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Dialog on Language Instruction
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CONTENTS

ARTICLE

- 1 Process-Based and Learner-Centered Grammar Instruction
 ~ *Yanmei Liu*

ACTION RESEARCH

- 12 Incorporating Free Voluntary Reading for an Engaging Curriculum
 ~ *Yanjing Jing*
- 25 Improving Vocabulary Retention by Training Students to Use Vocabulary Learning
Strategies In and Out of Class
 ~ *Tetiana Foster & Tatiana Saenko*

FACULTY FORUM

- 44 When Faculty Become Learners: Faculty Perceptions of Navajo Vocabulary
Instruction
 ~ *Roger Anderson*
- 63 The Power of Expectations and Implications for DLIFLC Teachers and Students
 ~ *Jon Phillips*
- 71 Reflection on Variables of Vocabulary Acquisition in the DLIFLC Learning Context:
Language Anxiety, Motivation, Learning Strategies, and Teaching Methods
 ~ *Yingyue Zhu*
- 78 Using Microsoft's *Immersive Reader* Tool to Enhance Students' Listening
Comprehension
 ~ *Marwan Bairaqqdar*
- 83 Student-Created Videos for *Esprit de Corps* in an Arabic Classroom
 ~ *Georgette Kassis*

QUICK TIPS

- 91 Enhancing Classroom Understanding through Concept Checking Questions (CCQs)
and Instruction Checking Questions (ICQs)
~ *Suyi Liu*

GENERAL INFORMATION

- 99 Call for Papers
- 100 Thank You, Reviewers!

Article

Process-Based and Learner-Centered Grammar Instruction

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Mastering grammar is not quick and easy for students, but is rather a gradual learning process. This paper proposes a process-based approach to grammar instruction in foreign language teaching, emphasizing a learner-centered methodology. Students need to go through four key phases in the grammar learning process: comprehension, memorization, internalization, and application. This study outlines indicators for identifying which learning phase a student is in based on their performance, recommends specific instructional strategies tailored to each stage, and suggests classroom activities aligned with learners' needs. By offering targeted and meaningful activities, this approach aims to support a successful progression through all phases of learning grammar, enhancing both the learning and teaching experience.

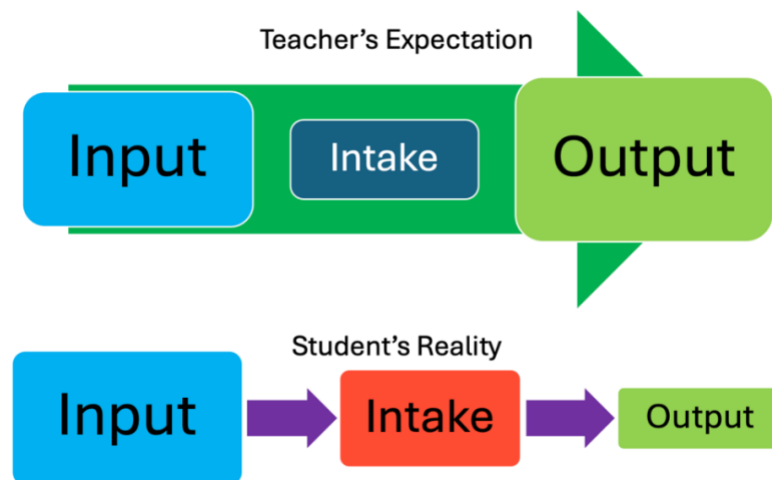
Keywords: Grammar, Learning Process, Learner-Centered, Pedagogy

INTRODUCTION

Teachers often have high expectations for their students, which can sometimes lead to frustration when students struggle to apply or retain grammar concepts after instruction. Many teachers expect immediate and accurate student output following input, sometimes even expecting students to produce more than what they have received as input. However, this overlooks the critical intake phase students require. In reality, student intake and output typically fall short of the input provided by teachers. This gap between teaching expectations and learning realities is illustrated in Figure 1. As shown, grammar acquisition is a gradual process, and mastery requires time and effort from students.

Figure 1

Teaching Expectations vs. Learning Realities



Learner-Centered Teaching

Effective teaching must be learner-centered, which requires teachers to adjust expectations that are based on the students' realities and provide targeted instructional support to meet their needs. According to Weimer (2002, p. XVI):

Being a learner-centered teacher means focusing attention squarely on the learning process: what the student is learning, how the student is learning, the conditions under which the student is learning, whether the student is retaining and applying the learning, and how current learning positions the student for future learning.

This tells us that learner-centered teachers are not only concerned with *what* students are learning but also *how* they are learning it. They have to have an understanding of the conditions that foster successful learning. We need to consider how students retain knowledge, and importantly, how to transfer their language knowledge into skills, or how they can apply what they have learned. In essence, being learner-centered ensures that every aspect of our teaching is designed with the student's learning process in mind.

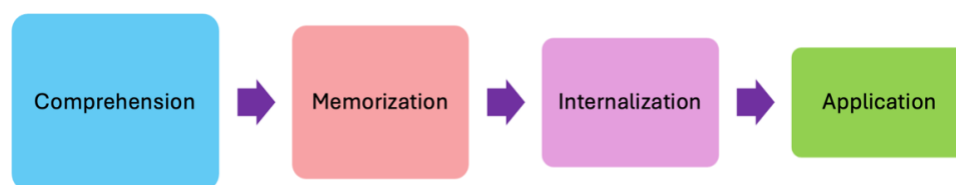
Grammar Learning Process

The Input Hypothesis was proposed by Krashen (1992), highlighting the importance of comprehensible input for language acquisition and outlining how the *comprehension* of input is the first stage in the grammar learning process. Corder (1967) was the first scholar to point out the mismatch between input and output and made a distinction between input and intake. He defined intake as "a mental representation of a physical stimulus" (Corder, 1967, p. 165). Literally, it is what learners take in. Since mental processing is unobservable, it is difficult to

clearly know what the intake is. Although we cannot have a clear and comprehensive understanding of intake, we can at least know that only what learners remember is part of their intake. Many psychological studies have shown that memory is important to learning, so *memorization* is also an indispensable stage in the grammar learning process. Chaudron (1985) refers to intake as “the mediating process between the target language available to the learners as input and the learner’s internalized set of L2 rules and strategies for second language development” (p. 1). Chaudron’s claim points out that *internalization* is the next stage of learning after intake. Swain (2005) proposed the “Output Hypothesis,” which posits that language production (speaking or writing) is part of the second language learning process. Learning grammar is not only for language production, but also for language comprehension, so the last stage of the grammar learning process can be summarized as language *application*.

