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Report from the Field

Strategies and Tools for Learning High Frequency and Domain-Specific Vocabulary for Adult English Language Learners

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Abstract

The goal of the project described here was to expose advanced English language learners (ELLs) to a variety of strategies and tools for learning high frequency and domain-specific vocabulary in order to facilitate recall and retention while contributing to the overall language acquisition process. With self-confidence as a driving factor in developing productive language skills, the correlation between self-confidence and improvement of language skills was also considered.

Key words: action research, vocabulary acquisition, language skills, learning strategies, learner autonomy

Preparing adult English language learners (ELLs) to enter the workforce or enroll in postsecondary education means not only building their language skills but also teaching them strategies that enable them to continue developing language skills independently. At the foundation of language lies the development of vocabulary. This paper describes an action research project I conducted that aimed to expedite students' vocabulary acquisition by systematically presenting and practicing high frequency and job-specific vocabulary while raising awareness of learning strategies and tools that promote the development of learner autonomy.

Context of the Project

The words we teach, the way we teach them, and the tools that students find useful for learning will vary depending on context, level, and individual student needs and preferences. Because successful learners use a wide variety of learning strategies, instruction should reflect this (Chacón-Beltrán, 2018). The action research project I implemented with advanced level learners participating in an Integrated Education and Training (IET) program at a community college in Pennsylvania attempted to accomplish this. The 192-hour Pharmacy Technician IET program, the focus of this project, entailed 64 hours of workplace preparation, 64 hours of job training, and 64 hours of adult basic education (ABE). This course was co-taught by a job trainer and me, an ESL instructor. I worked with a cohort of 10 students twice a week for a total of six hours focusing on language learning. To

participate, students had to test at NRS level 5 or 6 as measured by the CASAS STEPS test. Most students started learning English less than five years prior to starting the class (90%), and all have lived in the U.S. for under five years. While 80% used some or a lot of English at work, 70% did not use it at home. All of the students completed high school, with 30% having completed a technical degree or some college and 20% having completed postsecondary. The majority of the students in the cohort were native Spanish speakers (70%), followed by Ukrainian, Japanese, and Pashto.

This intervention was designed to reflect student goals of expanding their vocabulary base and communication skills while supporting my goal of adding structure and consistency to my lesson plans. Additionally, I recognized the need to develop learner autonomy and support self-confidence. This paper describes new practices I adopted to improve my teaching while addressing learners' needs.

Selection of Vocabulary

Many language practitioners advocate teaching from the Academic Word List (School of Linguistics and Applied Language Studies, n.d.). However, considering not all students expect to transition to postsecondary education, I believe the New General Service List (NGSL) provides a more practical and useful reference. The NGSL 1.2 is a 2,800 word list of the most high-frequency words in the English language based on corpus linguistics research (Browne, 2024). Although the native speaker knows an average of 25,000–30,000 words, these 2,800 words cover 92% of words used in most English texts. Essentially, learning these 2,800 words is a shortcut to understanding written and spoken text.

For my eight-week project, I narrowed this list down by selecting words based on relevancy to the Pharmacy Technician course materials and analysis of data collected from vocabulary self-evaluations of previous advanced level students. In addition to high frequency words, I also selected domain-specific pharmacy words. These were selected based on frequency in textbooks, class materials, and lecture content as well as relevancy to daily life. Researchers in language acquisition recommend teaching anywhere from 8–20 words per week (Rossiter et al., 2016; Sedita, 2023). Considering the advanced level of my students, I determined that 14 vocabulary words per week would be a manageable cognitive load.

Vocabulary Learning Process

Over my teaching career, I have observed that many students are neither cognizant of how they learn nor aware of techniques to improve their learning strategies. For example, learning new vocabulary requires repeated exposure and use of new words. Schmitt (2008) and Webb (2007) indicate that learners need 8–10 exposures to learn the meaning of new words (as cited in Rossiter et al., 2016). While teachers may know this, many students may be unaware of the importance of repetition. Additionally, by developing students' awareness and interest in words, we can increase word consciousness and thereby facilitate learning (Khamesipour, 2015). My intention in this project was to develop this consciousness.

Research further reveals that an explicit strategy approach to instruction enhances learners' awareness of learning strategies, provides opportunities to select and practice these strategies, and promotes feedback and reflection on them (Dörnyei, 2006, as cited by Raoofi et al., 2014). One effective approach for teaching vocabulary is for students to directly learn words by definition or example prior to other learning tasks (Khamesipour, 2015). Several studies link the development of understanding vocabulary with meaningful opportunities to interact with a new word, practice words in multiple contexts, analyze word parts and meanings, and internalize the words within their multiple contexts and relevant application (Beck, McKeown & Kucan, Larrotta, Marzano, Nisbet cited by Madrigal-Hopes et al., 2014). The challenge for teachers is how to effectively build such techniques into daily practice.

