

A preliminary study of strategic vocabulary teaching: Is it the right time to renew the JACET 8000?

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Abstract

This paper will be a preliminary study to investigate whether or not the vocabulary difficulty perceived by university students matches the JACET 8000 level and other corpus-based word frequency lists. Data were collected from 166 University students. They were asked to rate the level of word difficulty and fill out the corresponding translation. The data were analyzed by using a Rasch-model program.

Keywords

Corpus-based word frequency, Independent learning, Strategic vocabulary teaching

Introduction

As Nation (2008) among other educators points out, even five percent of unknown words are likely to impede reading comprehension. Therefore, in order to optimize students' learning, it is very important to monitor students' current vocabulary levels. This study will demonstrate some ways of doing this.

In order to measure vocabulary level, JACET 8000 is widely used in Japan. "The JACET 8000 is a radically new word list designed for all English learners in Japan", say Uemura and Ishikawa (2004). Those living in 2012 may feel this is not "new" anymore. However, present language teachers still make good use of the vocabulary list. That's because the JACET 8000 frequency list may be better tailored to the needs of Japanese learners of English, and results of this study somehow indicate this.

This paper will be a preliminary study to investigate whether or not the vocabulary difficulty perceived by university students matches the JACET 8000 level. Data were collected from 166 University students. They were asked to rate the level of word difficulty and fill out the corresponding translation.

One of my research questions is how the perceived level of word difficulty can interact with JACET 8000 levels. Another research question is to examine whether or not JACET 8000 should be renewed.

Owing to online translation websites, language learners now no longer have to look up each word in the dictionary. They can have all the unknown words translated at one time without any effort. These sites are kind enough to tell them the primary meaning and its auditory information. An inevitable consequence is more and more learners will be more dependent on ICT benefits and start learning vocabulary in a careless and shallow manner. While acknowledging the convenience and advantage of ICT use in learning, we have to find a way of teaching vocabulary more in depth.

1 Measuring vocabulary knowledge

In order to measure vocabulary knowledge, many scales have so far been developed. See more detail in Schmidt (2010). Current vocabulary knowledge scales adopt four to six categories, i.e., ranging from (1) I have never seen the word to (6) I can use the word accurately. Many researchers mention that vocabulary knowledge is not a simplistic or dichotomous concept such as known or unknown.

Our participants were asked to rate their word knowledge, using three categories (known, uncertain, and unknown). If the word was either uncertain or unknown, they were asked to put its Japanese translation.

All the word types were chosen from the textbook and listening or answer scripts used in the next two classes. The first 1,000 high-frequency words were excluded from the list. Most students write only primary meanings, so they are told to add other meanings and collocational phrases during class. Then, after the class, individual students will have their own unique glosses.

1.1 Participants

Participants are 166 university students who grew up and were educated in Japan. All reported their proficiency scores. Overall, 29 students are estimated to be at A1 CEFR level, and 35, 60, and 42 students may fall into A2, B1 and upper B1 bands, respectively. Their age range is 18 to 21.

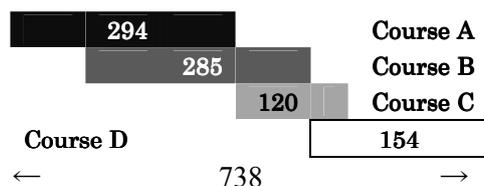
1.2 Procedures

166 students are enrolled in four different courses. All students were asked to complete the knowledge scale task on four different occasions. Since they are using different textbooks, the number of word items are different, according to the course they take.

	Number	Level Skills	Types	Types
Course A	33	<i>Intermediate Reading</i>	315	294
Course B	60	<i>Intermediate Oral</i>	346	285
Course C	50	<i>Basic Writing</i>	132	120
Course D	23	<i>Pre-intermediate Reading</i>	237	154
	166		1030	853

↓
738

33 students in Course A rated 315 words in total. However, some words occur repeatedly. Therefore, 294 word types are used in this analysis. The same is true for students in Courses B, C and D.



Totally, 853 word items are obtained from students enrolled in all the four courses. Since some word items are overlapped across the course groups, 738 types are analyzed in this study. This overlap allows “equating”, thus making scores somehow comparable across all the four courses.

2 Results: Rasch Analysis

The data were analyzed by using a Rasch-model computer program, *WINSTEPS 3.59.*, developed by Linacre (2006). The Rasch estimation indicates that person reliability and item reliability coefficients are .96 and .92.

Thirty-three items out of 738 were deleted from the analysis, because all students confidently know the words, i.e., boyfriend(L3), candle(L3), coin(L3), girlfriend(L3), shower(L3), soccer(L3), soup(L3), tomato(L3), moving(L4), colorful(L5), sleeping (L6), candy(L8), e-mail(NA).

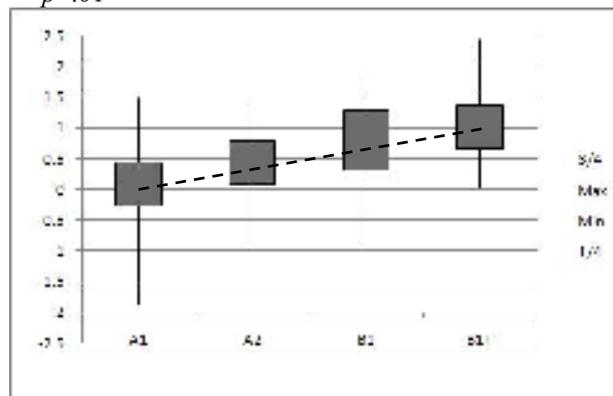
They tend to be ing-forms or the loan words that are frequently used in students’ daily lives. If JACET8000 is used for research purposes, these easy but supposedly high-ranked words may affect your research results.

2.1 Person Analysis

Learners latent traits (θ) are slightly correlated with proficiency test scores $r(166)=.44$ $p<.01$. Reading and vocabulary sections are more highly correlated. Also, as the CEFR band advances, word knowledge is acquired, although individual differences are taking place.

θ	Total	Vtest	Gtest	Rtest	Ltest
1.000	.436**	.418**	.255**	.463**	.257**
N	166	166	166	166	166

** $p<.01$



2.2 Item Analysis: Is JACET 8000 valid?

To compare JACET 8000 with other corpus-based word frequency lists, correlation studies are used. The following is Kendall’s Tau b, which shows an association between item difficulty (b) and frequency-based word level.

	JACET wordlist	Wordlist A	Wordlist B
Kendall's Tau-b	.252**	.240**	.158**
N	625	625	625

** $p<.01$

This shows JACET 8000 word level is a little bit more correlated with Japanese learners’ perceived word difficulties than other word frequency lists.

3 Discussion

Because of space limitations, more data, detail and discussions will be presented in the conference site.

4 Selected References

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