Student-Created Vocabulary Tests

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In this paper is described a preliminary study at a Japanese university on student affect toward self-created vocabulary tests. In order to foster greater learner autonomy in their vocabulary study, students were tasked with selecting words they wished to learn and creating their own tests using a template provided by the teacher. At the end of the course, a survey examining student attitudes toward the activity was conducted with 140 participants. The results were encouraging as they indicated that the majority found making their own vocabulary tests fun (79%) and thought that making the tests was useful for remembering new words (72%). In addition, the survey revealed that the experience of creating their own tests was a new one for nearly all students (98%).

本論では、自己作成した語彙テストに対する生徒の影響に関する日本の大学における予備的研究について説明する。語彙学習において学習者の自主性をさらに育成するために、学生は、自ら学ぶことを望む単語を選択し、教師が提供するテンプレートを使用して、独自のテストを作成した。コースの最後に、このアクティビティに対する学生の態度を調べる調査が140人の参加者で行われた。ほとんどの学生は、独自のテストを作ることを楽しんだと述べ(79%)、新しい単語を覚えるために有用だと感じており(72%)、心強い結果が出た。また、調査により、独自のテストを作成するのは、ほぼすべての学生にとって新しい経験であることが明らかになった(98%)。

From day one, vocabulary acquisition is an essential part of learning a foreign language. As Wilkins (1972) pointed out, "While without grammar very little can be conveyed, without vocabulary *nothing* can be conveyed" (p. 111). Estimates about how much vocabulary a learner needs vary, but Laufer, Meara, and Nation (2005) noted that to reasonably comprehend unsimplified nonfiction texts, research suggests that a knowledge of 5000 word families is necessary and for academic texts, there is a much higher threshold of 10,000 word families (p. 3).

Although vocabulary can be acquired through meaning-focused input such as reading, research indicates that deliberate study of targeted vocabulary leads to increased vocabulary acquisition (Butler et al., 2010, p. 4). Similarly, Nation (1995) advised that language-focused vocabulary learning, such as the deliberate study of word meanings and the memorization of collocations and sample sentences, is beneficial as a complement to meaning-focused input. Laufer et al. (2005) also saw value in the deliberate memorization of vocabulary. They recommended giving frequent vocabulary tests, noting that the remembering of newly introduced words is reinforced by "an additional stage of intentional memorization" (p. 5).

In a traditional EFL classroom, students' acquisition of vocabulary is often assessed via a summative approach, whereby the teacher prescribes word lists that students are expected to learn by test day. The questions are usually in a multiple-choice format and assess students' receptive knowledge of the words. Although students may acquire useful vocabulary in this manner, there are several drawbacks to this approach. Namely, students may

- be introduced to the words in isolation rather than through a natural context,
- study to the test and may not retain the words after the test's completion,
- not be studying words at their level or of particular interest to them,
- feel that studying vocabulary is stressful and monotonous, or
- not actually be able to produce language with the target vocabulary.

In order to alleviate the above-mentioned issues, I incorporated student-made tests into my university-level English communication course. In addition to teacher-prescribed lists and teacher-created tests, students were tasked with choosing the words they wished to learn and then creating their own vocabulary tests following a template. Judd (1978) argued that the words students study need to be meaningful to the learner. I hoped that in customising their tests to suit their own interests and meet their own learning needs, this would be the case.

Furthermore, it was hoped that by taking responsibility for the creation of their own study materials, the students would take a step toward greater autonomy in their studies. This is important because, as Benson (2003) noted, "Researchers generally agree that the most important abilities are those that allow learners to plan their own learning activities, monitor their progress and evaluate their outcomes" (p. 290). In terms of vocabulary learning, this means helping students to learn what vocabulary they need to know and how to learn it on their own.

Due to the emphasis in Japan on standardized testing at the high school level (Rotberg, 2006), it was expected that most students would not have had any prior experience in creating their own tests. Furthermore, owing to the novelty, it was unclear whether students would accept the face validity of self-created tests. However, Murphey (1994) provided reasons to be optimistic on this point. He noted that student-made tests are one way to bridge the "perception gap" of what is being taught that exists between students and teachers (p. 12).

