

The Influence of Communication-Oriented Instruction in Accordance with the Course of Study on Fluency and Vocabulary

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Abstracts

In EFL contexts in Japan, the primary focus was once on reading, writing and grammar, while communicative competence was not emphasized. However, the focus shifted from accuracy to fluency at secondary school in accordance with the course of study guidelines announced by Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology in 1989. As a result, writing fluency seems to have improved along with this method. On the other hand, vocabulary size as language elements provided by the guidelines has been reduced in recent years. In this article, the influence of communication-oriented instruction on fluency is to be examined. Moreover, the effects of the small size of vocabulary at school on the quality of written products by the students are to be studied. The data on fluency and error analysis came from essays written by the students in the past decade.

Introduction

The Course of Study guidelines are announced by Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology. The junior and senior high school's instructions in the classroom and textbooks are to undergo great changes in accordance with the course of study guidelines that are revised approximately every ten years. The revision of the guidelines affects the instruction of English in the classroom. Especially in the course of study for foreign languages announced in 1989, overall objectives changed noticeably. The emphasis in English education shifted to the goal of developing communication abilities and fostering a positive attitude toward communication. Significantly important change was seen in a shift to communicative competence. On the other hand, vocabulary size as language elements for lower and upper secondary school has been

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reduced markedly over years.

In this article, the historical change of the course of study guidelines for foreign languages is to be reviewed. Moreover, the influence of the guidelines on English communicative competence and vocabulary knowledge of university students in EFL contexts is also to be examined.

The Historical Review of the Course of Study for Foreign Languages

The new course of study was announced for lower secondary school in 1998 and for upper secondary school in 1999. The new course of study for lower secondary school was implemented in 2002 and that for upper secondary school was implemented in 2003. In the new course of study for foreign languages for lower secondary school, overall objectives are “to develop students’ basic practical communication abilities such as listening and speaking, deepening the understanding of language and culture, and fostering a positive attitude toward communication through foreign languages,”¹ while in that for upper secondary school, overall objectives are “to develop students’ practical communication abilities such as understanding information and the speaker’s or writer’s intentions, and expressing their own ideas, deepening the understanding of language and culture, and fostering a positive attitude toward communication through foreign languages.”² (Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology) These objectives insist on the importance of communicative competence.

In the 1989 guidelines, the 6th revision, the words of “communication abilities” appeared for the first time in the course of study. In the next 1998 guidelines for lower secondary school and in the next 1999 guidelines for upper secondary school, the 7th revision, the word “practical” was added to further develop communication abilities emphasized in the 6th revision of 1989. It is obvious that in recent years the focus has been on communicative competence, not on grammar knowledge.

Vocabulary Size as Language Elements in the Course of Study

The importance of vocabulary knowledge is evident in language learning. Goulden, Nation and Read (1990) state that a native speaker, who is a university graduate, will

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have a vocabulary of around 20,000 word families. Laufer (1997) points out that a language vocabulary is important for general reading comprehension, and that 3,000 word families or 5,000 lexical items are needed. Williams (1985) insists on the importance of guessing word meanings by use of contextual clues, while Carter & McCarthy (1987, p.15) state that “the more advanced the learners, the more likely they are to benefit from learning words in context.” All those researchers have argued the importance of vocabulary, have published many studies and have attempted to find ways to enhance vocabulary acquisition. However, in Japan, as shown in Table 1, 2 and 3, the vocabulary size as language elements in the course of study for foreign languages has been reduced recently though the communication abilities are emphasized. It is necessary to consider the effects of small size of vocabulary on fluency and also on correct usage of vocabulary.

Table 1 : Vocabulary Size for Lower Secondary School

Year of Revision	1958 (the 3 rd revision)		1969 (the 4 th revision)
grade	1 st	300	300~350
	2 nd	400	300~350
	3 rd	400~600	350~400
total	1,100~1,300 (520 specified)		950~1,100 (610 specified)
Year of Revision	1977 (the 5 th revision)		1989 (the 6 th revision)
grade	1 st	300~350	
	2 nd	300~350	
	3 rd	300~350	
total	900~1,050 (490 specified)		approximately 1000 (507 specified)
Year of Revision	1998 (the 7 th revision)		
total	approximately 900 (100 specified)		

Table 2 : Vocabulary Size for Upper Secondary School

Year of Revision		1960 (the 3 th revision)	1970 (the 4 th revision)
English B			
grade	1 st	1,000	700 ~ 1,100
	2 nd	1,200	800 ~ 1,200
	3 rd	1,400	900 ~ 1,300
total		3,600	2,400 ~ 3,600

Year of Revision		1978 (the 5 th revision)	1989 (the 6 th revision)
English I		400 ~ 500	English I 500
English II		600 ~ 700	English II 500
English II B		400 ~ 700	Reading 900
total		1400 ~ 1,900	1,900

