

News-based Activities to Motivate EFL Students for Deliberate Vocabulary Learning

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Abstract: *This study introduces and explains a news-based activity which was introduced into university EFL classes to increase intrinsic and extrinsic motivation for deliberate vocabulary learning. Quantitative and qualitative data analysis showed that the activity increased learners' motivation for deliberate vocabulary study, which in turn increased the amount of time learners engaged with target vocabulary.*

Keywords: *vocabulary acquisition, deliberate vocabulary learning, intrinsic motivation, extrinsic motivation, EFL.*

1. Introduction

While research has shown that motivation plays a central role in foreign language vocabulary development, many learners find vocabulary study a demotivating, never ending task (Schmitt, 2008). Therefore, providing enjoyable vocabulary learning activities that increase motivation and learning outcomes can be seen as one of the language teacher's primary responsibilities (Nation, 2013). This study introduces and explains a news-based activity which was introduced into university EFL classes to meet this goal. Quantitative and qualitative data analysis showed that the activity increased learners' motivation for deliberate vocabulary study, which in turn increased the amount of time learners engaged with target vocabulary.

2. Literature Review

Research has shown that both intrinsic and extrinsic motivation play an important role in foreign language study and learning (Deci, 1972, 1992; Harackiewicz & Sansone, 2000, Tseng & Schmitt, 2008). Intrinsic motivation is defined as when learners want to carry out an activity due to the enjoyment it provides, while extrinsic motivation refers to the situation where a learner's willingness to carry out a task is driven by external rewards such as grades or career advancement (Deci, 1972). Motivation is also a vital component for successful vocabulary study due to the large amount of time and effort needed to master the thousands of words needed for communication in a foreign language (Nation, 2013; Schmitt, 2008).

Vocabulary study activities are categorized as being either deliberate or incidental learning tasks. Deliberate vocabulary study involves learners carrying out any activity with the sole or main purpose of acquiring new vocabulary knowledge (Nation, 2013; Schmitt, 2008). This type of vocabulary study usually involves learners using dictionaries and then making and studying from word cards, lists, or vocabulary notebooks. The main alternative method of learning vocabulary is incidental vocabulary learning which involves learners acquiring vocabulary knowledge while engaged in other activities, most commonly extensive reading. (Nation, 2013).

Both methods have their own advantages and disadvantages, for example, while incidental vocabulary activities have been widely reported as being enjoyable, the vocabulary gains attributed to such activities are quite small (Elley, 1989, 1991; Elley & Mangubhai, 1983; Pellicer-Sánchez & Schmitt, 2010; Waring & Takaki, 2003). On the other hand, numerous research results have shown deliberate vocabulary learning to be a very time

efficient way of learning many new words (Cobb, 1999; Laufer & Rozovski-Roitblat, 2014; Nakata, 2008; Waring, 2004), however, many learners find this method to be tedious and demotivating (Thompson, 2014; Wilkinson, 2015).

Therefore, in terms of deliberate vocabulary learning, whether learning words out of context using methods such as word cards or notebooks, or within context from intensive reading or listening, providing tasks which learners enjoy, and which help them to understand the value of deliberate vocabulary study are needed in order to increase intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. The rest of this paper focuses on deliberate vocabulary study, and specifically investigates the effects of using news-based activities on learners' intrinsic and extrinsic motivation for deliberate vocabulary study.

3. Rationale for the Study

As part of a simple action research project with a number of university EFL classes, self-reported data regarding student perceptions of the usefulness or relevance (extrinsic benefits) of studying words from the New General Service List (NGSL) was collected and analyzed. Results indicated that students (a) did not see any extrinsic benefit to learning words from this list; making and studying from word cards, (b) did not feel it was time well spent, and (c) were not motivated to put effort into this aspect of the curriculum. Therefore, it was hypothesized that incorporating vocabulary learning activities that give students the opportunity to notice their vocabulary card items being used in a real-world context, would help students better understand the benefits of learning these items, and extrinsic motivation would be increased for making and studying from word cards.

