

*A Step-By-Step Approach to Learning English Vocabulary for Beginners as a
Second Language*

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Abstract

This study presents a step-by-step approach to an effective way to acquire English vocabulary for students (including those with special needs). Directed focus on vocabulary learning was conducted using pictures displaying the target word without English spelling or Japanese meaning assistance. Four days of experimental lessons were conducted on 87 seventh graders at a Japanese public junior high school. Their pronunciation skills were assessed by a native English speaker. The students in the experimental lessons using pictures achieved higher scores than those who no picture lessons. It was also found that even students without special needs have difficulty learning word pronunciation, spelling and meaning simultaneously. The results clearly indicate the important need for a step-by-step approach to effectively teach English vocabulary to students in the public school classroom.

Keywords: language teaching, vocabulary learning, English education

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Introduction

In spring 2007, the Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) special needs education into Japan's education program. The percentage of students with learning disabilities (LD) and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) is 6.3%. According to this, number is expected to increase. Schools must create an environment where all the students have the opportunity to receive the same education. This includes students with special learning disabilities. These students experience great difficulty in learning when using standard teaching approaches. It should be noted that the pedagogy in Japan has remained mostly unchanged for decades, especially in English as a Foreign Language (EFL).

Background of the study

Elementary school 5th and 6th graders have started to acquire 35 credits (about 26 hours) throughout the school year since 2011 in Japan. Prior to 2011, students only received formal English classes beginning in grade seven. MEXT recommended that elementary school students become familiar with English. Students are not required to learn English alphabet, phonics, and words (MEXT 2008): they begin learning the alphabet as 7th graders (junior high school). Normally, this is called the 7th graders' gap (shock) in English learning. Pronunciation of the alphabet leads to the first major stumble for beginner Japanese EFL students. Furthermore, the pedagogy for pronunciation instruction has remained basically unchanged since 1970 (Tejima 2011). There are differences between Japanese and English pronunciation. Each character has one sound in Japanese making it easier to recognize sounds and to master pronunciations. On the other hand, English has a variety of sounds per letter. It is therefore more difficult to learn how to read and write. Japanese students are greatly affected by how individual English letters are pronounced. However, many of the spellings and pronunciation of basic English words do not match the way they are read when spelling out individual letters.

The first language acquisition and the second language learning

What does it mean when "we know a word"? A language has a sound and the sound has a meaning. In written languages, individual letters or characters can symbolize the sound and meaning. When we say we know a word, the connection of the word to its sound and meaning is an essential part of the word acquisition. When we learn the word "chair" for example, a mother is pointing to the chair, she says /tʃɛər/ to her child. First, the child connects sound with meaning. The child later pronounces word, and then learns the word's spelling.

The first language (mother language)

1. Connect - sound with meaning
2. Pronounce the word
3. Spell the word

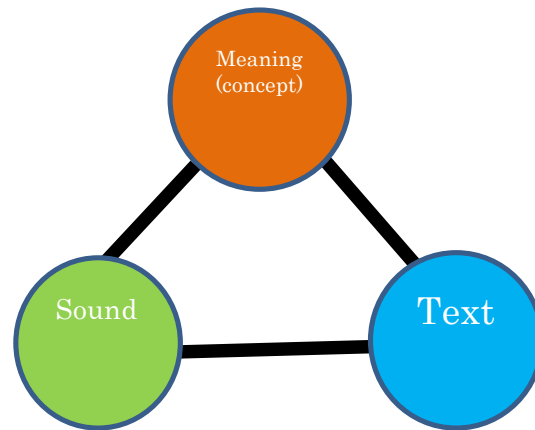
The second language (foreign language).

1. Connect three actions at the same time (sound, meaning, and text).
2. Able to write the spelling

The ordinary approach for learning new English words in Japan is as follows:

1. The teacher shows flashcards to students.
(one side displays English word, while the other side displays Japanese translation).
2. Students repeats after the teacher's pronunciation.
3. Students have a spelling test in the next lesson.

