An Examination of Loanword Cognates, False Friends and Synformy

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Abstract

An assessment was conducted in order to gather information on student attitudes to and knowledge of vocabulary, and in particular to English loanwords used in Japanese. A secondary purpose for the study was to look into potential benefits and pitfalls of the explicit teaching of vocabulary. Three categories for instruction were identified. The first, true cognates are loanwords that have been *borrowed* into Japanese, retaining the same meaning as in English. The second, false friends are also *borrowed* words that are similar in form. Close false friends have similar form and meaning while distant false friends have somehow undergone a semantic shift and acquired a new or original Japanese meaning. Finally, synforms are words that are similar looking and sounding but with different meaning to other words and prone to cause confusion in non-native speakers.

Introduction/Background

One concern of many for educators in the English language teaching field in Japan is to know how to help our students become more competent readers of authentic texts in English, to help them better comprehend texts, and understand how the words on a page are connected to each other so students do not simply resort to word-by-word interpretation. This means training them to go beyond simply being able to use an English to Japanese dictionary and translate a text into Japanese. It also means helping them to get the original gist of a text and understand how words collocate and function together.

To get students to extract enough information in order to understand, summarize, and evaluate a text that has been read in English requires them to be able to effortlessly draw upon a vast vocabulary. Vocabulary learning is an essential part of language learning and can be considered to be the most important aspect of second language acquisition (Coady, 1997; Knight, 1994). Research has shown that students of English need 5,000 word families to reach basic comprehension levels (Laufer, Meara & Nation, 2005).

In order for students to improve their English reading comprehension, a first step is to improve students' vocabulary levels. Nation (2005) proposes that teachers and learners spend considerable time on the 2,000 high frequency words of English through direct teaching and learning, incidental learning and planned meetings due to their importance in frequency, coverage and range. He elaborates that these "high-frequency

words are so important that anything that teachers and learners can do to make sure they are learned is worth doing" (p.16).

Knowing the meaning of the vocabulary in a text is of paramount importance if a student is to understand its meaning. As Wilkins (1972) expressed, " While without grammar very little can be conveyed, without vocabulary, nothing can be conveyed" (p.114). Moreover, it has been found that a learner's lexical knowledge, such as words' forms, concept, appropriateness, and related usage, is crucial to one's language proficiency (Beck, 1982; Kelly, 1989; Raimes, 1985).

It is generally assumed that it is impossible to talk about a subject without agreeing on the meaning of the terms involved. However, agreement on the definition of certain key terms seems to be difficult. *What is a word?* is a question with a variety of answers depending on whether one adopts a narrow or a broad definition. Do we limit the definition of *word* to single lexical items? Can the term include strings of words that form sets of two or three words phrases or more? Yet another controversy surrounds the notion of what it means to *know* a word. It surely involves more than simply knowing a word's definition (Beck & McKeown, 1991; Johnson & Pearson, 1984; Nagy & Scott, 2000).

The proper usage and gradual acquisition of a vocabulary item happens incrementally over a period of time and over numerous exposures. Learners acquire words by degrees, first through hearing or reading and recognizing the word and then on to the productive use of the word in speaking or writing. The depth of understanding of a word increases as the number of encounters increases. A student's level of word knowledge will have a great impact on their ability to use a language. Nation (1990, p. 31) proposes the following list of the different kinds of knowledge that a person must master to know a word.

- the meaning(s) of the word
- the written and spoken form of the word
- the grammatical behavior of the word
- the collocations and associations of the word
- the register of the word
- the frequency of the word

Students must be aware that a term can have more than one meaning and understand those meanings or at least be able to assess and access new meanings via the context of a sentence. Multiple meaning words abound in the English language. Johnson, Moe, and Baumann (1983) found that among the identified 9,000 critical vocabulary words for elementary-grade students, 70% had more than one meaning.

Additional dimensions of word knowledge include words that naturally appear alongside each other or typically collocate with each other (Johnson & Pearson, 1984; Nagy & Scott, 2000). Students' grasp of one word is linked to their knowledge of other words. Learning vocabulary should be thought of as learning about the interconnectedness of ideas and concepts as they are connected to other words.

Not all of the words of a language are equally useful. One way to measure the usefulness of a given word is to determine its frequency, or how often it occurs in the normal use of the language. Take for example the following words whose frequencies were accessed at *Compleat Lexical Tutor*, a website that provides a broad range of free computer based resources for both students and teachers. First, the item *meeting,* which is quite a common word falls into the 1000 most commonly used word list (K-1). The word *interview*, somewhat less common falls into the 2000 most commonly used word list (K-2) while *agenda* appears at the 3000 level (K-3).

Issues

Many researchers claim that extensive reading is a good way for both native speakers and learners alike to enhance word knowledge and get a lot of exposure to the most frequent and useful words (Coady, 1997; Krashen, 1989; Nation and Waring 1997). However, outside the classroom, our students most likely do not engage in extensive reading in English for pleasure. This is most likely due to a variety of reasons, the most obvious being that they simply do not have the time. University students in Japan are required to take a very large number of courses each semester leaving little time left over to engage in English reading simply for pleasure. Another is a lack of proficiency reading in English, which makes the task long, laborious and frustrating.