4. Research Questions

1. To what extent does the introduction of a news-based activity increase learners' intrinsic motivation for carrying out deliberate vocabulary study with word cards?
2. To what extent does the introduction of a news-based activity increase learners' extrinsic motivation for carrying out deliberate vocabulary study with word cards?
3. To what extent do learners view the news based activity as intrinsically and extrinsically motivating in term of their vocabulary development?

5. Methods

5.1. Participants

A total of 27 freshman Japanese EFL university students, from one intermediate-level English for Academic Purposes (EAP) course participated in this study. The course was a compulsory course for first-year students and met for one 90-minute class per week for 15 weeks. Students' TOEIC scores ranged from 340 to 450, and pre-course scores on the Vocabulary Levels Test (VLT) indicated that none of the students had obtained mastery of the first or second thousand word-level of the GSL (Means = 77% and 62% respectively). None of the students scored over 80% at the 2000-word level.

In terms of deliberate vocabulary study, as part of the course, learners were required to self-select 20 words per week from the NGSL and make word cards. They were encouraged to write more than just the L1 and L2 forms of the word, for example, stress patterns, the part of speech, other forms of the word, and example sentences. In addition, learners were also doing regular intensive reading activities from the course textbook. Furthermore, in terms of incidental vocabulary learning, students were completing two to three speed readings per week, and were asked to do at least 10 minutes of extensive reading per day.

5.2. Data Collection and Analysis

Data was primarily collected using surveys (see Appendix 1) that provided numerical data that was then subjected to statistical analysis using t-tests. In addition to the survey data, qualitative data collected from observations, interviews, and artifact checking was also analyzed.

5.3. Procedure

Stage 1: Control. After four weeks of carrying out deliberate vocabulary study from the NGSL using word cards, which was part of the course requirements, all students completed the questionnaire to assess 1) how useful they thought learning this vocabulary was, and 2) how much time they spent per week on deliberate vocabulary learning through word cards or notebooks. In addition, students' vocabulary cards were collected and analyzed to assess the type of information students were including on their word cards.

Survey results indicated that students (a) did not enjoy making word cards, (b) did not see any clear benefit of studying the vocabulary items, and therefore, (c) did not spend very much time studying their word cards. Statistical data regarding the pre-treatment survey results will be given in the results section. In addition, a brief analysis of the students' individual word cards showed that most students were only inputting the minimum required information: the English word (L2) and its Japanese (L1 translation). During the course, students had been repeatedly advised to add example sentences taken from dictionaries or the internet as well as part of speech information, and other forms of the word, but this was largely not taking place.

In addition, some survey questions inquired about students' perceptions of reading the news in order to learn vocabulary, and results indicated that they thought it could be somewhat useful, and some students wanted to read news stories as part of the course.

Stage 2: Treatment (News Report Activity). In order to try to increase opportunity for students to notice the real-life use of vocabulary used to make word cards, a news report activity was introduced. Noticing vocabulary being used in non-classroom contexts improves the amount of learning that takes place and can increase motivation (Schmitt, 2008). The main news activity was selected because it provides further repeated meetings with the NGSL words through meaning-focused input and output, both of which have been proven to result in additional vocabulary learning outcomes (Keating, 2008; Waring, 1997; Webb, 2005, 2007, 2009).

The process for the news report activity is outlined below.

1. For homework, students were required to find a news article from authentic online sources such as the BBC, CNN, Yahoo news, or any of the English-language newspapers.
2. They students had to read the article and use whatever strategies they deemed necessary to gain a good level of comprehension.
3. Then, while re-reading the article, students were asked to highlight any words they thought they recognize from their word cards.
4. The students were required to complete a news report form that included a list of some of the shared words they noticed in the article, as well as a summary and opinion section (See appendices 1).
5. After they had written the news report, they were also required to compare the news article vocabulary with the NGSL using the Range program available at www.lexutor.ca and write down the percentage of coverage given by the NGSL.
6. Finally, student gave a verbal report in small groups in the next class. Each student was required to speak for four to five minutes, and other students were encouraged to ask questions.

