

Promoting autonomy through vocabulary journals

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Although promoting learner autonomy seems like a worthy goal for any language teacher from both practical and theoretical standpoints, what concrete methods are there for promoting autonomy in a classroom setting? This research investigated whether vocabulary journals, by providing students with multiple choices in terms of formatting and organization, can be used as a tool to foster autonomy. The results seem to indicate that the use of vocabulary journals in the classroom can indeed promote autonomy, although it is unclear whether the observed effects will be maintained in the long-term.

実践的かつ理論的な観点から鑑み、学生の自律性を高めることは価値のある目標のようであるが、実際に授業において学生の自律性を高める方途としては具体的にどのようなものがあるのだろうか。本研究においては、学生に体裁や構成に関していくつかの選択肢を与えることにより、語彙ジャーナルが学生の自律性を高める手段の一つになりうるかという疑問点をテーマに調査を行った。研究結果は観察された効果が長期間に亘って維持されるかという点に関しては定かに示されていないが、授業における語彙ジャーナルの使用は学生の自律性を高める効果があることを示しているように思われる。

AUTONOMY HAS been a buzzword in second language teaching for some time now. Holec (1981), one of the first to promote the importance of autonomy, defined it as “the ability to take charge of one’s own learning” (p. 3). This ability is important for language learners because, as Scharle and Szabo (2000) state:

No matter how much students learn through lessons, there is always plenty more they will need to learn by practice, on their own. Also, the changing needs of learners will require them to go back to learning several times in their lives: then again, they will need to be able to study on their own. The best way to prepare them for this task is to help them become more autonomous. (p. 4)

Promoting autonomy seems like a worthy goal not only from a practical standpoint but a theoretical one as well. As Little (2007) indicates, fostering autonomy has validity from the points of view of constructivist learning theory, Deci and Ryan’s theory of self-regulation, and also the sociocultural theory of language learning.

However, as Benson (2006) points out, Holec’s original definition is somewhat vague in that it defines what autonomous learners do rather than how they are actually able to do it. We still know very little about how individual learners develop these behaviors in different learning



contexts (Benson, 2001). The question remains: what concrete things can teachers do in their classrooms to help promote learner autonomy? The research conducted for this paper explores whether vocabulary journals can be used to demonstrably promote autonomous learning behaviors.

Vocabulary journals and autonomy

Vocabulary journals seem like an ideal tool for promoting autonomous vocabulary learning in the classroom. As Nation (2001) states, “vocabulary notebooks ... aim at learners taking responsibility for their own learning and developing the necessary skills to do so” (p. 230).

Using vocabulary journals, instructors can help foster learner autonomy in three ways: by teaching students how to select words for their journal, providing them with options in organization, and giving them choices about what kinds of information can be included in the journal.

First, teachers can promote autonomy by helping learners decide what words to record in the journal. Although teachers might initially assign vocabulary to be learned, the ultimate goal of a vocabulary journal is for students to learn how to self-select their own vocabulary (Schmitt & Schmitt, 1995). Learning vocabulary self-selection strategies is crucial for students, since in their classes and other interactions with the second language they will likely encounter far more words than they could possibly memorize in a short period of time (Barker, 2007). Teaching learners how to appropriately choose which vocabulary words to learn is therefore essential to helping students initiate their own learning.

Second, vocabulary journals can be maintained in a variety of formats and organization styles that help encourage students to both study and review the words they record. One such format suggested by Schmitt and Schmitt (1995) uses note cards to

record vocabulary so that words can be easily arranged in terms of how confident the students are that they know the word. Words near the front of the journal can be reviewed more easily and therefore more frequently. As learners gain confidence with a word, they can move it to the back of the journal. Such a format has the benefit of promoting critical reflection on the vocabulary learning process as students decide which words to move to the back of the journal. Other formats and organization styles present differing ways for learners to monitor and assess their vocabulary learning progress.

Third, teachers can provide learners with choices about what types of information to record about a word. In addition to the definition, learners can be shown how to find and record other potentially useful information about the word such as synonyms and collocations. Instructors can also teach a variety of vocabulary recording strategies, including mnemonic devices such as the keyword method and visual aids such as semantic mapping, which can aid in recall of the word. After being shown the different kinds of information that can be contained in the journal, students can choose for themselves which information and strategies will work best for them on a word-by-word basis, further promoting autonomous and reflective learning.

For these reasons, vocabulary journals seem to be an ideal tool to promote autonomous traits in students. By showing students how to properly select vocabulary to learn and giving them a variety of options for how to record, organize, and review that vocabulary, teachers “[give] their students the tools and strategies to learn independently” (Schmitt & Schmitt, 1995, p. 133).

