# Self-directed and Teacher-led Learning for Vocabulary Acquisition

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### Abstract

This study explored the attitudes of 33 female students towards vocabulary acquisition in both self-directed and teacher-led environments. An open-ended and multiple-choice survey was used to gather student opinions and evaluate current classroom practice with the goal to encourage students to become more motivated and self-regulated learners.

*Key Words*：Self-directed, self-regulation, motivation, vocabulary acquisition, learner autonomy
キーワード：自主的、自主規制、動機付け、語彙習得、学習者の自発

### Introduction

"Change need not always be big; small changes can sometimes significantly alter the classroom dynamics" Padwad and Dixit, (2017). (p.168).

In high-intermediate English classes, it is evident even in the self-introductions on the first day of class that most learners are motivated and able to self-regulate their learning processes. Members voluntarily share with the class that they like to wake up and go to sleep early, they are good at making presentations, love to read, play musical instruments, and so on. When given a task by the teacher, this ability to self-regulate involves them analyzing the task to determine how they will complete it, setting various goals for themselves, managing their time appropriately, and seeking help in the case that they need assistance in their learning. Zimmerman (2005) describes these components as part of a triad of self-regulatory processes that are cyclically repeated. However, in lower-intermediate classes where self-regulation and motivation is not as developed in learners, some degree of support may be necessary in order to gain new knowledge. In this study, an open-ended qualitative

survey was used to discover the opinions of these learners regarding teacher-led vocabulary activities that were added midway through a course with the intention to motivate, promote autonomy, and stimulate increased self-regulation.

## Participants

The participants were 33 second-year female students enrolled in low- to high-intermediate levels of English classes at a women's university in Tokyo, Japan. The participants' majors were varied between English Communication (EC), Japanese Language and Culture (J), Psychology and Horticulture (P), and International Social Studies (IS). One class, the Global Challenge Program (GCP), is made up of students from all the previously listed majors with a high-intermediate English level. Participants typically reported that they held an Eiken certificate ranging from a Level 3 to a Level 2. Notable for this study is that the EC-R1 class had a higher proficiency than the JP-R3 class, with six members holding an Eiken level pre-2, one with a level 2 and six members with a TOEIC score between 350-400. Six members of the JP-R3 class had an Eiken level 3 certificate, two had a pre-2 and none had an Eiken level 2. Just one member had taken the TOEIC with a score of 350. All participants were taught by the researcher; this study was conducted on a convenience sampling.

## Context

After a trial lesson using teacher-adapted reading materials, students were enthusiastic about continuing with the same type of materials. Blake and Majors, (1995) presents a five-step procedure for learning vocabulary that includes receptive and productive elements (Table 1) in Nation, (2013) (p. 139).

**Table 1: Blake and Majors (1995) Five-step procedure for learning vocabulary**
Receptive elements:
(1) pre-teaching of vocabulary
(2) oral reading of a text containing the vocabulary with discussion of the meaning of the text
(3) deliberate word study

Productive elements:

(4) vocabulary quizzes, puzzles, or tests

(5) writing making use of the vocabulary

This procedure was followed except for step 4, using readings selected from newspapers, journals, and books. First, we focused on 10-15 words highlighted in bold in the reading. High frequency words were usually pre-selected by the teacher but sometimes the list was made together with the class. Words were also selected if they appeared in the Eiken or TOEIC tests. Learners looked up the meanings for unfamiliar words. Next, we orally read the article or passage together. Sometimes the teacher would read it, or sometimes the learners would take turns and read it. Then, we discussed the highlighted words together to make sure everyone understood them. Step four was initially omitted and the writing in step five was usually combined with a discussion, where pairs or small groups discussed questions related to the reading and wrote out their answers using the new vocabulary. Nation (2013) states that this type of procedure ensures that words are repeated and various aspects of what is involved in knowing a word are covered. Paribakht and Wesche (1997) state that "…focused vocabulary instruction based on theme-related reading texts and using a variety of techniques has shown greater effectiveness than reading comprehension alone for learning selected vocabulary" (p. 196).

A very brief review was held the next week before starting a new lesson. However, as learners in the EC and JP classes had difficulty in recalling the lesson from the previous week, step four was initiated at the beginning of this review session, in the form of spelling tests which is rather unusual at the tertiary level. In addition, bonus points were offered to anyone turning in a bilingual list of words from their personal study. Vocabulary notebooks, loose-leaf paper, flashcards were all praised and given credit. As time allowed, learners were asked where they had gleaned their words from and what they were studying on their own. Effort was made to give the learners as much control over the activity as possible. At the end of the term, this work and other bonus activities was used in a few cases to demonstrate the learner's motivation and recommend them to a higher-level English class. David Nunan

(2003) has shown that when teachers help learners to find their own learning styles and strategies, it helps them to become more autonomous learners.

