

The Importance of a High-frequency 'Built-in Lexicon' for EFL in Japan

日本のEFLのための高頻出 “Built-in Lexicon” の重要性

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キーワード

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When a link is perceived between two distant fields of research, often remarkable possibilities are revealed. Such a link exists for Japanese learners of English. First, much has been written about the importance of knowing the high-frequency vocabulary of English. It appears that one of the primary goals of learners should be to reach the crucial threshold of 3000 word families. According to Nation (1993):

Initially, learners' skill in using the language is heavily dependent on the number of words they know, with around 3000 word families being a crucial threshold (p. 115).

Second, there is an enormous number of English-based loanwords in Japanese. It would be virtually impossible to hold a conversation in Japanese without drawing upon numerous English-based forms.

Could it be that Japanese are already familiar with thousands of English words, including many of the 3000 *high-frequency* word families of English? Such a “built-in lexicon” of English-based vocabulary may be stored in the Japanese lexicon as loanwords. Kimura (1989) writes:

... Words deriving from original English such as English cognates or loanwords may be an effective instrument for ESL learners to communicate with native English speakers because these words are the most easily accessible English words to the learners who have acquired limited English vocabulary (p. 17).

Daulton (2003) created a nearly exhaustive list of correspondences between high-frequency English and common loanwords. He found that as many as 45.5 percent of the 3000,

most-frequent word families in English were found to have correspondences with common Japanese loanwords. Moreover, Daulton (2004) determined that the quality of the overlap and quality of those cognate pairs was sufficient to aid learning.

This paper will discuss the need for research into the relationship between high-frequency English vocabulary and the loanword lexicon in Japanese. First, the present state of English education in Japan will be described. Then, the importance of vocabulary in Japanese ESL will be the focus. Next, the important role of L1 knowledge and transfer will be addressed. Following that, some classroom implications of the “built-in lexicon” of high-frequency English will be discussed, highlighting the importance of cognate recognition.

Necessity of Research

Determining the effect of the English-based lexicon in Japanese upon EFL acquisition is of great importance. If there exists a useful tool for quick and massive vocabulary extension, it would be of great assistance to learners of English. By many – if not most – estimates, English education in Japan fails to produce competent speakers, and the many contributing factors include that the importance of vocabulary development in EFL, and the importance of L1 in foreign language learning, have been largely overlooked.

The State of English Education in Japan

The late Edwin O. Reischauer, former U.S. ambassador to Japan, satirically listed Japan’s miserable performance in English education as one of the seven wonders of the world (Honma, 1995). Despite the vast material resources devoted to English education, and the equally vast amount of English vocabulary circulating in forms ranging from bill-board advertisements to the loanwords in daily use, Japan is among the world’s monolingual societies where English-speaking visitors have great difficulty communicating.

Japan ought to be a bilingual country, considering how much time is spent studying English. For more than 100 years, there has been formal English education in Japan – with most Japanese people today having studied it for 6 to 10 years (Stanlaw, 1987). Ninety-nine percent of Japanese study English for three years at middle school, and about 92 percent for a further three years at high school (Morrow, 1987). The average Japanese has had at least 3120 hours of English instruction (Honma, 1995), more if they go on to college.

However, English education has long been burdened with a dependence on grammar-translation, a focus on entrance exams, large classes of taciturn students, and institutional conservatism, among other woes (Loveday, 1996 pp. 98, 153). Moreover, sociocultural factors such as self-efficacy, fear of failure, anxiety, and intolerance of mistakes afflict Japanese learners. Pea (1988) writes:

How students feel about their capabilities of performance in learning tasks can drastically affect their interest not only in

knowledge transfer but learning itself (p. 186).

Indeed, Japanese learners are handicapped by their usually lacking what Ngeow (1998) calls a “positive disposition towards learning,” which should include: high motivation; risk-taking attitudes; mindfulness or attentiveness; and a sense of responsibility for learning.