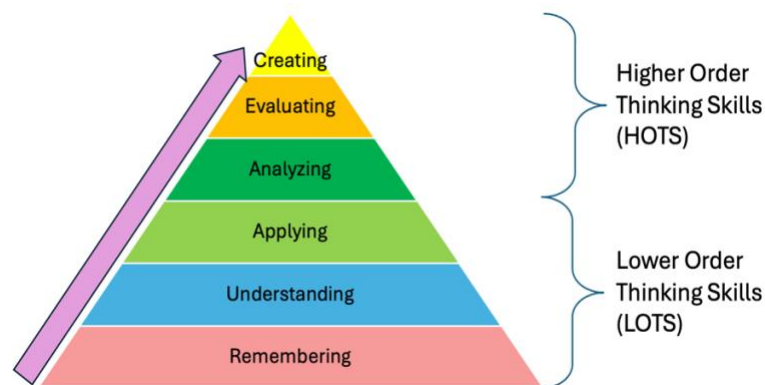
I have summarized my conception of the grammar learning process in Figure 2, which shows the four key phases—comprehension, memorization, internalization, and application. Each time students enter the next phase, the input information they retain will gradually decrease (the size of the boxes indicating the amount of input information students can retain and achieve). Though this process is demonstrated linearly in this figure, in reality the process is often cyclical and iterative, with students moving between phases as needed. Knowing and understanding grammatical rules is only the first step in the process, which means completing the *comprehension* phase. Next, students need to imitate and repeat grammar patterns to *memorize* them. They also need to digest and solidify grammar to achieve *internalization*. Then they can utilize grammar in communications and reach the *application* phase including comprehending and producing language (represented by a smaller box, indicating that students are able to *apply* grammatical knowledge less than they can *understand* and *remember* it).

Figure 2
Four Phases of the Learning Process



This learning process is different from Bloom’s Taxonomy. Bloom’s Taxonomy was developed to provide a framework for teachers to understand how students develop cognitively as they learn a subject. It is a classification of different learning outcomes and skills. The revised Bloom’s Taxonomy (Anderson & Krathwohl, 2001) classifies remembering, understanding, and applying as lower-order thinking skills (LOTS) and analyzing, evaluating, and creating as higher-order thinking skills (HOTS), as depicted in Figure 3. Foreign language learning differs from the learning of other subjects. Comprehension should come before memorization in foreign language learning to ensure “comprehensible input,” and internalization is a necessary stage before application in the grammar learning process.

Figure 3
Bloom's Taxonomy



Like other taxonomies, Bloom's is hierarchical, meaning that learning at the higher levels depends on having acquired prerequisite knowledge and skills at lower levels. It is necessary to encourage the use of HOTS activities in classroom teaching. However, only over-emphasizing HOTS and discouraging LOTS will lead to a misconception that HOTS and LOTS are opposite, thus ignoring the fact that moving from LOTS to HOTS is a continuous process. Only from a large accumulation of LOTS can a smaller number of HOTS be developed.

Process-based Grammar Instruction

Often, teachers cannot expect students to use grammar communicatively to complete a real task or comprehensive project immediately after learning grammatical rules. With more complex structures, teachers must provide appropriate scaffolding and meaningful teaching activities to facilitate the completion of all four phases in the grammar learning process, including providing concise and clear grammar content for students' comprehension. This scaffolding process entails ensuring sufficient drills, repetitions, and thorough contextualized activities to help them memorize and internalize grammar, and designing free and real communication scenarios to help them complete the application stage. This means that teachers should provide process-based grammar instruction. Process-based grammar instruction prioritizes the learning process of students; the goal is for students to go through the learning phases. In process-based instruction, the goal is not for the student to just get the correct answer to grammar questions. The goal is that they internalize grammar points and understanding so that when they encounter the grammar structure the next time, they will remember how it works. Product-based instruction focuses on ensuring that students only get correct answers to questions, whether or not the student really understands why. In this paper, I argue that we need to focus on process-based instruction to develop student understanding and internalization.

To provide this instruction, a teacher must identify grammar learning phases using students' performance, select methods and activities for each phase based on the pros and cons of each type of pedagogy, and design activities that cater to students' needs for each phase. How can we identify which stage a student is at in the grammar learning process? Teachers can diagnose their students' learning phases by observing, analyzing, and evaluating their performances in

classroom interactions, grammar exercises, lesson quizzes, achievement tests, etc. In addition to these diagnoses, student self-assessments, reflections, and reports are important indicators for determining learning phases.

Language pedagogy has evolved significantly over time, with the focus now being on choosing the best type of activity or instructional model depending on students' needs. There is no one method or type of activity that meets every student's need; rather, teachers must make educated decisions based on the strengths and weaknesses of a teaching approach or activity. For example, the grammar-translation activities, when used carefully and in moderation, can still be useful in foreign language teaching today because of their simplicity and high efficiency. No single teaching method is suitable for all learning phases, and one method may be more applicable for a certain learning stage. As teachers, it is essential that we understand the advantages and limitations of various pedagogical approaches and apply them appropriately for each phase. The key with teaching is to know which teaching methods are viable options, and to choose the option that seems to best meet students' needs. This principle also applies to the design of activities and the selection of exercises guided by pedagogies or teaching strategies.

Process-based grammar instruction also has its advantages and disadvantages. As an integrative approach that draws on various pedagogies, its primary strength lies in leveraging the benefits of different methods while mitigating their limitations. This approach emphasizes learning grammar as a dynamic process rather than as a set of static rules. It is particularly powerful in supporting students throughout the stages of grammar acquisition, addressing their individual learning needs, and optimizing learning outcomes and experiences. However, this approach also presents challenges, particularly for teachers and curriculum designers. Teachers must possess a high level of expertise, alongside strong observational and diagnostic skills, to design and implement process-based activities productively. As a result, only teachers with extensive experience or specialized training can use this approach flexibly and proficiently. Additionally, curriculum designers must carefully consider the stages of grammar learning to develop activities and exercises that help diagnose performance, assess progress, and provide the necessary support to ensure students successfully navigate the learning process.

Phases of Process-Based Grammar Instruction

The following is an introduction to each phase of process-based grammar instruction, including student performance as an indicator of the phase, instructional strategies tailored to each phase, and the activities recommended based on the student's learning needs during the phase.

Phase 1: Comprehension

Possible indicators of the comprehension phase include students avoiding certain grammatical structures, making incorrect choices, and errors in word order and forms. These students also struggle to understand how grammar, meaning, and pragmatics work together for more complex structures (e.g., strong active voice in Chinese Mandarin) and often misinterpret or avoid structures that are different from the SVO structure used by English.

Appropriate instructional methods for this stage may include the natural approach, cognitive-code approach, and grammar-translation activities. To facilitate students through this phase, both grammar and vocabulary should be provided, with a focus on assessing their understanding of grammatical meaning and form. Activities such as word selection for fill-in-the-blank exercises, sentence construction with given words, word reordering, and translation between English and the target language are recommended. To evaluate whether students have achieved comprehension, teachers can ask them to compare grammar points between the target language and English, and explain, paraphrase, or summarize them. Additionally, students can be asked to match grammar points with appropriate examples to further demonstrate understanding. In these activities, students should be required or encouraged to use the target language as much as possible, resorting to English only when unlearned vocabulary or grammar is encountered.

