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| journal or publication title | The Journal of Nagasaki University of Foreign Studies |
| number | 22 |
| page range | 181-187 |
| year | 2018-12-30 |
| URL | http://id.nii.ac.jp/1165/00000603/ |



Facilitating the use of English Adjectives Among Low-level Learners through Collaborative Learning

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共同学習を利用した形容詞学習促進に関する研究

草場 クリシャン

Abstract:

The study included 18 Japanese second language learners of English who were tested into a CEFR A1 writing class. The focus of the study was to introduce students to new adjectives, and how they are ordered in English, with the aim of moving the participants away from writing multiple short sentences to creating a single longer sentence that describes a noun (item). In order to familiarise them with the new lexis and demonstrate how the adjectives are ordered, they were tasked with working in groups and collaborating to complete several exercises that encouraged them to experiment with the language. It was found that as a group they began to use a more varied selection of adjectives in their writing and did follow the English order of adjectives.

概要：

CEFR A1レベルのライティングの授業を履修している18名の日本人英語学習者を対象に調査を行った。研究の焦点は、学習者の形容詞学習に当てられたもので、対象となる名詞（項目）を複数の短文で散発的に表現するのではなく、一文ではあるが長い文を用い表現できるように学習者を支援することをその目的としている。文中における形容詞の使われ方に対する理解を深めるために、学習者はグループになり様々なタスクに取り組んだ。その結果、グループで共同学習を行った時は、ライティングにおける形容詞の使用幅が広がり、より多くの形容詞を用いて表現し始めたことがわかった。

Keywords: Cooperative Learning, English adjective order, Group work

キーワード： 協同学習、英語形容詞の順番、グループワーク

Introduction:

Learning how to construct accurate sentences in a foreign language is a challenge all language learners must deal with; the more words used, the longer the sentence, and there is an increased chance of grammatical accuracy being lost, especially when a major component of the sentence comes from a particular language class, such as attributive adjectives (Dixon & Aikhenvald, 2006; Blöhdorn, 2009). A crucial setback with vocabulary teaching is not being able to accurately determine or understand what the learners know. This can also be a problem when setting teaching goals and for language assessment as argued by Nation & Webb (2011), as it is difficult to ‘*quickly and effectively measure depth of vocabulary knowledge*’ (p227); they also noted the lack of studies associated with this particular part of English language education. Each learner

progresses at a different rate, and their previous educational or language background can be extremely varied, meaning that even though a group of learners may be tested into a particular level or class does not mean that everyone has the exact same linguistic ability. Therefore, as language teachers, we need to find a middle ground and aim for the wider audience. However, if all the learners in a study were to come from the same language background, it may be easier to pinpoint common mistakes associated with language transfer (Odlin, 1997), or first language interference (Ellis, 1997). It was with this in mind that low-level learners from the same language group were selected for this study. Although the learners may be entering into the interlanguage (Selinker, 1972) phase of learning, they will still be at a general level where they have an elementary understanding of English, which will help to limit problems that may arise from selecting learners from multiple language groups, or with varying linguistic abilities.

Over the years, I have tried to encourage students of English writing to use adjectives, namely attributive adjectives (Dixon & Aikhenvald, 2006; Matthews, 2014), as a way to enhance their writing and descriptive abilities and have attempted numerous teaching approaches. However, it all came down to the same basic method of first showing students some new words, doing a few exercises with occasional team cooperation to have them put the new items into practice, and then having them use the new adjectives to describe something. This was justified under the belief that writing is, for the most part, an activity of individual output. Despite slight variations to the teaching methods, the outcome has always been temporarily successfully but otherwise unsuccessful for the wider scope of their learning, as students start using the new lexis for the present or upcoming activity but ultimately revert to using language that they are more comfortable with after its completion. Various sources were consulted and Nation's (2013) book on vocabulary studies in particular provided an excellent range of pedagogical suggestions for vocabulary teaching and learning to better help facilitate language acquisition.

Some researchers such as Blöhdorn (2009) noted there is a certain perception that people have of English communication. This being that communication in English without the use of adjectives is not possible, and this perception is supported by the adjective high frequency recognition in language corpora (p8). When reading a description of such things as physical items or people's features or personalities, it can be extremely challenging to do so without using adjectives. It may be possible to describe a place just by giving a list of nouns; however, without using adjectives to describe things, the reader is left with an oversimplified and detail-lacking description, meaning the writer has failed to convey an accurate representation of the thing in question. Therefore, the instruction methods used when teaching adjectives needs to be redesigned from the ground up, incorporating multiple stages where the students are required to cooperate with each other in teams and check each other's progress. This is where cooperative learning (Chiu, 2004 ; Attle & Baker, 2007) can prove to be beneficial, as each participant's performance can aid with improving the group as a whole (Johnson, Johnson, & Smith, 2014; Brame & Biel, 2015) through peer teaching and review. Although this may not always be the case, constant peer checks and teacher support, when required, should increase the chances of a more positive outcome. Setting up multiple steps in the language teaching, learning and practice process should encourage a more deeper learning experience (Lublin, 2003). In addition, checking to ensure that each step is carefully completed has the potential to reduce the

possibility of learner problems and fossilisation errors (Zheng, 2010; Nozadze, 2012).

