Vocabulary strategy training: An attempt to activate passive vocabulary for written communication

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Abstract
This article is based upon the reflection on my own teaching situation in an attempt to answer the question 'Why can't my students make use of the vocabulary they encountered while reading in writing a report?' The problem inspired me to add lessons on vocabulary strategy training as a remedy. It was noticed that, after the lessons, most students successfully used a variety of memory strategies to help them enlarge their vocabulary knowledge. Moreover, the lessons helped them retrieve and activate words in their lexicon for writing, suggesting that vocabulary understanding is vital in activating passive vocabulary for written communication.

Introduction
In the task-based curriculum of the Department of Language, King Mongkut's University of Technology Thonburi (KMUTT), students are encouraged to learn the language by using English to participate in different tasks. While performing these tasks, the students are required to be actively involved in their language learning, choosing the topics of their own interest, planning and monitoring their work in order to complete the tasks. In this task-based curriculum, the characteristics of the learner-centered approach are thus clearly reflected. This, however, does not mean that the teacher's role is reduced. The teachers still have to be very active, acting as facilitators and helpers supporting the students to complete the task, equipping them with tools for acquiring the language rather than transmitting knowledge about the language to the students.

In one of the task-based courses at KMUTT, the students work on a problem-solving and resourcing task. This task consists of eight lessons which last four weeks. First, the students form groups of four to five and choose a topic of interest by themselves. They start from brain-storming on social issues or environmental problems and then negotiate with each other to choose the one that the group would like to work on most. They then set up pre-questions to use as a guideline for gathering information to help them make decisions in solving the problem. The next step is resourcing. In this stage, the students search for information from different sources such as the internet, books, magazines. They then read these sources, using reading and note-taking strategies learnt from class to help them organize the information obtained and prepare to write a report presenting the problem and the suggested solutions.

While facilitating the students to perform this task, I noticed that my students did not perform well in the first draft of their reports, especially in terms of vocabulary. They could not use correctly the words that they encountered in the reading stage even though they did not show any problems in reading and understanding the text. They explained in consultation sessions that, though the vocabulary in the reading passages was quite difficult, they could solve the problems by themselves, consulting a dictionary and discussing the meaning with friends. The words that they encountered in the reading stage, therefore, were merely their passive vocabulary. They could not use them accurately in their productive skills.

In an attempt to solve this problem, I decided to provide some vocabulary strategy training sessions for them. This class consisted of 38 engineering students. They were students who had obtained a diploma and furthered their bachelor degree in a special evening programme at KMUTT so their levels of English proficiency were not good. However, their motivation to learn was very high.

The vocabulary strategy training sessions
The training sessions could be divided into three stages: understanding vocabulary, introducing memory strategies and producing vocabulary cards. These stages were neither a program instruction designed to be used step by step in the lesson nor were they planned for systematic data collection for research. Rather, each step emerged one after another in an attempt to analyze the classroom situation and to solve problems that occurred in the classroom.

Stage 1: Understanding vocabulary
This session was arranged as a classroom activity. The lesson started with a class discussion on what is meant by understanding vocabulary. The teacher then gathered the suggestions made, summarizing the main information needed in knowing a word.

Rationale
This session was conducted as it was hypothesized that the students were unable to make a correct use of words because they did not 'fully understand' them. Watson Todd (2000) suggests that, in order to fully know a word, its translation into the first language alone is not enough. The learners also need to know such information as its spelling, its pronunciation, its meanings, its grammar, and how to use it. This information will enable the learners to use the word successfully in productive skills.

Reflection
It was observed from the discussion that, in fact, all of the students realized that, in order to fully understand the word or to say that they 'know the word', information about its spelling, its pronunciation, its meanings, its parts of speech, its collocations and how to use it in a context is necessary. They also knew that this information is readily available in a dictionary, especially a monolingual one.