Phase 2: Memorization

Students who have understood the meaning of grammatical structures but frequently make errors in form (such as in structure, combination, or word order) are in the memorization phase. At this stage, students may use grammar passively but struggle with active application. Instructional methods suitable for this phase include the audio-lingual, direct, natural, and grammar-translation activities. Drill and repetition exercises are necessary for reinforcing grammatical structures, including sentence transformation and expansion, reading and speaking aloud, repeating after listening, answering questions, picture-based expressions, and translation. To expedite students' progression through the memorization phase, instructors can encourage analysis and comparison of grammatical structures and functions or ask students to categorize grammar points according to their respective functions.

Phase 3: Internalization

When students can actively apply grammar points but occasionally make structural or word order errors and can self-correct, they are in the internalization phase. During this stage, the situational method, immersion, silent way, and total physical response (TPR) activities are the most practical. Semi-structured exercises that involve real-world situations are recommended, including sentence completion, sentence construction, role-plays, monologues, dialog creation, summarizing, sentence correction, and pair or group activities. To support student progress, instructors can encourage them to modify their own or peers' grammatical expressions, justify their modifications and usage, and self-evaluate their grammatical accuracy. Additionally, students may be asked to anticipate which grammar points will be required in specific scenarios to prepare them for the application phase.

Phase 4: Application

When students' grammar use is generally active and correct but lacks full accuracy and appropriateness, where structural errors are rare but pragmatic errors are frequent, they have entered the application phase. At this stage, instructional strategies such as the communicative approach, task-based learning (TBL), project-based learning (PBL), and immersion activities are

the most favorable. Teachers should design free, unstructured, real, and meaningful exercises, such as task completion, mini-immersion activities, script writing, skit performances, topic-based speaking activities, daily or weekly journal writing, and comprehension and discussion of authentic listening or reading materials. To support students in this phase, teachers should create diverse situational contexts and set specific conditions that encourage students to apply and use the grammar they have learned. This will help them produce and generate a variety of language expressions using the targeted grammatical structures.

Table 1 outlines the key elements of process-based grammar instruction, encompassing both students' learning and teachers' instructional strategies as I envision them.

Table 1
Key Elements of Process-based Grammar Instruction

Phase		Comprehension	Memorization	Internalization	Application
Learning	Indicator	avoiding use, incorrect choices, errors in forms, meaning confusion or misinterpretation	passive use, frequent errors in structure, combination, or word order	active use with less structural errors, self-correction	active and correct use in forms, pragmatic errors
	Needs	knowing & understanding	imitating & repeating	digesting & solidifying	comprehending & producing
Teaching	Scaffolding	concise, clear & complete rules	sufficient drills & repetitions	semi-structured & contextualized activities	free & real communications
	Pedagogy	natural approach, cognitive-code approach, and grammar-translation activities	audio-lingual, audio-visual, direct, natural, and grammar-translation activities	situational method, immersion, silent way, and TPR	communicative approach, TBL, PBL, and immersive activities
	Exercise	fill-in-the-blank, sentence forming with given words, word reordering, and translation;	sentence transformation & expansion, answering questions, picture-based expressions, and translation;	completing, making, or correcting sentences, role-plays, monologues, summarizing, pair work or group activities;	tasks, projects, immersion activities, writing scripts, skit, topic expressions, authentic materials
	Activity	comparison, explanation, paraphrasing, summarizing, matching, ...	analyzing and comparing structures, comparing and categorizing functions, ...	modifying, justifying, evaluating, predicting, ...	comprehension and discussion; using, producing, creating, ...

This table specifically includes indicators for students' learning phases, stage-specific needs, and the scaffolding that teachers need to provide. Additionally, the table highlights appropriate pedagogical approaches and productive exercises and activities tailored to each stage of the grammar learning process. For example, in the Learning Phase of "Indicator," a student at the "Comprehension" phase will either avoid using a grammar structure or may make errors if producing it, while in the "Application" phase, a student will use the grammar form actively and correctly. Looking at the Teaching phases, a teacher wanting to help a student move from the "Comprehension" phase to the "Memorization" phase can have them analyze and compare structures.

AN EXAMPLE OF PROCESS-BASED GRAMMAR INSTRUCTION

This section uses the teaching of the Chinese Mandarin grammar "*ba*-construction" (把字句) as an example to illustrate the process-based grammar instruction. In Chinese, active voice can be expressed in two ways: the marked form (*ba*-construction) and the unmarked form (SVO). The *ba*-construction is commonly used to emphasize the result or effect of an action, thereby conveying a strong active voice.

Teaching for Comprehension

To enhance students' understanding of the *ba*-construction, teachers must first identify its specific challenges and then provide clear, concise, and complete explanations that address these difficulties. As English lacks an equivalent to the *ba*-construction, students often avoid its use or make errors when it is the only option for expressing a certain active voice. To mitigate these challenges, it is important that the *ba*-construction be introduced with examples where its use is mandatory. For instance, teachers can employ actions and visual aids to present the following examples:

- (1) 老师把书放在桌子上了。(The teacher put the book on the table.)
- (2) 老师把椅子搬到了桌子的前面。(The teacher moved the chair in front of the table.)
- (3) 她把美元换成人民币了。(She exchanged the US dollars into RMB.)
- (4) 他把“午饭”读成了“牛饭”。(He read “lunch” as “cow’s meal.”)

When presenting examples (1) and (2), the teacher can perform actions while verbalizing the sentences, allowing students to visualize how the sentences simulate the action processes. For instance, in Example (1), the teacher (subject) holds (*ba*: the grammaticalized verb) the book (object) and places (action) it on the table (position). After introducing Examples (3) and (4) using images or animations, the teacher can explain "*ba*" and the primary pragmatic conditions for the *ba*-construction: *ba* is a preposition grammaticalized from the verb "to hold" to a strong active voice marker (Liu, 2020); it is the only grammatical option when the sentence describes the action that causes the object's positional movement (examples 1 and 2) or the sentence contains both the object's pre-action and post-action states (examples 3 and 4).

Next, the teacher can guide students to summarize the syntactic structure as: “Subject + *ba* + Object + Verb + Complement” and clarify its semantic meaning: the *ba*-construction uses a strong active voice, emphasizing that the action causes a significant change to the object, such as moving its position or transforming its state from A to B. When the action affects the object but does not meet these conditions, the *ba*-construction may be interchangeable with the general active voice, the SVO structure. For example, in the sentence “我把衣服洗好了” (I have finished washing the clothes), the result of the action “好了” (finished/well done) does not involve a change in the position of the clothes, nor does it reflect a physical transformation of the clothes themselves. In this case, the meaning can be expressed using either a *ba*-construction or an SVO structure. However, in the sentence “她把美元换成人民币了” (She exchanged the US dollars into RMB), the action “换” (exchange) caused the object's physical transformation from A to B (from US dollar to RMB). Under such circumstances, the sentence must be expressed using the *ba*-construction, as the SVO structure would not be grammatically appropriate or semantically accurate. At this point, the teacher has provided a clear and explicit explanation of the *ba*-construction's semantics, syntax, and pragmatics.

