Brief Report

NONTRADITIONAL STUDENTS' INSIGHTS INTO VOCABULARY LEARNING IN THE ESL CLASSROOM

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Many nontraditional English language learners (ELLs) in urban two-year colleges come with limited academic literacy experience. Research has shown that vocabulary is essential in developing the necessary literacy skills to succeed in college, so vocabulary development is important for these students. Because nontraditional students learn in different ways compared to traditional students, it can be challenging for ESL instructors to devise teaching strategies to address the learning needs of this population. This study seeks to gain insight into promising educational practices for the vocabulary development of nontraditional ELLs by asking them for their awareness on (a) avoidance of some of the college-level words they know in their speech and writing, and (b) the kinds of practical classroom strategies that would help them learn and use new words more effectively. Study participants' responses were not only insightful, but also were in line with current learning theories in language acquisition and linguistics.

Keywords: ELL, ESL, learning strategies, nontraditional students, vocabulary

A growing number of nontraditional English language learners (ELLs) at urban community colleges have multiple obligations—e.g., full or part-time jobs, families—giving them limited time to study and do their homework, let alone read for pleasure. While traditional students are typically between 18 and 22, attend college full time, and have no family responsibilities, nontraditional students usually have additional obligations besides college. According to guidelines from the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES, 2002), a nontraditional student is one who satisfies one or more of seven criteria: (1) delayed college enrollment after high school; (2) part-time student status; (3) full-time workload; (4) financially independent in terms of qualifying for college aid; (5) family responsibilities; (6) single-parent obligations; or (7) GED or equivalency in place of high school certification. Faculty working with nontraditional ELLs in their classes have to come up with appropriate teaching strategies to address their students' academic literacy needs, which may differ from those of traditional students. Curry (2004) defines such teaching strategies as "specialized practices of academic reading, writing, and speaking that characterize college-level communication" (p. 51).

Several researchers agree that vocabulary knowledge is not only a good predictor for reading, but also essential for academic success (Laufer & Ravenhorst-Kalovski, 2010; Lervåg & Aukrust, 2010; Zhang, 2012), thus making vocabulary knowledge all the more vital for ELLs, who need this college-level skill to succeed academically. Though nontraditional ELLs can accelerate their literacy skills if they know more college-level vocabulary, the conventional vocabulary learning techniques, such as flash cards (paper or electronic), reading for pleasure, and taxonomy, are often not practical for these students because of the limited time they have available for practicing such literacy skills. One alternative for nontraditional ELLs is to leverage and build on learning strategies they may already be using. Bialystok (1981) has noted that active

language learners employ a variety of methods, including cognitive strategies, to acquire, store, and retrieve information. If classroom instructors can work with their students' awareness of their own learning strategies, students' perceptions of their own strategies could have important pedagogical implications (Tse, 2000), making them a resource for the classroom as well.

The aim of this study is to explore and understand vocabulary learning needs of nontraditional ELLs by engaging them in two linked activities: a written sentence construction task and a group discussion task. Insights gained from both parts of this study can help teachers implement effective vocabulary learning strategies in their classes with nontraditional ELLs.

Building on Previous Study

In a prior study, a multiple-choice vocabulary questionnaire with 100 words was administered to 23 high/intermediate-level ESL learners. The words were selected from nine short articles that were part of the course readings, so they were considered appropriate for the course level. Participants were asked to read each word silently and select the closest meaning from a choice of four options. An example was also provided:

To inhibit

- to slow or prevent something
- to promote growth
- to consume alcohol
- to organize work

The average percentage of correct responses for the 100 college-level words was 74.7%, meaning that participants were able to pick the correct meaning almost three-fourths of the time. These results suggest that the learners had some awareness of the meaning of the word. To see whether the learners could use the same words correctly in writing, the study discussed in the rest of this paper was conducted.

Current Study

Participants

As in the previous study, 23 students (13 female and 10 male) in the researcher's ESL 95 class, a high-intermediate-level class, took part in the study; all students in the class agreed to participate. The average age range was 18–25 years. All students had either a full-time job or a family, or was a single parent (usually the mother), and/or had delayed attending college after high school, making them nontraditional students according to the NCES definition. ESL 95 is a noncredit course, and testing out of it depends solely on students' performance on the CUNY Assessment Test for Writing (CATW), an exit exam. Because this test is administered by the testing office at the college and scored by two trained faculty members at another CUNY community college outside the purview of the classroom instructor, there is no conflict of interest.

Materials

1. Consent form.
2. Sentence construction task (written): 10 words from the 100 words used in the multiple-choice questionnaire from the previous study were selected. These 10 words, which received correct responses between 80% to 90% of the time, were selected because their standard deviation was low, ensuring that all 10 words are more or less equally challenging. Table 1 lists the 10 words, along with the percentage of correct responses given by the participants for each word on the multiple-choice questionnaire. The mean and SD for the 10 words are also displayed in Table 1.