It was also hoped that by creating their own vocabulary tests in this project, students would become more motivated to study and would retain more words longer. As Clarke (1989) explained, "Getting students involved in materials writing, including test writing, helps them to 'internalize the material through their own creative involvement'" (p. 12). Horgen (2007) echoed this point saying, "Creating something often results in learning and involves new cognitive processing of existing knowledge" (p. 2). Nation also advised that motivating students to make their own vocabulary learning decisions is one of the most important elements of teaching vocabulary (Laufer, Meara, & Nation, 2005, p. 6).

In order to gauge the students' perspective on self-made tests, the author conducted a preliminary research study exploring the following broad questions:

- RQ1. How much experience do students have with making their own tests?
- RQ2. How do students feel about creating their own tests?

The study's method and results are described below.

Method
Participants and Settings
The study was conducted with 140 first- and second-year native Japanese-speaking students (women = 47, men = 93; 1st-year = 51, 2nd-year = 89) in seven classes from four different faculties at a small private university in Tokyo, Japan. It was conducted over the span of a 15-week compulsory English communication course, which met for 90 minutes once per week, in the second semester of the 2014-2015 academic year.

Procedure
In the second semester of a yearlong course, students were tasked with creating two of their own vocabulary tests with the aid of a template. They were free to choose any words for the test from any sources with the recommendation from the teacher that the words be both personally interesting and useful. This was in contrast to the first semester in which all vocabulary tests were created by the teacher with words selected from set lists from each unit of the required textbook.

Explanation of the Test
The student-created test consisted of two parts: a word and definition matching section and a section for writing sample sentences with the target vocabulary. The process of creating and taking the test took three classes. In the first class, the teacher gave the students the test template and as homework assigned them to write their selected study words in the appropriate column and the corresponding definitions for those words in a random order in a parallel column. In the second class, the students submitted the test papers to the teacher for checking. In the third class, the teacher returned the test papers to the students in order to write the test.

For the first part of the test, the students drew connecting lines between their words and corresponding definitions. Then, in the second part, they wrote their sample sentences to demonstrate understanding of each word's meaning and correct usage in terms of grammar and collocations. The teacher collected the completed tests for marking and returned them the following class.

Explanation of the Survey
At the end of the course, students were surveyed using an anonymous questionnaire. Questions were posed in their native language regarding the experience of creating their own tests (Appendix). Students were asked if they had ever made their own test before and to indicate from where they had selected their vocabulary words and sample sentences. The questionnaire included a number of statements for them to express their level of agreement or disagreement with by means of a 6-point Likert scale. It also included several open questions to which they were to provide a written response. As a result, the survey produced both quantitative and qualitative data, which are reported below.

Results
Quantitative Data

The first question was, "Have you ever made your own test before?" There was a strong indication that self-made tests are not common at the primary or secondary level in the Kanto area of Japan, where most of the students came from, with only three students out of 140 (2.14%) saying they had prior experience making their own tests in any subject.

The majority of the words chosen by the students were sourced from class materials, particularly the textbook. A significant number of students chose words from other sources, including TOEIC study, newspapers, songs, and movies. Many students indicated that they chose words that they knew in Japanese and wanted to know in English. See Table 1.

Table 1. Student Responses to "Where Did You Get Your Words for the Vocabulary Tests You Made?" (*N* = 140)

Source	# of responses
The current unit of the textbook	96
A past unit of the textbook	66
Handouts from the teacher	22
Another English course	5
A friend	11
Other	54

Note. Multiple responses were permitted.

Dictionaries were the most popular source for sample sentences with self-composed sentences a close second. Students also selected a considerable number of their sentences from the course textbook. See Table 2.

Table 2. Student Responses to "Where Did You Get Your Sample Sentences?" (*N* = 140)

Source	# of responses
A textbook	54
Handouts from the teacher	12
A dictionary	80
The Internet	35
A book/magazine	0
A friend	5
I made them myself	71
Other	1

Note. Multiple responses were permitted.

