How do students improve their vocabulary retention?

Chapter 3
How do students improve their vocabulary retention?

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Teaching experience
14 years teaching experience in public school and international school contexts

Area of interest in teaching
vocabulary and grammar

Introduction

The students in this study are enrolled in the 'Gifted Program' which focuses on Maths and Science. Their subjects are taught through the medium of Thai language (except the two English courses, namely 'Fundamentals of English' and 'English for Everyday Use'). I teach the course 'English for Everyday Use' to Grade 8 students at Mathayom Taksin Rayong School, Rayong Provincial Administrative Organization. There are 26 students in this class. After having conducted teaching for a few weeks with a group of students assigned to me, I discovered that the students were struggling to acquire and retain new vocabulary. Additionally, the students' responses during the pre- and post-teaching phases were limited, and they were hesitant to use the new vocabulary that they had recently been taught. Accordingly, student retention and long-term memory became the focus of my inquiry. This chapter outlines one approach, flipped learning, which can help teachers and students overcome time constraints. To focus on my exploration, I came up with four research questions:

Two focused on my teaching:

Q1: How do I teach new vocabulary?

Q2: To what extent does the teacher provide an opportunity for the students to practise the target language vocabulary?

And two focused on my students' learning:

Q3: What do students think of their vocabulary knowledge?

Q4: What difficulties do students have when learning vocabulary?

To find the answers to these questions, and to ensure that specific teaching strategy problems wouldn't be overlooked, I scheduled peer evaluation, planned to conduct a focus group interview using bilingual questions on PowerPoint, and I kept a reflective journal.

To collect data on my own teaching, I wrote my own reflective journal, focusing on the vocabulary being taught to my students, and in particular, the difficulties they face — such as what they find difficult about the new language vocabulary difficult and how they learn the definitions.

Methods

The three tools or instruments used to discover students' impressions and needs were as follows:

Focus group interviews

From among the 26 students in my class, I randomly selected 15 mixed ability students and divided them into three groups of five members each. I then asked them to answer questions, which were given in Thai as well as English to ensure that the students would fully understand the contents. I presented using Microsoft PowerPoint so that the language itself would be visible to all students, and I also recorded the audio. The focus group interviews went well, and they occurred on three separate days (two days in one week, and one in the next). In these focus groups, the aim was to uncover student issues relating to vocabulary retention. Whilst one group was being interviewed by me, the rest of the students prepared their answers. I intentionally chose this open, scaffolded focus group interview with different groups of students in the class, so that others could see and read the questions and reflect on them. Whilst interviewing the first group, the rest of the students did not know if they would be chosen. As a result, all 26 students were motivated to think of responses, as well as having time to think about the answers in case they were chosen. The advantage of this approach was that it gave students time to discuss and develop opinions towards the given questions.

Peer Evaluation

The peer evaluations were arranged with a fellow teacher who also teaches the same class. We both teach English to this class, so we already knew our struggles regarding how to improve the students' learning experiences. She observed my classroom teaching (focusing on my teaching techniques before, while, and after teaching) as well as the learning experiences of the students (relating to their language use). The observations happened three times, each at different times during the 1-hour class period. The observing teacher focused on certain parameters, such as how I introduced new vocabulary in different ways, including i) by giving the definitions, ii) by switching from synonyms to antonyms, and iii) by giving the equivalent term in Thai.

The observation schedule required the observing teacher to focus mainly on vocabulary teaching and learning rather than other aspects in the class.

Reflective Journal

I decided to record the daily teaching experiences that might help me answer the research questions. I wrote guide questions that required the answers to focus directly on new vocabulary teaching and learning. One of the important factors was the emphasis on the description of vocabulary teaching strategies:

1. How many opportunities did you give to the students to practise the target language vocabulary?

2. How often do the students ask about/clarify the definition of the new target language vocabulary?

3. What specific challenges do students face when learning new vocabulary?

This process led to the following initial findings:

- In the first lesson, I elicited vocabulary by using pictures and we explored the pronunciation, meaning, grammatical use, functionality, and spelling (which was an issue).
- In the second lesson, during the recap and review of the past lesson, it was clear that students had not acquired the vocabulary successfully.

