanese, though they are commonly heard in Japan's classroom situations. Then, the emergence rate of certain English set phrases as well as their scores were checked. The supposedly correct answers were all within the reach of high school students with their knowledge of English set phrases from junior high school intact, and focused on how the subjects translated the samples and how their answers differed under two different conditions, being given the sentences whose meanings are the same but whose meanings are the same but whose phrasing is different. To increase the validity of the set phrases used, the corpus of eighteen state-approved textbooks published by six companies used from the seventh graders to the ninth graders, were analyzed and the way in which set phrased, including their collocations, were presented in the textbook corpus was confirmed. Based upon this groundwork, five phrased that seemed to best lend themselves to the purpose of this experiment were selected.

It must be understood that the possible correct answers are mere examples and nothing more. However, as the examples that can be attained with a junior high school level of knowledge, hopefully they are representative.

The subjects completed the test in exactly the same order illustrated in the appendix. That is, after they had finished all the questions on Test 1, they proceeded to Test 2. While completing the former, the question sheets for the latter were not distributed.

As is apparent from the measurement system shown in the appendix, the emergence rate the target expressions, syntax, and communication attainment were highlighted. Communication attainment implies the degree of appropriateness of the sentences in a given context. Therefore, it is possible that a certain sentence as an answer for a given question could be grammatically perfect and yet at the same time be totally unacceptable in terms of discourse, and vice versa.

Some explanations are due here. As for item 4 in Test 2, "many" in the place of "a lot of" was counted as correct, and it had been conjectured that some subjects would think of "many" instead of "a lot of" the moment they see the Japanese "takusan no (hito)." "A lot of," without question, sounds more appropriate, in view of the fact that "many" is unlikely to occur

in an affirmative sentence. However it was decided that this replacement does not impair communication. The inclusion of "how old" could possibly create another question. A conceivable criticism might be: " 'How old' should be treated as a grammatical item, not a set phrase." It may be so, but from a practical perspective, "how old" is a combination of two words and it would not matter greatly to the pupils, who try to recall this set of words for their use.

The results of the tests are shown below. Figure 1 shows the comparison of the emergence rates of the phrases dealt with here in Tests 1 and 2. The figures given vertically on the left-hand side show the percentage of the target phrase emergence for each item listed at the bottom. From Figure 2 onwards, the marks that the subjects scored for the two divisions of measure and the total points for each question are represented in detail.

The Emergence Rates of the Target Phrases

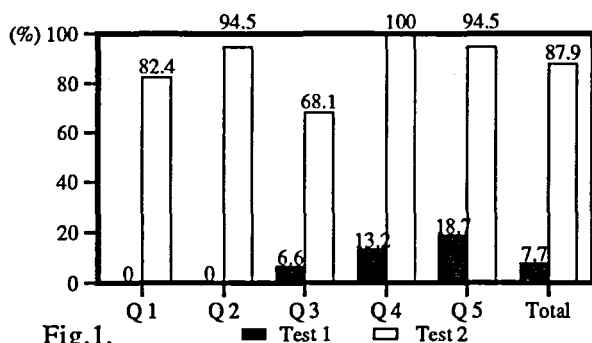


Fig.1.

In all of the following graphs, the unbroken line indicates the results obtained in Test 1. The dotted line depicts those of Test 2. The vertical figures represent the total number of students. The horizontal numbers represent the number of points received.

1. I couldn't take care of both our home and my job.

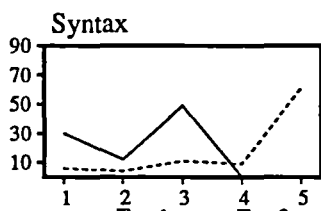


Fig.2.

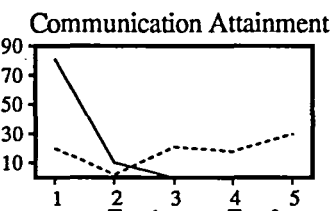


Fig.3.

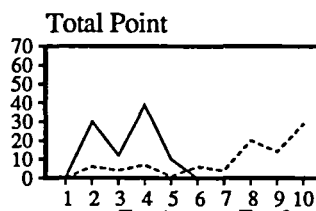


Fig.4.