Year of Revision		1999 (the 7 th revision)
English I		400
English II		500
Reading		900
total		1,800

Table 3: Vocabulary Size for Lower and Upper Secondary School

the 3 rd revision (1960s)	the 4 th revision (1970s)	the 5 th revision (1980s)
4,700 ~ 4,900	3,350 ~ 4,700	2,300 ~ 2950

the 6 th revision (1990s)	the 7 th revision (2000s)
2900	2700

The Effectiveness of Communication-Oriented Instruction on Writing Fluency

Subjects:

The students (English majors) enrolled in a first-year English class in 1994, 2002 and 2005 were followed. The students of 1994 and 2002 were reviewed and the results of 1994 and 2002 were shown with regard to writing fluency and analysis of grammatical errors (Tokioka, 2003). In this article, the students of 2005 are to be reviewed in the same way and the results obtained in this research are to be compared with those of

1994 and 2002. All these students were freshmen with some sophomores included and were enrolled in the same university. The numbers of participants in the pretest and the posttest were 91 and 79 respectively in 1994. In 2002, 78 students who took both the pretest and posttest were examined. The numbers of participants in the pretest and the posttest were 70 and 60 respectively in 2005, and these students were placed in the Group 1. Moreover, 55 students who took both the pretest and the posttest were placed in the Group 2.

Essay Writing as the Pretest and the Posttest:

The timed writing, that is, essay writing was conducted as the pretest in April. It was carried out in the same way in 1994, 2002 and 2005. The allocated time was 15 minutes with additional 5 minutes for revising. Five more minutes were given to complete unfinished sentences. They could re-read and transform what they wrote but were not allowed to add additional sentences. The students were encouraged to write as many words as possible without caring about grammatical correctness. The same essay writing was conducted as the posttest in December in the same way. The words they wrote were counted to assess their writing fluency.

Class Activities:

The students were instructed to write the composition whose topic came from each chapter of the textbook in the classroom. They were encouraged to write as much as possible. This free writing activity was conducted approximately every three weeks during an academic year.

Results :

The students in 1994 were affected by the 5th revision of 1977 for lower secondary school and that of 1978 for upper secondary school. Those revised guidelines did not emphasize communicative competence, while the required vocabulary was around 2,300 ~ 2950 words at junior and senior high schools. The students in 2002 were affected by the 6th revision of 1989. The revised guidelines for both lower and upper secondary school emphasized communicative abilities, while the required vocabulary was around 2,900 words. The average words number of the pretest in 1994 was 125.8 and that of

Table 4 : Fluency of Essay Writing in 1994

	N.	Ave.	Min	Max	Sd.	Gain rate
Essay (pretest)	91	125.8	41	284	46.9	
Essay (posttest)	79	154.4	56	265	50.4	22.7%

Table 5 : Fluency of Essay Writing in 2002

	N.	Ave.	Min	Max.	Sd.	Gain rate
Essay (pretest)	78	137.1	46	274	44.1	
Essay (posttest)	78	174.2	84	334	47.0	27.07%

the pretest in 2002 was 137.1. The students in 1994 and 2002 were enrolled at the same university. As shown in Table 4 and 5, these results suggest that communication-oriented instruction at lower and upper secondary school helped the students improve their fluency in writing.

On the other hand, Table 6.1 and 6.2 show that the average words numbers of the pretest in 2005 were 122.5 (Group 1) and 121.9 (Group 2) in April. Those students were also affected by the revision of 1989, while the average numbers of words of the pretest were lower than that of 2002. The students of both 2002 and 2005 received the same communication-oriented instruction, which was emphasized by the revised guidelines for foreign languages at secondary school. However, the students of 2005 could not improve in writing fluency, and fluency was lower than even that of 1994 when the communicative competence was not highlighted at secondary school. The standard deviations of the pretest in April were 46.9 in 1994, 44.1 in 2002, 38.4 (Group 1) and 33.9 (Group 2) in 2005 respectively. The results indicate that the standard deviations have narrowed somewhat for writing fluency recently. On the other hand, the standard deviations widened for fluency between the pretest in April and the posttest in December from 46.9 to 50.4 in 1994, from 44.1 to 47.0 in 2002 and from 38.4 to 46.7 (Group 1), from 33.9 to 47.4 (Group 2) in 2005. Especially the standard deviations of 2005 much more widened for fluency between the pretest and the posttest, compared with those of 1994 and 2002.