## Data collection and analysis

An open-ended survey in paper form was given at the end of the course only to the EC-R1 and JP-R3 participants (N=33) to discover their attitudes towards the learner-controlled bonus vocabulary activity and the teacher-led spelling quizzes. It also asked participants to estimate the number of new words gained every week and to judge their motivation as learners. Participants were not asked to identify themselves in this survey in order to gather as many candid opinions as possible. The questions were written in English, but the participants had access to their smartphones for translation help as they were accustomed to in class, as well as being able to ask the teacher for explanation in English or Japanese. Participants were given the option of writing their comments in English or Japanese. The GCP participants were exempted from this survey as they demonstrated they were autonomously studying any unknown vocabulary from the readings, could recall the major points of the reading in the following week's review session, and did fine in a pop spelling game to review vocabulary in class.

Data of students from class records are provided in Appendix 1: Vocabulary Extra Credit List, to collaborate results from the survey.

## Limitations of the study

During data analysis, it became evident that there were problems with an anonymous survey given at the end of a course as it was impossible to clarify ambiguities with the participant. Most wrote in English but a few answers, four in total, were incomprehensible due to grammar and syntax errors.

On 68 separate occasions, questions were left unanswered for unknown reasons. The first question regarding whether keeping vocabulary notes was useful or not, went unanswered by 26 out of 33 students, or 79% of the total. The question asking for other ideas on how to increase vocabulary was left unanswered in 10 out of 33 times.

It could be assumed that the participant did not have an idea on how to increase their vocabulary. It would have been better to ask participants to write "I don't know" if they did not have an answer. Perhaps an online survey could avoid this problem as the survey could be structured to show only one question at a time and require that the question be answered in order to continue. Also, if the survey were written in English and Japanese it might help to avoid potential misunderstandings and reduce the number of unanswered questions. On the other hand, it could be viewed that participants only answered the questions that they wanted to volunteer information.

Despite these limitations, it was possible to discover many notable opinions regarding the teacher-led vocabulary activity of spelling tests, which, when considered with the current research, are expedient for planning future classes.

## Results

The main question in this study is to discover the opinions of the lower-intermediate learners regarding teacher-led vocabulary quizzes added to course material to support them in learning new vocabulary. Only very distinct differences between the EC-R1 and JP-R3 are noted, other than that the results from both classes are interpreted together. Table 2 shows the seven vocabulary survey questions. Appendix 2: Survey Data shows the data of the gathered information.

### Table 2: Vocabulary survey questions

1. Was keeping vocabulary notes helpful for you? Please comment.
2. What form did you keep your notes?
3. Do you have other ideas about how to increase your vocabulary?
4. Where did you get your new words from?
5. What was your average number of words every week?
6. Do you consider yourself a motivated student?  Yes   No
7. Did the spelling tests after the lesson help you to remember new words? Please comment.

For the first question, 26 out of 33 participants, or 79% of the total, did not say if keeping vocabulary notes was helpful. However, as most learners referred to their vocabulary notes in class during discussions and before tests, it would seem to have been a little useful.

For the second question, 25 out of 33, or 75% of all participants said they kept vocabulary notes in some form. The most popular way was in a notebook (11 participants) or on loose-leaf paper (13 participants). Just one participant reported using flash cards. 8 participants left this question unanswered. Further class data in Appendix 2: Vocabulary extra credit (students and no. of times extra credit turned in) shows that 18 out of 36 students, or 50%, turned in this extra credit activity at least once. Additionally, more EC-R1 than JP-R3 learners turned it in more than once.

Eight participants reported proactive methods such as writing, taking word tests, doing recitations, talking or using their voice to increase their vocabulary. Ten participants said that watching movies, reading, listening to music, or doing English Central helped them to learn new words. One participant said it was important to be motivated. Five participants did not have any ideas to suggest. Ten participants left the question unanswered.

Fourteen participants found their new vocabulary from various classes, and eight participants reported movies or TV as helpful. Six cited English Central (which is funny because many continually complained about having to use EC). Participants also reported books (3), specifically TOEIC books (1), music/songs (3) electronic dictionaries (1), smartphone (1), Google (1), documentary articles (1), and manga (1). Four participants left this question unanswered.

Regarding average number of words learned per week, the EC-R1 class reported a higher top-end numbers than the JP-R3 class. One participant reported 50 words per week for EC-R1 and 9 participants reported 10-15 words. For the JP-R1 class, the majority of the participants reported between 0-10 words. Ten participants did not know or left this question unanswered.

18 out of 33 participants, or 55% reported themselves as being motivated students, and 11 said they were not. One participant said she was in-between yes and no, and 3 left the question unanswered. To break it down further, 5 out of 14, or 36%, of JP-R3 learners said they were motivated, as compared with 13 out of 19, or 68%, in the EC-R1 class.