- Most students reported that they forget previously taught vocabulary within a week and cannot use newly introduced words in subsequent speaking or writing tasks (productive skills).

- About half of the students felt that they have insufficient vocabulary and are 'beginners'.

- Interestingly, half of the group believed that the pandemic and online learning had prevented them from coming to class with sufficient background knowledge or vocabulary.

- Students were all able to recognise vocabulary but could not use it accurately or appropriately. This surface level issue affects students' confidence and increases their anxiety.

- The peer observation revealed that although I use a variety of approaches, there needs to be more time allocated for students to grasp the vocabulary and more repetition opportunities must be provided.

- Although the peer observation indicated that I created a positive learning atmosphere, my reflective journal highlighted that I tend to use a whole-class approach, and that therefore I should try to create opportunities for more individual, pair, and small group activities.

My students' difficulty in learning new vocabulary was arguably due to their lack of prior knowledge of the words. This was something the students themselves were aware of and attributed to the pandemic and online delivery during that period. It is also of note that when the students attempted to translate using the Thai language, they experienced great difficulty.

To bring about change and try to improve vocabulary acquisition and students' active vocabulary, the following steps were taken:

Pre-speaking stage	While-speaking stage	Post-speaking stage
I used a flipped approach by providing students with a list of the words in advance. This meant students could study before class and free up more time for activities which could reinforce the meaning and appropriate usage of target vocabulary. In this flipped approach, students were asked to prepare and bring in an item or object associated with to-be-learned vocabulary. This 'show and tell' activity was thought to be more meaningful for the students and their peers.	Because one of the initial findings was that time was an issue, the flipped learning approach allowed time for a greater variety of modes. During class, I reinforced the meaning of newly introduced words through using songs and video clips. This context-led approach meant that students could see the words in action and in context. Because students came to class prepared for the vocabulary, I could ask more generative questions. For example, when teaching the word 'abandon', I was able to ask open-ended questions about stray cats or dogs. Lastly, the flipped approach allowed me to use more individual, pair, and group work.	I asked my students to write simple, conversational-type questions with a template in which the students had to fill in the vocabulary they had explored deeply and had learned. The students undertook a practice conversation with their partner; this led to output through a speaking activity in front of the class (with scripts allowed to help students with learning loss (which was a result of school closures and the switch to online delivery caused by the recent COVID-19 pandemic) to feel less anxiety or stress). I also provided the students with a matching type test, wherein they read the definition and matched it with the vocabulary using contextual clues. Lastly, I conducted an informal check whilst summarising the lesson and gave short feedback.

Table 3.1. Summary of Actions Taken

Findings

The main finding was that by using the flipped learning approach to teach vocabulary, more time in class could be found for exploring the meaning and appropriate usage of the words. More time could be allocated to activities in which students reinforced their understanding of the words. Learning new words within a context — such as from a video clip or from a song — increased the depth of understanding. Thus, giving students lists of words before class to study independently (or to discuss with friends) created more space and time in class to look more deeply into a word.

Almost all of my students said that they were able to remember the new target language vocabulary well because they had read it, Googled it, read the meaning of the words, and had translated it in Thai. There were students who said: 'Teacher, I like the vocabulary used in the video clips; it wasn't boring at all, and you can listen to it many times as well'. Another student mentioned that she kept a note on her table about the vocabulary that we were to tackle in future classes. These responses and strategies were quite common, but they were mainly among students of high-prior attainment, and some students still had difficulty retaining vocabulary.

