

Using Student Writing to Plan and Develop A Reflective Course of Study

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Abstract

As all experienced teachers know, as students change from class to class and year to year so too do their language learning needs. For this reason, identifying lexical features that need to be taught to a particular group of students represents an important starting point when developing second language courses. The following paper will overview the process of analyzing student writing with the purpose of using results to devise a tentative “four strand” vocabulary building curriculum.

The Question of Vocabulary

Looking at language pedagogy textbooks today we often find extensive chapters on the four skills of language learning ; reading, writing, speaking, and listening. These four aspects of language are seen to be the pillars of learning, and any “good” course of study needs to incorporate all of them. Vocabulary teaching and learning is given little priority in second language learning programmes.

However many researchers, like Folse (2004), believe that the notion that vocabulary is not as important as other aspects of language knowledge to be a “myth.” Nation (2002) states that for most second language learners, language focused vocabulary instruction is an essential part of any language programme.

Reading and listening skills come from developing receptive vocabulary knowledge, and writing and speaking skills are the results of improving student productive vocabulary knowledge. It is argued then that at the very heart of learner language skill development is the question of vocabulary. Vocabulary growth needs to be planned for, deliberately controlled, and monitored (Hunt & Beglar, 2002 ; Nation, 2001). However, the position taken in this paper is that any deliberate and controlled actions must follow formal assessments of student proficiency and needs.

The Needs Analysis

Any language teacher will soon discover that second language instruction is a highly variable task. Teaching techniques and activities that once worked in the past may not work in the present, nor future. Today, with rapidly changing social norms, students and teaching contexts are becoming increasingly complex. Teachers are no longer able to use generic or generalized approaches to classroom problem solving and language teaching. There is a need for language teaching solutions and strategies to become more and more tailored to individual contexts. Many researchers feel that now, more than ever, teachers need to conduct context appropriate needs analysis to address the problems of curriculum design in today's classrooms (Brown, 2001 ; Hinkel, 2004 ; Nation, 2001 ; Raimes, 2002). Diagnostic needs analysis involve teachers analyzing initial student writing and speaking in order to explore possible instructional directions for their classrooms. The following paper will overview the process of analyzing student writing with the purpose of using results as a basis for future vocabulary/language learning instruction. Using student diagnostic compositions, the initial productive knowledge of students is assessed, forming the boundaries for developing a well-balanced language course outline containing Nation's four major strands of

language instruction : meaning focused input, meaning focused output, language focused instruction, and the development of vocabulary fluency (2001 ; 2002).

The Subjects

The action research project proposed in this paper was conducted with first year English majors at Fukuoka Jo Gakuin Jr. College, a women's University in Fukuoka, Japan. Class sizes are small, averaging about 20 students per class. The proficiency level of the students in the department is measured by interviews and standardized tests (TOIEC Bridge). Based upon test scores and interviews the students are divided into upper, intermediate, and lower ability classes.

A lower-intermediate proficiency level class was used for this study. The class consisted of 27 students ranging from 18 to 19 years old. The students in the study were all relatively highly motivated English Language majors, with excellent attendance and assignment completion histories.

The Diagnostic Composition

During class, students were required to write a short 2-3 paragraph description. The inspiration for the writing task was a detailed photograph of a man and child riding a bicycle. Students were told to write as much as they could to accurately describe the picture. Students were not allowed to use dictionaries and were given a time limit of 30 minutes. The paragraphs were collected after the class to be used as a diagnostic measure of student ability.

Data Collection Procedure

A pre-analysis of the student writing was undertaken in order to aid in initial

curriculum planning. Initially all papers were quickly skimmed and assessed using a generic academic checklist (appendix 1). Once each paper was read, the evaluating instrument was refined and the papers were once again thoroughly re-read and diagnosed with the refined guidelines (appendix 2). When diagnosing student ability it is important to devise an instrument that fits the needs of the students as opposed to having students fit the instrument. Otherwise the results found would tend to be more prescriptive than responsive to student needs.

Preliminary Results

Although every composition seemed to show individual strengths and weaknesses, issues of commonality were present. Many of the compositions displayed a lack of lexical variety. Words were frequently repeated seemingly for a lack of alternatives. Common function words were often overused or altogether absent. Students frequently made errors with the placement and use of adverbs and adjectives. Often modifier affixes were omitted or misused. Average sentence lengths found in the compositions were short. There seemed to be a lack of cohesive devices used throughout to develop student ideas.