For the final question, 17 out of 33 participants, or 51%, said the spelling tests after the lesson helped them to remember new words. No one said it had not helped them, but 7 participants left the question unanswered. One participant from the JP class reported "as before" which is being understood as "no change." The EC-R1 participants submitted several lengthy comments. One participant wrote "I watched [sic] the test again. It is difficult to input the some words. But, I'll do my best for myself everyday [sic]. Thank you very much." Another participant said "It was a review. However, I want you to devise [sic] a little more because it is difficult to remember." A third participant wrote "I think that it may be reviewed. However, I think that it is student oneslf [sic] watches a word book by habit that is the best."

To collaborate results from the survey, data from the teacher's class records are included (Appendix 3). 13 out of 15 learners from the EC-R1 class attempted the extra credit vocabulary activity at least once and 5 students turned in a word list 5 times or more. In contrast, 5 out of 18 low-intermediate JP-R3 learners turned in a spelling list or word cards, and 4 turned in the spelling list only once. The remaining learner turned it in twice.

## Discussion and Conclusion

Ideally, we want our students to be intrinsically motivated to study vocabulary on their own, if they are to reach a higher level of English fluency. Dornyei (2001) describes intrinsic motivation as "behavior performed for its own sake in order to experience pleasure and satisfaction…" However, on the first day of the spring term, learners in all levels of English classes expressed varying levels of discouragement in studying vocabulary. They reported that although they know it is important to

study vocabulary, it is boring, hard to remember, and difficult to continue. Apparently for many of us, learning vocabulary is not a pleasurable or satisfactory experience. However, by studying participants' survey responses and comparing them against the current research, it may be possible to discover more ways to make vocabulary learning a more satisfactory experience.

In the first question of the survey about the helpfulness of keeping vocabulary notes, it is unclear why so many participants left this question unanswered. In future classes, it would be beneficial to allow learners to take their favorite method of learning vocabulary and do a mini presentation and demonstration of the pros and cons of that style and discuss its value. Another possibility is suggested by Scharle & Szabo (2000) called "Ways to Words" where learners try a new technique to learn words and practice self-monitoring. They brainstorm different strategies to learn vocabulary and each pick out a new strategy to memorize a list of 10-15 items. Learners then discuss their impressions of the new strategy and how it compares with the way they are familiar. In this way, learners can raise their awareness of the value of keeping vocabulary notes as well as learn a variety of different ways.

For the second question, many participants reported that producing language orally or in written form helped to increase their vocabulary. This is encouraging because spelling tests also demand production by the learner.

Questions 3-6 help to gauge the motivation of the learners and the direction their English takes them. However, the key question to this study is in the final question, "Did the spelling tests after the lesson help you to remember new words?" Spelling tests had been reluctantly introduced when it became apparent that learners were having difficulty recalling new words from the previous weeks' lesson. The teacher was concerned that learners would object to have spelling tests in class, which is uncommon at the tertiary level, but seemed to be a relatively easy and efficient way to get everyone on board with the new vocabulary in the readings. It is very surprising to discover that 51% of the students said the tests following the reading and discussion were helpful and that no one objected to the tests (although 7

participants abstained from answering). Bandura (1997) states, "In addition to serving as cognitive motivators, proximal goals serve as an effective vehicle for developing a sense of personal efficacy. Without standards against which to measure their performances, people have little basis for judging how they are doing or for gauging their capabilities. Subgoal attainments provide rising indicants of mastery that help to instill and verify a growing sense of personal efficacy." In this case, the "proximal goals" or spelling tests did function as cognitive motivators and a way to gauge their capabilities. It was interesting to observe students competing against their own performance or even comparing themselves against their classmates and striving to improve their performance in the following test. Bandura (1991) also states that "When people attend closely to their performances they are inclined to set themselves goals of progressive improvement, even though they have not been encouraged to do so" (p.251). Seeing tertiary learners putting in real effort for the short spelling test of 10-15 words was surprising and encouraging for the teacher. Padwad and Dixit (2017) noted from their study of teacher classroom behavior that "teacher motivation and learner motivation seem crucially tied up with each other in a reciprocal relationship, in which the two bloom or wither together." Although many students in the JP-R3 class did not opt to turn in any word lists for bonus points, they did put in some effort for the spelling tests and learned a good number of new words. As 7 out of 14 in the JP-R3 class said that spelling tests after the lesson were helpful, they will be continued. In comparison, the high motivation level reported by the EC-R1 class at 68% is reflected in the higher average number of words they learned every week and in their enthusiasm for the bonus vocabulary activity. Several students wrote lengthy comments with supportive opinions and further suggestions and 10 out of 19 stated that the spelling tests were helpful for them.

