

Bridging Research and Secondary School Classrooms: A Case of Vocabulary Learning

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Despite the great advancement we have seen in vocabulary research, secondary school English teachers in Japan are not necessarily well informed in regard to such findings. This paper describes one workshop designed to help a private six-year secondary school in the Tokyo area. Although none of the topics covered is new to vocabulary researchers, the feedback from the teachers showed that the workshop was useful to them. Some teachers commented that they had learned about new concepts and that they could clarify the goals they should be working towards. Other teachers said that it was good for them to learn about research-based support for their choice of materials and stated that they could now teach with more confidence. This paper argues for the benefit of contextualizing research findings in each teaching setting and working together with the teachers to consider ways to improve their vocabulary instruction.

語彙習得研究は近年大きな成果を挙げてきたが、それが中学・高校の教育現場で充分には活かされていないようだ。本論では、都内の私立中高一貫校で英語科教員を対象に行った語彙指導ワークショップの概要を紹介する。ワークショップでは、語彙習得研究者には基礎的な事柄を扱ったにもかかわらず、「新しい知見が学べた」、「使用している教材に理論的根拠があることを知って自信がついた」など、前向きな反応を得た。研究成果を各学校の状況に適用して議論し、教員と研究者が共に指導の向上を目指すことは有益であると言える。

Over the last few decades we have seen significant advancements in vocabulary acquisition research, from which language teachers can learn greatly. One example is that we have better understanding about how the words are used in English, and some useful lists of basic vocabulary lists have been developed, such as the New General Service List (e.g., Browne, 2014). However, secondary school teachers in Japan do not seem to have sufficient time to learn about these research findings, and it is sometimes not quite obvious how those findings can be applied to their particular teaching settings. Research by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) showed that Japanese secondary school teachers have more administrative and extracurricular duties than their counterparts in 34 OECD member countries (OECD Newsroom, 2014). With this heavy workload, few

teachers have the luxury of learning from research. Based on personal communications with secondary school teachers, I feel it is necessary for researchers to distill the essence of our findings for them.

In 2010, *danshari* (断捨離) was nominated for the word of the year in Japan. This word literally means to *cut*, *throw away*, and *stay away*, and is used mostly in the context of encouraging people to possess less and keep life simple. Our modern lives are filled with objects, but the amount we can keep is limited. However, even when trying to minimize, some things are essential for our lives; we therefore need to make careful selections about which items we need and which we could live without. This is similar to how teachers should view vocabulary instruction. There are many words to be learned, and knowing a word fully involves many types of knowledge, such as derivation and collocation. Although there is much to teach, the time in classrooms is limited. *Danshari* of vocabulary instruction is therefore necessary, and teachers need to select wisely what should be taught during class time.

This paper describes a workshop that I conducted to inform secondary school teachers of recent key research findings in vocabulary. It illustrates that very basic concepts in the research field can potentially be valuable resources to classroom teachers, and it aims to encourage more researchers to share their expertise.

Workshop

Background

The workshop took place at a private school in Tokyo that incorporates both a junior high and a high school, with all ten English teachers at this school. The students are highly academically oriented, and passing university entrance examinations is one of their primary concerns. Prior to the workshop, I interviewed one of the teachers at the school and learned about their vocabulary instruction practices. This teacher was in good communication with her colleagues, and she could inform me of various opinions her colleagues had. At the time

of the workshop, in addition to having students learn words through reading textbooks, they used the *Kikutan: Basic* and *Kikutan: Advanced* textbooks (ALC, 2015a, 2015b) as supplementary materials for vocabulary building. Vocabulary quizzes were administered six times a year to encourage students to study these books. Through the interview, I learned that these bimonthly quizzes were burdensome for some teachers and that they were hoping for less frequent quizzes. I also discovered that some teachers were not comfortable using Japanese translations when teaching vocabulary, as they were worried that the use of Japanese might discourage students from learning the words more deeply. This compounded the pressure caused by the vocabulary quizzes, as the teachers felt that the quizzes needed to cover a range of aspects of word knowledge.