Given the abundance of English loanword cognates in Japanese – accounting for as many as half of all high frequency word families and up to a quarter of all academic word families (Daulton, 2008) – this is clearly an important field of investigation for both instructors and Japanese learners of English. Loanword cognates, words across languages that have similar form (e.g. sound) and sometimes meaning (Carroll, 1992), are commonly considered an excellent resource for learning English vocabulary (Hall, 2002; Lotto & De Groot, 1998; Nation, 2003). One could adopt a variety of approaches to develop students' English vocabulary through the explicit teaching of the English meanings of loanwords.

There are perceived benefits to the vast amount of loanwords contained in the Japanese lexicon. However, loanwords can mislead learners if the meaning of the word in the student's first language (L1) deviates

substantially from the source word in the second language (L2). There are a number of pitfalls, confusion with correct usage being one.

The Vocabulary Knowledge Scale

The Vocabulary Knowledge Scale (VKS) is a self-report assessment that was originally developed by Paribakht and Wesche (1996) to "distinguish stages in learners' developing knowledge of particular words"(Paribakt and Wesche, 1997:179). The VKS is not designed to inform sophisticated knowledge or lexical nuances of vocabulary in a variety of contexts. It combines students' self-reported knowledge of a word in combination with a constructed response demonstrating knowledge of each target word.

In it, students are presented with a target word in written form and are required to indicate their self-perceived knowledge of the item in question by completing one or more of five self-report categories ranging from total unfamiliarity to using it grammatically and semantically correctly in a sentence. The self-report categories are shown in Table 1.

Table 1. VKS Elicitation Scale

Self-report categories

I   I don't remember having seen this word before.
II   I have seen this word before but I don't know what it means.
III I have seen this word before, and I think it means _____. (Synonym or translation)
IV I know this word. It means _____. (Synonym or translation)
V   I can use this word in a sentence: _____. (Write a sentence. If you do this section, please also do Section IV.)

From*: Vocabulary enhancement activities and reading for meaning in second language vocabulary acquisition,* by Paribakht, T. and Wesche, M. 1997. In J. Coady and T. Huckins, (Eds.) Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

An important finding of Wesche and Paribakht's (1996) study of the VKS was the high correlation between the students' self-report of word knowledge and the actual score for demonstrated knowledge of the word. Correlations of perceived knowledge and attained scores for four content area themes were all above 0.95.

Procedure

The VKS was administered to 24 participants: seventeen 2nd year, four 3rd year and three 4th year university students enrolled in a business vocabulary based reading class the Faculty of Business Administration at Toyo University. All were native speakers of Japanese who had achieved low to mid-intermediate levels of English proficiency. Students met a total of fifteen times for ninety minutes each class over the course of the semester.

The teacher administered the test in written format during the final class of the first semester. The test consisted of items in the form of twenty target words (see Table 2) presented in isolation; that is, with no contextual clues. Half of the target words are utilized in Japanese as loanword cognates to one degree or other. Frequencies of the words were determined using the Compleat Lexical Tutor, a website that features a variety of vocabulary based language learning tools for both learners and teachers.

Table 2: List of target vocabulary and frequency

K-1 Words	advertisement, **arrange**, experience, insurance, **strike**, **training**
K-2 Words	**advise**, **claim,** correctly, lend
K-3 Words	complaint, **discount**, **innovation**, **output**, **personnel**, publication, **recruitment**, solve
K-4 Words	venue
K-5 Words	brochure

(loanwords appear in bold)

Students were required to indicate their self-perceived knowledge of each item by completing a self-report ranging from total unfamiliarity to knowing how to use the item correctly in a sentence and demonstrating this knowledge. An example of the scale is shown below in Table 3.

Table 3 VKS Word Rating Sheet

Name: _____   Student number: _____
Class name / number: _____   Department: _____

このページとページの裏の単語を読み、どの程度その単語を知っているかを１～４の番号で答え、３、４の場合は指示に従ってそれぞれ記入してください。
１＝その単語をまったく知らない。
２＝その単語を見たり聞いたりしたことがあるが、意味は分からない。
３＝その単語の意味を知っている。意味は ＿である。(番号の右の欄に単語の意味を日本語で書くこと。)
４＝その単語の意味を知っていて、それを使って英文を作れる。(番号の右の欄に単語の意味を日本語で書き、「４」の欄にその単語を使った英文を書くこと。)
記入例：

単語	番号 (1, 2, 3 or 4)	３、４ 単語の意味を日本語で書きなさい。	４ その単語を使った英文を書きなさい。
meeting	4	会議	I attended a two-hour meeting at work today.
agenda	2		
econom	3	経済	
graph	1		

To avoid any misunderstanding regarding task requirements, the presentation of the material and the instructions were given in Japanese. Students were first shown a sample word-rating sheet with four example words given. Each word was completed according to a category of familiarity with the chart filled in accordingly. Once the instructor was satisfied that that students understood the task requirements they were allowed to begin the task. A time limit of 60 minutes was given to complete the form.

