Applying the Skill of Inferring to Learning Vocabulary: A Call to Move from Details to Discourse

MEREDITH STEPHENS
TOKUSHIMA UNIVERSITY

Abstract: Learners need to develop the skill of inferring in order to ascertain the meaning of unknown vocabulary. They would be well advised to supplement the task of consulting the dictionary, by making reference to the contextual clues provided by language in use. Vocabulary can be acquired through multiple encounters in meaningful discourse. Current English language pedagogy fosters a reliance on translation and vocabulary lists as means of promoting vocabulary acquisition. This pedagogy suggests there is a ready equivalence between lexical items in Japanese and English. Learners need to be taught to connect the dots to become active participants in the process of meaning-making.
Introduction

This is a discussion of how higher-order thinking skills can facilitate the learning of vocabulary. Tokuhama-Espinosa (2010,) lists the higher order thinking skills that constitute critical thinking, as “analysis, evaluation, discernment, interpretation, inferences and self-regulation” (p. 145). One of these components of higher order thinking that could be applied to learning vocabulary is the skill of inferring. This occurs in the process of speaking with a competent interlocutor, because it is in the act of speaking that prompts the development of thinking skills (Lightbown & Spada, 2013). As Ricards Hopkins (2010) aptly explains, “Language pulls cognition out of our mouths” (p. 116). This discussion concerns, firstly, a description of some of the weaknesses in the current way in which vocabulary is taught. Next there is an explanation of the difficulties that underlie an assumption of lexical equivalence between languages. Finally, it suggests ways in which a higher order thinking skill, inferring, can be exploited in the process of vocabulary acquisition while engaging in social interaction in L2 English.

A PEDAGOGY THAT REINFORCES A FIXED VIEW OF TRANSLATION EQUIVALENTS

Sybing (2014) identifies the tendency for students to try and “find the right answer” (p. 82) in the dictionary. This discussion is a call for learners to look beyond the one to one correspondences in a dictionary and direct their attention to
comprehending English in the myriad of contexts in which various meanings are expressed. It has been prompted by the common experience of observing students who are in the midst of expressing their opinion in class, and suddenly stopping to consult their Japanese-English dictionary. This behaviour arguably derives from an unquestioned belief in the accuracy of translation equivalents, and not having been taught alternative ways of expressing themselves while maintaining the flow of the dialogue.

Current textbooks in Japan continue to be characterized by vocabulary lists and grammatical explanations. The assumption behind these textbooks may be that proficiency and success in tests derive from a detailed understanding of the minutiae of language use. This is partially true, but proficiency is also aided by attention to longer stretches of discourse. Vygotsky (2012) explains how individual words are subservient to the context: “A word derives its sense from the sentence, which, in turn, gets its sense from the paragraph, the paragraph from the book, the book from all the works of the author” (p.260). In the case of children using English as a first language, comprehension of words spoken in context exceeds that of words read in isolation (Willis, 2008). Their pattern of literacy development appears to be in contrast to that of L2 English learners in Japan.
Sakurai (2015) asserts that translation remains the prevalent teaching methodology in Japanese junior and senior high schools. She explains the methodology of these classes, in which students are directed to consult their dictionary to ascertain the meaning of unfamiliar words, decipher the meaning of grammatical structures, and achieve an understanding in Japanese. They may produce vocabulary lists, buy a vocabulary book, or receive one from the teacher. Sakurai explains how these vocabulary lists feature English on one side and Japanese on the other; students memorize the vocabulary by looking at these lists. What is striking about Sakurai’s description is how little appears to have changed since Gorsuch’s (1998) observations that in high school English classes there was a greater emphasis on achieving an accurate translation than on the English itself, and that translation was the defining feature of the classes.

Given that translation has traditionally been and continues to be an essential part of English teaching methodology, an examination of the processes of translation merits consideration. The lessons described by Sakurai (2015) require learners to focus on vocabulary, and to create and memorize vocabulary lists. The notion of a vocabulary list presupposes lexical equivalents across languages, but this deserves to be problematized. Sakurai highlights the preponderance of rote learning of translation equivalents as a tactic to succeed in examinations (p.108). She identifies
a worrying trend: “students just memorize meanings in Japanese without context. Ordinarily, output is not expected for most of the English words they learn by rote” (p. 108).