Following the explanation, the teacher can provide targeted exercises to address common student errors. For example, students may be asked to complete sentences by filling in the complement part, construct sentences using specified words to familiarize themselves with the unique word order, or translate English sentences that can only be expressed using the *ba*-construction into Chinese. These exercises aim to consolidate understanding and highlight areas where students are prone to make mistakes. After completing the exercises, students can be asked to paraphrase its semantics, syntax, and pragmatics to evaluate whether they have successfully completed the comprehension stage.

Teaching for Memorization

The memorization phase reinforces the learned structure through repetition and practice. Drills involving oral sentence transformation, answering questions, picture-based expression, and translation can be employed. For example, teachers can ask students to convert SVO sentences into *ba*-sentences, using the repetitive sentence transformation to aid short-term memory of the structure. To ensure accurate expression of the “verb + complement” part, teachers may use picture prompts and the audio-lingual method. By asking questions like “他把 XX 怎么了?” (What happened to the XX?) and requiring quick responses, students practice both accuracy and fluency. To evaluate mastery of its pragmatic conditions, translation exercises can be assigned. Students translate English sentences into Chinese and mark those that must be rendered using the *ba*-construction.

These activities can transition from classroom exercises to homework, providing scaffolding that supports retention. From sentence transformation to independent translation, progressively reducing prompts encourages students to develop the automaticity of sentence generation. This gradual increase in independence strengthens retention and completes the memorization phase.

Teaching for Internalization

Internalization is achieved through contextualized activities that integrate the *ba*-construction into real-life scenarios. Role-playing and journal-writing exercises engage students in describing actions involving object manipulation, such as tidying a room or organizing a desk. For instance, in a cleaning scenario, students may produce sentences like “我把衣服洗好了” (I have finished washing the clothes) and “我把桌子擦干净了” (I have cleaned the table). These contextualized tasks allow students to practice the *ba*-construction deliberately, enhancing their ability to internalize the structure while building confidence in its practical application.

These activities are most effective when conducted a day or two after introducing the *ba*-construction, allowing students sufficient time to memorize and process the new grammar point. This delayed practice creates a review cycle, enabling students to revisit and solidify the structure, thereby promoting deeper internalization and long-term retention.

Teaching for Application

This phase focuses on facilitating students’ use of the *ba*-construction naturally and creatively. Teachers can incorporate problem-solving tasks and mini-immersion activities, such as collaboratively decorating a room and/or preparing dishes for a party, which requires students to give instructions to peers using *ba*-sentences. Following these activities, students are tasked with narrating or describing their experiences, either orally or in writing, to further refine their mastery of the structure. These activities encourage students to integrate the *ba*-construction into their active linguistic repertoire, demonstrating their ability to apply it freely in spoken and written Chinese.

The teaching process outlined above illustrates the instruction of the *ba*-construction, one of the most challenging Chinese grammar points. Given its complexity, allocating sufficient time and providing ample exercises can help students effectively complete the learning process. The learning and teaching processes may vary for different grammar points because of the structure’s difficulty and students’ proficiency levels. For simpler grammar points, comprehension can also be assisted through flipped classroom methods, and memorization may be accomplished over a relatively short period. Internalization and application exercises can be implemented during class or assigned as homework.

Quality process-based grammar instruction relies significantly on the teacher’s expertise and the support provided by the curriculum. Consistent application of this approach is recommended throughout language basic courses, especially during Semester 1, when students begin their foreign language learning. During that time, scaffolding is critical in guiding students as they build their language skills progressively and systematically.

CONCLUSION

Grammar learning is a gradual process, rather than an immediate achievement. In a learner-centered approach, it is essential for teachers to carefully plan what to teach and how to implement process-based grammar instruction. Teachers must anticipate students' learning needs, predict potential challenges and errors, establish clear teaching objectives, and determine learning focuses *before* instruction. Careful observation and analysis of students' grammar use are crucial for diagnosing their current stage in the learning process. Using these assessments, targeted exercises should be selected to effectively support each learning phase, ultimately leading students through the entire process of grammar acquisition.

Some teachers may be concerned that this process is too time-consuming and that in the high-stress environment of DLIFLC, we lack the time to carry out these steps effectively. In my experience, however, this is not the case. I find that using this process decreases overall time spent on key grammar points and increases student learning. I think of it as a redistribution of time. I spend a bit more time at the beginning of instruction for a grammar point, but then less time later in the curriculum, since students need less review of these structures.

Process-based grammar instruction is strongly recommended, as it optimizes learning outcomes and enhances efficiency. It should be aligned with the distinct phases of students' learning. During the comprehension phase, instructors should provide clear, operational, and complete explanations to ensure foundational understanding. During the memorization phase, sufficient repetition and reinforcement are vital to solidify structures. As students progress to the internalization phase, functional situational practice should be incorporated to promote deeper learning. Finally, in the application phase, communicative activities and real tasks should be employed to facilitate the practical use of grammar in real-world contexts.

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Action Research

Incorporating Free Voluntary Reading for an Engaging Curriculum

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This paper examines the impact of incorporating Free Voluntary Reading (FVR) into the DLIFLC Chinese Mandarin Basic course. The paper starts with two reasons for incorporating FVR: the documented benefits of FVR on language development as evidenced by research, and the intensity and low repetition rate of vocabulary of the DLIFLC Basic Chinese Mandarin course curriculum. This paper outlines the three phases of the reading program, provides an overview of teachers' and students' feedback on the FVR program, and does an informal comparison of test results. Despite some challenges, the program offers varied repetition of vocabulary, boosts students' confidence in reading extended texts, enhances their enjoyment of language learning, and leads to improved performance in DLIFLC reading tests. The paper supports the use of FVR as an integral component of any DLIFLC Basic course curriculum.

Keywords: *Free Voluntary Reading, Curriculum, Repetition Rate, Graded Reader*

INTRODUCTION

Krashen once stated, "Free voluntary reading, reading because you want to, is one of the most effective tools we have in second language and foreign language education. It is also the easiest and most pleasant to use" (Krashen, 1997, p. 11). In a later paper, Krashen also said, "In the last few decades, evidence from several areas continues to show that those who do more recreational reading show better development in reading, writing, grammar and vocabulary. These results hold for first and second language acquisition, and for children and adults" (Krashen, 2004, p. 1). In many ways, his words ring true today, yet the reality is that a growing number of students spend a limited amount of time reading extensively in any language. This action research project explores the degree to which free voluntary reading in the target language can benefit DLIFLC students in terms of engagement and language gains.

