

The Eclectic Teacher – Approaches and Materials for a Teaching Context in Japan

In this paper I will discuss the context of my teaching situation and my development of materials for vocabulary and grammar acquisition and narrative development with reference to theories of language and second language acquisition.

The Context

I've been teaching in a private Japanese Junior and Senior High School for over three years, educating students from the Junior High (JHS) 1st grade, age 11, to Senior High (SHS), 1st age 15. The school offers a special structure whereby all three grades of JHS get several 25 minute lessons a week, with an average class size of about 16, with a native English speaker, and another two hours of regular Japanese style English classes. SHS get one hour a week with an average class size of 19. Classes are streamed according to results of entrance exams and regular tests. The native teachers have total freedom in what they do in class and this luxury has enabled me to experiment widely and continually develop and refine my instruction.

Vocabulary and Grammar Acquisition

Firstly I would like to describe how my approach to grammar and vocabulary teaching has changed according to several theories and show the concrete results of that in the materials I have developed.

One of the most powerful predictors of acquisition success is interest and motivation (Taynton, 2008). If a student's interest in a subject is properly aroused and supported then learning occurs at a deeper level and is longer lasting. Therefore one of the initial aspects when designing materials is to consider what will interest the students.

Another important aspect of engaging students and encouraging engagement is to link content to their current level of real world knowledge or context. As Williams says: "Nowadays 'contextualization' is a guiding principle in ESL/EFL grammar and vocabulary pedagogy: teachers and materials writers are encouraged to attempt, in one way or another, to ground classroom focus on language form/s in the 'real world' of learners" (2006, p23).

For my situation, after three years of interaction with students, I have a fairly good idea of what their level of cognitive development is, their likely real world experiences and interests. As I will demonstrate these factors play an important part in my materials.

So, what are some of the underlying principles that guide me? Recently I've found that "traditional" ways of learning new vocabulary didn't really seem to work. A weekly list of new words that were related to the current unit in the textbook were doled out and a dictionary task gave the students time to find the meaning and practise dictionary work. However, the vocabulary didn't really seem to be memorised and during tests or written work the new language was rarely used.

Lewis' Lexical Approach (reviewed in Kranz, 1997) guides students from a different direction.

In this model (ibid):

1. The grammar/vocabulary dichotomy is invalid.
2. Collocation is used as an organizing principle.
3. Successful language is a wider concept than accurate language.
4. The Observe-Hypothesise-Experiment cycle replaces the Present-Practise-Produce Paradigm.
5. Most importantly, language consists of grammaticalised lexis--not lexicalised grammar. "

Here, one of the most important aspects is teaching chunks of language from fairly fixed idiomatic expressions to more flexible collocations and open combinations (Bhans, 1993, p57). However in much of the research reviewed subjects were of intermediate level or above (e.g. Wei 1999) which poses a

problem for me in terms of how to get students started at the beginner level. Also, as Bhans notes (ibid, p59), there are tens of thousands of collocations in use and it appears futile to try and teach them all. His solution is to measure the level of translation error markedness between L1 and L2 and concentrate on errors which are caused where translation doesn't match well.

This idea begs the question as to how language is actually stored and retrieved in the mind. Are L1 and L2 separate systems or joined somehow. Lutjerharms (1990) proposes that there is a semantic memory of common meaning and mental lexicons are distinct language systems. When form is received (written or heard) recognition takes place and then a connection to meaning occurs as a separate process. In this way two or more sets of lexicon are developed that connect to a common meaning. If this is the case then both systems must be flexible and open ended as subtle changes or completely new meanings can be generated as a result of encountering new phenomena or cultural processes not found in L1. Some cutting edge research using Graph Theory to explore the patterns of phonological networks doesn't, unfortunately, consider this question of how meaning is linked to form (Vitevitch, 2008).

A well advocated method of developing language awareness and acquisition is extensive reading. In a literature review Broady (2008, p259-260) found that it increased vocabulary, spelling and form recognition but, perhaps surprisingly, frequency did not have an impact on lexical learning although as Webb (2007) found it does help with learning form.

Another factor that contributes to retention of vocabulary is the depth of processing and the involvement load hypothesis (Broady, 2008, p261). This model posits that the learner's need for the vocabulary to comprehend a word or text, a search for the meaning, and finally an evaluation of the item to adequately understand it in relation to other words will determine the depth of processing in a task. Positive correlations have been found for this model. She also found that two more factors increased retention and understanding: the use of task based language teaching and a social collaborative dialogue (ibid p260).

One study by Webb (2007) measured the effects of context and glossing of word pairs on vocabulary learning across a variety of aspects such as orthography and paradigmatic associations. He found that overall both L1 and L2 glossing, and some form of context do help learners to develop vocabulary knowledge across a range of aspects such as "orthography, paradigmatic association, meaning, syntagmatic association and grammar" (p77), although a single context alone would not help too much in development (p75).