The problem with learning words using the ordinary approach is that students have to learn an English word's sound, spelling, and meaning at the same time.



Purpose of this study

EFL teachers in Japan try to teach new vocabulary without using Japanese. Validity assessment without using Japanese translations in English lessons has not been previously studied. The purpose of this study is to verify the effectiveness of learning English words step by step with three connective actions (sound, meaning, and text) without using Japanese translations.

1. Connect the meaning to the sound.
2. Connect the meaning to the spelling.
3. Connecting the three actions.
4. Acquiring the ability - to spell a word

Method of research

The target students in the experimental lessons are used 87 seventh grade students at a public junior high school in Tokyo. The students were divided into two levels based on their mid-term test scores, with 43 advanced students and 44 average students. There were six classes (three advanced classes and three average classes). Of the six classes, two advanced and two average level classes underwent four experimental lessons with picture patterns and no-picture patterns.”

1. Goals of experimental lessons

A: Goals of the picture pattern without Japanese translations

The first goal: Pronounce a English word correctly by looking at its image picture

The second goal: Spell an English word correctly by looking at its image picture

B: Goals of the no-picture pattern with Japanese translations

The first goal: Pronounce each word correctly by looking at its Japanese translations

The second goal: Spell each word correctly by looking at its Japanese translations

2. Procedure of the step-by-step approach

Table 1: The target words

Lesson 1	pictures	sad	angry	excited	tired	sleepy	sleepy
Lesson 2	no-pictures	bad	happy	nervous	bored	scared	scared
Lesson 3	pictures	oil	radio	judge	stone	patient	patient
Lesson 4	no-pictures	sea	hotel	blood	river	parent	parent

Step 1

A: Picture pattern without Japanese translations

Students repeat after a teacher while looking at a picture. The teacher pronounces a target word twice, including it in seven rounds. Students pronounce each word 14 times all together.

B: No-picture pattern with Japanese translations

Students repeat after a teacher while looking at the flash cards, which contain English words and their Japanese translation. The teacher pronounces a connecting word twice including it in seven rounds. Students pronounce each word 14 times all together.

Step 2

A: Picture pattern without Japanese translations

Students pronounce each word while looking at the picture.

B: No-picture pattern with Japanese translations

Students pronounce each word while looking at a flashcard.

A native English speaker then assesses their pronunciation one on one. The assessment criterion is as follows:

- A. (3 points) Very good
- B. (2 points) Good
- C. (1 point) Need more practice

Step 3

A: Picture pattern without Japanese translations

Remembering the spelling of the target words is homework. The teacher gives students a worksheet with pictures and their associated spellings.

B: No-picture pattern with Japanese translations

Remembering the spelling of the target words is homework. The teacher gives students a worksheet with the English words and their associated spellings.

Step 4

A: Picture pattern without Japanese translations

Students have the spelling test. They spell the word while looking at the picture.

B: No-picture pattern with Japanese translation

Students have the spelling test. They spell the word while looking at the Japanese translations.

Results of pronunciation assessment

The test results for the Shapiro-Wilk showed that both the picture pattern and the no-picture pattern did not conform to normal distribution ($P < .01$).

Therefore, the median scores in both groups were compared via a Mann-Whitney U test. The result showed that the scores of the pictures group were significantly higher than no-picture pattern ($P < .05$).

Table 2: The size, median, standard deviation and Mann-Whitney U test result of each group.

	n	M	SD	2 score
pictures	87	13,21	1,449	-2,566*
no-pictures	87	13,97	1,476	

Results of spelling test

Table 3 shows the percentage of target words spelled correctly. We see from Table 3 that there is little difference between the pictures pattern and the no-pictures pattern tasks.