BACKGROUND

The benefits of ongoing, consistent reading have been well-documented in the language learning literature. Krashen and Mason (2015) analyzed the progress of seven adult English learners living in Japan using the method of free voluntary reading. The students took pre- and post-TOEIC tests (Test of English for International Communication) to track their progress. The analysis showed that the variable of “hours spent reading” was a very strong predictor of gains on the TOEIC test. The students gained a mean of 0.62 points for every hour of free voluntary reading. For example, if a student spent 120 hours on FVR, the test score would improve by 74.4 points (total score of 990). This result is nearly the same as what was reported by Nation (2014). Nation took a different approach by using corpora of various sizes and composition to see how many tokens of input would be needed to gain at least twelve repetitions, which empirically proved to be the threshold of word retention. Following Nation's analysis, it would take about 1,223 hours of reading for an English learner to reach the 9,000-word family level. This would be translated as 0.57 points gain in the TOEIC test for every hour of reading.

The effect of FVR is consistent with Krashen's theory of Comprehensible Input. Krashen said that “Free voluntary reading is an extremely powerful form of comprehensible input, and it is delivered in a low-anxiety environment” (Krashen, 2003, p. 3). It is also consistent with the theory of word repetition rate and retention. There is a clear relationship between repetition and vocabulary acquisition. Webb (2007) found that learners who encountered an unfamiliar word more times in informative contexts (e.g., reading to obtain information or reading for pleasure) achieved significantly greater vocabulary gains compared to those with fewer encounters with the given words. This is because language acquisition is exemplar-based; it is through the piecemeal learning of thousands of structures to achieve an abstraction of the regularities (Ellis, 2002). Extensive reading facilitates word repetition in meaningful contexts, and learners are more likely to engage in extensive reading because it is enjoyable.

With FVR, individuals read content that is interesting to them at a level they can easily understand. They should enjoy the reading and the reading process. Through this extensive reading, students reinforce vocabulary and grammar structures, while also immersing themselves in the target language. FVR has other names from researchers, such as “extensive reading,” “recreational reading,” and “pleasure reading.” They share the same features as summarized by Day and Bamford (2002):

1. The reading material is easy (i.e., “well within their reading comfort zone” p. 137, with learners knowing at least 98% of the words, according to Hu & Nation, 2000).
2. A variety of reading materials on a wide range of topics is available.
3. Learners choose what they want to read.
4. Learners read as much as possible.
5. The purpose of reading is usually related to pleasure, information, and general understanding.

However, in most language learning settings, students typically sit in a classroom, struggle through a challenging passage designed to demonstrate vocabulary and grammar, translate most of it, study the linguistic or grammatical structures, answer comprehension questions about it, and do drills. This “intensive reading” (vs. “extensive reading”) can be very difficult and offers only the promise of delayed gratification. Intensive reading also has benefits, but strong language programs implement both intensive and extensive readings in their curricula.

The following analysis, based on the latest edition of the Chinese Basic Course Semester I textbooks, offers an example of an *intensive* reading. This example is used to showcase the difference between the two types (intensive and extensive) and discuss the benefits each type offers.

The first key characteristic that underscores the curriculum's demands is the high density of new vocabulary. Below is an excerpt from Lesson 5, Presentation 3 (each lesson comprises three texts, referred to as presentations).

重庆在中国西南部， 是一个山城。重庆一年四季大部分是阴天， 很少有晴天。重庆的春天经常下雾。夏天很热， 最高气温 43 摄氏度。秋天常常下雨， 有时候刮风。冬天跟春天一样， 也常常下雾， 可是很少下雪。重庆的气候没有蒙特雷这么好， 夏天没有蒙特雷凉快， 冬天比蒙特雷冷， 平均最低气温 7 摄氏度左右。重庆有很多好玩的地方、好吃的东西， 是一个很有意思的城市。

The presentation consists of 146 characters, 79 of which are for new vocabulary (indicated with straight underlining), accounting for 54.1% of the entire text. Words with wavy underlining are from the lesson the students learned the previous day, consisting of 14.4% of the text. As these words have limited exposure and reinforcement, they are not yet firmly retained in memory, adding to the cognitive load. A text with over 50% new vocabulary requires significant deliberate study and cognitive effort from students.

The second notable characteristic is the low recurrence rate of vocabulary. The Semester I curriculum requires that students learn a total of 2,231 words, 47.6% of which appear only once throughout the semester.

Table 1

Word Occurrences Count of DLIFLC Basic Chinese Course Semester I Curriculum

Semester 1 Total words	2231	100%
Number of times a word appears		
1	1063	47.6%
2	399	17.9%
3–4	315	14.1%
5–6	138	6.2%
7–9	101	4.5%
10-11	37	1.7%
12 and above	178	8.0%

Due to the high density of new vocabulary, coupled with the low repetition rate, the curriculum is very intensive and demanding. Students learn under high stress; the retention remains a problem and occurs mainly through the simple repetition of old materials.

This action research aims to address the issue of low word repetition rates in materials and to enhance students' reading comprehension, motivation, and engagement through the implementation of FVR program. By incorporating this reading program, the researcher seeks to provide varied repetition of vocabulary in meaningful contexts and create a more enjoyable and low anxiety learning environment.

The study is guided by the following research questions:

1. How do students perceive the FVR program given their already rigorous and intensive workload?
2. To what extent does FVR improve students' reading comprehension and performance?

CONTEXT OF ACTION RESEARCH

Participants

The participants in this study are 18 students enrolled in the Chinese Mandarin program at DLIFLC. By week 12, the students had completed Unit 2 of the curriculum and been exposed to 765 words consisting of 601 unique Chinese characters.

On average, the students' reading performance was weaker than their listening. In the Unit 1 test, the average reading score was 79.64, compared to an average listening score of 82.43. In the mid-unit 2 test, the average reading score improved slightly to 81.14 but remained 2.75 points lower than the average listening score of 83.89. Also, the students frequently commented on the difficulty of learning Chinese characters.

Materials

The reading materials were primarily selected from graded readers. Graded Readers are “books of various genres that are specially created for learners of foreign languages” and can include new, original stories written only as graded readers or they can be simplified versions of existing works; these can be fiction or nonfiction. The word “graded” is used because “the syntax and lexis are controlled in order to make the content accessible to learners of the language” (Extensive Reading Foundation, n.d.). In other words, a class of students can all read the same story, but at different graded levels—some with easier vocabulary and grammar, others with more complicated structures. But the characters and plot are all the same. For this action research project, the books were from a series specifically designed for high school and college students. Each book aligns with grade-specific vocabulary and grammar while delivering an engaging story. The materials also include a few books for native speakers.