Research Questions

The research questions proposed for this study are as follows:

- 1 - Are the participants able to successfully follow the adjective order using a variety of words, and adapt it into their own work?
- 2 - After learning about the order of adjectives in English, do the students begin to independently use them in their secondary compositions and any work they submit after the core part of this research project has finished?

Methodology: Research design and Data Collection Procedures

The participants consisted of 18 Japanese second language learners of English, studying on a writing course at CEFR-A1 level. The major class focus was on sentence construction and writing progressive sentences coherently, and incorporated grammatical and lexical items from both the CEFR A1 and A2 bands.

Part 1: The participants were organised into groups of three or four people, and they were first tasked with selecting three physical items, which they like and/or regularly use, and write down as many words as they can to describe each item respectively. They were asked not to reveal to anyone in their group what items they had selected or what words they had chosen to describe each item. After that they had to describe their items to their team members without using the actual name of the item itself, and just rely on the description they made, to see how many people could accurately guess them. They then had to repeat this with a few people from other teams in the class for additional practice.

Part 2: For the following step, they were given an A4 sheet of paper, which was arranged in columns each representing a part of the order of adjectives for English (**See Appendix 1**) with an additional space for nouns. They were required to work in their teams to find adjectives relevant to each heading. After this was completed, each team member from each group had to write adjectives they found to help complete a master list on the whiteboard for the entire class to see and learn from. This meant that everyone had a large list of adjectives to work with, and, more importantly, each participant had the same number of words available to them. This exercise also doubled up as a time to ensure that the words they contributed were spelt properly, correctly used and relevant, thus ensuring that any obscene, archaic, extremely low-frequency or incorrectly placed words were removed from the list entirely, or assigned to the correct headings.

Part 3: They then had to revisit the items they described in part 1 and were asked if it was possible to add any adjectives to their original list to better describe them. After this, they were asked to describe their items again, this time using their original list with the newly added adjectives included, to people they had not yet spoken to and note whether they guessed the item or not more easily than before. This tested if their enhanced description was clearer than their original.

Part 4: For this step, they were given a worksheet (**see appendix 2**) and had to write down two different items (nouns), and then follow the order by inserting adjectives to create a description of said items. After they finished, they had to share their descriptions with two other group members. This meant that each person was now in possession of four completed item descriptions. When this was completed and peer and teacher checked, they were required to work as a team to create three more new examples to solidify their understanding of the adjective placement order in English.

Part 5: After completing the previous steps they were now required to revisit their part 3 descriptions correcting the adjective order, and they also had to choose an additional yet new item to describe, both of which were teacher checked. Any irregularities or mistakes were highlighted, and they had to correct these accordingly. They were also encouraged to start using this order to describe things in their weekly homework assignments. This consists of writing five short components (containing of 3-5 sentences in each) per week about anything of their choosing; they must just write something in English that has some kind of cohesion (writing four unrelated sentences was not acceptable), check it, and bring it to class for the next lesson to be teacher checked. The majority of studies write about a variety of things such as their daily life, things they like or dislike, grammar or words they are studying outside of class among other things; however, one or two learners just copy directly from dictionaries or magazines. At the conclusion of the study they had five weeks left in the semester, meaning they had 25 open entries to further practice adjective use. Nation (2013) noted that having some kind of long-term achievement test is crucial to ensuring that the vocabulary stays fresh within the learner's knowledge base. Therefore, by encouraging the learners to incorporate the words into their weekly assignments would act as a form of long-term testing (p522).

Part 6: The final part of the study introduced them to basic -ed/-in adjectives. This was then expanded upon in a second short composition where they were tasked to not only describe a different item (or items) but to then also make comments about the item using -ed or -ing adjectives. They were given a very short worksheet covering around ten different adjectives, such as amazed/amazing and bored/boring, and a few phrases they studied in a previous session, for example 'I use it when I am...', or 'When I (verb)'. They were presented with an example of a smartphone with a description of it (**see appendix 4**) that strictly followed the order of adjectives from the previous parts of the study. As with the previous section, it was peer and then teacher checked to remedy any errors.

Many Japanese school textbooks use a number of basic adjectives that are constantly overused, which leads to students focusing on and favouring the use of the same few words in what sometimes seems as a lack of willingness to learn new adjectives or incorporate alternative ones into their language. Therefore, the adjectives, 'good', 'great', 'bad', 'fun', 'cute', and 'nice' were prohibited, in addition the adverbs 'not', 'very' and 'really' were highly discouraged from being used in their writing, as the use of alternative synonyms was heavily encouraged, such as 'fun' being replaced with 'entertaining'; they were also briefly shown how to use a thesaurus to check for these.