In another study by Webb (2008), which measured the effects of context on vocabulary development, it was found that the higher the quality, or where there are more contextual clues to guess the meaning, a greater acquisition in meaning occurred, while the number of encounters of an item increased knowledge of form, but not necessarily meaning.

To obtain data for teaching in the Lexical Approach Harwood advocates the use of corpora, but with certain restrictions. He states that the number of choices and uses of various phrases in English by native speakers will simply overwhelm learners so care has to be taken in what is selected to teach; and genres and learners' needs need to be accounted for before selection (2002, 141-143). Also, he is critical of the Anglocentric nature of many corpora (ibid p145) which does have an impact on teaching in different contexts if the learners will not really encounter native speakers when using English. However the Word English Corpus by Macmillian (2008) shows that publishers are aware of this problem and are starting to collect data for reference which may eventually filter down into course books. For the purposes of teaching in my context, use of corpora would be a useful reference tool for me but probably unhelpful for beginners at this age.

So far several key themes can be drawn from the research reviewed. These points form the basis of developing materials for my context.

- 1) Context is important when acquiring meaning, and multiple context examples are better than a single.
- 2) L1 L2 glossing is useful for learning meaning as the common semantic core is accessed and the L2 lexical core is linked and developed
- 3) Frequency is useful for learning form

- 4) Markedness between L1 and L2 can be a guide for choosing what collocations to teach
- 5) Depth of processing affects retention and understanding
- 6) Interest is important to engage learners – materials should relate to their cognitive development and real world experience
- 7) Experimentation is a good thing
- 8) Reading is a good method for exposure to new vocabulary, spelling and recognition
- 9) Tasks and collaborative working increase retention and understanding
- 10) Learners needs are important when selecting language to be used from corpora

The Materials

From these points I developed a new way of teaching vocabulary that combines many of these key points in one worksheet (appendix 1).

The point of this sheet is for the students to find language to talk about something that they know about – their hobbies. This has a real world connection to their lives, so they can relate to it easily; is a useful type of language to know for informal conversation, which is one of the goals of the class; and is interesting to them.

The worksheets are themed around topics which are related to and interest students for example: hobbies, phone calls, weekend, after school club, family, food, TV, school life etc. The idea is to give context based vocabulary which shows how to talk about or use language in particular contexts. For example appropriate verbs, nouns or adjectives and prepositions to use and how they combine to form clauses.

The example provided here is about hobbies. During the introduction of the worksheet students draw four of their hobbies in the boxes to the left. I've found drawing a useful way of generating enthusiasm and comedy in this age group. It also serves to bring to mind the action or activity and “warms students up” to the topic. This technique is discussed further below.

In terms of chunks, each section offers the chance to build up sets of words that fit naturally together and are glossed by the students through dictionary work. There is one example in each section to get the students started, as well as blanks for them to use to describe their own hobbies. The blanks offer a chance for personalisation so that the interests of each student are reflected which increases a sense of ownership and relatedness, important in maintaining interest for the task.

There are several sections which break down a typical clause into its parts so that construction is less intimidating, and a traditional focus on forms can occur. For instance in the Verb + Noun section the (infamous) “go to shopping”, which is a direct translation from Japanese, is shown in the correct form “go shopping” which students then gloss with Japanese. I would say that this is a somewhat marked form of language (cf. Bahns 1993) that can be noticed using this technique.

go shopping	買い物に行く
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Another common error is to use inappropriate verbs. For example “play” can be used for various activities in Japanese (play judo, play fishing) but is not in English. Errors such as these can be caught at the translation stage and then memorised as a correct chunk, so hopefully reducing future production errors. Other sections answer questions like when, where, who with, and how often. Again these are scaffolded with starter words which students then complete to form chunks.

Once all the sections are completed and checked for accuracy students move onto construction of contextualized clauses which comprise the smaller “chunk” sections. A common problem with students at this level is that they often don't build long sentences, perhaps due to the required cognitive load of organising the chunks into clauses. This worksheet offers the chance for students to extend their sentences as they can easily see how the chunks fit together to form a long clause.

Three scaffolded examples, which show how the chunks like “when” “where” and “who” combine to form a clause, are given with students building up the parts by choosing from the related chunks. In this way they can see how a clause is formed and the form of each part. Once these chunks are memorised as a single part, organisation of the clause can hopefully occur at a much faster rate as analysis of prepositions or adverbs is already taken care of by the chunk. After three practice sentences students can then practise on their own by creating their own sentences of any length. This practice offers the chance of recycling of language, developing context for the vocabulary which is directly related to their lives, making it interesting, increases the frequency of exposure and, due to glossing, should increase understanding.