On the day of the workshop, I delivered a 50-minute lecture about recent findings in vocabulary research, which was followed by a 50-minute discussion, during which teachers expressed their thoughts about the content of my lecture and described the problems encountered in their daily teaching. The next section of this paper outlines the lecture and discusses how it was received by the teachers.

Workshop Content

1. How many words do learners need to know?

Before discussing how many words learners need to know, two types of word counting units were explained briefly: lemmas and word families. A lemma counts a headword and its inflected forms as one word. For instance, *apple* and *apples* are one lemma, and *happy*, *happier*, and *happiest* constitute one lemma. In addition to the inflected forms, a word family includes derived forms. In the case of the word *happy*, its derived forms such as *happily*, and *happiness* also join the family. Therefore, the knowledge of 3000 lemmas is actually much more limited than that of 3000 word families. In the literature of vocabulary research, these counting units co-exist; much research has been conducted based on word families, while recent studies are often lemma-based. It is therefore important for the teachers to know about these word counting units when discussing vocabulary learning goals.

An important outcome of vocabulary research relates to text coverage, that is the percentage of known words in a text. In English, a small proportion of vocabulary covers a massive amount of text, and the importance of teaching high-frequency words has long been recognized. Nation (2013)

proposes the principle of *cost-benefit* when teaching vocabulary items. The time and effort spent learning high frequency words is highly rewarded, whereas those involved in learning low-frequency words might not be. According to Nation (2013), the most frequent 1000 word families in the British National Corpus cover more than 80% of the corpus, with the next 1000 words adding only about 8%. Less frequent words contribute to the text coverage to an even lesser extent. With 4000 word families, the coverage reaches around 95%. Figure 1 shows how this idea of text coverage was presented to the teachers in a visual manner.

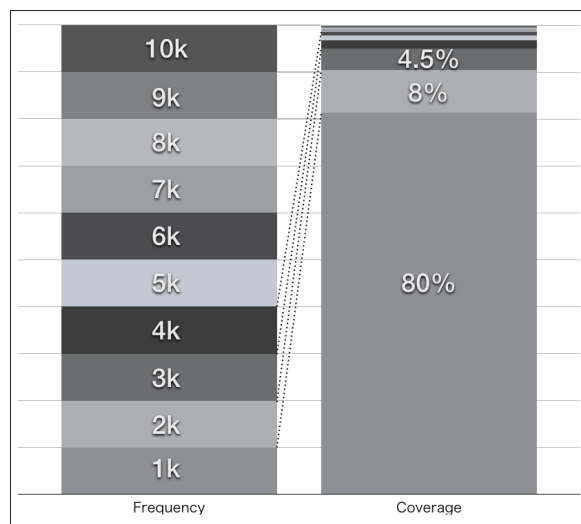


Figure 1. The principle of text coverage.

This point, although widely accepted among vocabulary researchers, was not well known among the teachers. During the discussion, several teachers expressed concern that supposedly learned lexis in junior high school might not be remembered at high school. As a result of learning about the percentage of the text covered by high-frequency words, they realized how problematic it was to move forward with instruction without the mastery of lower level words.

The workshop then addressed the number of words students should aim to learn. It is difficult to set a precise number, as it varies on the purpose of learning English. I proposed that mastering 4000 word families would be a suitable initial goal for all students (including those who do not particularly like studying English), aiming for a text coverage of 95%.