The results of the present system are disappointing. Almost no graduate can communicate with foreigners beyond a few formulaic expressions. The Japanese public has been described by Loveday (1996) as being “basilectal” (p. 153); “distant non-bilingual” (p. 95); and having “a low, pidgin-like level covering only the most basic of needs” (p. 99). He cites seven features shared between the Japanese linguistic environment and other pidginizing settings (p. 154):

- A lack of direct access to, or contact with, an input model.
- Non-integrative motivation.
- The absence of authorities and sanctions to enforce conformity to the norms of the L2 outside of the classroom.
- An output characterized by linguistic reductionism and invariance - no derivational, inflectional, declensional, or conjugational variation in the transferred forms.
- Extensive borrowing and syntactic convergence.
- Phonological and syntactic interference from the recipient group.
- Imperfect learning and simplification strategies.

Not surprisingly, Japan ranks near the bottom of nations in TOEFL scores (Bronner, 2000); during the years 1989 to 1991, Japan ranked at 149th place among 162 countries, behind China, South Korea, and Vietnam (Source: TOEFL Test and Score Manual, 1990-1991). It follows that English is one of the most unpopular subjects among students (Loveday, 1996 p. 98). The various linguistic processes found to operate in such non-developmental states of L2 proficiency include: oversimplification, over-generalization, regularization, ignorance of rule restrictions, false analogy, error fossilization, incomplete application of rules, and false-concept hypothesization (see Ellis, 1985).

Beyond pedagogical issues, Honna (1995) believes that the largest obstacle to English acquisition in Japan is the linguistic circumstances:

First, Japan is not a society in which English plays a meaningful role as a language of international communication. The lack of opportunity to use it weakens the motivations of learners to acquire a working command of English. This is true in many places other than Japan (p. 57).

Indeed, Ringbom’s (1987) description of the situation faced by EFL students in Finland applies:

The language is not spoken in the immediate environment of the learner, although mass media may provide opportunities for practicing the receptive skills. There is little or no opportunity for the learner to use the language in natural communication situations (p. 27).

Ringbom continues that learners in such situations spend only a “very limited time” on learning.

Perhaps the greatest obstacle for Japanese EFL learners is their cultural ideas regarding perfectionism. Honna (1995) explains:

By virtue of perfectionism, Japanese tend to hesitate to interact with English speakers ‘until’, as they often are heard to say, ‘they develop complete proficiency in the language’. Fears of making mistakes often prevent them from using the phrases and expressions they are learning currently (pp. 58-59).

This cult of perfectionism is amplified by those who design the education system.

... The objective in the English teaching programme set by the Ministry of Education is unrealistic. It calls for students to acquire native-like proficiency in English regardless of the sociolinguistic circumstances ... This version of perfectionism should be held accountable for under achievement (p. 57).

Learners without the confidence to test theories are passive learners. Such learners require much greater time to achieve any measure of fluency, as they are not actively engaged in theory testing, and have more limited reception and production opportunities. Ringbom (1987) writes:

Those who suffer from speech anxiety and who speak only when they are spoken to ... will need a very long time to achieve fluent speech production, even though they know a lot about the language (p. 31).

It appears that Japanese learners of English are greatly handicapped both by their surroundings and their own approach to education. Such being the case, one approach to encouraging English learning would be to focus on the vital role of vocabulary development, employing time-effective techniques aimed at maximum gains particularly regarding the high-frequency words of English. Furthermore, Japanese learners may possess a powerful tool for rapid language growth that has been largely overlooked until now.

The Importance of Vocabulary in Japanese EFL

Most researchers believe communicative competence is heavily based on lexicon. Although the

importance of vocabulary was neglected until the 1970s, this tendency has been replaced by a growing awareness of its significant role. What many language teachers might have intuitively known – “that a solid vocabulary is necessary in every stage of learning” (Laufer, 1997 p. 140) – is now being openly stated by some researchers. Without grammar, very little can be communicated, but without vocabulary, nothing can. Uchida (2001a) gives this illustration:

For example, if a Japanese tourist asks you a question on the street, “Telephone box, where?”, you could guess what s/he means, although this enquiry consists of English words in a Japanese order without a verb or an indefinite article. On the contrary, if the tourist does not know the word ‘telephone box’, s/he cannot ask the question even if s/he might have learnt an English grammatical rule such as you must put an article before a concrete noun. Fortunately, almost any Japanese tourist in the world knows this word, ‘telephone box’, since it exists in Japanese as a cognate (p. 49).

Learners themselves are very quick to identify lexical problems as their greatest single source of difficulty in the L2 (Meara, 1984). Moreover, native speakers faced with learner errors normally rate them as more disruptive and more serious than grammatical errors (Johansson, 1978).

