

Students' Views on Using Word Card Books in a Vocabulary Review Activity for Learning New English Vocabulary

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This paper examines students' views on the use of a vocabulary review activity (VRA) in learning the meaning, spelling, pronunciation and usage of new words met during Integrated English C lessons. Ten students responded to a five-item survey to provide quantitative and qualitative data on their views regarding the VRA and the word book it uses. While the results show the VRA to be quite useful for learning the meaning of new words, it was seen as more (i.e. very) useful for learning pronunciation, which is particularly problematic for Japanese students of English. The results also showed that the VRA was only a little helpful for learning how to spell and use new words within a grammatical framework. These results suggest that the use of the VRA should be continued, but perhaps adapted to facilitate more practice in spelling and using new vocabulary at the sentential level. Students' comments also shed light on how to improve the use of the word book and suggestions are forwarded.

Key Words: Vocabulary learning, Meaning, Spelling, Pronunciation, Usage, Recall

1 Introduction

While grammar may be seen as the framework upon which language is built, a wide vocabulary is needed to utilize that framework in various situations and for a range of meanings. This is why vocabulary is seen as an essential component in the knowledge of any language and why a large portion of elementary, junior and senior high school English classes in Japan are devoted to the learning of vocabulary. Indeed Carter & McCarthy [1], Carter [2], Aitchison [3] and McCarthy [4] have all highlighted the importance of vocabulary in learning foreign languages.

The challenge for foreign language teachers is to develop engaging activities which apply Second Language Acquisition theory relating to vocabulary learning within the time and material constraints imposed by the classroom setting. This paper therefore examines students' perceptions of a vocabulary review activity (VRA) and the word book it uses, both of which are intended to help students consolidate learning of the meaning, spelling, pronunciation and usage of new words in a second year Integrated English C (IE C) course.

2 The word book and Vocabulary Review Activity

In the first lesson of the IE C course, each student is given a small, 80-page, ring-bound vocabulary flashcard book (7 cm × 3 cm). Students write their name and student number on the front cover and

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the following questions on the back cover for easy reference during the VRA:

1. What does ~ mean in English / Japanese ?
2. How do you spell ~ ?
3. How do you say this word ?
4. What does ~ mean ?
5. Use ~ in a sentence.

When a student finds a new word during this (or any other course), they write the word in English on one side, being careful to spell the word correctly. They also include the part of speech (noun, verb, adjective etc.) to aid in correct grammar usage. For pronunciation, they also mark the stressed syllable and write the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA) symbols beneath the word. Learning these symbols also forms part of the IE C course content. They also write an example sentence to show correct usage. Finally, on the reverse side they write the Japanese equivalent.

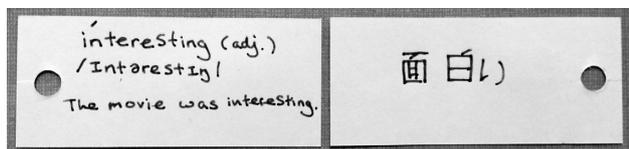


Photo 1 How the word card is set out.

The VRA lasts approximately five minutes, during which students work in pairs. They exchange their word books and take turns asking the above questions about the words in their partner's word book. The activity is done at the start of every IE C lesson so that repeated 'meeting' of the word can aid rapid recall and correct usage. However the word book can also be used as a self-study tool to review a word's meaning, spelling, pronunciation and usage whenever the student has spare time, for example on the bus or train.

Method

Ten students on the IE C class of 2017 were asked to anonymously complete the survey provided in the appendix immediately after a VRA session at the start of an IE C lesson. The survey was distributed and its purpose explained. The students were then given

enough time to complete the survey (approximately ten minutes), in Japanese and/or English. They then returned the forms by placing them on a table away from the teacher to maintain anonymity. The teacher offered to share the results with the class as soon as possible.

Analysis and discussion

The data for questions 1-4 were input into Microsoft Excel for analysis and to generate the results in graphical form (figures 1-4). To calculate the overall result for questions 1-4, 'Not useful' responses were assigned a value of 1 point, 'A little useful' 2 points, 'Quite useful' 3 points and 'Very useful' 4 points. The total for each question was calculated, then placed on a continuum which divided the four levels across a range between 10 points (minimum possible total) and 40 points (maximum possible total), as shown in table 1 below.

Table 1 Continuum score ranges

Description	Score range
Not useful	10~17 points
A little useful	18~25 points
Quite useful	26~33 points
Very useful	34~40 points

Question 1 asked how useful the VRA was for learning a new word's meaning. The results are shown in figure 1.