Table 3 presents the results for selected questions from Part 5 of the survey, in which students were presented with several statements regarding their experience of making their own vocabulary tests. They were requested to express their level of agreement or disagreement with the statements by means of a Likert scale. The scale ran from 1 (*strong disagreement*) to 6 (*strong agreement*), with no neutral option.

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Table 3. Student Responses to Questionnaire Statements Regarding the Creation of Their Own Vocabulary Tests in Terms of Agreement or Disagreement (*N* = 140)

Statement	Mode	*M*	*SD*	% Agree	% Disagree
I enjoyed choosing my own words.	4	4.15	1.04	76.43	23.57
I would like to make my own English tests again.	4	4.09	1.07	75.71	24.29
I prefer tests made by the teacher.	3	3.59	1.19	50.71	49.29
I think that making my own test made me study less than usual.	4	3.55	1.23	53.96	46.04
I think that making my own test made me study more than usual.	3	3.50	1.24	49.29	50.71
I think that making my own test was interesting.	4	4.25	0.92	84.29	15.71
I think that making my own test was fun.	4	4.24	0.95	79.14	20.86
I think that making my own test was boring.	3	2.65	0.98	14.29	85.71
I think that making my own test was difficult.	3	3.11	1.13	33.09	66.91
I think that making my own test was useful for remembering new words.	4	4.12	1.14	72.14	27.86

Note. 1 = *strong disagreement*; 6 = *strong agreement*; responses of 1-3 were considered to be disagreement, 4-6 were agreement; not all percentages total 100% due to rounding, no response given, or both.

From their responses, it does not appear that many had strong feelings about the act of making their own tests regardless of whether they agreed or disagreed with the given statements. This is suggested by all of the items generating a mode response of either 3 or 4. Encouragingly though, the majority of students found making their own tests useful for remembering new words (72.14%), fun (79.14%), and interesting (84.29%). Moreover, most expressed an interest in doing the activity again (75.71%).

Despite my expectation that the activity would lead to an increased amount of studying on the part of the students by increasing their motivation, according to their self-reporting, there seemed to be little impact. The mean response to "I think that making my own test made me study less than usual" was 3.55 and to "I think that making my own test made me study more than usual" was 3.50. These responses indicate an overall neutral response. The mode response of 4 (*slightly agree*) to "I think that making my own test made me study less than usual" and the mode respond of 3 (*slightly disagree*) to "I think that making my own test made me study more than usual" perhaps even suggest a slight decrease in the amount that students studied.

Perhaps related to the students' view that creating their own tests did not increase the amount they studied, students do not appear to have found the act of making their own tests to be particularly challenging. About two thirds (66.91%) reported that it was not difficult.

Qualitative Data

In addition to the questionnaire items, students were given space to write their opinions of this new study method. Forty-six participants (32.9%) elected to provide responses to the open-ended questions. Most of the comments were positive, but several students raised concerns or provided constructive criticism. A brief summary of their comments follows.

Positive Student Feedback

Several students noted that this was their first time to make their own tests and several added that they found the novelty refreshing, thereby aiding in their motivation to study. One even said that they[1] would like to try the same method with other subjects.

One student commented that alternating teacher-made and student-made tests was also good for maintaining interest and motivation.

Several students expressed an appreciation of being in control of their own study. Some explained that they found this motivating, but others felt they were able to study more deeply and remember the vocabulary more easily because it was more personally meaningful. One student also expressed appreciation for the opportunity and freedom to both review and learn new words.

One student said it was good having the opportunity to write sample sentences, a feature absent from most standardized tests.

Critical Student Feedback

The most common concerns were that some students were unsure of what level or what kind of words they should be choosing. Some felt the teacher should set a certain level or provide a list of words to choose from.

One student expressed confusion about how to study words with multiple definitions.

Some expressed concerns about the fairness of the tests saying that they felt that some students were purposely choosing low-level (i.e., easier) words in order to get a higher score.