Nation & Waring (1997) describe how lexis is a driving force in language acquisition:

Vocabulary knowledge enables language use, language use enables the increase of vocabulary knowledge, knowledge of the world enables the increase of vocabulary knowledge and language use and so on (p. 7).

Not surprisingly, vocabulary ability correlates positively with overall linguistic ability. Anderson & Freebody (1981) assert that:

An assessment of the number of meanings a reader knows enables a remarkably accurate prediction of this individual’s ability to comprehend discourse ... Measures of vocabulary knowledge are potent predictors of a variety of indices of linguistic ability (p. 77).

Read (2000) agrees that:

Rather than simply measuring vocabulary knowledge, objective vocabulary tests seemed to be valid indicators of language ability in a broad sense (p. 76).

Numerous, current studies confirm the crucial role of vocabulary in both L1 (e.g. Carroll, 1972) and L2 acquisition (Coady & Huckin, 1997; Huckin et al., 1993; Schreuder & Weltens, 1993;

Schmitt & McCarthy, 1997).

Furthermore, there appears to be a wide gulf between the language native speakers of English use and that taught in the current textbooks for learners of English, which do not reflect authentic language use (Kennedy, 1987). This situation makes clear the potential for incorporating corpus and frequency data into English curriculums.

Japan's English education system is likely to be failing, among other things, in providing the "massive vocabulary expansion" (Kelly, 1991 p. 257) needed to attain communicative competence. This is unfortunate, as a renewed interest in vocabulary might likewise draw attention to the powerful role of the learners' native language.

The Importance of L1 Knowledge in Japanese EFL

By dividing the types of cues involved in successful inferencing into intralingual, contextual and interlingual cues (see Carton, 1971; Haastrup 1991), we can see the disadvantage that low-level learners face – and "lower-level" describes most English learners in Japan. The first type of cues, intralingual, is unavailable since beginners lack target language knowledge concerning phonology, orthography, morphology, and syntax (Palmberg, 1987). Contextual cues, which are supplied by linguistic and non-linguistic context such as world knowledge, are likewise problematic as such interpretations are biased by one's sociocultural perceptions. However, cognates belong to the third type of cues – interlingual – which draw upon learner's previous, usually native, language knowledge, particularly the phonological and orthographical correspondences that arise through borrowing. This type of cue has obvious import for Japanese learners, with their extensive loanword lexicons, because it may be the only type of cues available to them.

Learners' L1 can be their most important asset in acquiring a second language. Lee (1958) argues for the exploitation of English loanwords in Korean:

Since Korean people who are now learning English, or intend to learn it, have the preconception that it is a very difficult language, they usually feel discouraged ... It is urgent to destroy this preconceived notion.

... The use of cognates adequately stimulates the learner's efforts to learn English vocabulary. The effort of vocabulary learning is necessary to achieve a certain result desired by the learner, and the learner may be encouraged by seeing how fast he can go. The learner is interested primarily in accomplishment. He is interested in effort only in so far as it is conducive to the accomplishment which he desires. In particular, with cognates, it is easy for him to recognize the form and meaning of vocabulary items and to produce such sentences as he would like to express (pp. 57-58).

Ngeow (1998) reports that research suggests that, "... Transfer and motivation are mutually

supportive in creating an optimal learning environment.” For instance, Odlin (1989) writes that similarities between native language and target language vocabulary can reduce the time needed to develop good reading comprehension.

Daulton (2003) showed that roughly half of the high-frequency words of English – those words most likely to be met again and again by learners – appear to correlate to loanword cognates. This vast number of English loanwords in Japanese might assist English vocabulary learning – including the learning of high-frequency words. Researchers must explore the role of English loanwords in Japanese as what Daulton (1999a) referred to as a “built-in lexicon,” and what Uchida (2001a) described as a “potential knowledge” of L2 words they have never encountered before (p. 49). Uchida illustrates the importance of lexical transfer for particularly low-level learners:

Although potential knowledge can be based on either L1 or L2, L2-based potential knowledge is so minimal for beginners that they are more inclined towards depending on their L1 knowledge. Potential knowledge can be converted into actual knowledge when L2 learners process the same items repeatedly in comprehension and these repeated encounters change the learners’ mental representations. This phenomenon is called transfer in learning. Once learners learn the correspondences between L1 and L2 in a particular aspect, this knowledge subsequently becomes available for L2 production ... (pp. 49-50).