The largest numbers of words in the pretest in April were 284 in 1994, 274 in 2002, 233 (Group 1) and 203 (Group 2) in 2005 respectively. These numbers fell gradually. The smallest numbers of words in the pretest in April were 41 in 1994, 46 in 2002 and

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Table 6.1 : Fluency of Essay Writing in 2005 (Group 1)

	N.	Ave.	Min	Max.	Sd.	Gain rate
Essay (pretest)	70	122.5	42	233	38.4	
Essay (posttest)	60	141.3	66	258	46.7	15.3%

Table 6.2 : Fluency of Essay Writing in 2005 (Group 2)

	N.	Ave.	Min	Max.	Sd.	Gain rate
Essay (pretest)	55	121.9	42	203	33.9	
Essay (posttest)	55	141.7	66	258	47.4	16.2%

42 for both Group 1 and Group 2 in 2005 respectively. These numbers did not change noticeably. It could be assumed that the upper group students in each cluster could not gain much fluency though a communication-oriented approach was adopted at secondary school.

As for the gain rate for fluency between the pretest and the posttest, the students in 2005 acquired some gain, 15.3% of Group 1 and 16.2% of Group 2 compared with that of 22.7% in 1994 and 27.1% in 2002. Basically, though the students of 2002 and those of 2005 were affected by the same course of study guidelines, a small gain was indicated for the students of 2005.

In the previous studies by Writing Research Group JACET Kansai Chapter (1995; 2003), the surveys conducted in April and December presented some data concerning English proficiency, writing fluency, etc. With regard to the survey conducted in 1994, the subjects were 1,018 students from seven universities for the pretest in April and 746 students for the posttest in December. In 2002, 327 students from five universities

Table 7 : Fluency of Essay Writing in 1994 (Writing Research Group, 1995)

	N.	Ave.	Sd.
Essay (pretest)	1,018 (7universities)	90.1	44.8
Essay (posttest)	746	116.2	53.9

Table 8 : Fluency of Essay Writing in 2002 (Writing Research Group, 2003)

	N.	Ave.	Sd.
Essay (pretest)	327 (5 universities)	102	53.00
Essay (posttest)	281	128	63.04

for the pretest in April and 281 students for the posttest in December provided some data for the research. The same procedure was adopted for essay writing as the pretest and as the posttest both in 1994 and 2002. The students were given 15 minutes to write the essay with 5 more minutes for revising. Table 7 and 8 reveal that writing fluency displayed the same tendency shown above to increase from 1994 to 2002. The students of 2002 demonstrated more fluency than those of 1994.

Reduced Vocabulary Size and Errors of Vocabulary Usage

In the previous studies (Tokioka, 1997; 2003), grammatical errors in some segments were analyzed to assess the quality of essays written by the students. In this research, errors produced by the students in 2005 were reviewed and compared with those of 1995 and 2002.

Subjects:

A total of 34 students in 1995, 78 students in 2002 and 70 students in 2005 under review were freshmen of English majors with some sophomores included and were enrolled in the same university.

Procedures:

All the students took the pretest of essay writing in April. They were given 15 minutes with additional 5 minutes for revising. The procedures were all same in 1995, 2002 and 2005. In order to measure the quality of students' essay, specific objective errors were selected and those errors were counted. Error of word usage was one of these error categories. All papers written by the students in the pretests of April were analyzed concerning word usage. In recent years, vocabulary size provided by the course of study for lower and upper secondary school has been shrinking. The effects

Table. 9 : The Number of Vocabulary Errors per 100 Words

1995	2002	2005
1.0	2.48	1.65

of reduced vocabulary size on errors of word usage were examined. As shown in Table 9, the students of 1995 under the old version of the course of study guidelines gave a lower number than those of 2002 and 2005, who were affected by the new course of study guidelines.

Conclusion

As for fluency, the data for 1994 and 2002 implies that communicative-competence could be enhanced through communication-oriented instruction at secondary school, although the data for 2005 could not suggest that the students could attain communication abilities by the communication-oriented approach. Regarding vocabulary, though the number of errors of word usage was the lowest in 1995, the data on these groups is not reliable enough to suggest that the students under the new guidelines have smaller vocabulary than those under the old guidelines. Not only the vocabulary segment but also other grammatical sections, such as mechanics, structure, agreement, etc., should be analyzed in more detail. Students who have small size of vocabulary could not distinguish delicate difference of meaning among words and tend to produce some errors. As a large vocabulary size is beneficial to the steady improvement in English language, the influence of reduced vocabulary size on the overall English language proficiency should be further considered on a larger scale. On the other hand, in order to measure the quality of written products by the students, a careful analysis of structure like T-unit as well as fluency should be conducted. On the whole, considering the results of fluency and errors of word usage, it could be assumed that the students under the new guidelines could not attain the greater overall English language proficiency than those under the old version of the guidelines at that university. For further study, consideration should also be given to frequency of use as well as vocabulary size.

Notes

1. Available: <http://www.mext.go.jp/english/shotou/030301.htm>
2. Available: <http://www.mext.go.jp/english/shotou/030301.htm>

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