Findings and evaluation:

The outcome of the research was successful to the extent of having them acquire new, mainly high-frequency (Nation, 2013, p22) adjectives while having them abide to the English order of adjectives; however, despite the extensive and continuous steps of practice, a few of the participants switched from using what they were taught back to a style they felt more comfortable with.

The first research question's intended outcome was successfully met as all 18 participants followed the adjective order and demonstrated their successful understanding of it by applying it correctly to their item descriptions. The numerous steps they went through from independently trying to construct something by working as a group and sharing their ideas with each other proved that they understood what to do and how to accurately produce it. There were slight errors made by some students, but this was mainly due to them accidentally switching the word order around. Other common errors were mistakes associated with describing the size and shape of something, and forgetting to insert the correct article [a, an, the] before the description started. For example, one participant described their school bag and started with the opinion of it being ugly, writing 'a ugly' instead of 'an ugly'.

The second research question's outcome was something that was not initially anticipated as it was happening so quickly. Out of the 18 participants in the class, 15 of them began to use a more varied selection of adjectives than in their previous work. Out of those 15, 11 of them started to actively use them in their weekly homework assignments even after the study had concluded. However, around 6 of them began to revert to separating the adjectives into multiple sentences despite going through the long process of learning how to do it in just one. This happened within just two weeks of finishing the study.

The goal was to have students produce a description, for example (**see also Appendix 3**):

'It is a useful, compact, flat, new, black and silver, Japanese-made, plastic laptop computer.'

However, 8 of the participants instead started to write them separately, for example:

'I will describe my laptop computer. It is very useful, and it is compact and flat. It is new, black and silver. It is Japanese and made of plastic.'

When asked about this, most replied that it was easier and more comfortable for them to write this way. This was probably due to their previous language learning experience and confidence in writing short sentences during their school years.

Conclusion:

The project was completely successful, if limited to just increasing their English adjective knowledge base, as it presented the participants with a larger and more diverse range of adjectives that helped augment their language knowledge. However, despite learning the order of adjectives in English in detail and how to use multiple adjectives in a sequence to describe a noun, many reverted to a more basic approach of using several short sentences, or short sentences linked with a conjunction to explain their items. Most who followed this approach did accurately adhere to the adjective order; they just spread it out over several unnecessary sentences. Neither the

approach nor the language they used were wrong, as they were most likely just trying to limit the complexity of their written output, yet it was just cumbersome with several unnecessary sentences. Having them work in teams to not only compile adjective lists but also to explain their items to each other, seemed to speed up the language acquisition process, and their post-study independent use of adjectives in their writing acted as confirmation that the peer collaboration learning experience was more successful than a solo approach, which was attempted personally numerous times in previous years. This study was tested on low-level learners of English but could easily be adapted for higher-level students in the CEFR B1 or even B2 band of English. Having learners from the same language background was more advantageous as it was easier to anticipate certain specific first language problems that may arise, but this study could be adapted with groups of learners from multiples language backgrounds.

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Appendix 1: Order of Adjectives

| Opinion | Size | Shape | Condition | Age | Colour | Pattern | Origin | Material | Purpose | Noun |
|-----------|-------|-------|-----------|-----|--------|---------|----------|----------|----------|-------|
| ugly | small | thin | dirty | old | red | flowery | British | cotton | sleeping | bag |
| beautiful | large | long | broken | new | white | spotted | Japanese | silk | wedding | dress |

(Note: table has been scaled down for the appendix)

Appendix 2: Collaboration Exercise**Yours**

| Opinion | Size | Shape | Condition | Age | Colour | Pattern | Origin | Material | Purpose | Noun |
|---------|------|-------|-----------|-----|--------|---------|--------|----------|---------|------|
| | | | | | | | | | | |

Your friends

| Opinion | Size | Shape | Condition | Age | Colour | Pattern | Origin | Material | Purpose | Noun |
|---------|------|-------|-----------|-----|--------|---------|--------|----------|---------|------|
| | | | | | | | | | | |

Team

| Opinion | Size | Shape | Condition | Age | Colour | Pattern | Origin | Material | Purpose | Noun |
|---------|------|-------|-----------|-----|--------|---------|--------|----------|---------|------|
| | | | | | | | | | | |

Appendix 3: Sample item

My favourite item is my bag. It is a useful, square, smooth, grey, checked, cotton, shopping bag.

Appendix 4: Intended example.

It is a long, thin, black, hard, aluminium and glass, American-made smartphone. I use it when I am **bored**. I also use it to listen to music on my **relaxing** bed.