Native speakers of Japanese have a loanword resource, and could achieve rapid progress in high-frequency English to reach the critical threshold of vocabulary knowledge. Moreover, the implications of research on borrowing and transfer in Japan, with a focus on high-frequency English, is likely generalizable to any situation where there has been extensive lexical borrowing from a target language into the native language.

Some Classroom Implications of the High-frequency “Built-in Lexicon”

High-frequency, English vocabulary is of great use to learners in an L2 situation, as it provides good coverage of even unsimplified texts. It appears that 2,000 to 3,000 word families are necessary to provide adequate coverage. Fortunately, for Japanese learners of English, around half of those high-frequency word families are well-embedded in the everyday lexicon of Japanese. The formal overlap between the two types of words is of a sufficient level to push L2 borrowed words into production, which facilitates the learning of even related, derived forms. Thus the English-based loanwords in Japanese constitute an extraordinary, built-in lexicon for Japanese students of English, which has implications in virtually all facets of English pedagogy.

The first implication is that it is necessary to pay attention to the high-frequency vocabulary of English in the classroom. Nation (2001 p. 16) suggests that attention to high-

frequency English can be accomplished through the following means, all of which can be facilitated by transfer:

Table 1: Means of Treating High-frequency English in the Classroom, Example and Cognate Application		
method	example	example cognate application
direct teaching	teachers or peers teaching	Person teaching can make reference to L1 cognates.
direct learning	study from word cards and dictionaries	Cards and dictionaries can make reference to L1 cognates.
incidental learning	guessing from context in extensive reading and word use in communicative strategies	Cognates use is a natural strategy in guessing and communication tasks.
planned encounters	graded readings and vocabulary exercises	Lists of the easier cognate vocabulary can aid in the creation of graded readings and exercises.

Likewise, Nation's (2001) well-balanced, "four-strands" approach in language courses is also fundamentally influenced by the existence of cognates (pp. 2, 3).

Table 2: "Four Strands" Approach for Language Courses and Cognate Applications		
	explanation of strand	example cognate application
1	Learning from comprehensible, meaning-focused input where learners are familiar with at least 95 percent of the involved running words.	Cognates facilitate comprehension of borrowed words and indirectly assist the guessing of non-borrowed words by providing contextual clues
2	Language focused learning, involving the direct teaching of vocabulary.	The person teaching can make reference to L1 cognates.
3	Meaning-focused output, that "encourages learners to listen like a speaker and read like a writer."	Cognates include many of the most basic concepts of English.
4	Fluency development that makes language forms "fluently available for comprehension."	Borrowed words are processed more rapidly than non-borrowed words.

The many successful strategies for general vocabulary learning that exist (for an overview, see Nation, 2001) should achieve greater success with borrowed words, due to their lighter learning burdens. Techniques such as the “keyword approach” are naturally enhanced when students are made aware of their loanword resource, and have confidence to use their intuitions about unknown English vocabulary. In fact, cognitively, utilizing the keyword approach and utilizing loanwords bear many similarities, as both exploit previous knowledge on which to attach new information.

Kimura (1989 pp. 79, 89) advises that teachers and learners pay special attention to loanwords in formal instruction, and further asserts that the loanword lexicon may even be used to develop a native-like semantic intuition. He also showed that English loanwords might assist acquisition of the correct range of meanings of English words (p. 49). Nation (1990) notes:

The more the teacher or the course designer draws attention to the similarities and patterns (between first language and target-language vocabulary), the greater the opportunity for transfer (p. 49).

Uchida (in press) advises that the usefulness of cognates should be emphasized particularly to beginners as a tool to make up for lack of L2 knowledge.

Simplifying authentic texts for learners is another example of where a list of L1 correspondences to high-frequency English could be readily applied. Brown (1995) has written:

Reading texts, built up around the many words that have been borrowed from English into Japanese, might prove to be effective tools in the development of English vocabulary among Japanese university students.

Uchida (in press) writes:

Textbooks for beginners should try to include more true cognates, as they are easier to process and learn (p. 89).

Of course, true cognates should not be emphasized to the point that students begin to trust cognates blindly.