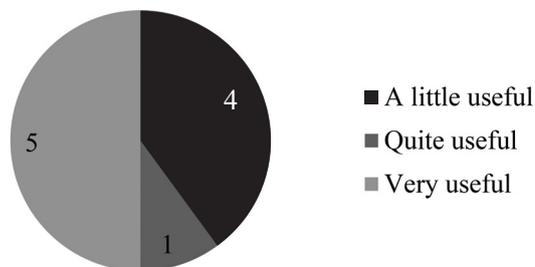


Fig. 1 Results for question 1: Meaning

Overall, question 1 had a total score of 31 points, suggesting that the group viewed the VRA to be quite useful for learning the meaning of new words. All ten

participants found the VRA and/or the word book useful to some degree in learning the meaning of new words. Half of the class found it very useful because:

- the word book can be used anywhere and anytime ($n=3$): “I can use any time” and “I can review many times when I have free time or am on the train.”;
- the word book is easy to use ($n=3$): “It was easy to look up a word when I forgot it.”
- they aid recall: “I learned well”.

However, four students found it only a little useful because:

- the words relate only to the IE C course ($n=2$);
- one prefers to learn new vocabulary by contextualizing it within a sentence and
- another felt there were too many words to learn.

Question 2 asked how useful the VRA was for learning a new word’s spelling. Figure 2 below shows the results.

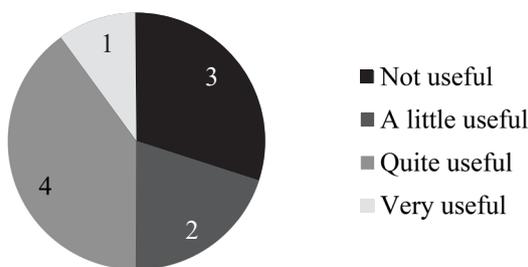


Fig. 2 Results for question 2: Spelling

Overall, question 2 had a total score of 23 points, showing that, as a group, the participants viewed the VRA and word book to be only a little useful for learning the spelling of new words. Three students commented that they do not actually use the VRA or word book to learn spelling, for example “I do not study spelling with this”, though it is unclear why they do not use the VRA or word book for this function. Another student highlighted the low correlation in English between spelling and pronunciation, which Moritoshi [5] has previously highlighted as a major source of difficulty for Japanese learners of English in acquiring spelling and pronunciation. More positive

comments included that the word book’s design makes it easy to review words’ spelling and to link a word’s spelling to its meaning. The one student who found the VRA and word book very useful for learning spelling ascribed this to the repetitive demands of the VRA itself.

Question 3 asked how useful the VRA was for learning a new word’s pronunciation. The results are presented in figure 3 below.

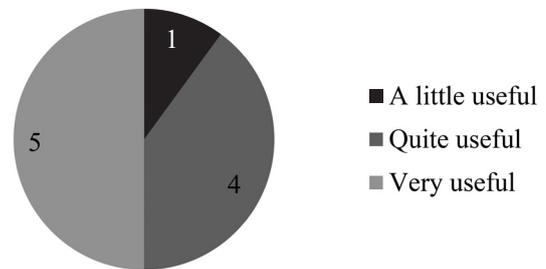


Fig. 3 Results for question 3: Pronunciation

Overall question 3 had a total score of 34 points, showing that the class viewed the VRA to be very useful for learning new words’ pronunciation. Three students who evaluated the VRA and word book as quite or very useful commented that they use the IPA symbols which they had learned in the IE C course to help them learn the pronunciation of new words, for example “I came to learn [the new words’ pronunciation] well because I have learned the phonetic symbols”. Learning the full set of 44 IPA symbols is a core element of the course as it provides students with a tool for autonomous learning and for the teacher to enhance classroom-based learning. These comments support both the inclusion of the IPA in the IE C course and the use of the IPA symbols in the word book.

A further three students rating the VRA and word book as quite or very useful highlighted that these had encouraged them to pay more attention to their English pronunciation in general and the pronunciation of new words in particular, for example “Especially I’m conscious of pronunciation with this”. Moritoshi [5] demonstrated that paying closer attention to their English pronunciation can help to reduce errors, so the finding here that the VRA and/or word book elicit this higher level of attention support their use in the IE C classroom. Furthermore, in evaluating the word

book as very useful, another student seems to have reported improved learner autonomy with respect to learning pronunciation: “I can practice by myself”.