Discussion

What do the preliminary results tell us about the students' vocabulary learning? Table 4 shows some of the sentences produced by the students to demonstrate their word knowledge. Students had a minimum of three opportunities, most likely considerably more, to encounter these words at differing depths over the course of the semester. At first encounter students looked up words in the dictionary and completed passages in the textbook. Next, they completed vocabulary recall, recognition and word form activities through weekly review activities and quizzes. Finally, they were presented with the vocabulary used in context in meaningful texts in class and were encouraged to discuss the texts in small groups. As this course focused on the acquisition of Business Vocabulary the students were informed many times through the semester that the vocabulary they encountered was to be studied and used in relation to business.

By and far, the most erroneously responded to item on the list was *publication*, a non-loanword found at the K-3 level. Only nine of twenty-four students (37.5%) were able to correctly identify the word form, provide a definition and use it with any level of control in a sentence. The type of interference here appears to be due to synformy, as fourteen students confused it with "public" (公・公共) or "public space" (公共の場), a K-1 level word which also features prominently as a loanword in Japanese. Words that are similar in sound and/or appearance of word form can cause confusion in non-native speakers. One student failed to respond to the item at all.

Another item that provided a challenge to students was *personnel*, another non-loanword. It is very similar to the commonly used loanword and synform *personal*. Ten students (41.7%) provided a Level 3 response with a meaning for the latter while only fourteen students (58.3%) gave the correct response of the item being connected to the people employed in an office or organization (職員・人員・人事). These two words might have proved difficult for students to distinguish phonologically and so they became confused.

The third most incorrectly answered item on the assessment was the loanword *claim*. This word seemed to give students a different type of

interference as it is commonly used in Japanese, however as a distant false friend. While seventeen of the group (70.8%) provided the meaning of "claim" that had been presented and studied in class (i.e. to say something is true when others may disagree), only six of those (25%) were able to provide a Level 4 sentences showing control of the item. Seven students (29.2%) supplied the meaning after undergoing a semantic shift and becoming a distant false friend. クレーム (claim) has acquired a meaning similar to *complaint* or *to complain*（クレームする）. Other students provided the Japanese meanings of うったえる (to complain of) and 苦情 (hardship). Eleven (45.8%) students were able to provide a correct meaning in Japanese（主張する）but provided sentences that seemed to be more in line with the meaning of the distant false friend.

The fourth most incorrectly answered item was *strike*. This time nineteen out of twenty four were able to correctly identify the word (79.2%) and provide a sample sentence illustrating the usage, as intended, in a business context. Five students confused it with another meaning of strike "to hit"（打つ）, although all vocabulary examined through the semester was introduced in a business context. Again, it seems that the same form and sound may have confused students.

Table 4: Student sentences for VKS Level 4

Target word	Level 4 student sample sentences and meaning in Japanese
publication	• Japanese people should think over them activity in publication. (公共の場) • The president made a speech in publication place. (公共) • Hibari Misora memorial house opened for publication. (公)
personnel	• I have a personnel computer for studying. (個人的な) • The actress was asked personnel questions in the interview. (個人的な) • The information is personal (sic.) data for you. (個人)
claim	• I claimed the company about unfair fired. (うったえる= complain of) • Customer made a claim to restaurant because of bad service. (苦情= hardship)
claim	• I claim to exchange the new thing in the shop. (主張する) • I don't want to hear claim anymore. (主張する)
strike	• I striked his hand because I lost my head. (打つ/たたく) • I striked him because I thought the accident caused by him. (攻撃) • I striked this bowl. (打つ)

(Level 3 meaning provided by students shown in brackets)

Further Research and Conclusion

A number of linguistic issues have arisen from this brief look into student vocabulary learning as related to loanword cognates, especially more distant false friends, and synforms. Learners must be made more aware

of and attentive to the transfer of knowledge of English loanwords that are found so often in modern Japanese.

Loanword cognates that retain the same meaning from English to Japanese can provide a wealth English vocabulary to students. However, students must also be made aware that not all loanwords can be treated equally and that proper word recognition is vital, especially with distant false friends whose meaning has undergone change. Poor word recognition skills by students will result in inefficient processing so explicit instruction of spelling, pronunciation and use is warranted.

As evident from the sample sentences provided by students in Table 2, many students have a weak command of grammar and only partial knowledge of a word. The size of students' lexicon must be expanded and the control over components including words forms, irregular verbs and colloquial language must be improved. This can hopefully be done through repeated exposures to target words and by providing activities, which encourage students to go beyond simple memorization of definitions and direct translation. A more detailed examination of the data will surely provide more clues as to which types of words should be given direct attention and how students can be of most benefit from more direct instruction of vocabulary.

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