After 5 weeks of carrying out the news report activity, the students answered the same questionnaire that was administered during the control stage. In addition, at this stage, some students' word cards were collected and analyzed, and a few students were interviewed.

5.4. Results

Research Question 1: To what extent does the introduction of a news-based activity increase learners' intrinsic motivation for carrying out deliberate vocabulary study with word cards? (Survey question 1)

In this study, intrinsic motivation was operationalized very simply as level of enjoyment (survey question 1). Analysis of the pre- and post-treatment survey data showed that the mean enjoyment rating increased from 1.52 during the control stage to 1.66 after the treatment; carrying out the news report activity for five weeks. However,

the results of a t-test showed that the difference was statistically insignificant ($t = 1.099$, $df = 52$, $p = 0.276$). Therefore, results indicate that (a) levels of intrinsic motivation for making and studying word cards was low before and after the introduction of the news activity, and (b) the news activity did not significantly improve intrinsic motivation levels.

Research Question 2: To what extent does the introduction of a news-based activity increase learners' extrinsic motivation for carrying out deliberate vocabulary study with word cards? (Survey questions 2 to 4)

Extrinsic motivation was operationalized as how useful learners view word card study for their general English ability and English needs in general, and more specifically to their reading ability. In addition, due to the low levels of intrinsic motivation discussed above, any changes in amount of study time (time on task) was also viewed as being a result of extrinsic motivation.

First, analysis of the pre- and post-treatment survey data regarding students' perceptions of the usefulness or relevance of studying the vocabulary increased. Means were 1.74 before the introduction of the activity, and 3.44 after the 5 weeks of carrying out the news report activity. A t-test showed that the difference was statistically significant ($t = 12.128$, $df = 52$, $p < 0.0001$).

Second, analysis of the pre and post treatment survey data regarding students' perceptions of the usefulness of vocabulary to reading were also positive. Means were 2.04 before the introduction of the activity, and 3.81 after the 5 week treatment period. A t-test showed that the difference was statistically significant ($t = 11.412$, $df = 52$, $p < 0.0001$).

The final analysis for research question two involved analysis of the pre and post treatment word card study time data, and again, a mean increase was observed. Means were 1.48 before the introduction of the activity, and 2.81 after the 5 week treatment period. A t-test showed that the difference was statistically significant ($t = 8.144$, $df = 52$, $p < 0.0001$).

Overall, the above results intimate that due to the news report activity, learners viewed the words input onto their word cards as much more useful to their general English ability and needs, and to reading English texts. Due to this, they were more intrinsically motivated to study from their cards, and as a result, were spending more time studying from their deliberate study materials.

In addition, after collecting the students' word cards towards the end of the course; it was clear that the students were including much more detailed and holistic information than before. Although instruction on how to make word cards, and what information to include, did not change during the course, after introducing the activities mentioned above, students generally and consistently began including much more information such other word forms, collocations, and example sentences, often taken from the news stories.

Research Question 3: To what extent do learners view the news based activity as intrinsically and extrinsically motivating in term of their vocabulary development? (Survey questions 5 and 6)

For this part of the study, extrinsic motivation was operationalized and assessed by the extent to which learners felt reading English news stories was useful to their vocabulary development (survey question 5). Analysis of the pre- and post-treatment survey data showed that the mean usefulness rating increased from 1.92 during the control stage to 3.41 after carrying out the news report activity for five weeks. The results indicate that on average, learners viewed reading English news stories as only somewhat useful before the treatment but thought they were very useful by the end of the study. The results of a t-test showed that the positive change in perceptions was statistically significant ($t = 8.697$, $df = 52$, $p < 0.0001$).