2. What vocabulary is presently taught at the school?

The next topic covered in the workshop was how well the materials used at this particular school were covering this 4000-word goal. The *Kikutan* vocabulary books used at this school were based on a word list called *Standard Vocabulary List 12000* (hereafter, *SVL12000*; ALC, n.d.). According to the source of this list (ALC, n.d.), *SVL 12000* is a corpus-based list designed for Japanese learners of English, and it comprises 12 levels of 1000 words each. Although not explicitly stated, the items on the *SVL 12000* suggest the list is based on lemmas and not on word families. *Kikutan: Basic* covers up to 4000 lemmas, and *Kikutan: Advanced* up to 6000 lemmas. The initial learning goal of 4000 words mentioned above is word family-based, whereas the *Kikutan* books are lemma-based, and so a re-interpretation of the numbers is required. In their study investigating text coverage in *TOEIC*, *TOEFL*, and *EIKEN*, Chujo & Oghigian (2009) identified that approximately the first 6000 lemmas from the *SVL 12000* were equivalent to 5000 word families from Nation's (2006) list, in terms of the text coverage. It can then be assumed that covering all the words in the two *Kikutan* wordbooks would lead students to achieve a working vocabulary of more than 4000 word families. In the feedback, some teachers expressed relief upon discovering that the vocabulary learning goals they had set for their students were indeed supported by academic rationale.

3. Do learners remember the vocabulary they have learned?

At the time of this workshop, the English teachers conducted vocabulary quizzes six times a year, with no repetition of words. This meant that students might begin preparing only a week before a quiz by studying many pages at once, complete the quiz,

and never return to review those words again. However, people tend to forget something if they only see it once without repeated exposure. Vocabulary is no exception, and researchers have investigated optimal cycles for repeated reviews (e.g., Nakata, 2015).

I presented a series of diagrams (Figure 2) to express visually how students can forget the words they have learned and how important it is to encourage students to review. In these diagrams, the largest circle indicates unknown words that exist in English but that the learner has never encountered. The next circle represents inactive words that the learner has previously seen, but can no longer remember the meaning of. The circles representing receptive and productive words follow. As a learner's vocabulary grows, words from the unknown area will move to either the receptive or productive areas as shown in diagram B. However, without enough repetition, receptive words can quickly fall into the inactive zone (diagram C in Figure 2).

In order to encourage students to study their wordbooks regularly, it was suggested that they take more quizzes, and that the same words should be tested on multiple occasions. As was mentioned earlier, some teachers were finding the quizzes burdensome and were hoping to have them less frequently. This suggestion was initially received with surprise, especially since the word *danshari* had been a keyword for the workshop. However, these quizzes should be designed to build a regular habit of vocabulary learning and not to measure the students' capacity to learn a large number of words at one time. Even with an increased frequency of quiz administration, by making the quizzes simple, the increase in teachers' workload could be minimized. Also, encouraging students to review their wordbooks can be done through a wide range of classroom activities that do not require much teach-

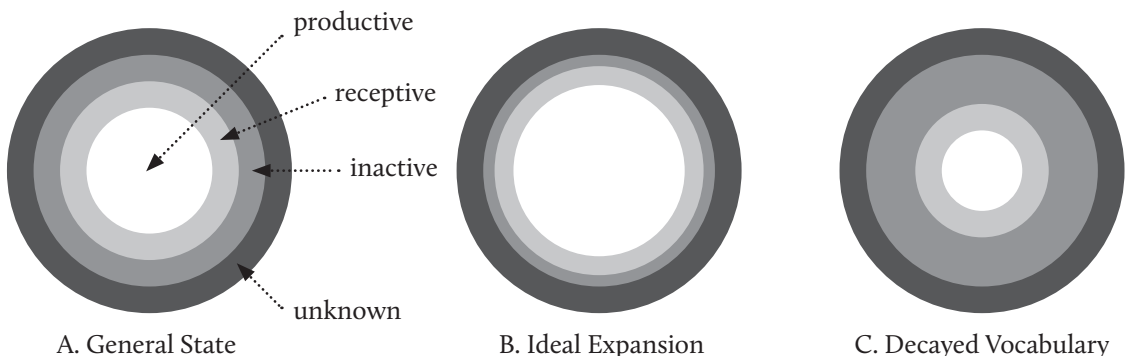


Figure 2. Diagrams representing vocabulary growth and decay.

er preparation. It was emphasized that the number of times students reviewed their wordbooks should not be sacrificed in order to reduce teachers' workloads. Rather, teachers should explore different ways of maximizing the frequency of the reviews without creating more work.