However, while they read the passages to gather the information for their report, they simply focused on the meaning of the words without paying attention to their form or other grammatical information. This, in fact, reflected a characteristic of a good reader. The students seemed to realize that reading is not a vocabulary learning activity. They had a clear purpose for reading, i.e. gathering information, and they could achieve this goal, obtaining the information they wanted, so there was no need to study the new words in detail. However, they tended to forget that these new words might cause difficulties in the writing stage. They did not go back to study the new words after finishing reading, leaving a big gap between reading for information and making use of this information to write a report. I, then, planned to help them by providing opportunities to work more on the new words that they had encountered.

Stage 2: Introducing memory strategies
This stage was also organized as a whole class activity. At this stage, different memory strategies, such as drawing pictures, using diagrams, putting the word in a context, using

key word techniques and grouping words, were introduced. Then the students were presented with a list of 10 words. They were asked to study and remember them within 10 minutes using the techniques that they preferred. After that, they shared the strategies used with their friends.

Rationale
The main aim of the session was to introduce the students to ways of remembering vocabulary. This session emerged as I believe that every learner is different in their styles of learning. They preferred different strategies so they were provided with choices to be used as a tool for their own learning.

Reflection
It was noticed that the students enjoyed the lesson on memory strategies. They reported that they had learnt a lot of useful techniques for remembering new words. They also had fun talking and sharing the strategies they used with their friends. It was found that almost half of the class kept repeating the words again and again both by spelling them out loud and writing the words to help them remember. About ten of them wrote the words in their notebooks and grouped them according to some criteria, e.g. the parts of speech, similar meanings, similar sounds. A few of them either created a story relating the words together or used pictures. They also related the new words to the known ones both in terms of meanings and sounds.

This session was a satisfactory lesson. However, it was arranged just for a short period of time in class to introduce some memory strategies. The students still needed to practice more on their own. The next lesson was then planned as a follow-up practice session.

Stage 3: Producing vocabulary cards
At this stage, each student worked on the section of the report that they were responsible for. They went back to the reading passages and their notes, choosing the words they thought would be useful for their reports. Each of them then prepared vocabulary cards for the words. They were also encouraged to share their cards within the group.

After preparing the vocabulary cards, the students made use of the memory strategies they preferred and thought were effective for them in remembering the words. In doing this, they were advised to group the words into three categories: new words, processing words, and known words. *New words* are the words that they encountered in the reading passage. These new words might be the ones whose form, meaning or grammatical constraints they are not familiar with. *Processing words* are the words that they were working on in an attempt to 'fully know' them. *Known words* are the words that they 'fully know' and were confident they could use productively. The aim of this stage was, therefore, to move the words in the 'new' category to the 'known' one.

At this stage, both intrinsic and extrinsic motivations were used to motivate the students to participate in the activity. I convinced them that the higher the numbers of words in the known section, the larger the lexicon they would have and the better their productive skills would be. Moreover, the students were challenged to prepare as many cards as they could. They would get a special gift for producing the highest number of vocabulary cards, no matter which of the three categories the words were in.

Rationale
Vocabulary cards were taken into consideration to provide the learners with opportunities to make use of their preferred memory strategies. Moreover, in order to prepare the cards, the students were required to study the words in detail, adding the information needed to fully understand the words, as discussed in Stage 1. This also fosters their vocabulary learning after reading.

Fountain (1980) comments that vocabulary cards provide learners with a simple but effective way of increasing active vocabulary as words on cards are more efficient than words in a reading passage since learners can focus more on words they choose to study and work more with these words in order to master them. In addition, vocabulary cards allow the learners to review their vocabulary at any time. They are also easy to keep, rearrange and classify.

Reflection
All the students said the vocabulary cards are useful for their vocabulary learning. They spent about a week outside class time preparing the cards, choosing the words and studying them on their own. They designed their cards in many interesting styles as seen from the examples below.