Brown et al. (2008) call for researchers to attend to the complexity of vocabulary learning and direct attention beyond the single word level (p. 158-9). Even though the importance of the context in language learning has been widely identified (e.g. Nunan, 1995), Gee (1990) identifies the tendency for teachers to conceptualize language teaching as “a form of mental transference of neatly wrapped little packages (drills, grammar lessons, vocabulary lists) along a conveyor belt from teacher to student” (p. 96). Such packages may be misleading in terms of the simplicity they imply. Van Lier (1995) describes the false impression given by dictionaries and textbooks that “words have well-defined and precise meanings” (p. 76). In contrast to this assumption he argues “we often have to calculate the meaning of a particular word every time anew, in the context in which it is uttered” (p. 76-77).

THE POLYSEMY OF MEANING IN THE CONTEXT OF DISCOURSE

Accordingly, in meaningful contexts vocabulary usage is characterized by polysemy, creativity and originality. Danow explains Bakhtin’s notion of the fluidity of word meanings in context:
“In Bakhtin’s view, as noted, there is no such thing as ‘the word as such’- except as it exists in the dictionary; as a ‘living thing’, the word is always contextual. Moreover, ‘the word does not enter the utterance from a dictionary, but from life, from utterance to utterance’ (FM, 122) (Danow, 1991, p. 39).

Wajnryb (2008) distinguishes between the semantic and pragmatic perspectives on vocabulary: the former referring to the dictionary definition and the latter to the more fluid role of the word in context, with usage of vocabulary being controlled by the nuances of the speaker. She eloquently explains the notion of how the listener constructs meaning:

“Clearly, the meaning of words resides only partly in dictionaries. Their richness is in the pragmatic space between what is said and what is meant. In this space, loose and unanchored, float notions like shared experience of the word/world, cultural understandings, connotations and associations - a well of possibilities from which one draws to infer and construct meaning.” (Wajnryb, 2008, p. 109)
Pavlenko distinguishes between three forms of lexical equivalence between languages: conceptual equivalence, partial (non)equivalence and non-equivalence. Conceptual equivalence refers to L2 words that can be positively transferred from the L1. Partial (non) equivalence refers to vocabulary that can sometimes be transferred positively from the L1. However, when learners assume equivalence this can backfire and result in negative transfer, requiring them to restructure their understanding of lexical items. Non-equivalence refers to lexical items which exist in only one of the languages. Yet another perspective is posited by Wierzbicka (2014), who appears to suggest that a sizeable number of English words belong to the last category: “most English words are not cross-translatable into other languages and carry with them a particular culturally shaped perspective” (p.50). Gee (2014) also acknowledges the limitations of dictionary definitions, providing the example of the definition of the word ‘bachelor’ as an unmarried male. He gives numerous examples of unmarried men who would not be classed as bachelors, such as the Pope, a thrice-divorced man or a man in an irreversible coma. Mastery of a word is achieved through use rather than simply consulting a dictionary.

Educational materials and practices for Japanese students of English neither adequately incorporate Pavlenko’s (2009) distinctions, nor Wierzbicka’s (2014) and Gee’s (2014)
insights, and result in the often futile search for lexical equivalents in the Japanese-English dictionary. The practices identified by Sakurai (2015), in which teachers direct students to consult dictionaries to ascertain the meaning of words, and create word lists, presuppose an assumption of lexical equivalence.

**WORDS AS GENERALIZATIONS**

Wittgenstein (1981, no. 135, as cited in Shotter, 2008, p. 1) explains that it is the flow of discourse that supplies the meanings of individual words: “Conversation flows on, the application and interpretation of words, and only in its course do words have their meaning.” Similarly Gee (1990) stresses the contextual importance of individual words: “Words have no meaning in and of themselves and by themselves apart from other words” (p.101). A limitation of the reliance on dictionaries is the fluid and changing nature of word meanings. Vygotsky (2012) and Bakhtin (Danow, 1991) elaborate on the dynamic nature of the meanings of individual words:

“A word does not refer to a single object, but to a group or a class of objects. Each word is therefore already a generalization. Generalization is a verbal act of thought and reflects reality in quite another way than sensation and perception reflect it.” (Vygotsky, 2012, p.6)
“There inheres in both the word and its corresponding object an infinitely open-ended series of meanings, affording, with each contextual usage, a potentially new sense.” (Danow, 1991, p.32-33)