Question 4 asked how useful the VRA was for learning a new word’s usage. Figure 4 below shows the results.

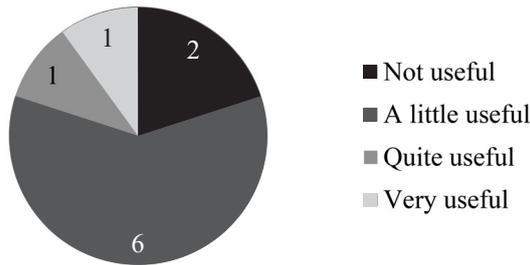


Fig. 4 Results for question 4: Usage

Overall question 4 had a total score of only 21 points, indicating that the participants viewed the VRA to be only a little useful for learning new words’ usage. Comments provided by the participants offer two reasons for this low score. The first is that three students apparently don’t use the VRA or word books to think about sentential level usage, for example “I don’t think about grammar”. Two other students pointed out that the word book is too small to write sample sentences. This feedback is useful as it indicates that students should be told to continue the sample sentence on to the reverse side of the card if they need more space.

Another student wrote that she “prefer[s] to learn the usage in a passage”. Texts can certainly help students to practice discourse level writing and reading and to contextualise individual lexical items. It is also true that ‘grammar’ can cross sentential boundaries, but even while Thornbury [6] makes a case for this view of language, he concedes that for the purposes of teaching English at lower levels, it is more pragmatic to treat grammar as a sentential level phenomenon. It should therefore be pointed out to students that they still need to know how to apply new vocabulary within individual sentences, regardless of preceding or following sentences.

Finally, one student stated that the cards helped them to learn a word’s usage because each card contained the part of speech: “The signs such as (v) and (adj.) are good to learn the grammar”, while

another found the inclusion of a sample sentence on each card useful: “The cards have not only the meaning of each word but also have sample sentences on them”. This supports the use of the cards’ limited space for both these components.

Question 5 asked students to evaluate the VRA using a sentence completion task. Of the ten participants, nine assessed the VRA positively in one way or another. Reasons provided included:

- that the various information each card contains aids language skills development ($n=3$): “I think it is very important for four skills”, especially speaking and listening: “I think it is important for conversation”;
- it’s selectivity: “I can review only the words I have not learned”;
- its multi-functionality: “the cards have sentences and pronunciation, as well as the spelling and meaning” and
- enjoyment.

Three others commented on the portability of the word book itself, for example “It’s compact to carry”, supporting the view that students like having the word book for review purposes.

The extent to which, and ways in which students benefit from the word book and VRA depend largely on how they use them and how often. If during the VRA their partner uses a limited range of questions rather than all five listed above, or if students do not use it beyond the IE C’s VRA, the learning effect would be restricted.

Conclusion

This paper examined students’ views on the use of the VRA in learning the meaning, spelling, pronunciation and usage of new words met during IE C lessons and other courses. While the results show the VRA to be quite useful for learning meaning, it was seen as more (i.e. very) useful for learning pronunciation, which is particularly problematic to Japanese students of English. The results also showed that the VRA was only a little helpful for learning how to spell and use new words within a grammatical framework. These results suggest that the use of the VRA should be continued, but perhaps

adapted to facilitate more practice in spelling and using new vocabulary at the sentential level.

References

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Appendix: Vocabulary review activity questionnaire

I am researching the use of vocabulary cards for learning English in my classes. Please answer questions 1~4, part a with a check mark (). Please answer all the questions in Japanese or English.

1a). How useful are vocabulary cards for learning a word's meaning ?

1 (Not useful)	2 (A little useful)	3 (Quite useful)	4 (Very useful)
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

1b). Why did you give that answer ?

Because _____

2a). How useful are vocabulary cards for learning a word's spelling ?

1 (Not useful)	2 (A little useful)	3 (Quite useful)	4 (Very useful)
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

2b). Why did you give that answer ?

Because _____

3a). How useful are vocabulary cards for learning a word's pronunciation ?

1 (Not useful)	2 (A little useful)	3 (Quite useful)	4 (Very useful)
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

3b). Why did you give that answer ?

Because _____

4a). How useful are vocabulary cards for learning a word's grammar usage ?

1 (Not useful)	2 (A little useful)	3 (Quite useful)	4 (Very useful)
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

4b). Why did you give that answer ?

Because _____

5). Finish the following sentence with your opinion about the vocabulary review activity:

The vocabulary review activity is _____
because _____.

Thank you for answering this survey. I will tell you the results later.