In order to explore the number of words that each student worked on, they were asked to bring their cards to share with the class and report the total number of cards that they made, as well as the number of words in each category.
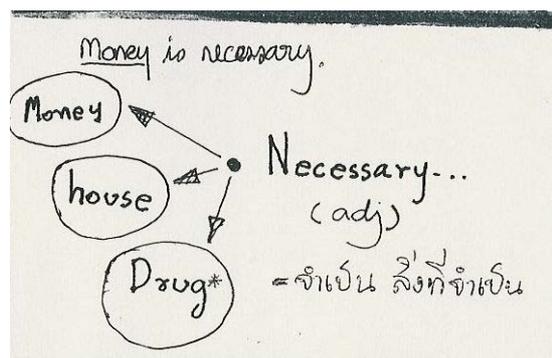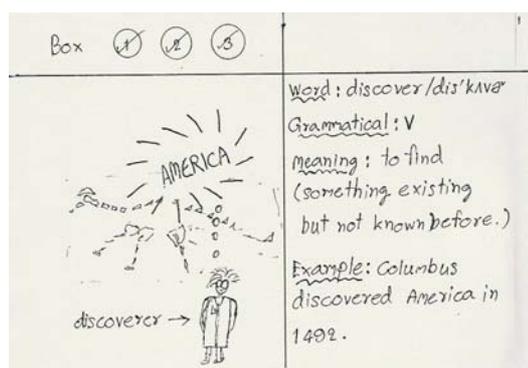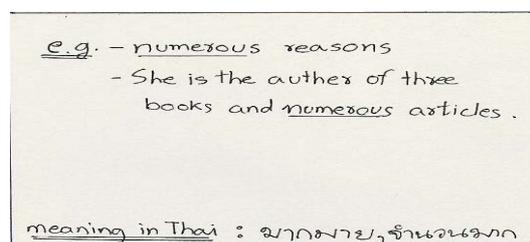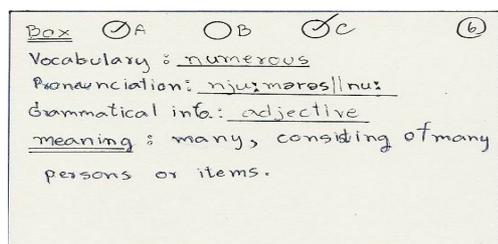
The number of cards each student prepared ranged from 18 to 32. The number of words that the students regarded as 'known' ranged from 5 to 24 while many of them were at the 'processing' stage. For me, the numbers of words that the students studied was satisfactory. Within a week, my students were confident to use more words and they enjoyed learning in this way. Almost all of them prepared a box to classify their vocabulary cards. All of them agreed that it was more systematic than writing the new words in their notebooks.

However, it was noticed that many students still needed help in selecting the meanings from a dictionary, especially the explanation of meaning in English. Many students wrote the meanings of the words in Thai together with the English explanations. However, some of the English explanations chosen from the dictionary did not match the Thai meanings well.

Many students also had problems choosing from the examples of how to use the words in contexts, especially the words that could be more than one part of speech. They sometimes, for example, prepared a card for the word 'income', stating that it is a 'verb' but provided an example using it as a 'noun'.

The production stage: Using the words
About a week after working on the vocabulary cards (and also because of the time constraint), the students revised the first drafts of their reports, making use of the vocabulary that they had studied. At this stage, my overall impression was that they could correct only some of the mistakes I spotted. This might be because they studied just 18 to 32 words and some of them still had problems in selecting meanings. Nevertheless, it seemed that the students were more confident in using the words that they studied. They could correct most of the words that they classified as the 'fully known' ones. A further systematic and well-planned study is, however, still needed in order to gain quantitative data to support this finding.

Conclusion
From my own observation, the vocabulary strategy training session and work on vocabulary cards, to a certain extent, helps learners expand their lexicon and activate their passive vocabulary. Students are fully engaged in vocabulary learning and this helps them fully understand the words which, in turn, increases their confidence in using the words, especially the ones that they have already put into the 'known' category. The activity also encourages learners to organize and assess their own vocabulary learning.

References
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