4. Should we avoid Japanese translations?

Some teachers disagreed strongly about teaching lexis using Japanese translations whereas others were open to this approach. Even if not entirely against the use of translation, some teachers expressed concern that the use of the English-Japanese matching format might instill the notion that learning one Japanese meaning is all that vocabulary learning involves.

However, although there is much to learn about any word, it is not possible to teach all the aspects at one time. Reviewing the literature, Webb (2009) concludes that the use of L1 translation is an accepted approach to introducing new words. Vocabulary learning is incremental in nature, requiring many encounters with each word in various contexts. It probably is not the role of wordbooks to cover all these aspects. Focusing on the primary translation of each word and helping learners to increase the number of the words they know one meaning of should be acceptable goals for list learning. In the workshop, I encouraged the use of Japanese translation as a compromise to increase the frequency with which students review their wordbooks. Awareness about various other aspects of vocabulary knowledge can be cultivated within reading courses where students meet words in context.

Teachers' Reaction

In summary, the workshop was developed with *danshari* as a keyword, and the following three points were emphasized:

1. A vocabulary of 4000 word families is an appropriate initial goal.
2. Frequent encounters with vocabulary words should be prioritized.
3. The initial use of translation is not to be discouraged.

It was noted that focusing on identifying primary meanings via the use of Japanese is a good option. However, regardless of what teachers omitted from their vocabulary instruction, frequent encounters with the words to be learned should never be

sacrificed in their *danshari* process. In addition, it was emphasized that the vocabulary learning target, namely the wordbooks they were using, was appropriate in light of the 4000 word families goal.

These messages were well received by the teachers. Some teachers commented that they did not know about word counting units and text coverage, and that they could now clarify the goals they should be working towards. Other teachers said that it was beneficial for them to learn about research-based support for their choice of word books and stated that they could now teach with more confidence. This workshop also elicited a change in teachers' actions: shortly after the workshop, they began incorporating short vocabulary activities into each lesson, such as having students attempt oral vocabulary quizzes in pairs. This should help the students to review their vocabulary books more frequently, without overly adding to the teachers' workload. This seems an example of successful *danshari* of their teaching.

Considerations for Future Workshops

This workshop occurred as a result of conversing with one of the teachers at this school. She shared her concerns and the problems her colleagues were facing, and the workshop was an attempt to help them find solutions. Understanding the problems teachers were facing was essential in order to make the workshop beneficial. As mentioned earlier, there has been a massive accumulation of research findings on vocabulary learning. However, interpreting research findings and applying them to each teacher's unique teaching context is not always easy. Sometimes teachers are not well informed about the materials they teach with. Explaining how teaching materials compare to what research says can be reassuring and encouraging for teach-

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ers, as was seen through the teachers' feedback. At this school, some teachers were looking for a way to reduce the number of vocabulary quizzes, while more frequent quizzes were in fact desirable for a better learning outcome. Acknowledging the teachers' hard work and discussing how they could solve these issues were necessary steps in order to help them feel that there were actions they could take.

Despite their potential usefulness, findings in vocabulary research are not necessarily very well-shared with teachers in Japanese classrooms. Having abundant resources in bookstores does not mean that the teachers who need them are able to make use of them in their teaching. I believe that this is true of areas other than vocabulary, and that teachers in classrooms need others' support in learning about and contextualizing research findings. I hope that this paper might inspire more researchers to become aware of the potential contribution their knowledge can make to language education in this country.

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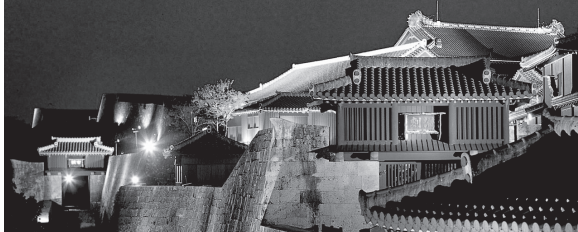
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