One student said they thought more self-made tests than the two completed in the course would have been better.

Discussion

Teachers who are familiar with vocabulary test development will appreciate that creating a test that suits a range of students in a given class can be challenging. By shifting the responsibility for making the test from the teacher to the students, each student writes a customized test suited to their own needs with a reduced burden on the teacher to create new tests. Furthermore, the activity encourages students to take responsibility for their learning. This means that if they do not score well on their own tests, they have no excuse. There are no trick questions or distractors. Poor performance cannot be blamed on unreasonable teacher expectations or unexpected questions. Rather, students must reflect and ask themselves whether they chose appropriate words and studied adequately.

As expected, students did very well on the matching component of the first section, which tested their receptive knowledge. Most students were able to match all 10 of their words and definitions and only occasionally did a student mistake two similar words or forget to draw a connecting line. However, the second section requiring the production of sample sentences proved to be a greater challenge for many students. The two most common issues were (a) failure to complete all of their sample sentences in the allotted time and (b) grammar mistakes, particularly in terms of collocations. Common collocation errors included the misuse of prepositions in conjunction with the target words and attempting to use the target word as a direct substitute for a known synonym. Students who had committed their sample sentences to memory seemed to have little difficulty in completing the test within the given time. It is suspected that those who had made their own sentences, rather than memorizing ready-made ones, encountered the most difficulty with grammar.

Despite the shift in responsibility for making the tests, there was no corresponding saving in time for the teacher for two main reasons. First, because this was a new activity for nearly all of the students, preparation took a considerable amount of time. Owing to the novelty of the activity, some students were a little unsure of the method for creating their own tests at first, so examples were essential. This was one of the reasons that students were asked to submit their tests for checking the week prior to the test day. Second, as each test was unique, considerably more time was required to mark them than is usual with standardized instruments. It is important that the teacher decide beforehand how strictly they will mark the sample sentences for local errors, that is, minor errors that "do not impede understanding" (Ferris, 2002, p. 22). In my own experience, much time has been wasted wrestling with whether points should be deducted for a missing article or spelling. I also had to be careful about not penalizing students who attempted longer or more complex sentences, as long as the target word itself and the immediately surrounding collocations were used correctly. About this last point, it is, as Laufer et al. (2005) recommended, worth discussing the importance of learning collocations with students as many overlook their significance. Indeed, Thornbury (2009) suggested that it may be more helpful to conceive of grammar as collocations rather than as a set of prescriptive rules and to encourage students to work to recognize the common word combinations through exposure and noticing.

As mentioned earlier, some students raised concerns about the fairness of the student-made tests as they perceived that some classmates were choosing easier words. This is a valid point and, in some part, the test depended on an honour system. In other words, students were responsible for choosing words they really had an interest in studying. However, the teacher could also explain that in classes of mixed ability, there will inevitably be a range of words chosen, and this is perfectly acceptable as one of the main objectives of the student-created test is to have students customize their studies to their own particular needs and interests. Moreover, it was rare for students to merely choose elementary-level words far below their current level. Both the survey and a review of the students' tests confirmed that the majority of words had indeed been selected from the textbook or other class materials. This suggests that the concerns about fairness were more of an issue of perception than reality.

Even when students did choose lower level vocabulary, they were still tasked with creating English definitions and grammatically correct, meaningful sentences. Therefore, there was little advantage in trying to create an easier test merely by choosing simpler words. Thus, for example, if a student chose a word such as *pen*, which they may have studied in junior high school, they would still be expected to formulate a definition (e.g.,

a writing tool using ink) and a sample sentence (e.g., *My pen broke while I was writing a letter and I got ink on my shirt*). The sentence that they learned in their junior high school textbook might not necessarily receive full marks. For example, the sentence *This is a pen*, although grammatically correct, does not indicate a specific meaning for *pen* without the context of other sentences or a picture. For many students, this would be the first time to write a definition of such a basic object in English rather than as a translation from their native language.