2. He is interested in you.

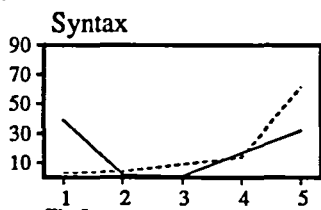


Fig.5.

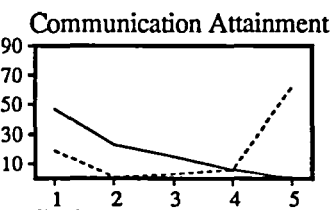


Fig.6.

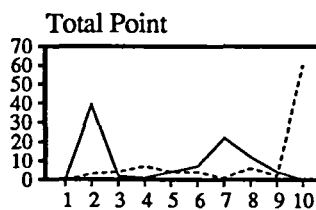
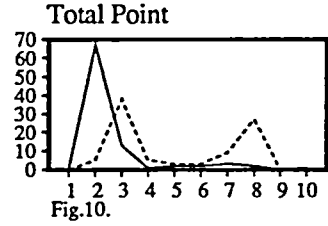
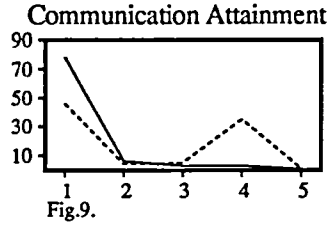
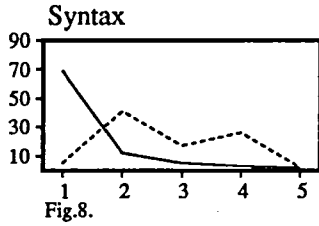
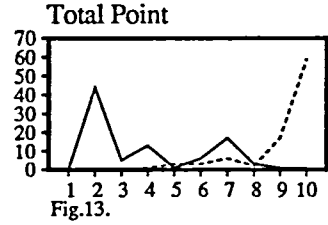
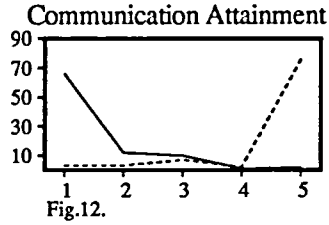
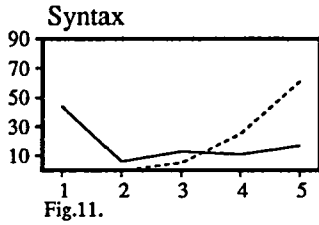


Fig.7.

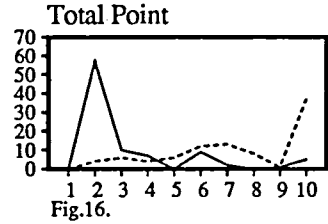
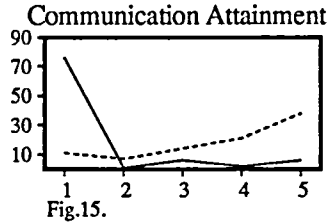
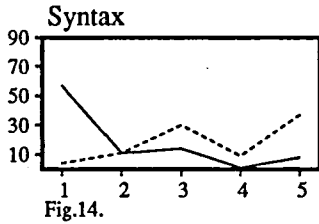
3. I like chess but I'm not very good at it.



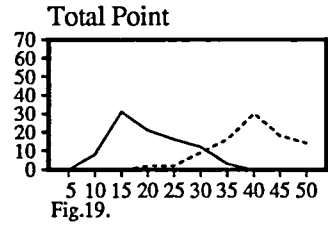
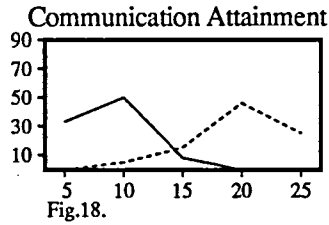
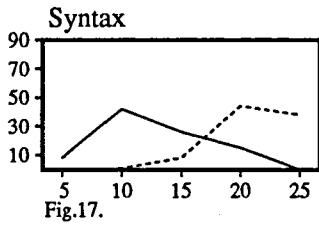
4. He knows a lot of people.