Lexical Richness Measure

Initial assessments of student compositions found that the overall quality of student writing to be poor. Student sentences relied on straight SVO constructs along with scarce functional vocabulary. Student compositions tended to lack a personal and descriptive quality that is common with native production. Based on these initial findings an additional assessment measure was administered. Similar to Laufer *et al*'s (1995) measures of lexical richness, a measure of modifier density (MD) was taken to assess to what extent students were using

descriptive modifiers.

$$MD = \frac{\text{\# of lexical modifier tokens} \times 100}{\text{Total \# of lexical tokens}}$$

This measure could also be used throughout the course to determine to what extent students are making productive use of previously introduced materials.

Vocabulary Levels Test

Due to time constraints, Nation's (2001) Vocabulary Levels Test (VLT) was not completed for this research project. In future proposals the VLT would be conducted along with the diagnostic compositions in order to better evaluate student initial lexical abilities.

Tentative Curriculum Guidelines

Based on the results of the student diagnostic compositions the following course curriculum was devised.

Figure 1

Week	Vocabulary Cards ¹	Skill Building ²	Strategy Use ²	Extensive Writing ³
1	Introducing vocabulary card techniques	Introducing the skill building tasks	Introducing the need for strategy use	Introducing the Journal assignment and fluency tasks
2	1000-2000 word lists given to students	Using adjectives	Cultural Conventions	Extensive fluency practice Writing task- picture story Journal writing assignment
3	New vocabulary assignment & Evaluation	Using descriptive modifiers in a story	Analysing Word Parts- Adjectives	Extensive fluency practice Writing task- picture story Journal writing assignment
4	New vocabulary assignment, Review & Evaluation	Using adverbs	Using Context	Extensive fluency practice Writing task- picture story Journal writing assignment
5	New vocabulary assignment, Review & Evaluation	Using descriptive modifiers in a story	Analysing Word Parts- Adverbs	Extensive fluency practice Writing task- picture story Journal writing assignment
6	New vocabulary assignment, Review & Evaluation	Using prepositional phrases	Noticing- to be used with vocabulary cards	Extensive fluency practice Writing task- picture story Journal writing assignment
7	Review & Evaluation	Course Review	Course Review	Extensive fluency practice Writing task- picture story Journal writing assignment
8	New vocabulary assignment, Review & Evaluation	Using Gerunds	Dictionary Skills	Extensive fluency practice Writing task- picture story Journal writing assignment
9	New vocabulary assignment, Review & Evaluation	Paragraph formation	*Generative Learner Strategy as needed	Extensive fluency practice Writing task- picture story Journal writing assignment
10	New vocabulary assignment, Review & Evaluation	Conjunctions and Transition words	*Generative Learner Strategy as needed	Extensive fluency practice Writing task- picture story Journal writing assignment
11	New vocabulary assignment, Review & Evaluation	Using conjunctions and transition words in a story	*Generative Learner Strategy as needed	Extensive fluency practice Writing task- picture story Journal writing assignment
12	Review & Evaluation	Course Review	Course Review	Course Review

¹ The rate of new vocabulary should be adjusted on a weekly basis to best match the needs of students.

² As necessary more time can be spent with skill building and independent strategy development.

³ The fluency building tasks should be varied regularly to account for, and maintain, student interest.

* Near the end of the course the selection of learner strategies should be more individualized to specific learning styles and needs.

After a teacher has developed a course curriculum, it is necessary to explain the overall course of study to students. If students understand the direction of the course and how the instructor intends to meet language goals, then they are better able to take responsibility for their own learning. It is important for students to be updated on learning objectives as the course changes and develops.

Vocabulary

Recent research on L2 vocabulary learning has made direct connections between vocabulary acquisition and extensive reading (Nation, 2001). Vocabulary knowledge however, is very fragile and will soon be lost if not encountered repetitively after the initial exposure. An average word must be met 7 to 20 times before it is “known”. This amount of repetition may not be easily found in today’s graded readers. Hulstijn & Laufer (2001) also illustrate that uptake from incidental exposure tends to occur at low rates, if at all, in most graded reading materials. Therefore relying on extensive reading alone to teach vocabulary can be seen to be largely ineffective. Improvements in student vocabulary would then have to be made through explicit instruction and memorization techniques. Early on in the course of study students need to be presented with the most frequent 1000 and 2000 word lists and be required to study the vocabulary at home.

One of the most effective means for studying vocabulary at home is the use of Vocabulary Cards. Recent research has demonstrated that overt studying provides not only the best returns for time spent, but it is also an effective means of increasing depth of lexical knowledge (Nation, 2001; Schmitt & Schmitt, 1995).

- Vocabulary Cards

In order to quickly build student vocabulary bases, the course curriculum

outlined in this paper calls for the regular use of vocabulary cards. Initial classes entail explicit instruction on practical and strategical vocabulary card use. From the first week of study students will be assigned 10-15 new words/week to be studied. The selection and number of new words will be varied from week to week according to student progress.