Daulton (1999b) examined how effectively an authentic text had been simplified for Japanese EFL learners at the college level. The test was a blank filling test with a Japanese prompt. The simplification was done in a Petri-dish fashion where a limited number of target words – 2K (2000 level) vocabulary from Wests’ (1953) A General Service List of English Words (GSL) – was presented in a nourishing environment of 1K GSL words plus borrowed words *of any level*. A baseline was set with an entrance test of different 2K vocabulary. Scores were recorded for both phonological recall (e.g. “correge” instead of courage) and orthographic recall. The results were:

Table 3: Entrance and Exit Test Results--Percent Recalled Phonologically; Percent Recalled Orthographically (Daulton, 1999b)		
Type of Result	Phonological Recall	Orthographic Recall
Entrance Test	45.0%	32.0%
Exit Test	81.5%	75.0%

Daulton concluded that the target vocabulary had been presented with some efficacy, although the comprehension rates for borrowed words and 1K words turned out to be only 67 percent and 75 percent respectively.

As roughly half of the high-frequency words of English appear to correspond to loanword cognates, the loanword lexicon can be tapped to allow young learners to gain a large number of highly useful lexical items, particularly nouns, in a short period of time, while providing lexical clues for the understanding of the (harder) non-borrowed words presented later. The key to actualizing this lexical resource is recognition.

Cognate Recognition

Recognizing cognate relationships appears to be the key to activating the built-in lexicon. Although interlingual connections are made by learners naturally, their sensitivity to them can likely be improved. For instance, Uchida (2001b) writes that being familiar with the system that rephonologizes English into Japanese enables learners to recognize cognates in English and guess their meanings even when they have only met them before in Japanese (p. 215).

Uchida (in press) states that since beginners are better at perceiving spoken cognates than written ones, the initial presentation should be through listening to motivate them (p. 88). Indeed, certain after-class activities involving spoken English appear to improve learners' ability to perceive lexical correspondences. In a survey of Japanese ESL and EFL students, Kitagawa (1998) observed the importance of time spent listening to music and watching movies. Kitagawa writes:

Time spent on the two activities seems to facilitate subjects' ability to transform original English loanwords back to English source words (p. 59).

There are likely to be various means that will enable learners to quickly reach competency in those valuable English words corresponding to Japanese. Further research needs to focus on the effects of:

Being familiar with the common affixes of English--Since Japanese has rabu, learning English love is easy. And if one is familiar with the common affixes, then loved, loving, lovable, etc. are within easy reach. Good results should occur with directly teaching English affixes. For instance, the four most common prefixes occur in 58 percent of prefixed words, and the top 10 suffixes constitute 85 percent of suffixed words (White et al., 1989).

Having confidence in intuitions regarding English words--Learners must confidently recognize and exploit similarities between Japanese and English. After all, false friends are relatively few and it is certainly allowable to make mistakes. Efforts made by teachers to encourage such confidence is likely to have positive results.

Focusing on proper English pronunciation--Helping students understand the patterns of how English sounds are transformed into Japanese is likely to be helpful. Advanced students could use the International Phonetic Alphabet (I. P. A.) to transcribe each other's pronunciations to compare with native transcriptions. For younger classes, it is likely that teachers' providing accurate pronunciation models is very important. In either case, awareness should be the goal rather than perfection.

Holding unrecognized sound patterns in memory--Uchida (in press) believes that it is important in listening that learners be taught to hold unrecognized sound patterns in memory while awaiting elaboration and confirmation of their guesses.

Since auditory stimuli are fleeting and held in short-term memory, learners have to be trained to keep the information in their memory, although admittedly it will require frequent listening practice for a long period (p. 89).

Using context--After making a prediction about the meaning of an English word, learners should see if this meaning works in the context in which the English word is presented. If it does not, utilizing a dictionary is usually an option. Simple reading exercises that feature helpful loanwords and false friends might be of benefit to learners, who could work individually or in pairs to focus on the unknown loanwords.

The high-frequency words of English that have come into Japanese as loanwords constitute a marvelous built-in lexicon. This should be thoroughly researched and developed. Until now, there have been too few Japanese speakers of English on the world scene. The built-in lexicon might be a key for Japan to emerge as the bilingual nation that it ardently aspires to be.

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