3. The two group discussion questions are:
   a. You were able to pick the correct meaning for many of the words on the multiple-choice exercise. However, you were not able to use many of these words in meaningful sentences in speaking or writing. What do you think are some reasons?
   b. What are some ways/strategies that you think will help you use these college-level words in speaking and writing?

Table 1. *The Average Percentage of Correct Responses Given by the Participants for Each Word on the Multiple-Choice Questionnaire from the Previous Study*

		% of Correct Responses
1	to boost	86.4
2	to illustrate	86.4
3	to navigate	86.4
4	promising	86.4
5	crucial	86.4
6	cohesive	81.8
7	complacency	81.8
8	to emphasize	81.8
9	harmonious	81.8
10	interactive	81.8
	Mean	**84.1**
	SD	**2.42**

Procedures

During the first week of classes, participants were informed about the study, but without giving them any details that would affect or skew the results. Participants then read and signed the consent form.

During the second week, participants completed the sentence construction task in class. Students were asked to write 10 sentences, each with one of the 10 words, in the response booklet. See example below:

> In this task, you will write a sentence with each word following the examples:
> Examples:
> **a. create (verb)**
> *John organized his study table so he could create more space to work.*
> **b. genius (noun)**
> *Steve Jobs was a real genius. He was the first to think of the idea of a smart phone.*
>
> **1. boost (verb)**
>
> _____
>
> _____

Participants did not receive any feedback on the sentences they wrote until after the completion of the study.

Data Analysis

Each written sentence was marked either as a meaningful sentence (√) or not (X). A meaningful sentence was one in which the word was used correctly in the context. See example below:

I like boost. (X)
Boost is good. (X)
My confidence was boosted when I won the prize at the dance competition. (√)

Spelling, punctuation, and minor grammatical errors were not counted against a student, as long as the core meaning of the word was expressed. The researcher tabulated each participant's written responses and computed the percentage of meaningful sentences constructed for each of the 10 words. The mean and standard deviation were also calculated.

Results

Table 2 provides the percentage of correct response for each of the 10 words on the multiple-choice questionnaire from the previous study and the sentence construction task in the current study. The mean and standard deviations are also included. The standard deviation for the multiple-choice questionnaire is low (SD=2.42), meaning that participants selected the correct meaning of the 10 words more or less evenly. However, the standard deviation on the sentence construction task is very high (SD=11.21), indicating that participants were able to construct sentences with some words more easily than others; a possible limitation in this sentence completion task is that the researcher might not have considered the possibility of cognates interfering with the results. For example, in Table 1 we see that participants used the word *crucial* in a sentence correctly 78.2% of the time, which is much higher than for other words. This may be because eight of the 23 participants were Spanish speakers, and the word *crucial* in English and Spanish is spelled the same way and has the same meaning. Because the participants came from seven different language backgrounds, it is challenging for the researcher to determine the participants' familiarity with words in the first language and identify the types of possible cognates between the seven different languages and English. Hence, cognates were not examined.

A paired t-test was performed to statistically confirm the difference in the participants' performance on the two tasks, multiple-choice questionnaire and sentence construction task. At $8.57 \bullet 10^{-06}$, the p-value is less than the alpha level $p < .05$, so the null hypothesis is rejected, meaning that there is no difference between the means. The paired t-test shows a high level of significance—t(9)=8.57E-06, $p=8.57 \bullet 10^{-06}$, indicating that students performed quite differently on the multiple-choice and sentence construction tasks. The results indicate that although participants were able to pick the correct meaning of each of the 10 words on average 84.1% of the time on the multiple-choice questionnaire, they were able to write a sentence with the same words correctly on average only 53.4% of the time, a 30.7% difference. A gap of this size clearly confirms a dissociation between knowing the meaning of the word and writing a sentence with the same word.

Table 2. *The Average Percentage of Correct Responses Given by the Participants for Each Word on the Multiple-Choice Questionnaire and the Sentence Construction Task*

		Multiple-Choice Task (previous study)	Sentence Construction Task (current study)
1	to boost	86.4	60.8
2	to illustrate	86.4	47.8
3	to navigate	86.4	56.5
4	promising	86.4	39.1
5	crucial	86.4	78.2
6	cohesive	81.8	47.8
7	complacency	81.8	43.5
8	to emphasize	81.8	60.8
9	harmonious	81.8	52.1
10	interactive	81.8	47.8
	Mean	**84.1**	**53.44**
	SD	**2.42**	**11.22**

Small-Group Discussions

Two days after the sentence construction task, participants formed groups of four or five and took part in a small-group discussion task during class time to discuss questions (a) and (b), found at the top of page 3 of this report. Students were informed that there were no right or wrong answers and were given 10 minutes to discuss. A recorder in the group wrote down the points discussed within the group, and students then shared the findings of their group discussions with the entire class. One spokesperson in each group shared the points discussed, often helped by other participants in the group when a point was missed or when a point needed more clarification.

