

Student feedback regarding the use of ‘mastery sentences’

Theoretical Framework

To build strong vocabulary knowledge, students need to use strategies that call upon receptive and productive language skills (Nation, 2001; Ryan, 1997). However, most language classrooms tend to focus on receptive activities (Webb, 2005) due in part to the fact that productive activities are a more complex task (de la Fuente, 2002). This is particularly true in the Japanese EFL context where students have little experience producing output in the public school curriculum and few opportunities to encounter the L2 outside of the classroom setting. Students may recognize word-to-word meaning, but are often unable to appropriately use words in sentences. One way to address this imbalance is to have students write sentences, therefore moving from processing words as lexical units to adequately producing them in semantic chunks. Developing such productive skills is essential to improving vocabulary mastery (Schmitt, 2008). First, language output, which requires productive skills, has been shown to result in improved gains in vocabulary acquisition (Ellis & He, 1999). Second, when writing, reading and evaluating their sentences, students encounter target words several times, a necessary condition in order for words to be learned (Nation, 2001). Third, writing sentences not only helps learners gain mastery in producing the language, but also improves receptive skills (e.g., reading a sentence over), which have to be used during the creation process (Pichette, de Serres, & Lafontaine, 2011). Finally, research has shown that students who write new vocabulary in sentences retain it best (Folse, 2006; Hulstijn & Trompeter, 1998; Laufer, 2003).

In this study, students were asked to write ‘mastery sentences’- elaborate sentences that indicate multi-level word understanding. Such sentences require the knowledge of a word be demonstrated beyond its spelling, and the meaning be explained within the sentence itself. A successful ‘mastery sentence’ must satisfy requirements for both usage and intended meaning in such a way that the target word can only be replaced by a direct synonym.

For example: *impression*

*1) He made quite an **impression** on us when he walked into the class with a hat, a cane and no shoes on.*

This study will outline an activity for teaching vocabulary with mastery sentences and examine student perceptions of this strategy through classroom feedback and interviews.

Student population

One class of 22 low-intermediate (400 on the TOEIC®), non-English majors at a private Japanese university.

Procedure

First, students made groups of four and created a ‘mastery sentence’ together using a previously studied word written on the blackboard. Then, each group was asked to write their sentence on the board. After this, the teacher indicated any mistakes (e.g., spelling, grammar, usage, meaning, mastery, tense) with yellow chalk. Finally, each group identified and corrected their mistakes.

Written feedback about the activity was collected from students (n=17) in class. The comments were reviewed by the teacher, who then interviewed two volunteer students to gain a deeper understanding of the students’ perspectives on this strategy.

Preliminary results

Students felt the strategy helped them improve their English in two ways: 1) in terms of making sentences (“Last year, I was not good at making sentences, but this year, I am better at making sentences”) and 2) building their vocabulary knowledge (“I can learn other words and it helps my vocabulary”). Students also appreciated practicing word usage (“We can learn how to use words. When we make mastery sentences, we use many words, so we can learn many words”).

Despite some complaints that the strategy was difficult to understand and execute, students recognized that although deeper processing is more cognitively demanding, it serves a purpose (“It’s a little difficult for me, but it’s important for us so I think it’s not a bad point”). To avoid cognitive overload, the different aspects of the activity (e.g., studying vocabulary, building sentences, reviewing them, understanding the marking rubric) must be scaffolded with prior in-class explanations, practice and homework.

Preliminary conclusions

Overall, students enjoyed the activity claiming it helped them understand meaning and usage (13), improve their English skills (8) and remember vocabulary (5). These results suggest that creating ‘mastery sentences’ is one effective means of promoting a deeper understanding, and ultimately, mastery of new vocabulary.

Future directions

Tracking students' progress in building mastery sentences over the course of the semester would allow teachers to determine which aspects of morphology and syntax are the most challenging for students. A qualitative investigation into their progression could then offer a better understanding of how students overcome these challenges.

References

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