Research

This research explored whether using vocabulary journals in a classroom setting could demonstrably promote learner autonomy. Over the period of 15-weeks, participants were shown how



to maintain a vocabulary journal, trained in how to self-select vocabulary to learn, and taught different strategies for recording vocabulary in the journal. At the end of the research period the journals were collected and analyzed for evidence of autonomous behavior, defined in this study as any additional information added to the journal by participants that was not required for participation in the research.

Participants and setting

The research focused on 23 second-year university students (6 male, 17 female) between the ages of 19 and 21 who are attending a mid-sized university in Japan. Two of the participants dropped out partway through the research, leaving 21 participants in total. All of the participants are International Communication majors, an English major that focuses on enabling students to communicate effectively in English on global issues.

The research was conducted in a Media English class, a year-long course that meets twice a week for 90 minutes and is conducted entirely in English. The class uses authentic news stories taken from newspapers or English news websites to provide students with an understanding of current global issues while also developing their vocabulary skills.

As part of the vocabulary development program for the course, every assigned news story is accompanied by a vocabulary worksheet containing a list of 10 to 12 words selected from the news article. The vocabulary worksheet instructs students to record the part of speech, the definition, and an example sentence for each new vocabulary word. Students are expected to use these vocabulary worksheets to prepare for vocabulary quizzes which are administered every two to three weeks.

Methodology

The first semester of Media English was conducted in a regular manner. Participants read nine news stories and filled in a vocabulary worksheet for each story.

At the start of the second semester, participants were informed that the researcher would investigate the usefulness of vocabulary journals as a study tool. However, participants were not told that autonomy would be a central focus of the study. An exploratory survey was administered to the participants to assess their current knowledge about vocabulary journals and elicit their attitudes towards them. This survey found that all of the participants were familiar with the concept of vocabulary journals and 91% of the participants felt they were useful language learning tools. However, the survey also found that although most students (65%) preferred choosing which words to include in their journals, many (43%) did not feel confident in their ability to select words to learn for themselves.

Based on the results of the initial survey, approximately 30 minutes of one class were spent instructing participants in how to effectively self-select vocabulary using Barker's (2007) cost/benefit questions. Examples of these questions include:

- Have I met this word before? More than once?
- Would I use the translation of this word in my language?
- Do I have a special reason for wanting to know this word?
- Will I meet or want to use this word?

Barker developed these questions specifically to assist language learners in deciding whether a new vocabulary word was worth, in terms of the learners' time and effort, recording or ignoring. The capacity to make such decisions and the critical reflection involved in them are a key component of autonomy (Little, 1991).



In the second session, the researcher and participants discussed the best way to keep a vocabulary journal. Participants were shown several possible vocabulary journal formats such as using note cards, spiral-bound notebooks, loose-leaf binders, and clear-file folders. The advantages and disadvantages of these formats were discussed. Additionally, the researcher showed participants his own Japanese vocabulary journal, a spiral notebook, as an example. Participants were instructed to select a format that they felt would work best for them and to bring the journal to the next session.

In the third session, the requirements of keeping a vocabulary journal for the research project were discussed. As in the first semester of the class, the participants would be given a list of words to learn for each assigned news story. Participants were required to record these words in their journals along with the part of speech and the definition of the word.

It may seem odd to require students to write words in the journal when one of the goals of the vocabulary journal is to foster self-selection of vocabulary. The choice to have required words was made for several reasons. First, because the vocabulary quizzes accounted for 25% of the final grade, the researcher did not feel comfortable making the recording of the words that appear on the quizzes an entirely optional activity. Second, many students in the initial survey indicated that they were not yet comfortable selecting all of their own vocabulary words. Finally, it seemed both unrealistic and unfair to expect students who have until recently experienced a mostly teacher-centered education system to suddenly embrace fully autonomous learning. An approach that provided structure but allowed them to experiment with autonomy was seen as acceptable.

This approach had a further advantage in that the required components of the journal provided a measure against which autonomous behaviors could be compared. While the required components obviously could not be considered examples of

autonomous behavior, the inclusion of additional words beyond the Media English class or extra information about the required words, such as the pronunciation of a word, could be considered a demonstration of autonomous behavior on the part of the learner, as they would be choosing to engage in the behavior voluntarily and with no extrinsic benefit.

Participants were told that the journals would be collected periodically and assessed on a credit/no-credit basis. This assessment would be based purely on whether the required words, along with their part of speech and definition, were included in the journal. Any other words or any other information about the required words would be ignored during these assessments. Although it was made clear that the inclusion of information beyond the definition and part of speech of the required words would not be considered when assigning grades for the Media English class, participants were highly encouraged to use the vocabulary journal to record words not only for Media English class but for all of their English vocabulary learning, both inside and outside of school. They were also encouraged to record any extra information, such as the pronunciation of the word or an example sentence that uses the word correctly, which they thought might be useful in helping them learn the new words. An emphasis was placed on experimenting with the journal and for each individual to find the best way to use it for successful vocabulary learning.