Instructional Process

Building from the work of Madrigal-Hopes et al. (2014) and Chacón-Beltrán (2018), I developed a scaffolded, structured, and systematic approach to teaching vocabulary. To introduce the project, I presented Charles Browne's "Power of Words" Tedx Talks (2016) with the purpose of familiarizing students with the NGSL. Next, I

led a conversation about vocabulary-learning experiences and strategies. Students then completed an 84-word vocabulary self-evaluation pretest in which they indicated their level of understanding of words by selecting "I know very well," "I think I know," or "I don't know." Students also completed a survey on demographic information, language usage and practice trends, and prior exposure to learning strategies and technology tools.

Every week during the six-week practice, I taught 14 new words: seven domain-specific and seven high frequency words (Table 1). On Day 1, I presented new vocabulary, definitions, and pronunciation via a digital flashcard tool called Quizlet (https://quizlet.com/). Students were also encouraged to use this tool to study outside of class. One or two additional digital learning tools were explored each week to promote self-directed learning skills and learner autonomy. Tools were selected with the purpose of expanding on students' familiarity and use (GoogleTranslate, Quizlet, GoogleSheets), exposing them to the value of generative AI (PiAI and ChatGPT), improving on word and sentence analysis skills (Vocab Attack), and enhancing translation and usage accuracy (WordReference).

TABLE 1: Sample Vocabulary Words

Sample NGSL words	Sample domain-specific words
disease, average, lack, perhaps, although, aim, raise, wage	swallow, ointment, sweat, needle, syringe, bruise, batch, accurate

On Day 2, I used various practice strategies to promote the development of language skills, including fill-in-the-blank sentences and paragraphs, traditional dictations, running dictations, sentence-writing, conversation questions, dialogue reading and writing, audio recording, and games such as Quizlet Live and WordWall. At the end of Day 2, students completed a self-evaluation identifying words as "easy" (likely to be retained) or "not easy" (requiring additional review). Additionally, formative assessments were administered during weeks 3 and 6 to measure vocabulary acquisition and effectiveness of learning strategies. Class discussions were conducted throughout the study to understand students' practices outside of the classroom and to gauge preferences for in-class activities.

To conclude the project, I administered an 84-word vocabulary self-evaluation post test and a post-survey on change in confidence, overall language improvement, vocabulary improvement, and usefulness of learning tools and strategies. The CASAS STEPS post test was also conducted by the ESL program to measure Educational Functioning Level (EFL) gains.

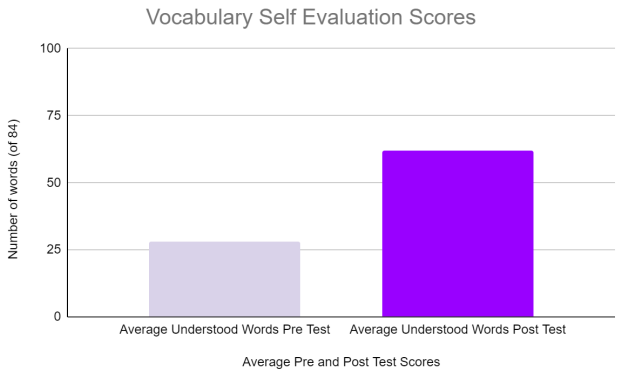
Outcomes

Throughout the project, students appeared engaged and interested in the learning process. They indicated that explicit vocabulary practice felt embedded and contributed to the practice of other language skill areas.

Impact on English and Vocabulary Skills and Understanding

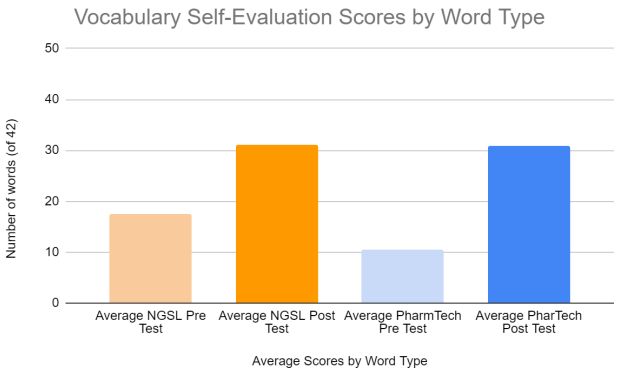
Overall, students showed remarkable improvement in their vocabulary (Figure 1). Students indicated, on average, that they learned 34 words over the six-week project with average pre test scores of 33% (28/84 words) and average post test scores of 74% (62/84 words).