As each group shared their responses to question (a) with the entire class, the researcher carefully recorded the responses on the computer in the classroom. Notes from the recorder for each group were collected to cross-check the responses. After the class discussion, the researcher projected their responses on the screen and asked the students to order their responses by relevance—specifically, relevant according to the way students actually learn or want to learn within the time they have available to study, and not according to what is considered "normal" or "ideal" in academia. As students made their judgments, the researcher reordered the responses accordingly so students could see them on the screen. The most relevant reasons selected by the students were then analyzed within the various language learning and linguistic theories. Once the class had come to a consensus on the list for question (a), the participants proceeded to follow the same procedure for question (b). One major limitation in this group discussion task is that it was hard to determine whether all students contributed their preferred learning strategy during the discussion or whether the more vocal students came up with most of the responses.

A compilation of student responses for questions (a) and (b) are presented in the order of relevance proposed by the participants in Tables 3 and 4, respectively.

Table 3. *Compilation of Student Responses to Question (a)*

	Group discussion question (a): You were able to pick the correct meaning for many of the words on the multiple-choice exercise. However, you were not able to use many of these words in meaningful sentences in speaking or writing. What do you think are some reasons?
1	We're not sure of how to pronounce the word (speaking) or spell the word (writing).
2	People around us use simpler words, so it's easier to use these everyday words.
3	We are in the habit of using the same words because they come to our mind first.
4	Sometimes we're not very sure of the meaning of the word.
5	It is hard to remember the new words while speaking or writing.
6	We use words that first come to our mind because we are focused on the meaning of what we are saying or writing, and not on vocabulary.
7	Sometimes we know the meaning of a word, but we are not sure how to use the word in a sentence.
8	When we speak, sometimes we are nervous and cannot think of higher level words even if we know the meaning.
9	We forget that we need to use the new words in our writings.

Table 4. *Compilation of Student Responses to Question (b)*
(Note: In #3, researcher clarification appears in parentheses.)

	Group discussion question (b): What are some ways/strategies that you think will help you use these college-level words in speaking and writing?
1	We need to use tricks to remember the spelling of a word; e.g., there is an "ear" in "h*ear*" because we hear with our ears. This helps me in knowing the difference between *here* and *hear*.
2	We can remember new words by using the word in a funny way, like jokes.
3	We need to learn how to pronounce words, especially the stress on long words (meaning multisyllabic).
4	We like to have a picture of the word in our mind, like a little video.
5	We should pay attention to the words we use when we speak or write.
6	Teachers should use these words in class more often.
7	We need to learn how to spell words correctly.
8	We should rehearse/repeat the word several times.
9	We should read more books.
10	We can read subtitles when watching TV or a movie.
11	We can remember new words more easily when we listen to songs in English.
12	We can use flashcards.
13	We should practice the new word in multiple sentences.
14	We should write down the new words we learn several times.
15	We can use the cell phone to learn new words.
16	We should look for the synonyms of a word.
17	We can research new words and present them in class.

Discussion and Classroom Implications

Sentence Construction Task

The results of the t-test clearly illustrate a disconnect between *knowing* the meaning of the word in reading (receptive or passive skill) and *using* the word in a sentence in writing (productive or active skill). This reception and production dissociation in second language vocabulary development has been observed in several research studies (Milton, 2009; Pignot-Shahov, 2012; Schneider, Healy, & Bourne, 2002). Laufer and Paribakht (1998) found that "learners' passive (P) vocabulary is larger than their controlled active (CA) vocabulary" (p. 383). If nontraditional ELLs have an implicit knowledge of many college-level words, then how can they transform their receptive/passive knowledge to productive/active knowledge? This question is explored next.

Group Discussion Task

Participants were asked to list their preferred vocabulary learning strategies from most relevant to least relevant based on their everyday reality. In this way, students rearranged the order of the strategies based on their preference, not what the classroom instructor prefers or what is considered ideal in academia. Four of their most relevant learning strategies are examined here in more detail.

