

Meeting Ministry Recommendations for Vocabulary Learning: A Suggestion

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The Japanese ministry of education has changed its recommendations for English vocabulary study. The recommended number of words has been increased from 1,200 for junior high school students to 1,800 words, and, as before, without a clear recommendation to students on how to learn these words. A small-scale study was done with Japanese 7th graders at a local junior high school to study the efficiency and effect of these instructions and goals and was compared to Story-Listening. The latter was more effective and efficient, and probably contributed more than vocabulary learning.

INTRODUCTION

The Japanese ministry of education has changed its recommendations for English vocabulary study. The recommended number of words to be learned has been increased from 1,200 for junior high school students to 1,800 words, ⁽¹⁾ and, as before, without a clear recommendation to students on how to learn the new words.

The new standards, combined with the lack of guidance on the learning method, do not seem to have made a difference: A survey by the Japanese government in 2017 with 60,000 12th graders in 300 public high schools, ⁽²⁾ reported that over 95% of 12th graders in Japan are still at the A1 and A2 levels ⁽³⁾ of English proficiency after more than five years of dedicated work by both teachers and students.

The profession has made real progress in understanding how vocabulary can be acquired (Krashen, 1985, 1989, 2003, 2004, 2011). So far, studies have shown that newer approaches are just as or even more effective as simply requiring study without guidance, and also appear to be far more interesting and pleasant, producing not only vocabulary acquisition but contributing also to English language proficiency in other ways.

The approach used for comparison here is Story-Listening (Mason & Krashen, 2020a; Krashen & Mason, 2022), ⁽⁴⁾ which consists of the teacher presenting stories of interest to students, and making them comprehensible in several ways (e.g., drawing pictures, providing an additional explanation, occasional translation: Krashen, Mason, & Smith, 2018). The stories used are those widely acknowledged to be interesting, e.g., Grimm's Fairy Tales, and many are available free of charge on the internet. No attempt is made to test students on the new words, no supplementary traditional vocabulary instruction is provided and there is no encouragement to study the new words as homework. The focus is on the enjoyment of the stories.

AN INITIAL STUDY: STORY-LISTENING VERSUS “STUDY”

The acquisition rates from listening to stories have been found to range from .17 to .25 words per minute when the delayed post-test was administered one (1) to five (5) weeks after listening to the story (Mason & Krashen, 2004, 2018; Clarke, 2019, 2020; Mason, Smith, & Krashen, 2020; Mason & Ae, 2021), far more impressive than learning rates reported with the use of traditional pedagogy (McQuillan, 2019).

In this initial study, we wanted to determine the rate of learning vocabulary using student-selected methods. Seventh-grade students of EFL in Japan served as subjects.

Subjects (N=33) were given a list of 30 English words on a sheet of paper. The teacher read each word aloud and students were asked to write definitions in Japanese, taking about 10 seconds per word. Subjects were then given a list of the same 30 words in English with a Japanese definition for each word and were told to learn as many of the words as they could in 20 minutes, using any techniques they wanted to in preparation for a posttest to be given after 20 minutes. In addition, an unnotified delayed post-test was given after four (4) weeks.

The average learning rate on the delayed post-test was .10 words per minute, half the typical results for Story-Listening.⁽⁵⁾ The rate of vocabulary acquisition via story-listening on a four-week delayed test by 7th graders at the same junior high school was .21 words per minute. (Mason & Ae, 2021).⁽⁶⁾

A questionnaire was given to determine what method subjects used to learn the words. Most students used brute repetition, writing and rewriting the target words as well as various forms of mnemonics. Students reported that they memorized the words in the order they appeared on the list.

We conclude from this small study that the use of personally chosen means of study has not shown to be more effective than SL. It is likely that Story-Listening can meet the goals established by the ministry of education. Assuming that a retention rate of .20 wpm using SL holds for all stories, and students hear 120 stories each year each story taking 25 minutes, students will gain about 1,800 words in 150 hours of listening to stories in three years.

SL has several advantages over the methods used by the subjects. It is far more interesting than word study, exposes students to interesting content, and may result in an increased interest in reading (Wang & Lee, 2007; Cho & Choi, 2007). It is done in a relaxing way with a focus on enjoying a story, not trying to force the retention of arbitrary words presented on a list. New vocabulary is also naturally recycled in stories, and students are exposed to new grammar as well.

The disadvantage of telling stories is that a teacher needs to find stories, prepare them for delivery, and tell many stories (e.g., about 360 in three years). But this could be an advantage: S/he can enjoy reading interesting stories, learn new words him/herself from preparing for the story, and above all, can observe most students enjoying stories in class and improving in the foreign language as they are exposed to optimal input (Krashen, 1982; Krashen & Mason, 2020; Mason & Krashen, 2020b).

This initial study is of course not enough. Millions of language students are affected by Ministry policy. We recommend continuing to study the efficiency and long-term effect of individualized study in comparison to other approaches.

NOTES

(1) Vocabulary requirements change: <https://allabout.co.jp/gm/gc/487726/>

(2) The Ministry of Education Survey 平成 29 年度 英語力調査結果 (高校 3 年生) の概要

https://www.mext.go.jp/a_menu/kokusai/gaikokugo/_icsFiles/afieldfile/2018/04/06/1403470_03_1.pdf

(3) The Common European Framework of Reference

<https://www.coe.int/en/web/common-european-framework-reference-languages>

(4) Story-Listening website: <https://www.story-listening.net/>

(5)

List Learning: Descriptive Statistics on three Tests, Points Gained, and Learning Rate

List learning 7 th graders (N=33)	Pretest Mean (SD)	Post-test Mean (SD)	Mid Gain	Delayed Mean (SD)	Final Gain Mean	Learning Rate (wpm)	Delayed post-test Week
	0.91 (1.33)	15.18 (8.04)	14.27	2.97 (2.28)	2.06	.10	4

The number of items on the vocabulary test = 30. The time spent for list-learning = 20 minutes

(6)

From Mason & Ae (2021). Table 1. Descriptive Statistics on three Tests, Points gained, and Acquisition Rate

Story-Listening 7 th graders (N=37)	Pretest Mean (SD)	Post-test Mean (SD)	Mid Gain	Delayed Mean (SD)	Final Gain Mean (SD)	Acquisition Rate (wpm)	Delayed Post-test Week
Mean (SD)	4.03 (2.57)	15.84 (8.05)	11.81	8.59 (6.25)	4.56	0.21	4

The number of items on the vocabulary test = 35. The time spent for SL = 22 minutes.

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