FIGURE 1: Vocabulary Self-Evaluation Scores



Considering word type, students started the project with a lower base in domain-specific vocabulary and learned more of those than general vocabulary (Figure 2). Considering the focus of the class is on developing work skills for students to be employed as Pharmacy Technicians, this increase is not surprising. These results indicate that the use of a variety of learning strategies and tools were effective in fostering understanding of new vocabulary.

FIGURE 2: Vocabulary Self Evaluation by Word Type



Formative Assessment Data

Two 14-question formative assessments were conducted to validate students' recall and use. These quizzes included fill-in-the-blank sentences, word-definition matching, and sentence writing. Students scored an average of 80% on both formative assessments, confirming a solid overall understanding of the new vocabulary.

Impact on Standardized Assessment

While vocabulary recognition increased, CASAS scores remained flat. Half of the vocabulary consisted of pharmacy-specific terms; therefore, it seems natural that practicing these words would not have an impact on scores. The second half of the vocabulary, however, was composed of high frequency words that could appear on the CASAS test given it draws on both the Academic Word List and the NGSL. However, considering there was no specific analysis of the test content prior to the intervention, nor was the intervention designed with the goal of improving CASAS scores, it is not surprising that CASAS gains were not impacted.

Analysis of Study Habits, Tools, and Strategies

The pre-survey indicated that 70% of students study English outside of class, but the majority do so less than one hour per week. Most students recognize the need to practice more in order to meet their postsecondary or employment goals. However, juggling work, school, and family commitments are a challenge. Post-survey results indicated that 67% of students felt that how they practice vocabulary had changed. 100% indicated an increased awareness of strategies and tools for learning new vocabulary. Of the tools explored, the majority of students had been exposed to Quizlet in previous classes and Google Translate through personal use. Some students had familiarity with ChatGPT but not for vocabulary acquisition purposes. As to the utility of the tools, 30% of students found Quizlet to be the most useful while 20% chose WordReference.com. Students indicated that the variety of learning strategies I implemented were useful, including "Vocabulary Attack," writing sentences, fill-in the blank sentences, playing games, working on a project in a team, and dictations.

Impact on Confidence

On average, participants' pre-intervention survey indicated a confidence score in listening of 3.3 and reading of 3.3 out of 5. Participants post-survey indicated a confidence score in listening of 3.8 and reading of 4.3. This increase may imply that the vocabulary instruction positively affected confidence in receptive skills. Productive skill growth and increased confidence were additionally observed through short presentations and role plays. I believe the measurable successes in vocabulary acquisition positively impacted this growth in confidence. However, considering the students receive instruction in a range of English skills, it is difficult to determine whether this outcome is specifically linked to vocabulary instruction. Yet, the results are promising.

Next Steps

Overall, the vocabulary-learning strategies project provided a systematic instructional approach with students showing increased awareness of learning strategies, growth in vocabulary, and higher levels of self-confidence. Looking to the future, there are several implications for practice:

1. Despite their awareness of the value of learning new vocabulary, participants do not practice vocabulary or English in general outside of class as much as they believe they should. Therefore, organizational tools should be explored, and instruction should guide students in developing time management strategies that promote practice outside of the classroom.
2. Informal interviews indicated participants use Siri and Alexa to refine their speaking skills. It would be beneficial to learn more about students' existing practices and utilize tools that students are already familiar with since they have already experienced the effectiveness of these tools.

3. Opportunities could be created in the classroom for students to engage in peer learning by sharing their best practices. As the dissemination of innovation is a gradual process, utilizing student voices to generate buy-in to effective tools and techniques could be a useful instructional strategy.
4. Build more time for additional review activities such as games, role plays, or longer writing assignments at the midpoint and end of the project prior to assessments to further promote recall, use, and retention.

Conclusion

This exploration into vocabulary acquisition and learning strategies demonstrates that structured practice and the development of learner autonomy lead not only to improved vocabulary knowledge but also contribute to learner confidence. Educators can support advanced level ELLs in a myriad of ways both inside and outside the classroom. First, by creating a customized vocabulary list including both domain-specific words and high frequency words to support language development across contexts. Additionally, it is fundamental to provide a range of in-class and independent practice activities that reinforce vocabulary while appealing to different learning styles and encompassing a range of language skills. Finally, conducting periodic assessments is important to measure recall and retention of vocabulary. In conclusion, building on these foundational vocabulary skills while developing learning strategies contributes positively to overall learner confidence and continual growth as they transition out of the program and reach toward their goals.

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