Investigating Vocabulary Use Following Pre-Discussion Vocabulary-Building Activities

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents the results of a study in which English Discussion students were given a vocabulary activity targeting ten words from their homework reading. Students were then monitored in the final discussion for frequency of these words. Students were also given a short questionnaire to determine their prior knowledge of the vocabulary items.

INTRODUCTION

Nation (2001) writes, "There are many things to know about any particular word and there are many degrees of knowing" (pg 23). He goes on to discuss the interlocking nature of the receptive / productive (passive / active) system of learning new vocabulary. How do we, as teachers, know that our students know a word? Surely the simplest answer is – when it is used correctly-when it becomes "active". In the EDC context, this would mean, when a student uses it correctly in its spoken form .

A year and a half into teaching the EDC it was clear that students were often negotiating the meaning of words in the final discussion that were in their textbook reading. Students have a week between each lesson – sufficient time to read the text in preparation for the next lesson and, if necessary, check the definitions of any new vocabulary. Sufficient time to "know" any new vocabulary. The purpose of this project was to see if incorporating a vocabulary activity into the lesson, drawing on vocabulary from the homework reading, would support students' expression of their opinions in the final discussion and reduce the need for negotiating meaning of those words.

Research Questions:
- Would a vocabulary activity targeting words from the homework reading encourage students to use those words in the final discussion and reduce the need for negotiating meaning of those words?
- Do students take time during the week before each lesson to check new vocabulary?

METHOD

Lesson 10, "The Right to Life", was chosen due to strong memories of Fall 2009 students saying words and phrases such as: "crimer" instead of "criminal", "a person who kills another person" instead of "murderer" and "the person who is killed by another person" instead of "victim". Ten words were selected that were considered, by the teacher, as potentially useful for students in answering the final discussion questions.

Discussion Questions:
1. Do you think the death penalty is a good punishment for murderers?
2. Do you think the death penalty stops crime?

Ten words chosen from the homework reading: Protect / Criminal / Murderer / Victim / Violent / Rehabilitate / Punishment / Stealing / Innocent / Guilty

A variety of vocabulary activities were considered and a gap-fill and a definition matching activity were decided upon (see appendix 1 & 2). Initially, a picture matching activity was attempted however, given the selected words, proved too difficult. Across the 14 classes that week 77 students were in attendance. Five classes did the definition matching activity (28 students), five classes did the gap-fill activity (26 students) and four classes did no vocabulary activity (23 students). The activity was conducted directly after the quiz in place of the usual fluency activity. The students who did not do the vocabulary activity did fluency as usual. During the final discussion I listened for use of target vocabulary and noted the frequency. See the table (appendix 3) for this data.

To address the second research question, a short questionnaire (in English and Japanese) was given to students at the end of the final discussion. Students who did no activity were not given the questionnaire. It should be noted that question 4 does not pertain directly to the research question- it was as a matter of interest only (about which more shall be said in the discussion).

1 .Did you know this word before doing the textbook reading?
2. Did you check a dictionary for the meaning of this word?
3. Did you understand this word after doing the activity?
4. Did you use this word in the final discussion?

RESULTS
See the table (appendix 3).
Overall, there was a 123.68% increase in frequency with students who did the gap-fill activity and a 97% increase with students who did the definition matching activity.

For four words – rehabilitate / protect / stealing / violent – there was zero or only one use in the final discussion across the three groups. Victim / punishment/ murderer had the highest frequency. It should be noted, however, that the word "murderer" appeared in the actual discussion question ("Do you think the death penalty is a good punishment for *murderers*") and the word "criminal" was in the question for discussion one ("What is the best punishment from the *criminal's* point of view"). Therefore, students were more likely to use these two words confidently.

The word "criminal" was negotiated for meaning once within the group of students who did no activity. In one other instance, in the no activity group, a student said, "crimer" and was understood (not corrected) by the other students.

The results of the questionnaire show that out of 54 students who did a vocabulary activity there were 27 instances of words being checked in a dictionary (the highest being "rehabilitate" (9) and "victim" (4)) before class. Even though "rehabilitate" was the highest, there were no instances of it being used in discussion.

DISCUSSION
This project suggests that some kind of vocabulary activity increases students' use of the target words in the final discussion and minimizes the need for negotiating meaning of these words. Students who did the gap-fill activity had the higher frequency. It would have been worthwhile

noting which *other* words needed negotiation of meaning during these discussions. Also, the ten words chosen were what I thought would be useful in the discussion. Another teacher may have chosen different words – it is subjective and difficult to predict what vocabulary students will need. It may be that students, while understanding words such as "rehabilitate" and "stealing", had no use for them in the discussion. Moir and Nation's (2008) study of effective strategies for learning vocabulary argued that students need to take ownership of the vocabulary they choose to learn. A future path of research would be for students to choose the words they think they will need (either from the textbook reading or, in prior reflection upon the discussion questions) in the final discussion, rather than the teacher-directed activities used in this study.