Across a variety of topics these worksheets offer the chance to show how the same or similar language is used which not only recycles language (good for learning form) but also increases the contexts, which aids retention and understanding. Showing how the same items (a strongly marked item is “like”, or many adjectives) are used in different ways in different contexts enables the student to build a stronger L2 lexical core related to different parts of the L1 semantic core, enabling them to learn how to say what they want correctly.

In conclusion teaching language chunks to beginners offers some advantages over rote learning of vocabulary lists and traditional grammatical instruction. The combination at a micro level two commonly and naturally used items (e.g. verb + noun – go shopping, do judo) and showing, through glossing, how L1 and L2 are different develops the L2 lexical core and increases understanding by linking to L1 semantic core. Placing the language in a personally relevant and interesting range of topics facilitates motivation and context. Practising joining chunks to form clauses increases depth of processing and understanding as cognitive activity is required over simple memorisation of sentences or words. Therefore these materials at the beginning level raises students awareness about natural language units, such as collocations, and their formation into clauses hopefully preparing them for more effective noticing and acquisition in “higher” levels.

Developing Conversation

While the worksheets offer students a chance to develop clauses which are well formed written texts, a different approach needs to be made to help them develop awareness of types of spoken discourses and interactional patterns with the goal of developing spoken fluency.

Aside from understanding conventional written narratives like stories, which comprise a setting, characters, a problem, solutions and resolutions (Naughton, 2008), social interaction works in a different way and can be analysed in terms of two types of function: interactional (compliments, jokes, rapport building) and transactional (buying a stamp, arranging a meeting) each with their own protocols and structure (Burkhart, 1998, p5).

In their pilot study Bygate and Porter (1991) found that familiarity could have an influence on fluency and complexity. One problem that I have encountered in my context is that students may not have had experience of a particular situation so they have no schema to fall back on to describe how an interaction may proceed. In order to build a connection between myriad functional settings, which may or may not exist in a students’ experience, and the development of the language needed in them to function I have selected cartoons based on various situations from course books (the English Firsthand series, Helgesen et al., 2007), and other sources, with speech bubbles where the language has been blanked out (Appendix 2). The pictorial nature hopefully offers a scaffold for students if they don’t have any such experience.

Students work in pairs (a task based collaborative dialogue - Broady 2008, p261) using their imagination to generate dialogue and, through a process of teacher interaction to help with natural expressions and repair and subsequently with reference to the original in the textbook, notice what is different and find out why. Hanaoka’s study (2007) into a similar situation showed a positive effect on language acquisition through increased noticing of differences and revision of students’ interlanguage.

The pictorial situations can also be used to raise awareness of how to achieve a particular goal in terms of pragmatics by forcing the student to think about what kinds of words and phrases are acceptable in

various situations with reference to L2 norms. For example the level of politeness between two participants and how that politeness is realized through language (e.g. Partridge 2006, p56 for a transactional conversation ordering a burger). This activity has, I would say, has a fairly high involvement load which requires deep processing thus more likely to aid retention and understanding.

Once students have finished they practice reading aloud in pairs all of each others' cartoons. This is a great source of amusement and a good chance to practise speaking. It also shows how one situation can generate many different ways of achieving a goal and so increases students' awareness of language that can be used. This helps to overcome one weakness of course books which typically offer only one example for practice.

After this, discussion takes place about the situation and what language could be and shouldn't be used to reach a communicative goal. This review helps develop connections between the L1 semantic core and L2 lexis, and raises awareness of cultural and linguistic discourse differences, like interactional patterns and cross cultural pragmatics (Paltridge, 2006, p66).

Developing Stories

Another use for these cartoons which can be used to teach story narratives (cf. Naughton 2008) is to firstly explain a story structure and then ask students to think "what happened next". They then draw another 4-6 pictures and write dialogue that shows a problem, solution and resolution.

Following awareness of narrative structure, extensive reading of various EFL collections, such as the Penguin Young Readers (Hughes et al, 1996) and the Foundations Reading Library (Wenger, 2008), is used to raise awareness of the gap between students' production and native texts.

In follow up work students are asked to analyse the structure of the narrative by answering questions such as who are the characters, what are the problems and how is it resolved. This combination of explicit teaching of narrative structure, production and comparison to native texts hopefully help students to notice not only the form of language, but underlying discourse structures.

Conclusion

In this paper I have showed how research into acquisition of vocabulary and grammar has led to the production of materials for my context. Several factors influence the choice and form of materials such as age, previous experience, areas of interest, cognitive development and goals of study. The theoretical basis for material development blend traditional aspects of second language learning, such as focus on forms, together with more recent ideas such as the lexical approach. This blend of methods and techniques is, I believe, in keeping with Girard's description of the eclectic teacher and offers students interesting and useful ways to improve not only their L2 language learning, but also analytical abilities and transferable language production skills.

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Appendix 2

Example of a blanked cartoon (Helgesen et al. 2007, p84)