Students should limit the number of words they study to reduce cognitive strain, and thus improve their chances of acquisition. Frequent short sessions with a limited number of words are ideal as they facilitate the exposure and repetition that is necessary for acquisition. Each week students will be assigned new words. Each word ought to start with a different letter of the alphabet, and not contain similar syllables. Synonyms, antonyms, or otherwise related words should not be studied together (i.e. jobs, animals, foods...). In doing so, students will again eliminate confusion, reduce cognitive strain, and improve their chances of success (Tinkham, 1997).

- **Spaced Review**

When using vocabulary cards to study new words, a number of sets and tiered levels should be used. Words should be ranked in levels from first exposure new vocabulary, through to “known” words that students can use comfortably in speech or writing. Three or four different levels of familiarity and facility should suffice. Within each level the student should have a number of vocabulary card sets.

As students study vocabulary from the first tier (new words), their goal should be only basic understanding: a direct L2-L1 translation of meaning. During the initial stages of lexical acquisition, translation is a necessary and useful approach to L2 learning, and according to Barcroft (2004), anything more can inhibit learning.

Once familiar, the words should be moved up to the next level for more

comprehensive understanding. Successive levels could involve using the new words in context (spoken or written), describing the word in detail, etc., until the student is confident that they are “known”. Along with improving their sight vocabulary learners must also practice saying and listening to the pronunciation of the word. This ensures that the new vocabulary is stored in the learner’s visual and aural/oral memory.

Two key elements of using vocabulary cards are self-testing and repetition. Learners must administer their own forms of tests to graduate a word from one level to the next. If a word has been forgotten, or cannot be used with confidence and speed, it should be demoted to the previous tier. The movement of words between these different levels will lead to the repetition of exposure that is necessary for acquisition.

Noticing New Words

According to Sokmen (1992), students should not be overlooked as a source of level appropriate vocabulary. To tie in vocabulary building activities with other classes (reading, speaking and listening), students should be given the task of finding new words for the class to study. With strategy instruction and practice, it is hoped that students will begin to be able to recognize in textbooks and graded readers, lexical forms similar to those explicitly taught in classroom skill-building lessons. If words are frequent in one book, they are likely to be found in others of a similar topic (Hirsh & Nation, 1992). It is possible for students to teach each other new descriptive modifiers and to provide stylistic examples of authentic vocabulary.

Again, with the use of vocabulary cards, it would be wise to explicitly explain to students that there is a direct connection between an improvement in their vocabulary base and the quality of their language skills.

Language Focused Instruction

A central goal of the course involves improving student awareness and use of descriptive modifiers. Early on in the course of study students will engage in activities to improve their awareness of adverbs and adjectives through the study of word parts and common affixes (figure 1).

Along with improving student descriptive vocabulary, there is a need to address micro organizational features in student writing. According to Hinkel (2004), one of the most practical approaches to teaching features of language is the study of lexicalized stems along with appropriate replacements and substitutable parts (e.g., for example, for instance, in particular). The proposed course of study outlined in this paper involves explicitly introducing vocabulary such as conjunctions and transitional devices, and allowing for extensive practice.

Meaning Focused Input

Fukuoka Jo Gakuin is an ideal setting for coordinating English reading, writing, speaking and listening classes in order to provide students with rich meaning focused input. Fukuoka Jo Gakuin Jr. College has implemented topic based instructional guidelines in which teachers from every class cover similar themes. Recycling of vocabulary across the four skills is vital in reinforcing and maintaining the new language in memory.

Meaning Focused Output

Based on the diagnostic essays, there was also a need for error analysis and instruction with common function words and affixes. Nation (2001) states that learners need feedback on errors in order to develop a deeper understanding of

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vocabulary including not only form but also constraints on use. Feedback offered to students should be explicit when necessary, but in instances where the entire class is having difficulties, more time should be spent. Nation (2002) states that allowing for students to negotiate on the meaning of unknown vocabulary, and using Consciousness-Raising (CR) instructional techniques, are essential alternatives to traditional teacher-centred instruction. CR tasks are activities that provide students with information about how a particular language form works, and helps them work out the “rules” for themselves. Students who negotiate meanings and receive instruction that attempts to affect the way in which they intake language input are better able to process, and subsequently use language forms (Brown, 2001).

Developing Fluency with Vocabulary

Along with ensuring initial exposure, teachers have to provide students opportunities to develop fluency with receptive and productive knowledge (Nation, 2002). In each lesson students perform tasks involving previously introduced language, allowing them to develop receptive and productive speeds. Students are encouraged to incrementally produce more language in the given amount of class time. Assigned Journal Writing homework also allows students to build fluency outside of class.