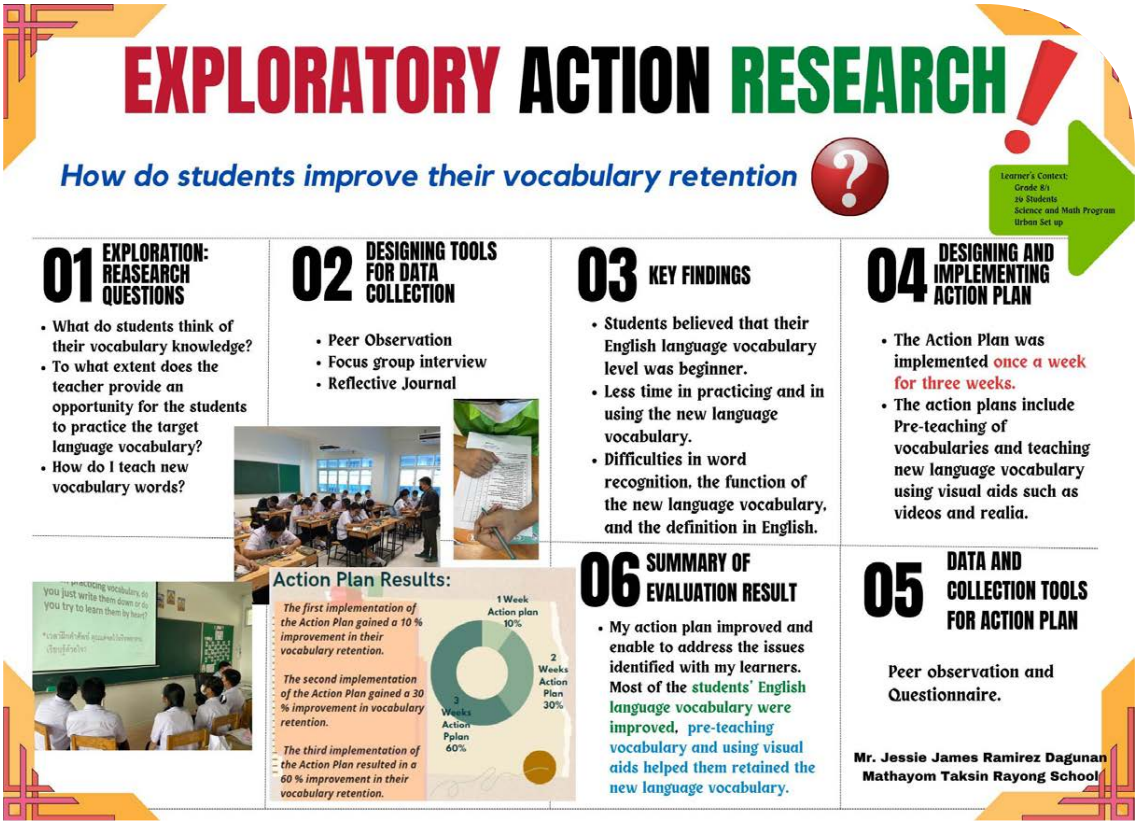

Figure 3.1. Poster Presentation

Discussion

One of the most important steps was to ask students about their issues. As mentioned earlier in this chapter, students are very self-conscious about their abilities. The learning loss resulting from school closures, online learning, and other factors may have lowered their motivation, belief, and confidence, and increased their anxiety. Allowing students to prepare for class through the flipped learning method could offer benefits for both the student and the teacher. Often, teachers do not have time to cover all aspects in the class, such as introducing vocabulary at the start to ending the lesson with the new words in the students' active vocabulary. However, by giving students the to-be-learned words and asking them to prepare by looking up the definition and finding the translation ahead of time, more time can be found in class to explore the words in more engaging, enjoyable, meaningful, and — most importantly — more effective ways.

Although the approach had a positive impact, repetition is still needed. I found that students needed three interactions with new vocabulary, on different days, to truly be able to use such words productively when speaking and writing. Even after this, I found that although the students had become more effective, my perception that new words had entered their active vocabulary occurred in only six out of ten cases. Therefore, teachers must ensure that only essential, high-frequency, and level- and age-appropriate words are reinforced and practised. More work should be done to separate low-frequency from high-frequency words. Additionally, more training in generative questioning would be helpful to improve teaching techniques and student recall.