Table 2

The Graded Reader Reading Materials used in the FVR Program

Chinese Breeze graded readers		
Level 1	300-word level	3 books
Level 2	500-word level	4 books
Level 3	750-word level	3 books
Level 4	1100-word level	4 books
Other graded readers		
HSK* level 4	1200-word level	2 books
In traditional character	300-character level	1 book
Non-graded readers		
For native children		3 books
For native youth		1 book

*HSK is the Chinese Language Proficiency Test in China that has nine levels.

Take the first graded reader introduced to the students as an example. The book *Whom Do You Like More* (300-word level) was introduced at the end of Unit 2. Compared to the Unit 1 and 2 textbooks in the Chinese program, this reader contains 230 unfamiliar words, the majority of which are transparent words. This means components of these words are already familiar to the students, so the meaning can be easily deduced with minimal cognitive effort. For example, 打电话 (make a phone call), 好/朋友 (good friend), 有/事 (occupied) are all built from previously learned components. The graded reader introduces only a total of 52 new characters, making it accessible and manageable for students at this stage.

Additionally, some new words serve as important supplements to the DLIFLC textbook, such as 昨天 (yesterday), 教室 (classroom), 再见 (goodbye), 上班 (go to work), and 上一次 (last time). These high-frequency words were not introduced early in the existing textbook.

Using these analyses, the teaching team was confident that this book was well-suited as an effective starting point for the FVR program. The collections' carefully scaffolded content and controlled introduction of new vocabulary make them an ideal resource for fostering independent reading, sustaining progress, and supporting ongoing language development.

ACTION PLAN: THREE PHASES

Phase 1

Phase 1 represents a modified version of the FVR program. Due to the limited availability of beginner-level books and the need to effectively assess students' progress and gather feedback, the teaching team carefully selected the first book for the students. While this approach involves some initial limitations in book selection, it upholds the core principles of FVR by ensuring the material is slightly easier than their current study level, allowing students to read at their own comfortable pace. Faster readers can move on to other books at the same level once they complete the initial selection, preserving a sense of freedom and flexibility in their reading journey.

The first book, *Whom Do You Like More*, was introduced to the students after they completed Units 1 and 2. The students read the book independently during class time with instructors available for support. It took six sessions for the entire class to finish the book. After finishing the book, each student wrote a book report. To provide context for their reports, here is the summary of the main content of the book:

Fang Xin's wife, Xie Hong, went to study in America and decided to settle there and wanted her husband to join her. However, Fang Xin wanted to stay in China and develop software. During his time of solitude, a girl named Xiaoyue offered him much-needed help. Eventually, Fang Xin successfully developed the software and was ready to start his own company. Also, Fang Xin and his wife divorced, and he married Xiaoyue happily.

Table 3 shows excerpts from the students' book reports written in the target language, discussing the content and language level of the book, accompanied with English translation.

Table 3

Excerpts from Students' Book Reports about the Content and Language Level of the First Graded Reader

Excerpts from students' book reports	Translation
我觉得这本书真不错。从小的到现在，我总是喜欢看书。这本书是一样。	I think this book is really good. I've always loved reading since I was a kid. This book is the same.
虽然我不喜欢方新，但是这个故事非常好玩。	Although I don't like Fang Xin, this story was a lot of fun.
我觉得这本书为我们班阅读的能力很合适。	This book is very suitable to the reading level of our class.
故事只有四个人，谁我都不太喜欢，不过我对故事还感兴趣。	There are only four people in the story. I don't really like any of them, but I'm still interested in the story.
这个故事我喜欢，因为我常常想了“他们都会做什么？”	I like this story, because I've often wondered “What would they do?”
我很喜欢这个书，因为是有意思，而且我读懂了，可以连我的阅读。我平常不喜欢阅读，因为读的事又不有意思，又没有故事。我也觉得这个故事是喜欢种的故事。	I like this book very much, because it is interesting, and I understood it. It's suitable to my reading level. I usually don't like reading because the reading material is boring and there is no story. I feel this is the type of story I like.

The students also shared their moral perspectives on the book. Table 4 shows excerpts from their book reports in the target language, along with the English translation.

Table 4

Students' Book Reports about Their Moral Perspectives on the First Graded Reader

Excerpts from students' book reports	Translation
为什么方新没去美国？他可以做软件到处吧。	Why didn't Fang Xin go to America? He can work on his software anywhere in the world, right?
方新我有时不喜欢，有时觉得还可以。他做了很多的问题，比如他几个月后才告诉他的太太他的计划。同时我觉得如果他不想去美国，他应该不去。他的问题是他对他太太没说太多时间。	Sometimes I don't like Fang Xin, sometimes I feel he is okay. He made a lot of trouble, like he didn't tell his wife about his plans until months later. If he doesn't want to go to America, he doesn't have to, his problem is that he didn't spend enough time to communicate with his wife.
谢红是我最喜欢的人。不过，我还不喜欢她。她没有想太多方新想做什么，只想了她要什么。她当然还爱了他的先生，所以我不能不喜欢她。	Xie Hong is my favorite character. but I still don't like her that much. She doesn't care what her husband wants to do. She only thinks what she wants. However, she still loves her husband, that's why I can't help but like her.
然而小月，我不喜欢因为她知道了方新根谢红结婚了，但还做了她的事。	I don't like Xiaoyue, she knows that Fang Xin is married, but she still did a lot.
我觉得这样的故事很有意思，这个故事告诉我们，在生活中沟通很重要。 能教很多人最好把你想要的事说出来。比如故事开始的时候，两人能一起说他们想的事比较好。大概如果他们说得好，会更懂了为什么方新不想要去美国。第二我担心年轻人读以后，他们觉得找爱人是非常容易。不是容易，非常难。你找爱人的时候，最好耐心地认识你喜欢的人。我懂方新的感觉，可是我不能同意他的做法。	I think this kind of stories are very interesting. This story tells us that communication is very important in life. It teaches a lot of people that it is better to speak out what they are thinking. For example, at the beginning of the story, it would have been better for the two to be able to say what they were thinking. Probably if they talked about it well, they would have understood better why Fang Xin didn't want to go to America. Secondly, I worry that when young people read it, they would think it's very easy to find a partner. It's not easy, it's very hard. When you're looking for a partner, it's best to be patient and get to know the person. I understand how Fang Xin feels, but I can't agree with his approach.

From these comments, we can see the following from students' perspective:

1. The book's content successfully captured the students' interest and was well-suited to their comprehension level.
2. They demonstrated critical thinking about the characters' decisions and actions. They are not just summarizing the plot but analyzing the characters' behaviors and choices, indicating that they are engaging deeply with the text.

Phase 2

Phase 2 involved assigning books as homework, with students writing a summary in the target language for each chapter they read. This phase was further divided into two stages.