The notions of partial (non) equivalence (Pavlenko, 2009) and of the fluid and dynamic potential meanings of words (Gee, 1990; Vygotsky, 2012; Danow, 1991), also referred to as the “polysemy problem” by Aitchison (2012, p.171), do not receive adequate attention in the presentation of vocabulary in Japan. Accordingly, students sometimes assume that a Japanese word has an English equivalent, to the extent that they faithfully consult their Japanese-English dictionaries, rather than elicit the words’ intended meanings through dialogue with their interlocutors. More attention to the process of inferring meaning, and a heightened awareness of the role of context in retrieving meaning, are recommended.

**Future directions**

The preponderance of translation exercises of lexical items and individual sentences in teaching materials may encourage the belief that expressions in different languages may be neutrally transferred between them. Alternative methods of teaching reading and listening need to be provided in order for students to be given the opportunity to allow the true voice of texts to penetrate their thinking.
Students need to be introduced to the notion of acquiring vocabulary from multiple encounters in context, rather than relying on educational materials and practices that suggest translation equivalents found in dictionaries are the most accurate means of identifying the meaning of words. Students’ attention should be directed away from a narrow focus on the translation equivalents in the dictionary, to a global understanding of discourse in meaningful contexts.

Because of the inefficiency of processing vocabulary through the arduous process of looking up individual lexical items in a dictionary, it is suggested that students learn how to invoke one of the processes identified in higher order thinking skills, inferring. Inferring is listed under the Bloom’s taxonomy of higher levels of thinking under ‘Analysis’ (Davidson & Decker, 2006, p. 13). In Anderson & Krathwohl’s (2001) revision of Bloom’s taxonomy, inferring is referred to as a cognitive process, and is defined as “drawing a logical conclusion from presented information” (p. 67). Wiggins & McTighe (2004, as cited in Tokuhama-Espinosa, 2014, p. 100) provide a list of “Performance Verbs Associated With the Six Facets of Understanding” (p.100), and list the verb “infer” under the category of “Perspective”. This notion concerns the ability to see the “big picture” (Wiggins & McTighe, 2011, as cited in Tokuhama-Espinosa, 2014, p. 98). Accordingly, the process of inferring is recommended by a wide range of
scholars of higher level thinking skills, as well as the applied linguists and other scholars noted earlier.

Students can be advised to extend their L2 English vocabulary by practices such as extensive reading, practised as a form of flipped learning. Numerous encounters with vocabulary in the context can be accessed through extensive reading as homework, participation in university English-language spaces, and the classroom. If the exposure to vocabulary is extensive, students will encounter the vocabulary in multiple contexts, and learn to appreciate the nuances of meaning vocabulary acquire in varied contexts.

A cognitive perspective on second language acquisition suggests that knowledge for speaking and understanding is a skill that can be practised until it becomes automatic (Lightbown & Spada, 2013, p. 108-109). Hattie and Yates (2015) explain the process of the development of automaticity of skills. Initially, the learner focuses attention on the acquisition of the skill, and after repeated practice it becomes automatic. The application of higher order thinking skills, and in particular, inferring, can be used as a means of reaching the goal of automatic processing.

According to sociocultural theory, the act of thinking is mediated by the processes of speaking and writing; speaking and thinking are interdependent. Social activity provides the
stimulus to the reorganization of knowledge (Lightbown & Spada, 2013, p.118-119). If this theory were applied to the learning of vocabulary, it would imply that scaffolding of vocabulary acquisition by a competent interlocutor, in a range of meaningful contexts, could aid vocabulary acquisition. Output is a means of refining thinking, and therefore, if students hypothesize how to apply vocabulary in the course of social interaction, they can obtain the necessary feedback to be able to use the vocabulary with increasing accuracy.

Concluding Remarks

This discussion urges teachers and learners to broaden their approach to the task of learning second language vocabulary. The application of one of the subsets of higher order thinking skills, inferring, is recommended as a means enriching vocabulary learning. Currently students tend to assume lexical equivalence in their first and second languages. Rather than always consulting a dictionary to search for an assumed lexical equivalent for an L1 Japanese word, students would be well advised to make inferences from the usages of the words of their interlocutors, and to test the usages of these words, in social interaction.
References


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