Practicality. While most students agreed that although flashcards on their mobile phones (such as Quizlet) were an easy and an effective technique for practicing new words, it was not practical for them, as they couldn't devote that much time to learning new words. Even when they had a little time, they noted, they either forgot or were too tired to review the words. Instead, they felt that learning strategies such as tricks, mnemonics, jokes, and funny anecdotes taught in the classroom were more useful in helping them remember the words in less time. The nontraditional students' reasoning is not arbitrary or frivolous, and in fact is rooted in various psycholinguistic theories. There is rich literature in psychology to demonstrate the power of mnemonics in memory studies (Danziger, 2008), making mnemonics ideal for nontraditional ELLs for vocabulary learning. Several websites present amusing mnemonics for learning vocabulary that ESL instructors can readily adapt for their classes. In addition, students can also be taught to create mnemonics of their own.

Prosody (learning to speak). Participants expressed that they don't use certain words while speaking and writing because they don't know how to pronounce the words or which syllable to stress in multisyllabic words. They also expressed that pronouncing words greatly increased their confidence level and helped them remember the words better. Once again, students' perceptions are grounded in language acquisition literature. Every spoken language has its unique prosody (rhythm, stress, intonation of speech), which is crucial for discerning the structural relationships among linguistic units within a sentence in text or in speech (Chang & Millett, 2013). In children's language acquisition, there is ample evidence to demonstrate that prosody clearly precedes speaking, as demonstrated by the rhythms found in baby cooing and babbling (Whalley & Hansen, 2006). While teaching language skills to adults, however, often very little or no emphasis is placed on prosody. Some researchers have claimed that exposure to prosody should precede the reading of complex texts (Stephens, 2011); Miccinati (1985), in fact, suggests that we teach prosodic cues explicitly to adult ELLs. Carolyn Graham's technique of jazz chanting addresses this very issue by teaching the prosody of American English through chants. Instructors should consider including some of these jazz chant exercises routinely in their classes with nontraditional students.

Visualization and personalization. Students mentioned that visualizing helped them remember words more easily. Visualization in learning is a technique that has been supported heavily in literature (Nation, 1999). Images reinforce learning a new word because an additional sensory element (besides the sound and/or spelling of the word) is now available to the brain. Visualizing can range from an image of an eggplant and the word *eggplant* written by or under the image to personalizing visualization (Koller, 2015). For example, when I introduce and explain the word *contentious* to a class, I present the word along

with several sample sentences. Then I ask students to visualize a situation in their lives when someone was contentious. Students then construct a sentence connecting the word *contentious* to the person they know—e.g., *Uncle Vargas had a* contentious *discussion with our landlord when the rent was suddenly increased*. Such associations to real-life incidents often help students personalize the words and remember them better (Alharbi, 2015). Similarly, the semantics of a word also plays a crucial role. Lightbown's (2008) Transfer Appropriate Processing (TAP) framework favors the importance of matching the processes during learning with processes at the time of retrieval. She writes, "If the task for retrieval requires memory for the semantic elements of the stimulus, then semantic encoding may be more effective than encoding that focuses instead on some perceptual feature of the stimulus—how it is spelled or pronounced or what it rhymes with" (p. 43).

Vocabulary exposure. Finally, participants expressed that when they hear, see, or read college-level words used frequently in the classroom, they would remember the words better. According to Laufer and Paribakht (1998), passive/receptive vocabulary can be activated to become productive vocabulary with "multiple exposures to words and broad opportunities to use them" (p. 387). The classroom is often the only place where nontraditional students encounter college-level vocabulary, and hence class time must be utilized efficiently to maximize vocabulary learning. Thus, it is important for ESL instructors not to limit themselves to simpler vocabulary and to reinforce the college-level words during class time whenever the opportunity arises, and not to rely on assigning vocabulary practice outside of class.

Conclusion

Overall, the results of this study clearly demonstrate that nontraditional students have a coherent understanding of their vocabulary learning strategies. As teachers, it therefore behooves us to pay attention to their needs and address them accordingly in the classroom. In fact, in their study, Oxford and Nyikos (1989) advocate for "a language program which takes into account learners' needs, including the need to gain self-control and autonomy through strategy" (p. 297).

Throughout the study, nontraditional students provided many valuable insights into their vocabulary development process. The participants are deeply aware of their own learning strategies. They also realize that their study time for practicing vocabulary skills is limited, and thus they want teachers to use strategies in the classroom that can transition their vocabulary development from receptive to productive knowledge in a short time. Several of the preferred strategies they shared were not isolated, but rather embedded within established learning theories and methodologies.

As the demographics in our classes change from more traditional students to more nontraditional students, ESL instructors will face challenges. Kenner and Weinerman (2011) note, for example, that "Although these differences present challenges for educators, they also provide opportunities for educators to embrace the life experiences and wisdom that these adult learners bring to the collegiate community" (p. 87). And as ESL instructors prepare their teaching materials, Griffiths (2007) encourages them to look for intersections between teachers' perceptions and students' perceptions of learning strategies and find common ground that can inform classroom practices.

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