Designing Distance Learning Tasks to Help Maximize Vocabulary Development

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ABSTRACT

Task-based language learning using the benefits of online computer-assisted language learning (CALL) can be effective for rapid vocabulary expansion, especially when target vocabulary has been pre-arranged into bilingual categories under simpler, common Semantic Field Keywords. Results and satisfaction levels for both Chinese English majors and Japanese Engineering majors were high in this qualitative comparative study, indicating its potential for helping many students from various language backgrounds to rapidly expand their target language vocabulary, especially when blended with other real language negotiation tasks, preferably for an authentic audience. Print versus online reading and vocabulary development methods are compared, as well as surveys of both Chinese and Japanese college students, after they were engaged in a “Collaborative Writing Exchange Project” using similar online vocabulary development tools. All target terms were pre-organized and made available under common Semantic Field Keywords online in both Japanese and Chinese, but students had freedom to choose within sets of most relevant words from five academic disciplines. Writing themes were suggested to learners in both countries to keep their email exchanges consistent.

Keywords: Clickable Glossing, Computer-Assisted Language Learning (CALL), Density and Placement of Word Glosses in Reading Texts, Digital Vocabulary Learning, Enhancing Online Reading, Immediate-Access Automatic Glossing, Second Language Vocabulary Acquisition (SLVA)

INTRODUCTION

Important issues in language learning are addressed by this study, especially how to help improve vocabulary development, which will always play a pivotal role in language acquisition. By using a computer-assisted language learning (CALL) based Semantic Field Keyword Approach (Loucky, 2004) coupled with online reading and collaborative writing tasks we were able to help Japanese graduate engineering students learn how to rapidly improve their low English vocabulary levels. At the same time, our colleague working with Taiwanese undergraduate English students helped her students to improve their vocabulary and writing skills, using some of the same programs and sharing in a collaborative writing exchange. This article reviews the outcome of this distance learning project, with a particular focus on what we can learn from how these online and classroom-based programs were used to help both Chinese and Japanese students
improve their English reading, vocabulary and writing skills.

**LITERATURE REVIEW**

Many language teachers have been looking for more innovative and interesting approaches to improve online second language reading and writing instruction. Pan and Huang (2009) developed a web-based college English outside reading (which they abbreviated as a WBEOR) learning system for freshmen, evaluated recently in Japan’s *JALT CALL Journal*. While their site was not made publicly available for testing, the writer compared his online reading-writing course with his research partner’s in Taiwan (Huang et al., 2009) from Fall 2007-Spring 2008. Common points between these studies are their search for features that enhance language learning motivation, web-based learning satisfaction, and both English reading and writing achievement as well as L2 vocabulary acquisition rates. Two other recent studies related to CALL-enhanced writing instruction are Chang, Chang, Chen, and Liou (2008) and Napolitatno and Stent (2004).

Dictionary research has sought to answer general questions about which kinds of electronic portable, software or online dictionaries offer the best support for vocabulary and language learning. Our study in particular sought to find out to what extent using a pre-organized, bilingualized online glossary based on an author-designed computerized version of the Semantic Field Keyword Approach would enhance both vocabulary learning and use by Japanese and Chinese learners engaged in five “Collaborative Writing Exchanges.”

**Aspects of Second Language Vocabulary Acquisition (SLVA) Investigated**

While it is now widely recognized that enhanced attention to a new word’s form, greater elaboration, and motivation help to promote vocabulary learning, Laufer and Hulstijn’s (2001) construct of task-induced involvement and cognitive load upon the learner, with its three motivational and cognitive dimensions of need, search and evaluation will be considered here. Following their suggestion that we may be able to better measure and develop second language vocabulary acquisition (SLVA) by furthering task-induced involvement, the researcher (Loucky, 2005, 2006, 2007) has focused upon finding ways to better measure, motivate, teach and develop vocabulary learning strategies (VLSs) used by language learners online as well as in print.

The present study is situated within this same cognitive framework, as well as building further upon insights about dimensions and strategies involved in SLVA put forward by Henriksen (1999), Gu (2000), etc. In addition to their constructs regarding L2 vocabulary development, we need to more sharply define depth of vocabulary knowledge and lexical processing as including a rarely measured or researched construct, which has been called degree of organizational structure of the mental lexicon (or DOS) (Loucky, 2005). Situated within this multi-dimensional model of SLVA, this study examines how to use various vocabulary assessment instruments and learning sites to produce more task-induced involvement or deeper lexical processing and elaboration, using four motivating dimensions. These include Laufer and Hulstijn’s need, search and evaluation, as well as what we may call the degree of organizational structure developed within a learner’s mental lexicon (L1 or L2).

Generally speaking, language learners prefer access to both first and second language information, and beginner to intermediate level learners are in need of both kinds of data, making monolingual dictionaries alone insufficient for their needs. Since Laufer and Hadar (1997) and others have shown the benefits of learners using fully bilingualized dictionaries, an important research question is to try to determine which kinds of electronic portable, software or online dictionaries offer the best support for their needs. There is a close relationship between processing new terms more deeply, verifying their meanings and retaining them. In this study we were able to provide both Chinese and Japanese learners
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