Online Approaches to Learning Vocabulary: Teacher-Centred or Learner-Centred?

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ABSTRACT

Examples of learning vocabulary through the computer are appearing with increasing regularity in the recent CALL literature. Much of this learning, however, tends to be teacher-centred in that learners often rely on teachers to select the vocabulary items that they are to study. In the current study, pre-intermediate learners of English studying at a university in Japan were divided into two groups: a teacher-centred (TC) group where the learners were provided with online vocabulary learning activities composed of items selected by the teacher and a learner-centred (LC) group where the learners were required to compile their own vocabulary lists which were then entered by the learners themselves into a specially designed online system that would then create the vocabulary learning activities from these items. Data were collected in the form of pre- and post-testing of vocabulary items that appeared in the teaching materials and through questionnaires regarding their perceptions of the system.

Keywords: Computer-Assisted Language Learning, Learner Autonomy, Learner-Centred Learning, Pedagogy, Vocabulary Learning

INTRODUCTION

CALL and Vocabulary Learning

Few would dispute the importance of learning vocabulary in second language learning (e.g., Zimmerman, 1997), and there has been a good deal of research into this aspect of second language learning over the past couple of decades, as evidenced by the appearance of an increasing number of books in recent years (e.g., Nation, 2008; Milton, 2009). It is not surprising to see that vocabulary learning is also popular in CALL research. It is an area that has attracted interest since early days of CALL, and more recently has developed into one of the most commonly researched areas in CALL (Stockwell, 2007). CALL software for learning vocabulary takes a number of different forms. Ma (2004) describes three major categories; general courseware with a vocabulary component, reading texts with various types of annotations, and software that is specifically dedicated to learning vocabulary.

According to Ma, the first category, general courseware that deals with vocabulary as a component of a larger package, generally gives vocabulary a rather limited amount of attention, often directing attention towards other skills such as grammar. This is a trend seen not only CALL but also generally in language education,
as a “product of the structural and other approaches to language teaching that have become highly pervasive in language teaching” (Milton, 2009, p. 1). In these approaches, vocabulary often receives rather haphazard attention, and it may be considered difficult for learners to make substantial gains in vocabulary if this is the only means through which vocabulary is taught. The second category, annotations, is also an area that has been seen in the literature. The most common type of annotations is the inclusion of additional information to written texts, either textual (De Ridder, 2002) or non-textual such as images and sound (Jones, 2003; Yeh & Wang, 2003). Annotations are a good method through which learners may acquire new vocabulary, but it depends on the learners being exposed to a large amount of reading in which they may have the opportunities to encounter words that they are not familiar with. Another difficulty is just because the learner is able to understand the word in the given context as a result of the annotation, it is unlikely that they would be able to retain it in the long term unless they were exposed to the word in multiple contexts.

The third category, dedicated software, refers to software that has been developed with a specific and singular purpose of developing learners’ vocabulary skills. While these are extremely varied in their approaches and sophistication, Groot (2000) suggests that they should be made up of four major steps: deduction, usage, examples, and retrieval. Firstly, in the deduction stage, learners are provided with activities where they must deduct the meaning of unknown words from a given context. Obviously this would require a sufficient amount of information to be provided to make correct deduction possible and to avoid deducting an incorrect meaning for the word. Next, in the usage stage, learners can consolidate the deduced meanings through a range of exercises that require them to use the word, such as multiple choice gap-filling and so forth. After that, in the examples stage, learners may further consolidate their understanding through seeing words that they have been working on presented in authentic contexts. Finally, in the retrieval stage, learners are able to activate their productive skills through typing the correct word for a given sentence (Groot, 2000). Because of the concentrated time devoted to learning vocabulary through dedicated software, it is thought that it would be the most effective to acquire a large amount of vocabulary quickly and accurately.

Obviously, there is also a range of other ways through which learners may learn vocabulary using the computer, so much so that it is difficult to list all of them here. One important method that has been identified in addition to those described here is through computer-mediated communication (CMC) such as chat and email (see Stockwell, 2007). Interacting with other learners, the teacher, or with native speakers through CMC has the potential to expose learners to new vocabulary items, but, as with annotations, these items would need to be encountered several times in order for them to be acquired.

Learner-Centeredness in Vocabulary Learning

A benefit of CALL that has been cited since the very early days of the development of the field has been that it provides learners with various types of freedom, including freedom of time and place (Bax, 2003), freedom to choose their own content (Brandl, 2002), and freedom to choose who they wish to communicate with (Belz, 2002). With vocabulary learning, however, this freedom becomes limited, particularly in dedicated software packages or classroom situations. While learners may have be able to choose what vocabulary they wish to study from a pre-determined list, the vocabulary are essentially fixed by the package or by the teacher, as is the information about the vocabulary.

One way in which responsibility for creating learning content may be transferred to the learners is through authoring systems, which allow teachers or students to create information
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