In the first stage, students were required to complete three chapters per week. However, the teaching team noticed a widening gap in reading speeds—some finished a chapter in 30 minutes, while others took up to 90 minutes. To address this, the second stage introduced a fixed reading time of 90 minutes per week, allowing students to read at their own pace within that timeframe. The goal was to ensure FVR didn't become another burden for the students. By shifting to a time-based approach, the program accommodated individual differences while preserving the flexibility and autonomy central to FVR.

The teaching team also designed some activities to support students' reading and encourage participation from the entire class. One such activity was "Guess Who." In this game, a student would take on the role of a character from books they had read, keeping the character's name a secret. The other students would then ask questions to figure out the character's identity. Another activity involved creating side stories for minor characters in the books and exploring the reasons behind their behavior.

These activities kept students fully engaged in their studies. Through the assigned homework and classroom activities, students integrated their reading, listening, writing, and speaking skills. Furthermore, their critical thinking, imagination, and creativity were actively nurtured and applied, contributing to a well-rounded learning experience.

Phase 3

Phase 3 of the program introduced free voluntary reading in its full form, giving students the freedom to decide whether to continue with the program, select their reading materials, and determine how much time to devote to reading, without it being a mandatory assignment.

Phase 3 began at the beginning of Semester II. While a few students opted out of the reading program, most completed all the graded readers voluntarily.

As the students progressed through the DLIFLC curriculum, their reading abilities improved rapidly. Some students reported that they could finish an entire graded reader book in a single

weekend and requested more advanced materials. A few students moved beyond graded readers and began reading books meant for native speakers. One student even took the initiative to create footnotes for two native speaker books to help his classmates.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Student Perceptions of the FVR Program

Overall, students voiced appreciation for this program. The teaching team initially was concerned that students might resist the reading program due to their already rigorous study load. However, as shown in Tables 3 and 4, students perceived the graded readers very positively despite their demanding workload. This positive reception is further evidenced by their high level of engagement during classroom activities related to the graded readers, the fact that most students voluntarily completed all available graded readers, and the requests from some students for more advanced books. Despite having studied Chinese for only a few months, students experienced a sense of accomplishment and enjoyment from completing entire books; this tangible progress boosted their motivation and reinforced their commitment to learning.

Students perceived that the FVR Program helped their reading comprehension and performance due to the following:

1. Confidence in reading extended texts and boosted motivation

Many students initially felt apprehensive about reading long texts, often finding lengthy passages in their textbooks daunting. However, as they progressed through the FVR program, they reported increased confidence in tackling more complex materials. Most of the graded readers contained between 10,000 and 15,000 characters, helping students gradually improve their reading fluency and adapt to longer texts. A few students read unadopted books exceeding 25,000 characters. This progression suggests that the FVR program can foster reading habits and reduces reading anxiety.

2. Enhanced vocabulary understanding through varied repetition

To fully grasp the meaning of a word, it must be encountered multiple times in various contexts. The following quote from students highlights this point: “When taking the ICPT and PROFIT tests, I recognized that I had learned these words before, but I wasn’t sure about their meanings in the new context.” This illustrates the importance of varied repetition in language learning.

During the reading program, students frequently inquired about the meaning of phrases in the graded readers like 不知道东西南北了. While the students had previously learned the characters, words, and grammar, they still couldn’t fully understand the intended meaning. The phrase translates to “don’t know the cardinal directions of east, west, south, or north,”

but its actual meaning refers to being mesmerized by flattery. Phrases like this are not typically covered in dictionaries or grammar books; they can only be understood through extensive reading and contextual experience.

Reading Gains in the FVR Program

As noted in the participants section of this article, the students initially demonstrated lower reading performance in unit 1 and 2 tests compared to listening. The average reading score for the first two units was 82.61, compared to the average listening score at 83.37. This is primarily due to challenges with Chinese character recognition and writing. After implementation of the reading program at the end of unit 2, the students' average reading test score remained lower than the listening for two units, suggesting a possible delayed effect that manifested later. From Unit 5 onward, however, reading performance consistently exceeded listening performance, with both modalities showing improvement. While this is promising, it is important to note that test scores are influenced by various factors, requiring more detailed analysis in the future to better understand these trends.

Table 5 shows the results of major listening and reading tests during semesters I and II, the numbers in bold indicate higher scores compared to the other modality.

Table 5

Results of Students' Listening and Reading Tests in Semesters I and II

	Listening average	Reading average
Mid unit 1	84.54	86.31
Unit 1	82.43	79.64
Mid unit 2	83.89	81.14
Unit 2	82.61	83.35
Mid unit 3	84.50	85.18
Unit 3	84.36	78.56
Mid unit 4	84.35	80.41
Unit 4	88.21	82.75
Mid unit 5	84.42	87.69
Unit 5	85.81	87.20
Mid unit 6	88.29	92.19
Unit 6	85.65	89.38
Mid unit 7	92.77	94.58
Unit 7	88.37	91.54
Mid unit 8	92.81	93.65
Unit 8	85.58	91.67
Mid unit 9	84.92	89.27
Unit 9	88.90	92.27

CHALLENGES

Developing and implementing a free voluntary reading program over time does pose some difficulties. One key challenge is the limited availability of reading materials. While the graded readers provide a convenient start for the reading program, most are at lower levels, with vocabulary size less than 1,200 words, falling behind the students' reading level after the first half of semester 2.

Additionally, there is a significant gap between these materials and the books intended for adult native speakers. Research by Nation (2006) and Laufer (2013) indicates that readers need to understand 98% of the words in a text to achieve relatively fluent reading and adequate comprehension. For instance, the popular Chinese novel *A Beijing Native in New York* contains a vocabulary size of nearly 8,000 words, meaning students would need to know over 7,800 words to read it comprehensibly, far beyond their current reading ability. To address this challenge, after most students finished the available graded readers and requested more books, the team began recommending books intended for native children and young readers. This was what the team tried to avoid at the beginning of the reading program, as the content might not appeal to adult learners and the language in children's books is often unnatural for them. Moving forward, DLIFLC may consider acquiring or developing more Chinese Mandarin graded readers and encouraging their regular use in class. This would likely benefit students.

The second challenge involves supporting lower-performing students in the reading program. Notably, two students were exempted from the program during Phase 2, and three students withdrew in Phase 3 due to difficulties keeping up with the DLIFLC coursework, choosing to prioritize the core coursework. Ultimately, all five students were disenrolled from the DLIFLC Chinese Basic course because of low academic performance. This outcome suggests that while the FVR program aligns well with the DLIFLC curriculum, it serves primarily as a learning enhancer rather than a remedial intervention. To better support lower-performing students, the program could be introduced earlier with simpler reading materials, lower word counts, and more visual aids to build student confidence and gradually improve their comprehension skills. Additionally, aligning the reading program more closely with the core curriculum would help students see direct benefits in their academic performance, making reading a more supportive tool.