Starting from the fourth session, students were given the first assigned word list. Additionally, over the next three sessions about 15-20 minutes of class time were spent presenting participants with vocabulary recording strategies. These strategies were methods of recording information in the journals to help learners remember and use the words correctly. Each session focused on a different strategy: the keyword method, semantic mapping, and using a corpus to find common collocations.

The keyword method is a visual-mnemonic technique that can be used to help remember new vocabulary. Learners think



of an L1 word or phrase that sounds similar to the L2 word that is being learned. Next, the learner imagines or draws an image that associates the two words. Usually this juxtaposition of the L1 and L2 results in striking and rather humorous images that aid in the recall of the word. Schmitt & Schmitt (1995) give the example of Japanese students attempting to learn the word “horror.” The English pronunciation sounds similar to the Japanese word *horu*, which means “to dig”. Therefore, for the visual aid, the learners might draw a picture of someone being horrified at digging up a skeleton. The image is meaningful to the learner because it contains reminders of both the semantic meaning of the word “horror” as well as its pronunciation. Research has overwhelmingly shown the effectiveness of the keyword method in aiding in recall of newly learned vocabulary words (Gu, 2003).

Semantic mapping is a technique in which a participant relates a new word to already known words by drawing a map showing the connections between the words. Connections might include synonyms, word family members, or other related words. This technique draws inspiration both from network models of the mental lexicon and schema theory, which states that new information is best learned by being related to already known information (Johnson & Steele, 1996).

Collocations are words that commonly occur together in a fairly predictable pattern (Nation, 2001). Knowing the semantic meaning of a word is not enough for a learner to be able to use it effectively because words often associate with other words in chunks or phrases. Ellis (as cited in Nation, 2001, p. 321) argues that language learning is in fact primarily about learning these collocations and how they fit together rather than the memorization of grammar rules. Finding the collocations of a new word can be difficult, however. Some dictionaries do not include collocations and even those that do may not have enough examples for learners to fully understand how to use the new word

appropriately. Using a corpus, however, students can quickly find many authentic examples of usage of the word as well as its collocations. Participants were therefore instructed in how to use the online Corpus of Contemporary American English (Davies, 2008) to identify collocations and quickly find example sentences containing those collocations.

During each session in which the above strategies were taught, participants were provided with a worksheet that explained the strategy and described the advantages and disadvantages of using it. The researcher demonstrated each strategy in front of the class and afterwards participants practiced the strategy themselves with an actual vocabulary word that they wished to learn. At the end of each session, participants were encouraged to use the technique in their vocabulary journals if they felt it was useful. However, they were also reminded that their choice to use or not use the technique would not affect their grade in the Media English class in any way.

Once the treatment sessions were finished, students continued to be assigned news stories and vocabulary lists. In total, nine news stories were read by the participants and 96 words were assigned for mandatory recording. Throughout the semester, the researcher collected the vocabulary journals and checked to make sure the required components of the definition and part of speech were being included. Words other than the assigned words or additional information, such as the pronunciation, about assigned words were ignored for the purposes of assessment. At the end of the semester the journals were once again collected. This time, however, they were analyzed for evidence of autonomous behavior. After the analysis, a follow-up survey was administered in order to gain further insight into the results.



Data analysis

Because the only requirement for the vocabulary journals was to include the part of speech and the definition of the assigned words, any additional information included in the journal was considered to be an example of autonomous behavior on the part of the student. Analysis of the journals uncovered that participants engaged in 10 separate categories of autonomous learning behaviors. Figure 1 lists the behaviors and the number of students who demonstrated each behavior in their journal.

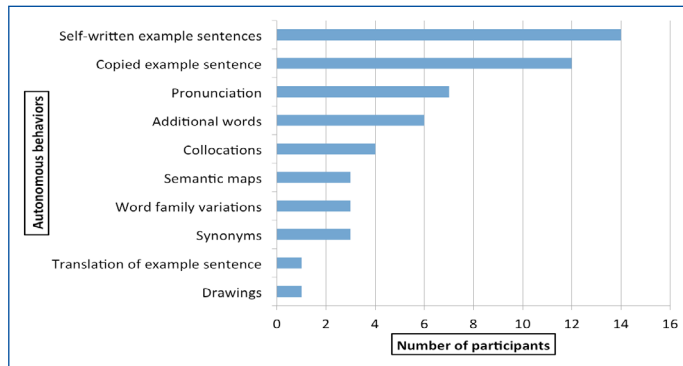


Figure 1. Autonomous learning behaviors observed in the vocabulary journals and the number of participants using each behavior.