5. How old is your school?



Total Score



4. Evaluation

What is most worthy of special mention, as evidenced by the bar graph, is that in all of the five questions, which are two in kind and allocated respectively to Test 1 and Test 2, the use of the target phrases in Test 2 far surpasses that in Test 1. In Question 1, the subjects scored 0% for Test 1 and 82.4% for Test 2; in Question 2, 0% and 94.5%; In Question 3, 6.6% and 68.1%; in Question 4, 13.2% and 100%; in Question 5, 18.7% and 94.5%; and in Total, 7.7% and 87.9%, respectively. The differences are so marked that they leave no room for question. The testees manifestly expressed the great ease and familiarity with which they cope with Japanese sentences to be translated, when they are presented in a formal manner that sounds as though it is directly from the stereotypical translation work. These salient differences are worthy of note.

Notice that the three line graphs for Total Score display almost symmetrical X-shaped patterns. This shows that the testees' responses in Test 1 (Average points: Syntax, 2.5; Communication Attainment, 1.7; Total, 4.1) are the reverse of those displayed in Test 2 (Average points: Syntax, 4.3; Communication Attainment, 3.1; Total, 7.5). Without exceptions, the students exhibited a conspicuously higher emergence rate of the target phrases in Test 2, where they were given Japanese sentences which appeared to be dragged along by English, i.e., English-colored Japanese. Moreover, again in Test 2, they demonstrated better grammatical performance as well as superior effectiveness in communication. Interestingly enough, these test sentences may sound strongly affected by English and thus unnatural, but they are widely heard in ordinary English classrooms in Japan.

What then, can be made of these results? First, the fact that the average emergence rate of the target phrases in Test 2 proudly transcends a remarkable 80% demonstrates that at least as far as the five expressions looked at here: "to take care of," "to be interested in," "to be good at," "(to know) a lot of," and "how old," have been all but memorized as a result of study. Second, concerning scores, the overwhelming performance that Test 2 boasts of (the average score is 75.6 as compared with Test 1's 36.1) indicates that the use of the five expressions has been more or less mastered (under certain circumstances, more specifically, with the assistance of only one Japanese equivalent each). In other words, the vocabulary items or grammatical items that were once learned by heart through junior high school study, can be recalled relatively easily if and when exactly the same Japanese translation is the cue.

Put in other terms, the junior high school learning process exerts a great influence and the learners' performance could be said to be a reliable measure of this. Some other questions of a similar type, which were not part of the study, were asked of the same subjects, off the record. Among them was "to be proud of." In fact, this particular phrase was not used in the textbooks which the subjects studied. The result was, as might be conjectured, that the emergence rate of "to be proud of" stands at about 3 and 4% in Tests 1 and 2 respectively. The subjects therefore obtained very low marks in both tests. The contrast between this result and the other five conveniently proves that the pupils were able to demonstrate what they had learned to a rather appreciable extent, because in contrast with the extremely low scores in both Tests 1 and 2 with "to be proud of", as a result of not having been encountered before, the pupils scored remarkably higher in at least Test 2 with the five test sentences used in this experiment. The junior high school level of instruction therefore, was proven to be important. This fact sheds light to the possibility of the learners expanding their horizons of expressions if and when the awareness is implanted in them that one English phrase can correspond with more than one Japanese concept.

5. Implications for the Teaching of English

An area of vocabulary teaching, in this particular case, set phrases, highlights the possible importance of vernacular use in English classrooms, in the context of translation from Japanese to English. In more specific terms, in the stage of consolidation, newly introduced vocabulary items should be used when the pupils attempt to do the translation. At this point, at

least two, and hopefully more, kinds of Japanese sentences in which they have to think of the target item in one way or another will be given. One of those two or more kinds of sentences could be the close and traditional-sounding equivalent in the mother tongue, as discussed before, and the other(s) should be looser equivalents which sound more like natural Japanese. These different kinds of sentences need not have the same content. The important point is that the learners are made aware that one expression or phrase is open to use in many more situations than they had previously imagined.