Through this study, the researchers agree with the findings from Padwad and Dixit (2017) that "The experience of trying out small changes in the classroom and watching them make a positive impact went beyond increasing the participants' confidence. It also triggered interest in (the teacher) learning more about their subject, teaching techniques, (and) ideas for activities…" As a result of this study,

spelling tests will be continued, especially for the lower-intermediate classes and other methods for reviewing vocabulary will be considered. Providing a short-term goal seems to aid with motivation and improve learner self-regulation.

**For further consideration**

Bandura (1991) stated "The exercise of forethought enables them to wield adaptive control anticipatorily rather than being simply reactive to the effects of their efforts." (p. 259). In future classes, it will be important to set short- and long-term goals to develop increased self-regulation and motivation.

Several points to consider in planning future classes:

1. Additional activities using the word lists are necessary as per student request.

2. There is a need to find ways to help learners stay motivated and improve their self-regulation.

3. Did offering bonus points demotivate any learners, as it forced an intrinsically-rewarded activity to receive an extrinsic reward?

4. What would encourage these university students to improve their self-efficacy?

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**Appendix 1: Vocabulary extra credit  N=33**

| Form | Class | Number of learners |
|---|---|---|
| Notebook | JP-R 3 | 0 |
| Notebook | EC-R 1 | 11 |
| Loose leaf paper | JP-R 3 | 8 |
| Loose leaf paper | EC-R 1 | 5 |
| Flashcards | JP-R 3 | 0 |
| Flashcards | EC-R 1 | 1 |
| Other | JP-R 3 | 0 |
| Other | EC-R 1 | 0 |

**Appendix 2: Survey data  (N=33)**

| No. | Survey question | JP-R 3  (N=14) | EC-R 1  (N=19) |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1. | Keeping vocabulary notes helpful | 2 | 5 |
| | Keeping vocabulary notes not helpful | 0 | 0 |
| | Question unanswered | 12 | 14 |
| | | | |

| 2. | Form of vocabulary notes<br>（1 learner had 2 answers in EC-R 1 ） | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| | Notebook | 0 | 11 |
| | Loose-leaf | 8 | 5 |
| | Flashcards | 0 | 1 |
| | I don't keep notes | 0 | 1 |
| | Question unanswered | 6 | 2 |

**Appendix 2: Survey data –continued  (N=33)**

| No. | Survey question | JP-R3 (N=14) | EC-R1 (N=19) |
|---|---|---|---|
| 3. | Other ways to increase vocabulary (some students more than one answer) | | |
| | write | 0 | 3 |
| | talk/use voice/read aloud | 2 | 1 |
| | use word test | 1 | 0 |
| | recitation | 1 | 0 |
| | listen to music | 0 | 1 |
| | watch movies/videos | 3 | 2 |
| | read | 0 | 1 |
| | flashcards/word book | 0 | 2 |
| | be motivated | 1 | 0 |
| | English Central | 1 | 0 |
| | I don't know/incomprehensible | 2 | 4 |
| | Favorite things | 1 | 0 |
| | Unanswered | 2 | 8 |
| | | | |
| 4. | New words from | JP-R3 (N=14) | EC-R1 (N=19) |
| | class notes | 4 | 10 |
| | movies/TV | 3 | 5 |
| | music/songs | 0 | 3 |
| | books/novels | 1 | 2 |
| | English Central | 2 | 4 |
| | TOEIC book | 0 | 1 |
| | documentary articles | 0 | 1 |

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| | manga | 0 | 1 |
| | smartphone/PC/Internet/Google | 1 | 3 |
| | electronic dictionary | 0 | 1 |
| | unanswered | 3 | 1 |
| | | | |
| 5. | Average number of words learned every week | | |
| | 0～3 | 3 | 1 |
| | 5～10 | 3 | 4 |
| | 10～15 | 0 | 5 |
| | 15～20 | 2 | 4 |
| | 50 | 0 | 1 |
| | I don't know | 2 | 0 |
| | unanswered | 4 | 4 |
| | | | |
| 6. | Are you a motivated student? | | |
| | Yes | 5 | 13 |
| | No | 7 | 4 |
| | Middle between yes and no | 0 | 1 |
| | unanswered | 2 | 1 |
| | | | |
| 7. | Spelling tests after the lesson were helpful | 7 | 10 |
| | Spelling tests were not helpful | 0 | 0 |
| | As before/unchanged | 2 | 0 |
| | Incomprehensible/Unclear reply | 3 | 4 |
| | unanswered | 2 | 5 |

**Appendix 3: Vocabulary extra credit  (N=18)**

| | Times vocabulary list turned in | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Class | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 |
| JP-R3 | 4 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| EC-R3 | 4 | 1 | 3 | 0 | 1 | 3 | 0 | 1 |