Next, in terms of intrinsic motivation, which was operationalized very simply as whether the students wanted to continue the news activities or not (survey question 1). Analysis of the pre- and post-treatment survey data showed that 11 of the 27 students (40%) wanted to read and talk about English-medium news stories at the beginning of the course, but this increased to 23 students (85%) after doing the activity for five weeks. In order to subject the results to statistical analysis, if learners stated that they did not want to do the news activities they were assigned a value of 0, but if they wanted the activities included in the syllabus they were assigned a value

of 1. The mean score before the treatment was 0.41, but after the five weeks it had increased to 0.85. Again, the results of a t-test showed that the difference was statistically significant ($t = 3.738$, $df = 52$, $p = 0.0005$). Therefore, results indicate that levels of intrinsic motivation for reading and discussing English news stories as part of the course significantly increased.

6. Conclusions

This study showed that although students had previously been engaging in meaning focused input activities in the form of intensive and extensive reading, and output activities such as academic writing and speaking activities, they did not enjoy or clearly see the value of deliberate learning from word cards. Therefore, under a pretest-posttest design, a news report activity was introduced into the course, and data was collected and analyzed. There were three main results of this study.

First, after carrying out the news-based activities described in this paper, intrinsic motivation for word card study did not increase. That is to say, that the incorporation of the news activities into the syllabus, learners still did not enjoy making and studying from words card. While this is a little disappointing as a teacher, it is unsurprising as the two activities are very different and would not be expected to interact with each other in a meaningful way.

However, in terms of the second research question, through incorporating 'real-life' news texts as a mixed skills news report activity (the activity incorporated reading, writing, speaking and listening) students noticed the vocabulary items being used in real and meaningful ways, which increased levels of extrinsic motivation for word card study, and ultimately time on task.

The final result was that the news report activity was both intrinsically and extrinsically motivating for most of the learners. On average, learners found the news stories enjoyable (intrinsically motivating) and largely expressed a desire to continue doing the activities after the initial five-week period (extrinsically motivating). Therefore, students in the experimental group described in this paper continued doing the news report activity for the remained of the course. In addition, the news activities have now been officially added to the syllabus with subsequent groups of learners and continue to be a popular and enjoyable part of the course.

7. Limitations

This study has a number of limitations that make the generalizability of the results to other contexts difficult. First, the participant sample size was very small ($n = 27$), and all participants came from one intact class at one university in Japan. That being said, the participants represented fairly typical Japanese university EFL learners in that they were both male and female, were not English majors, and had mixed levels of motivation for studying English. Second, the results of this study are based on student self-report data, something which can be unreliable as we do not know if what students say is actually what they think. However, as the news activity did not carry any course points; did not affect their course grade, and students were not required to provide their names, there is little reason for learners to provide false data. Further investigation with a larger number of participants, and which provides more concrete data would be beneficial. For example, learners could be asked to study vocabulary using a digital platform where study time can be monitored, instead of using paper word cards.

8. Appendix: Questionnaire

Please read the questions below and circle the most correct response for you.

1. Do you enjoy making and studying from your word cards?

No, I do not 1	I don't mind 2	It is a little enjoyable 3	I like it 4
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2. How useful do you think the words on your word cards are for your general English ability?

Not Useful at all 1	Somewhat Useful 2	Useful 3	Very Useful 4
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3. How useful do you think the words on you word cards are for helping you to understand written information (textbooks, news articles, stories etc.)?

Not Useful at all 1	Somewhat Useful 2	Useful 3	Very Useful 4
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4. How much time do you spend making and studying your word cards per week?

Less than 30 minutes 1	30 minutes to 1 hour 2	Between 1 hour and 90 minutes 3	Over 90 minutes 4
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5. Do you think reading news articles in English is useful/helpful to improve your English skills?

Not at all useful 1	Somewhat Useful 2	Useful 3	Very useful 4
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6. Would you like to read news articles and talk about them as part of this course?

Yes 1	No 2
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9. References

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