The process of creating their own tests did not appear to increase the amount of time students studied, but this may be because the test was more of a self-contained project. As students knew exactly what would be on their tests, they did not have to cover material that the teacher potentially could ask as is the case with a traditional test. In this way, the self-made test was as much a focused project as it was a test.

It should also be noted that I still implemented a number of traditional teacher-created tests. As a result, over the course of the 15-week term, students only completed two self-made tests. Although in the future I intend to make the activity a more regular feature of the course, wholly replacing teacher-made materials does not appear to be recommended. Garfield (1994) noted that with assessment "It is often recommended that multiple methods be used to provide a richer more complete representation of student learning" (p. 4).

Advice for Teachers

In order to address the above-mentioned concerns related to teacher marking, fairness, and method, it is imperative that the teacher (a) provide clear training in how to select words and create the tests and (b) discuss how the tests are marked. Also, although more advanced students may appreciate the freedom in being able to choose their words from any sources, setting guidelines for the kinds of words students choose may benefit beginners. In terms of training students to select their own words, Barker's (2007) "cost/benefit" questions are useful.

Questions to Ask the Teacher

1. Is this a common word in English?
2. Is it a useful word for someone at my level to learn?
3. Is there any reason I should learn this word now?

Questions to Ask Yourself

1. Have I met this word before? More than once?
2. Would I use the translation of this word in my language?
3. Do I have a special reason for wanting to know this word?
4. Will I meet or want to use this word?
5. Can I say this word?
6. Can I connect this word to any other word(s) I already know?
7. Can I personalize this word?
8. Will this be an easy word for me to remember?
9. Do I have room for this word in my budget right now?

To assist students in determining the level of vocabulary they should be choosing, Nation and Beglar's (2007) diagnostic test of one's receptive vocabulary knowledge is helpful (see <http://www.lextutor.ca/tests/levels/recognition/1_14k/> for an online version of this test). To help students in assessing the usefulness of the words they encounter, teachers may wish to introduce Browne, Culligan, and Phillips' (n.d.) New General Service List, which is a compilation of approximately 2800 high frequency words based on the Cambridge English Corpus, and Coxhead's (2000) Academic Word List, which is a compilation of 570 word families based on a written academic English corpus. In addition, the English-Japanese dictionary Eijirou, available at <www.alc.co.jp>, is a good source for learning collocations. It provides many sample phrases and sentences taken from authentic sources with Japanese translations.

Conclusions

The results of this preliminary study were largely positive, but it is expected that the activity would be received differently by other students, depending on such factors as their age, the educational setting, the course objectives, the amount of training, and their expectations. Nonetheless, the results reported here have been encouraging. Students appeared to embrace the novelty of creating their own tests. Moreover, the results suggested a willingness on the part of the students to take more control in their vocabulary acquisition and assessment. The results also indicate a further need for research into the effect of student-created assessment tools on their language acquisition.

Whatever the results of a study such as this, it may be that the greatest benefit of the self-made vocabulary test is that it turns what is nominally a test (i.e., an assessment tool) into more of a pedagogical activity. If the point of education is to help students to develop their learning skills and not merely to tell them where they stand in an academic pecking order, the inclusion of such formative assessment is invaluable. Students creating their own tests is a step in this direction.

Note

1.   In this paper, *they* and *their* are used as singular pronouns that are not gender specific.

Bio Data

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Appendix
Student Questionnaire

アンケート：自作の単語テストについて

今学期、２度行った自作の単語テストについてのアンケートです。研究目的の為匿名で行いますので正直に答えて下さい。

問１．あなたは似た様な自作のテストをしたことがありますか？
はい　　／　　いいえ
はいの場合、どこで/いつ？ ＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿

問２．なぜ、あなたはこのコースで自作のテストを行ったと思いますか？

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問３. 自作の単語テストの語彙はどこから選びましたか。該当するものに全てチェックして下さい。

□ 教科書の現在のユニット

□ 教科書の前のユニット

□ 先生からの配布資料から

□ 別の英語コースから

□ 友人から

□ その他：（説明してください）＿＿＿＿＿＿＿

問４. 何からサンプル文書を選びましたか。該当するものに全てチェックして下さい。

□ 教科書

□ 先生からの配布資料

□ 辞書

□ インターネット

□ 本/雑誌

□ 友人から

□ 自分で作った

□ その他：（説明してください）＿＿＿＿＿＿＿

問５.