Independent Strategy Development

The proposed course of study also highlights the need to develop student strategy use. Teaching students about using and developing learning strategies is an effective way of empowering students, and providing them with increased responsibility for their own learning. Nation (2001) and Schmitt (1997) both

stress the need for introducing strategies to students along with providing opportunities to practice in, and outside of the language classroom. Based on suggestions from Nation and Schmitt, time each week will be set aside for the introduction of vocabulary learning strategies (figure 1). This meta-linguistic awareness provides students with the skills and confidence they need to accomplish a variety of language goals. Included with instruction of strategies is a goal of raising student awareness of cultural norms in English.

- Cultural Conventions

Frequently the phlegmatic nature of student production is attributed to a lack of proficiency. However, another way to approach this problem is by considering the notion of responsibility: reader vs. writer responsibility, and speaker vs. listener responsibility. When teaching second language learners one must consider carefully the social and cultural differences that arise with respect to topic presentation and expansion. Japanese is frequently *full* of implied omissions. Whereas native English speakers tend to be quite colourful and expressive, details readily apparent to listeners/readers are often not included by Japanese language learners. McKay (1993), states that there is a need to openly discuss cultural differences in approaches to language. As writing is a social activity, the concepts of audience and genre (*discourse community*) are fundamental. Swales (1990) states that there is a necessity for students to produce writing that is acceptable to their intended readers.

Problems with the Diagnostic Writing

An initial problem with the diagnostic student writing concerns the fact that only one sample was used per student. Laufer and Nation (1995) state that when assessing student writing it is important to acquire samples written on various

topics. They argue that as some themes are sure to be of more intrinsic interest to students, the quantity and quality of the writing would be variable. While a broader sample would provide a more accurate measure of student language needs, it is not a realistic option for this study. Instead, the course curriculum devised from the diagnostic writing should be used as a starting point, and developed and altered as more information of student proficiency becomes available.

When deciding the final shape of the course, it is worthwhile to stress the cyclical nature of the process, where continual evaluations of student writing leads to further analysis and alterations to the course curriculum.

Evaluation of the approach

When considering language and vocabulary development this approach seems like an ideal pedagogical choice, however, it does involve some constraints and disadvantages. The process of reactively creating a curriculum based on student writing is a time intensive but worthy undertaking. As every teaching context and students have different needs they will require a different approach. In large classrooms with fixed time constraints it may not be feasible to incorporate all of the stages outlined in this paper. It is therefore up to teachers to use these instructional techniques flexibly, depending on their goals, and according to the needs of their learners. It is possible to teach some of the skills related to receptive and productive vocabulary development and leave others to future classes. As always, the teacher should introduce a programme that best meets the needs of the learners.

Conclusion

Using diagnostic essays to design a course curriculum represents a shift in

vocabulary acquisition and language learning pedagogy, diverting focus from the what students should know or be taught, to thoughts about what they actually do know, and how to best narrow the gap between them. Ideally the process outlined in this paper should be an ongoing cycle of student evaluation, classroom reflection and assessment, leading to changes made to the course curriculum.

Appendix 1 based on Hinkel's (2004) Academic Checklist

Generic Checklist	
_____	Approx. # of words
Error Analysis	
Noun ending errors	
_____	Singular/Plural
_____	Other--suffixation
Verb errors	
_____	tense
_____	form (irregular verbs)
_____	active/passive (form/meaning)
_____	modals
Other errors	
_____	Articles
_____	Prepositions
_____	Conjunctions
_____	Prepositions
Language Needs	
Vocabulary/Written Register	
_____	Collocations
_____	Nominalizations
_____	Synonym clusters
_____	Nouns
_____	Verbs
_____	Adjectives/Adverbs
_____	Catch-all nouns
_____	Hedges
_____	Noun quantifiers
_____	Frequency adverbs
_____	Modal verbs

Appendix 2 based on Hinkel's (2004) Academic Checklist

Diagnostic Checklist

Student Composition #	*1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8...
Approx. # of words								
Vocabulary Error Analysis								
Noun ending errors								
Singular/Plural								
Other--suffixation								
Verb errors								
Tense								
form (irregular verbs)								
active/passive (form/meaning)								
Modals								
Other errors								
Articles & Prepositions								
Conjunctions & Transtions								
Vocabulary Needs								
Vocabulary/Written Register								
Collocations								
Synonym clusters								
Nouns								
Verbs								
Adjectives/Adverbs								
Frequency adverbs								
Modal verbs								
Subordinate clauses								
Adverb								
Adjective								

*Columns can be added or removed depending upon the size of the sample.
Using one instrument to assess an entire class allows teachers to quickly weigh language needs.

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