It is interesting, but not surprising, to note students response to question four. Students vastly over-reported their use of these words. As with self-checks for function use, students often over or under-estimate their use. It may be that students felt they had had a deep discussion in which many complex ideas were expressed (they did) and some targeted vocabulary was used, therefore it was safe to assume that more items were used than was, in fact, true. Further speculation is beyond the scope of this paper.

CONCLUSION

Trying different kinds of vocabulary activities may be useful. Perhaps a picture matching activity or a pair negotiation of meaning activity would prove more effective. It may also have increased frequency in the final discussion if there had been some activity that 'forced' students to use the words once meaning had been established. Corson (1997) suggests that in learning new vocabulary learners need to produce items as well as have a receptive understanding. The Sentence Writing Method (or *Sentence Generate Method*) (Dale, O'Rouke and Bamman, 1971; Gipe, 1979 – cited in Pressley et al. 1982, p. 51) in which students write a sentence using the target word could be done in pairs as a verbal activity. However, making time for that kind of activity is questionable in the context of this course and its goals. Bitchner's (2003) longitudinal study of pair, task-based negotiation suggests a more suitable kind of approach that is in keeping with the communicative goals of the EDC.

As stated previously, it would also be interesting to note which words *do* require negotiation of meaning in the final discussion and how much time is spent doing this. Further research from here would be to explore the frequency of negotiating meaning as well as the most and least efficient ways students do this.

REREFENCES

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APPENDIX 1

Week 10- Vocabulary Review

Protect	Murderer	Violent	Punishment	Stealing
Criminal	Victim	Rehabilitate	Innocent	Guilty

1. Strong or powerful people should _____ weak or less powerful people.
2. Some people can't control their emotions and become _____ when they are angry.
3. She is a _____. She killed her husband!
4. He is homeless and was caught _____ food from Lawson because he was hungry.
5. Everyone thought he had taken the money, but they were wrong. He was _____.
6. I think that it is better to send a _____ to jail than to make them pay a fine.
7. When I was in elementary school the teacher was very strict! She would hit us with a stick as _____ for talking in class.
8. An elderly woman was the _____of an attack by two, drunk teenagers.
9. This jail tries to _____ people with drug problems so they can rejoin society.
10. Its true! I did it! I took the wallet! I am _____!

APPENDIX 2

Week 10 Vocabulary Review

Protect	Murderer	Violent	Punishment	Stealing
Criminal	Victim	Rehabilitate	Innocent	Guilty

1._____ To do something with strong, rough, uncontrolled force.

2._____ To cover or guard from injury or danger.

3_____To have done something wrong or against the law.

4._____Someone who kills someone else intentionally.

5._____ Harmless; pure; to have not done anything wrong.

6._____ To take something belonging to someone else without permission.

7._____A person who does a crime (something against the law).

8._____To help a person live a normal life again

9._____ A penalty; something done to a person who does something wrong.

10._____ Someone who has been hurt or killed.

APPENDIX 3

Target vocabulary from homework reading	No activity (4 classes- 23 students)	Gap-fill activity (5 classes- 26 students)	Definition Matching (5 classes – 28 students)	Ss who said they knew the word before reading the text	Ss who said they checked a dictionary	Ss who said they understood the word after doing activity	Ss who said they used the word in the final discussion
Rehabilitate	0	0	0	35	9	10 6/4	12 6/6
Protect	1	0	0	54	0	1 0/1	17 5/12
Stealing	0	0	0	49	2	4 3/1	20 6/14
Guilty	0	2	2	52	2	3 2/1	25 12/13
Innocent	3	5	4	54	1	2 0/2	24 14/10
Criminal	1	6	9	49	2	5 2/3	38 22/16
Violent	0	0	1	51	2	3 2/1	13 4/9
Victim	0	13	13	47	4	5 4/1	42 22/20
Punishment	3	13	11	50	2	4 2/2	48 24/24
Murderer	30	46	35	52	3	1 0/1	53 28/25

*The first three shaded columns show word frequency in final discussion
**In the final two columns these figures are the total number of students, then, those who did the gap-fill activity and those who did the definition -matching activity.
***One instance of "criminal" being negotiated in the 'no activity' classes.*