Strongly disagree **1** 強くそう思わない	Quite disagree **2** そう思わない	Slightly disagree **3** あまり思わない	Slightly agree **4** まあまあそう思う	Quite agree **5** そう思う	Strongly agree **6** 強くそう思う

自作のテストを行い、どう思いましたか。当てはまるものに〇をつけてください。

自分で言葉を選ぶのが楽しかった。　　　　1------2------3------4------5------6

新しい言葉を選んだ。　　　　　　　　　　1------2------3------4------5------6

知っている言葉で、復習したいので選んだ。1------2------3------4------5------6

また同じ様な自作のテストがしたい。　　　1------2------3------4------5------6

先生によって作られたテストがしたい。　　1------2------3------4------5------6

自作のテストは

いつもより勉強した。　　　　　　　　1------2------3------4------5------6

いつもより少ない勉強時間だった。　　1------2------3------4------5------6

興味深かった。　　　　　　　　　　　1------2------3------4------5------6

楽しかった。　　　　　　　　　　　　1------2------3------4------5------6

退屈だった。　　　　　　　　　　　　1------2------3------4------5------6

自信がついた。　　　　　　　　　　　1------2------3------4------5------6

簡単だった。　　　　　　　　　　　　1------2------3------4------5------6

難しかった。　　　　　　　　　　　　1------2------3------4------5------6

新しい単語を覚えるのに役だった。　　1------2------3------4------5------6

新しい勉強法だった。　　　　　　　　1------2------3------4------5------6

とい６. 自作の単語テストについて意見がありますか。

詳しく説明してください：

Survey: Student-Created Vocabulary Tests

This survey is about your experience making your own vocabulary tests. The information will only be used for research purposes. Your individual responses are anonymous and confidential, so please answer honestly.

Part 1: Have you ever made your own test before?

Yes / No

If yes, where/when: ＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿

Part 2: Why do you think you were asked to make your own tests in this course?

Part 3: Where did you get your words for the vocabulary tests you made? Check all that apply:

☐ The current unit of the textbook

☐ A past unit of the textbook

☐ From handouts from the teacher

☐ From another English course

☐ From a friend

☐ Other: (please explain) _____

Part 4: Where did you get your sample sentences? Check all that apply:

☐ A textbook

☐ Class handouts from the teacher

☐ A dictionary

☐ The Internet

☐ A book/magazine

☐ A friend

☐ I made them myself

☐ Other: (please explain) _____

Part 5: These questions use the following scale:

Strongly disagree	Quite disagree	Slightly disagree	Slightly agree	Quite agree	Strongly agree
1	2	3	4	5	6

Please think about your experience making your own vocabulary tests. Please circle your answer.

I enjoyed choosing my own words	1----2----3----4----5----6
I mostly chose words that were new to me.	1----2----3----4----5----6
I mostly chose words that I knew but wanted to review.	1----2----3----4----5----6
I would like to make my own English tests again.	1----2----3----4----5----6
I prefer tests made by the teacher.	1----2----3----4----5----6

I think that making my own test:

Made me study less than usual.	1----2----3----4----5----6
Made me study more than usual.	1----2----3----4----5----6
Was interesting.	1----2----3----4----5----6
Was fun.	1----2----3----4----5----6
Was boring.	1----2----3----4----5----6
Gave me confidence.	1----2----3----4----5----6
Was easy.	1----2----3----4----5----6
Was difficult.	1----2----3----4----5----6
Was useful for remembering new words.	1----2----3----4----5----6
Was a new way to study.	1----2----3----4----5----6

Part 5: Do you have any general comments about the self-made vocabulary tests?

Please explain in detail