“Self-written example sentences” are original sentences written by the participant using the new word. “Example sentences or phrases copied from a text” refer to sentences or phrases using the new word that have been copied from an English-language source such as a newspaper or dictionary. “Pronunciation” refers to an attempt to record the pronunciation of the word using phonetic symbols. “Additional words

not on the assigned lists” means that the participant included words in the journal that were not required for the class. “Collocations” means the participant included words or phrases that commonly appear together with the new vocabulary word. “Semantic maps” means the participant drew a web of connections showing the relationship between new word and already known words. “Word family variations” means the participant also recorded words that are considered related to the new word through affixation. For example, under the entry for the new vocabulary word *conscious*, a participant might include words such as *unconscious* and *consciously*. “Synonyms” refers to the participant recording words that are similar in meaning to the new word. “Japanese translation of example sentence” means the participant translated the English example sentences they wrote in the journal into Japanese. “Drawings” refers to participants who included self-drawn pictures in their word entries that either demonstrated the meaning of the new word or used a mnemonic device to help them remember it.

In total, 19 of the 21 participants demonstrated autonomous behaviors as described by the categories listed in Figure 1. The journal exhibiting the most variety in autonomous behaviors contained 8 of the 10 categories. However, the median number of behaviors observed in the journals was two, with half of the journals exhibiting two or more behaviors and half of the class including two or less. As can be seen from Figure 1, among the vocabulary recording strategies presented by the researcher, collocations were used the most (four participants), followed closely by semantic maps (three participants), and the keyword method, which was used least (only one participant).

Discussion

The results from this research seem to demonstrate that vocabulary journals indeed can be used to successfully promote autonomous vocabulary learning in a classroom environment. Nearly



all participants experimented with a variety of strategies for recording vocabulary in their journals, even though they were not required to and received no extrinsic reward for doing so. In addition, nearly one-third of participants self-selected other vocabulary words in addition to the assigned words to include in their journals. A follow-up survey conducted at the end of research project found that these words came from a variety of sources including TOEIC test preparation books, English-language films, and conversations with teachers. This demonstrates that these participants were actively engaged in taking control of their own vocabulary learning outside of the Media English class as well.

Although the results seem promising, two caveats must be made about the data. First is the inclusion of the “example sentences” categories. Although it is true that writing an example sentence for the new vocabulary words was not a required part of the journal, given that it had been a requirement of the vocabulary worksheets from the previous semester and also usually is a requirement in the participants’ other classes, it was initially unclear whether the writing of an example sentence was in fact a demonstration of autonomy, rather than simply a force of habit or a misunderstanding of the instructions.

The decision to include the example sentences in the data was made due to the results of the follow-up survey, which found that most (70%) of participants believed writing an example sentence to be the most helpful of the strategies they used in learning new vocabulary words during the semester. This seems to indicate that participants included example sentences because they genuinely felt it would help their learning. Still, even if the data for the example sentences categories were discounted, 14 of the 21 participants demonstrated other autonomous behaviors, which still supports the idea that vocabulary journals can be used successfully to help promote autonomy in the classroom.

Second, it should be noted that not all participants demonstrated the autonomous behaviors consistently throughout the

experiment. In fact, there was a noticeable fall-off effect towards the end of the experiment in many participants’ journals. Even those participants who had consistently been displaying autonomous behaviors from multiple categories in their journals in the first few weeks of the experiment began to record only the required part of speech and definition for each word towards the end of the semester.

One possible explanation for this is that students became busy with final projects in other classes and no longer had time to work on the journals. Some evidence for this explanation was found in the follow-up survey. Two participants commented that they had difficulty maintaining the journal to the level they desired due to a lack of time. Still, the observed fall-off effect raises questions as to whether any observed autonomous behaviors will actually be maintained in the long-term.

Conclusion

This exploratory research seems to indicate that vocabulary journals can be a useful tool for promoting autonomy in a classroom setting. The open-ended nature of the journal combined with scaffolding provided by the instructor provides students with a safe environment in which they can test out a variety of autonomous behaviors.

Because this is a preliminary study, more research is needed to not only confirm the results but also to answer questions such as how the classroom setting and context, learner background, and other variables impact the usefulness of using vocabulary journals in promoting autonomy. Further research is also needed to confirm whether the observed autonomous behaviors are maintained in the long term.

The results of this study provide optimism that vocabulary journals can be used successfully in the classroom to help promote learner autonomy. According to Little (2007), “learner



autonomy is the product of an interactive process in which the teacher gradually enlarges the scope of her learners' autonomy by gradually allowing them more control of the process and content of their learning" (p. 26). Using vocabulary journals, instructors can introduce learners to strategies for self-selecting words and provide them with a variety of ways to organize and record those words, thereby gradually helping learners take control of both the process and content of their vocabulary learning.

Bio data

Jared Baierschmidt is a full-time lecturer at Kanda University of International Studies. He has a wide range of research interests which include learner autonomy, vocabulary acquisition, teacher feedback on student writing, and the use of digital games in language learning.

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