Usage-Based Vocabulary Teaching in Japanese Secondary Education

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Introduction

The Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) in Japan conducted a nationwide English achievement test for third-year junior high school students across the nation in line with the government's plan to improve students' abilities in the language. According to National Institute for Educational Policy Research (NIER, 2019), the test results highlighted Japanese students' poor English speaking and writing skills. In the speaking section, for instance, many students struggled with impromptu speech on randomly chosen topics, while in the writing section, many students had difficulty using their vocabulary and grammar skills or struggled with writing coherently. Although MEXT announced the introduction of a new curriculum for junior high schools beginning in 2021 where more focus will be put on speaking and writing skills (MEXT, 2014), many junior high schools have yet to apply a balanced pedagogical strategy that would enable students to develop these productive skills (i.e., speaking and writing).

As an underpinning factor which is common to these language skills, vocabulary learning has an integral aspect of second language (L2) learning, so that applying effective vocabulary learning strategies into L2 pedagogy is very important. Nevertheless, there seems to be no framework for teaching English vocabulary efficiently in Japanese secondary education, where Japanese students heavily rely on rote memory strategies to learn vocabulary, that is, writing or saying decontextualized words repeatedly. In this paper, L2 vocabulary learning focusing on productive use in Japanese EFL context will be discussed from a usage-based perspective.

Review of Critical Studies

The Process of Language Acquisition

Ellis (2019) proposed five learner-related key factors of the process of language acquisition; learned attention, automaticity, transfer, overshadowing, and blocking, and that these cognitive factors each play important roles in language acquisition. Ellis also proposed another five construction-related factors; frequency, saliency, prototypicality, redundancy, and contingency, as key concepts in the process of language acquisition. Based on this framework of cognitive approaches, Ellis emphasized that it is through usage experience that form-function mappings are woven into a network of construction forms and their meanings, and "through this network, activation spreads as a function of the learned probabilities of the different form-meaning associations that a speaker has formed over his or her lifespan" (Ellis, 2019, p.45). He describes this knowledge networks as the one which arise from originally few and simple mechanism that learners employ, and that the knowledge evolves over time to be complex, dynamic and adaptive (p.45). However, while it is convincing as for L1 acquisition that in usage-based, input-based, and implicit learning, learners gradually figure language out through experiencing the frequencies of occurrence of construction hypothesizing the probabilities and learn to use them consistently thereafter, Ellis (2015) pointed out that L2 acquisition by implicit mean alone is limited in its success, for fluent native language processing is characterized as being automatized and unconscious, while L2 processing is not.

Cognitive Approach for L1 Transfer

Ellis (2006) elaborated the associative learning theory to explain the fragile features of L2 acquisition where input fails to become intake, while L1 acquisition produces a final-state model of language that properly reflects input. The primary idea is that once an L1 is acquired, one cannot process an L2 without the filter of the L1. Ellis argues that "linguistic forms that L2 learners fail to adopt and to use routinely thereafter in their second language

processing are those which, however available as a result of frequency, recency, or context, fall short of intake because of one of associative learning factors of contingency, cue competition, or salience, or because of associative attentional tuning involving interference, overshadowing and blocking, or perceptual learning, all shaped by the L1" (2006, p.165). Selinker (1971) developed the concept of interlanguage and emphasized that language transfer is an integral part of SLA, but it is accompanied by a range of other factors including the overgeneralization of L2 rules, or transfer of training and strategies of L2 learning.

What they both emphasize is that second language acquisition does not have an end-state model, but it is influenced by interactions among the different part of the complex system that are unique in time (Ellis, 2006). L1 transfer does exist to an extent which cannot be ignored, and interlanguage is affected by a range of developmental factors, so that cannot be described as stepwise from unacquired to acquired, but multidimensional continuum.

Dual approaches of Implicit AND Explicit Language Learning

While implicit learning is defined as to be the learning of complex information without selective attention to what is being learned, L2 acquisition is largely characterized as to be explicit learning (Ellis, 2019). He argues, citing Schmidt's (2001) Noticing Hypothesis, that L2 learners must pay conscious and selective attention to the target structures, so that explicit learning and teaching gain even more relevance for L2 learners in EFL context where there is only limited L2 input takes place. Based on this argument, Ellis suggests that form-focused instruction (FFI) can help to encourage noticing, by which learners' attention can be drawn to linguistic forms that might otherwise be ignored. Then, "once a construction has been represented in this way, its use in subsequent implicit processing can update the statistical tallying of its frequency of usage and probabilities of form-function mapping" (Ellis, 2015, p.14). Schmitt (2008) also argues that explicit and intentional

learning "almost always leads to greater and faster gains, with a better chance of retention and of reaching productive levels of mastery" (p.341), when it is accompanied with repeated exposure both to new words and to high-frequency vocabulary, which may enrich and strengthen the learner's knowledge of it.