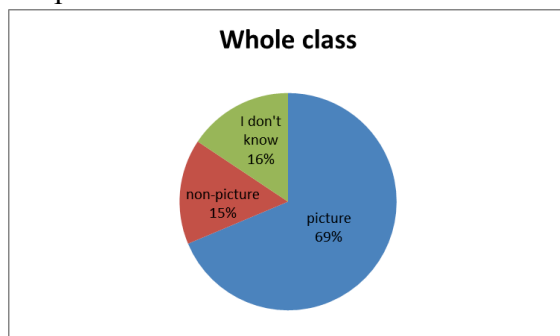
Table3: The percentage of target words spelled correctly

	All students	Advanced students	Average students
pictures	72.16%	89.77%	54.62%
no-pictures	72.08%	90%	54.15%

Results of questionnaire

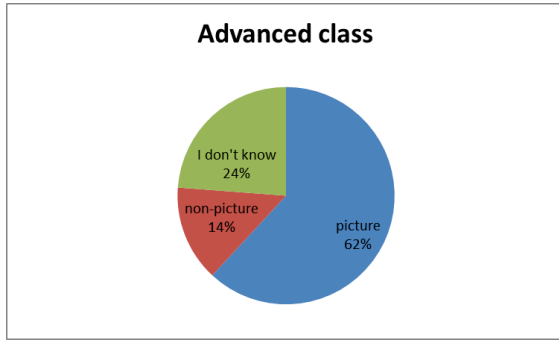
1. Which approach do you think is better —, the pictures patterns or the no-pictures patterns approach?

Graph 1

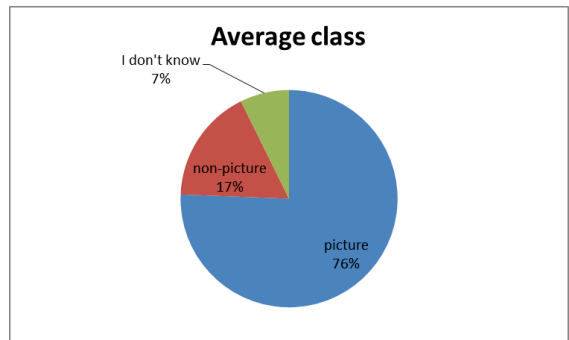


We see from the graph 1 that 69% of the students prefer the picture pattern. If we look at graphs 2 and 3, we will see that the average level students prefer the picture pattern more than the advanced students.

Graph 2



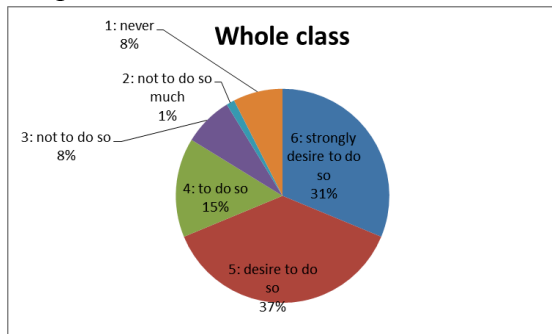
Graph 3



2. Would you like to continue studying English using this approach ?

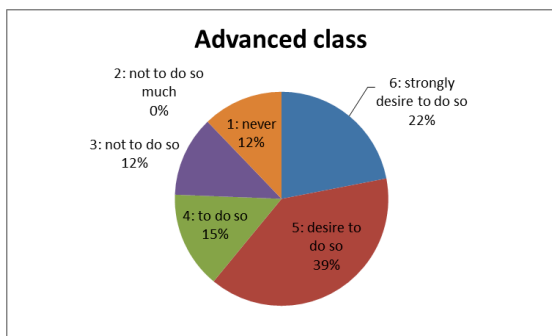
- 6: Strongly desire to do so
- 5: Desire to do so
- 4: Would like to do so
- 3: Not to do so
- 2: Would prefer not to do so
- 1: Never

Graph 4

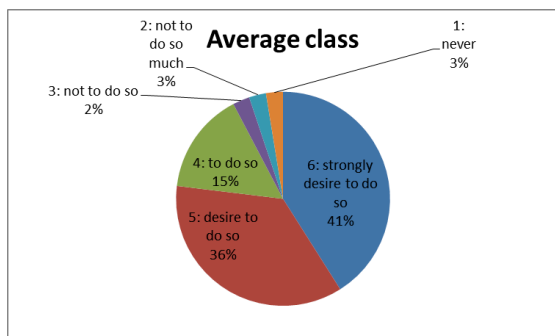


By studying graph 4, 83% of students have positive feedback to the picture pattern approach. We can see the difference between the advanced and average level students in the graph 5 and graph 6. More specifically 92% of average level students are in favor of this approach as compared with the advanced level students.

