Preparing EFL Learners for Native English-Speaking Context Through Vocabulary Learning: Two Chinese Cases in New Zealand

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While numerous studies in English as a second/foreign language (EFL) have examined vocabulary learning and teaching in the perspective of theories and practical tips, there is a paucity of research on the impact of high-frequency words learning on preparing new EFL residents for the life in English-speaking countries. In order to fill this gap, this study draws on the experience of two EFL learners in New Zealand (NZ), so as to explore the effectiveness of a 16-week daily-English-focused vocabulary learning program, which might generate useful implications about the effective adaption of new EFL residents to their target countries.

Keywords: EFL, vocabulary learning, vocabulary teaching, daily English, case study, New Zealand

Introduction

Numerous studies in English as a second/foreign language (EFL) have examined vocabulary learning and teaching, including theories and practical tips (Nation, 2001). Some researchers defined vocabulary as the words taught in the foreign language (Nation, 2001), whereas some others stressed that vocabulary can be presented, explained, and included in all kinds of activities, but it must be learned by the individual rather than be taught (Banerjee, 2006). While vocabulary learning strategies have been a focus of researchers for a long time (Gu & Johnson, 1996), there is a paucity of research on the impact of daily-English words learning (Nation, 2001) on preparing new EFL residents for the life in English-speaking countries. In order to fill this gap, this study draws on the experience of two EFL learners in New Zealand (NZ), so as to explore the effectiveness of a 16-week vocabulary learning program, which might generate useful implications about the effective adaption of new EFL residents to their target countries. One key research question guides this study: How did the participants become prepared for the new life through vocabulary learning?

This Study

The vocabulary learning program reported in this case study was embedded in an English course in NZ. This course, based on intermediate daily English, aimed to help students to deploy different learning strategies so as to develop their English proficiency. Vocabulary learning program was a section of the course. In this program, nine EFL learners attended over 16 weeks (two hours per class; twice a week). This program focused

on daily-English words (Nation, 2001), organized communicative activities, and introduced some vocabulary learning strategies (Nation, 2001). Considering the frequency, coverage, range, availability, learnability, opportunism, and centers of interest (Nation, 2001), the textbook—Get Together 4, published by Oxford University Press, was selected as a guideline in which 16 topics were covered (see Table 1). In addition, students were assigned to accumulate words in supermarkets or shopping malls after class and then share their word accumulation in the next class.

Table 1

Vocabulary Learning Plan

Topic		Content and sequencing (Nation 2001)		Format and presentation (Nation 2001)	Learning goals	Monitoring and assessment (Nation, 2001)
		Vocabulary from the text book	Other resources			
W1	Parts of an animal	Tail, back, patch, paw, fur...	Internet bilingual dictionary	Mnemonic and rote vocabulary learning strategies	Match the words with items and be able to describe pets or other animals	Short-term achievement
W2	Feelings	Embarrassed, thrilled, worried, disappointed, relieved...	English movies Conversation	Communicative activities	Be able to express and understand the feelings	Proficiency Achievement test (Read, 2000)
W3	Verbs related to visiting people	Used to do, didn't use to...	Conversation	Communicative activities	Learn how to describe one's past life	
W4	Vocabulary related to mailing letters	Mail, receive, deliver, return address, Envelope, stamp...	Post office	Rote vocabulary learning strategies	Learn to deal with letters	
W5	Outdoor sports	Climb, hike, fish, ride, camp, ride, rugby...	Travel agency, "Beautiful World" (a TV travel programme introducing NZ)	Guessing from context; Communicative activities	Be able to describe leisure activities	Short-term achievement; Proficiency
W6	School subjects	Chemistry, Biology, Art, Geography, P.E....	Library Bookshop	Mnemonic and rote vocabulary learning strategies	Be able to select lessons appropriately	
W7	Directions words	South, North, East, West...	Compass; Map	Mnemonic and rote vocabulary learning strategies	Learn to read map in the new city	Proficiency Achievement test (Read, 2000)
W8	Shapes	Square, rectangle, circle, heart, diamond, star, triangle...	Geometry book Conversation	Mnemonic and rote vocabulary learning strategies	Be able to describe things.	
W9	Sense verbs	Smell, taste, look, feel, sound...	Conversation	Communicative activities	Be able to describe things	

(Table 1 continued)