Pedagogical implications

According to Ellis' (2019) cognitive approaches to language acquisition, what makes L2 acquisition difficult is the lack of frequent exposure to the target language and top-down knowledge to support their lack of perception of the language features. In addition, various cognitive biases as a result of L1 experiences, by which their attention to the target language is distracted, also make it difficult for non-native speakers to acquire L2. Based on this L2 learning conditions, I will investigate some practical implications in terms of explicit vocabulary teaching focusing on productive use in Japanese secondary education.

Teaching Dictionary Use

Typically, Japanese junior high school students are never taught how to use an English dictionary until they get into the high school, because they are not asked to use a dictionary when they are in junior high school, for each course book has its word lists as appendix, within which all the tasks and the tests are arranged. However, probably for the purpose of reducing students' cognitive load, those word lists typically present only one translation for a word which is the most suitable in the contexts of the textbook, although a word in one language does not always have an identical translation in the other language. Allowing students to memorize a word spelling and its L2 translation using that kind of word lists alone eventually hinders the opportunities for weaving their mean-function mapping into their knowledge of language.

Nation (2011) suggests that beginning and intermediate learners are better off using a bilingual dictionary, which seems to be quite reasonable to the Japanese junior high school

students. Furthermore, it is necessary that teachers demonstrate how to use it together with the students until students get used to the strategies to learn vocabulary using the dictionary. For this purpose, having the students have the same specific dictionary is efficient to do so. For example, when teaching the word, *police*, which few students try to look up because they believe they 'know' the word, the teacher can ask them to open the dictionary on the page where the word is and check (a) that the word is one of the high frequency words and (b) that the Japanese learners should be careful about the word stress, and (c) the word is uncountable, treated as plural, and often occurs with the article *the*, drawing the students conscious attention to the function and the meaning of the item. Teacher can choose which item they teach and the extent to which they will elaborate the word meaning, depending on the learners' proficiency level. When they get used to learning vocabulary using a dictionary, then, they can commence to learn by themselves outside of the classroom.

Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) and Willingness to Communicate (WTC)

In TBLT, a task is seen as central to the learning cycle and is very much towards the meaning-based goal, engaging the learners' interest primarily focusing on meaning, having them related to real world activities through communicative tasks (Willis & Willis, 2009).

As for interpersonal communication in the L2 classroom, Oxford (1997) pointed out that one of the aspects that interaction relates to is learners' willingness to communicate (WTC) with each other. WTC has been defined as a student's intention to interact with others in the target language, given the chance to do so. Second language WTC research has empirically shown that WTC increases the frequency of use of foreign languages both inside and outside of the classroom, and a high frequency of use is associated with more L2 learning (e.g., Yashima, Zenuk- Nishide, & Shimizu, 2004). On the other hand, a study, which explored the longitudinal changes of Japanese EFL learners' psychological attributes of unwillingness to speak English in a task-based classroom, shows that while learners

experienced positive gains overwhelmingly, communicative TBLT may not be suitable for L2 learning of introverted learners because avoidance of communication induced by unwillingness causes an obstacle to L2 learning (Fukuta, 2017). Therefore, it is important that these types of learners, before engaging in communicative lessons, must have confidence, or even skills, to speak in a second language to some extent.

Writing for speaking

Speaking activities designed to encourage the use of certain vocabulary can be used as the first stage of a writing task (Nation, 2013). However, considering Japanese teenage learners tend to hesitate to speak spontaneously in front of their classmates, it would be better to adopt those activities in the backward direction. For example, teachers can let them choose the topic that they are familiar with and ask them to write about the topic. If the purpose of the writing is to have the students practice conjunction relationship (e.g., cause and effect, contrast), teachers need to draw the students' attention to a range of vocabulary representing conjunction and encourage them to use that vocabulary. After the students finish their first draft, teachers have them trade their writings with their peer, and give feedback each other, giving a clue for a correction, such as 'WC' for the word choice error or 'WF' for the word form error as scaffolding. Then teachers add other feedbacks giving them comments and underlining the part where the student need to change or elaborate, facilitating their noticing. Evans, Hartshorn, McCollum, and Wolfersberger (2010) advocate the value of written corrective feedback (WCF). That is, feedback can be beneficial when the students can have enough time to process, learn from, and apply the feedback the teacher provides and invest in the learning process by reasoning through their errors. After they finish writing, teachers give their students some time to practice reading aloud, providing them with advice about phonological aspects and delivery. With carefully written script, the students can be more confident about making a speech in the class. In addition, when they have QA time, teachers can provide the students with the opportunities to

retrieve the vocabulary appeared in the speech.

Conclusion

One of the important jobs for language teachers is to have their students well informed of the strategies to learn vocabulary explicitly and always encourage them to keep learning vocabulary. The view that the learning vocabulary is cumulative process where meaning and knowledge of form are gradually enriched and strengthened (Nation, 2013) supports Ellis' (2019) framework of cognitive approaches to second language acquisition, in that language learning is multidimensional continuum which keeps evolving, whether we are conscious or unconscious of it.

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