Graph 5



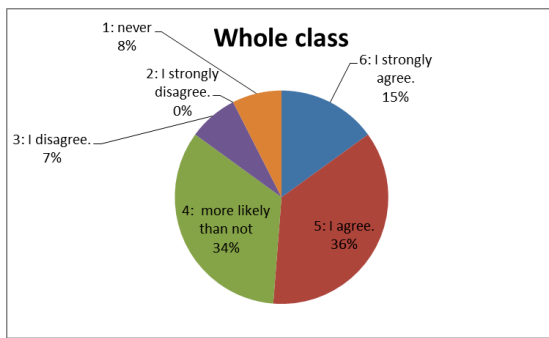
Graph 6



3. Is it easier to remember the spelling when you can pronounce the word?

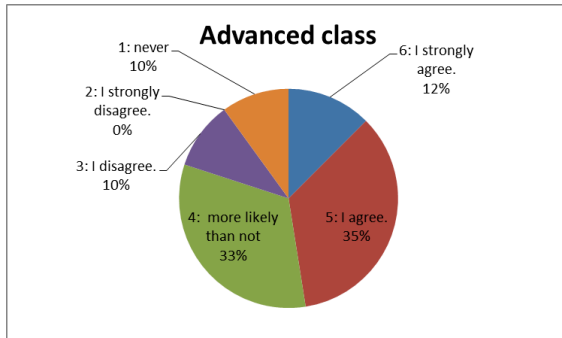
- 6: I strongly agree.
- 5: I agree.
- 4: More likely than not
- 3: I disagree.
- 2: I strongly disagree.
- 1: Never

Graph 7

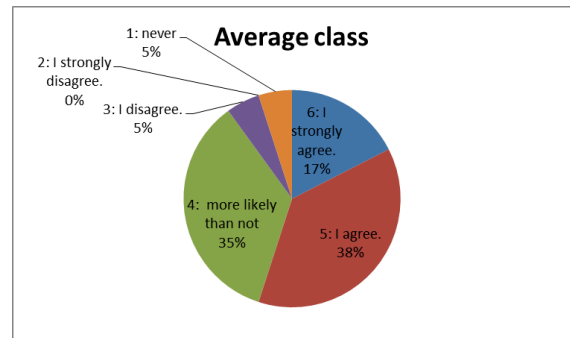


The graph 7 shows that 85% students in all feel that it is easier to remember the spelling when they can pronounce the word. When we look at each class (graph 8 & 9), 80% of the students in the advanced class and 90% of the students in average class stated that pronunciation leads to better spelling recall.

Graph 8



Graph 9



Conclusion

Lessons using images could achieve the same vocabulary learning results as using Japanese translations. Students can guess a word's meaning without using Japanese by using the picture. We could say the target words used in the experimental lessons were easy to show pictorially. A future study can be conducted on the efficacy of this pictorial approach with the use of abstract words. However, using pictures to learn words in a second language is useful for beginners. Students can focus on pronunciation when using a picture and are not influenced by the pronunciation of individual alphabet letters. Pronunciation practice before the spelling tests could soften the resistance to learning English words. There was little difference between both patterns but most of the students agree that it is easier to remember the spelling when they can pronounce the word. Furthermore, students can be more proactive in learning English word spellings this step by step technique. This approach is seen to be effective for students with and without special needs. The results indicate the importance of a step-by-step approach to effectively teach English vocabulary to students in the Japanese public school system. My future work is to develop a computer system that will allow students to acquire pronunciation through self-study.

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