Topic	Content and sequencing (Nation 2001)		Format and presentation (Nation 2001)	Learning goals	Monitoring and assessment (Nation, 2001)
	Vocabulary from the text book	Other resources			
W10 Places in a town	Bus stop, department store, drugstore, gas station, newsstand...	Road, Conversation		Know what these places are and where I should go if I need to	
W11 Vegetables and fruits	Eggplant, onion, mushroom, broccoli, tempura...	Supermarket Fruit World Restaurant...	Word cards; Context; Mnemonic and rote vocabulary learning strategies Repetition	Be able to match the words with items, and then read recipe and order dishes in restaurants	Short-term achievement; Proficiency Achievement test (Read, 2000)
W12 Condiments	Mustard, pepper, soy sauce, salt, salad dressing, ketchup...	Supermarket		Be able to understand the recipe	
W13 Swimming accessories	Towel, bathing cap, goggles, bathing suit, bathrobe...	Swimming pool, Shopping mall			
W14 Personal care items	Soap, shampoo, toothbrush, toothpaste, Hairbrush, comb...	Supermarket		Be able to match the words with items	
W15 Clothing	Slipper, jacket, suit, tie, belt, pant, jeans...	Shopping mall			
W16 (Phrasal verbs)	Answer the phone, turn off the TV, turn on the coffee machine, put away the food...	Dictionary Newspaper Movies Conversation...	Communicative activities context; Dictionary Use; Repetition; Translation Grammar	Master the collocation	Proficiency

Participants and Methods

The participants, Cindy and Sandy (pseudonyms), new residents in NZ less than one month, were invited to participate in this research. Both of them were university graduates from Mainland China (MC), and had no experience of living outside MC. Data were collected through six semi-interviews prior to, during, and at the end of the program. In the interviews, the participants were encouraged to share their motivations for learning English, reflections on learning experience, and expectations for new life in NZ. All the data were transcribed, translated, and analyzed by the researcher. To enhance the validity of the data, member checking was conducted

Findings

This study demonstrates that both contents and instructional strategies in the program largely contributed to the participants' growth as new residents.

First of all, the contents of this program mapped out a scene for the participants to engage in daily life, such as conversational topics and necessities for life. At the beginning, both of them had capability to perform well in English exams based on grammatical or structural syllabus, but they did not have sufficient control of the essential daily-English words, such as the names of necessities for life (Nation, 2001). As Cindy said, "it was difficult for me to tell the names of commodities in supermarket... One day when I wanted to buy toner, I asked 'where I could find water keeping face wet'... I felt like an idiot then..." despite her 8.0 (of 9.0) grade in Reading Test of IELTS. Sandy also mentioned that he could read academic English, but had little knowledge of local life; he also noted that "I was eager to talk with native people, but did not know what to talk... I even did not know the difference between copy and print..." However, after the program, not only could they recognize these words, but also became confident and fluent in using them. As Cindy said, "I once thought supermarket was like an alien world, because I did not know what was on the shelves... Now I can find out anything I want to buy... I like it..." The same confidence was also evident in Sandy, who realized that "I'm not afraid to communicate with others any more... Everyone was interested in shopping... Nobody would refuse to talk about food..."

Second, the strategies taught in this program created a platform for the EFL learners to share experiences and collaborate incidental learning with intentional learning (Nation, 2001). At the beginning, students preferred to look up dictionaries when they encountered unfamiliar words, when intentional learning was their first or sole option. As Cindy reflected, "if I did not see the meaning in the dictionary, I had no confidence that I did understand it..." So did Sandy, who brought his electronic dictionary wherever he went. Through this program, they started to pay attention to local news and learn new words via collecting and guessing in daily life, such as watching English movies and communicating with local people. As some examples shared by Cindy, "I learnt the meanings of 'out of the blue', 'foreign body' in hospital... it's amazing that they could be used in this way... Oh, yes, 'amazing' is also the one I picked up..." Sandy also shared proudly that he had also learnt some slangs with local friends, "I don't know how to say them in Chinese, but I know when to use them..." In addition to learning strategies, these changes have revealed that both Cindy and Sandy, to some extent, started to become the members of the society.

Discussion and Conclusion

This study reports on a vocabulary learning program whereby two EFL new residents learned to adapt

themselves to the new life in NZ. Both the participants benefitted from a wide range of resources in terms of learning contents and vocabulary learning strategies. Learning contents not only widened their horizon on local topics, but also increased their accumulation of daily-English words. These learning strategies developed their language skills and proficiency, connected their academic classrooms with real outdoor life (Thomson, 2016), and also fostered their autonomy of language learning (Gao & Zhang, 2011). These experiences and insights, otherwise, might be accumulated from daily life at a slower pace. It should be emphasized that these changes were accompanied by participants' high expectation for native-like life and strong motivation to transfer their roles from language learners to language users, and then to the local members of the society. It was these changes that indeed cultivated their confidence and optimism in the process of adaption, which might also shed a useful light on their future. In this sense, daily-English-words-focused vocabulary learning program can truly become a pathway towards life in target countries.

This small-scale case study provides a strong impetus for bringing innovation to the design of vocabulary learning and teaching for new EFL residents, as well as some insights into the preparation of the EFL people who aspire to study or live in English-speaking countries. Provided the limited scope of the study, further research is suggested. This may include more participants of different target languages or of different levels of language proficiency to broaden the horizon of the effectiveness of taking daily-English words as a breakthrough.

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