For example, the five set phrases taken up in this paper should be allied with at least one Japanese counterpart of the type employed in the experiment, namely, one which is quite different from the direct translation, in addition to the conventional counterpart. When the learners have achieved this state of poly-association, they possess the elasticity with which to operate, a condition which the present author would like to term "elasticity awareness". If this elasticity awareness is instilled in a learner in this way, a one-to-one correspondence will become a one-to-two correspondence, then one-to-three, then four, and eventually one-to-many. It is true that such theorists as Krashen have had a low opinion of the vernacular use and of teaching. But even after what is allegedly called acquisition, it may be possible that the very first sound a speaker hears is his/her mother tongue, if it is always stronger as Sweet asserts:

But these cross-associations are independent of translation. They arise simply from the fact that each idea that comes into our minds instantly suggests the native expression of it, whether the words are uttered or not: and however strongly we may stamp the foreign expression on our memories, the native one will always be stronger. (1900, 198)

The most feasible approach, then, would be to take advantage of the native language instead of trying to banish it. And, see to it that, in the course of instruction, the learners start applying a single vocabulary element to a larger correspondence sphere. This is not to say that Krashen's "input hypothesis" has no part to play. It can be easily seen that even after the students are awakened to the elasticity awareness, in order for the vocabulary they have memorized to be efficiently activated, an extensive degree of hearing and reading them in an authentic situation is an absolute must. This is where Krashen's "comprehensible input of 'i+1'" means a lot. Yet it remains appropriate to insist that the provision of the elasticity awareness would even work to the advantage of input-based acquisition in the long term.

The stage of comprehension, of course, should not be ignored. Ordinarily this comes relatively early on in the teaching procedure, and an inference is possible concerning the influence that is exerted by the way in which vocabulary items are presented and explained. A concrete guiding principle would be to consider teaching the core meaning of vocabulary. This point is stressed by Umamoto (forthcoming). He discovered that if the learners were directed to obtain a wider semantic coverage in comprehension when using translation from English into Japanese, by means of explicit instructions, they would accordingly outperform others using traditional methods in translation from Japanese into English. Although the improvement was

not substantial, this clearly suggests the breakthrough that is needed to reach the final objective, correspondence sphere expansion. The point being made by the present thesis is that by working directly on the process of active vocabulary being used in a translation context, a sparkling rise in the emergence rate of the target phrases and scores can be achieved. Considering this noteworthy increase, coping with the active-vocabulary-training still deserves sole independent attention. However, the assimilation of this view and that presented by Umamoto should form a friendly integration of working systems of vocabulary teaching.

6. Conclusion

Throughout this study, the use of the mother tongue has been restressed as an inevitable but effective medium, but not in the same way commonly found in ordinary classrooms in Japan. Simply because mother tongue use is not working at the present moment does not necessarily mean that it entails innate shortcomings and thus should be excluded. On the contrary, the author has sought to show how the use of the mother tongue can be incorporated into classroom activities. Moreover it could lead to what the author has described in another paper in this booklet as "thinking in English." For a further discussion of this area, see Mikuma 1991a. This study, I hope, has raised some interesting points which can be pursued in further research.

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Appendix

Test 1

-
1. 家庭と仕事の両立はできなかった。 家庭 (our home),
仕事 (my job)
-

2. 彼、あなたに気があるのよ。
-

3. 「チェスをやりますか」 「下手の横好きですがね」
"Do you play chess?"
-

4. 彼は顔が広い。
-

5. あなたの学校は創立何年ですか。
-

Test 2

1. 私は家庭と仕事の両方の世話をすることができなかった。

2. 彼はあなたに興味がある。

3. 私はチェスは好きですが、それはあまり得意ではありません。

4. 彼はたくさんの人を知っている。

5. あなたの学校は何歳ですか。

Correct Answers

1. I couldn't take care of both our home and my job.
2. He is interested in you.
3. I like chess but I'm not very good at it.
4. He knows a lot of people.
5. How old is your school?

Target Expressions

1. take care of
2. be interested in
3. be good at
4. [know] a lot of
5. how old

The Measurement System Employed

a. Use of the target expression Yes / No

b. Syntax 1 2 3 4 5

└───┬───┬───┬───┬───┘

c. Communication Attainment 1 2 3 4 5

└───┬───┬───┬───┬───┘