The third observation is less of a challenge and more of a missed opportunity. Many graded readers include audio recordings of the transcripts. Most students, however, did not utilize this feature. Future projects could consider how teaching teams can integrate audio recordings into a free voluntary reading program to leverage gains in both reading and listening skills.

CONCLUSION

This action research describes a FVR program that can improve students' reading comprehension, motivation, and learning engagement. Through this program, students reported that they increased their language knowledge through implicit learning, consolidated previously learned

language through varied repetition, developed reading fluency and automaticity, gained confidence with extended texts, and experienced a sense of gratification through language learning even at the basic level. This action research project demonstrates that FVR can be a valuable addition to the Basic Chinese course curriculum and has potential applications to all language schools at DLIFLC.

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Action Research

Improving Vocabulary Retention by Training Students to Use Vocabulary Learning Strategies In and Out of Class

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This article describes an action research study to enhance vocabulary retention in intro-level students by implementing an optimized blended approach of combining memory-enhancing vocabulary learning strategies. In a classroom setting, 18 Russian language learners participated in a well-structured, 3-week workshop series during which they used their concrete experience to build threshold vocabulary skills by integrating vocabulary learning strategies organized into logically structured learning blocks, aimed at helping them acquire all word aspects. Under the guidance of researchers, participants integrated digital technology with traditional vocabulary learning tools and developed their own algorithm of vocabulary learning pertinent to their needs. Utilizing both quantitative ratings from survey questions and qualitative analyses of surveys, interviews, and vocabulary journal comments as well as participant output during the project, this study seeks to ascertain the benefits of this approach in enhancing student vocabulary retention.

Keywords: *Vocabulary Learning Strategies, Vocabulary Retention, Reflective Learning*

INTRODUCTION

Background

From the beginning of the foreign language learning experience, language learners are facing a never-ending task of vocabulary learning. Significant effort has been taken into discovering a wide range of vocabulary learning strategies (VLS) that students use to foster long-term retention and comprehension, which resulted in a few VLS taxonomies (Gu, 2018; Nation, 2013). Although

second language (L2) acquisition depends on word learning and retention, remembering a large number of words is often challenging for students (Nation, 2013; Schmitt, 2019). Gu (2019) argues that at the start of the language learning program greater emphasis should be placed on developing students' threshold vocabulary skills—such as word recognition, word processing, and decoding—before focusing on complex cognitive skills such as understanding vocabulary in context with authentic listening or reading.

Research suggests different methods to build vocabulary skills in L2 students. Traditional teaching methods tend to focus on input-based approaches, primarily emphasizing the introduction of new vocabulary and promoting incremental learning. However, a series of studies on output-oriented techniques emphasize that vocabulary retrieval from students has demonstrated superior long-term retention and comprehension of language concepts. Strong (2023) suggests that a blended approach that integrates retrieval practice with other effective learning strategies, such as spacing and interleaving, can provide an optimized learning environment that encourages active recall and bolsters vocabulary knowledge among language learners.

Other studies found that 'multidomain' approaches that combine different memory enhancement vocabulary learning techniques can be used to design optimized study regimens by incorporating spacing, retrieval practice, and repetitions that eventually yield enhanced retention outcomes for L2 learners (Karatas et al., 2021; Ullman & Lovelett, 2018). This approach promotes a more engaged and active learning environment, which is particularly crucial for DLIFLC learners seeking to achieve linguistic proficiency in intense language learning programs with significant time constraints.

Our action research employed the latest series of studies on "multidomain" approaches to enhance the effectiveness of learners' vocabulary learning. In this study, students under the guidance of instructors participated in structured workshops designed to model effective vocabulary learning in an individual setting. These workshops consisted of logically structured learning blocks to help students acquire all word aspects. They integrated word recognition and manipulation with repetition, retrieval, and spacing techniques, all of which proved their effectiveness in earlier research.

This study intended to answer the following research questions:

1. When students enter the Basic Russian language program, what vocabulary learning strategies do they know about and use?
2. What are students' perceptions of the usefulness of the vocabulary learning strategies they learned and practiced in a 3-week workshop?

We sought to create an optimized learning environment for Russian intro-level learners by equipping them with effective vocabulary learning skills that they could use autonomously to ensure better vocabulary retention throughout the course. The action plan follows.

ACTION PLAN

Context

This action research was prompted by the challenge that students in the Russian Basic Program face in memorizing large volumes of vocabulary, often up to 100 words per week. Such demands place a heavy cognitive load on learners that often results in superficial learning or burnout, especially since students must both recognize and accurately produce the words. We observed that beginner-level students typically lack strategies to manage this load, taking over a month to discover effective methods through trial and error, causing unnecessary stress early in the course and undermining success. To better support them, we aimed to make vocabulary learning more meaningful by introducing strategies that encourage deeper learning and more efficient use of individual study time.

The participants consisted of 18 students, aged 19 to 25, enrolled in a three-section class that began the Russian Basic Program in February 2024 and graduated in February 2025. Throughout the project, each section was led by one of three full-time Russian instructors, who remained assigned to their respective groups for the duration of the project. The project moved from goal setting to delivering the workshops.

Goal Setting

Before the project, we set clear learning objectives for the participants, stating that by the end of the project, students would:

- incorporate memory-enhancing vocabulary learning strategies to optimize their study time independently, and
- develop a plan of action with effective vocabulary learning strategies pertinent to their needs.

The objectives were well accepted by the students, as they could see their value.

Needs Analysis

On the first day of the project, students took an *Intro Diagnostic Questionnaire* (Appendix A). The survey results provided insight into word memorization strategies that students had already established (Table 1) and served as a needs assessment tool. It was based on a five-point Likert measurement that included *never*, *occasionally*, *sometimes*, *usually*, and *always* as its options. The questions of the questionnaire were originally drawn from Strategy Inventory Language Learning (SILL) version 7.0 for speakers of other languages learning English (Oxford, 1990). Then, investigators made some modifications to the questions to adjust them to the needs of the participants and added an open-ended question to probe deeper into participants' responses.

This information was used to help students apply their existing strategies more effectively and to identify strategies they were interested in exploring.

Table 1

Students' Self-Reported Usage of Various Memorization VLSs: Intro Diagnostic Questionnaire Results (out of 5.0)

Vocabulary Learning Strategy	Never	Occasionally	Sometimes	Usually	Always
Number of Responses for Each					
1. Taking notes of the new words for later look up	0	2	7	7	2
2. Keeping a neat and spacious vocabulary notebook for new, important, or difficult to remember words	2	4	5	5	2
3. Using flashcards	0	2	1	6	9
5. Repeating the words aloud	0	0	0	10	8
6. Writing the new word repeatedly and memorizing its spelling letter by letter	0	5	5	5	3
8. Writing lists of words over and over	3	6	5	2	2
9. Using associations with English words	1	3	5	4	5
10. Acting out a word	7	3	5	3	0
15. Organizing words in groups					
16. Remembering words through common expressions/idioms	3	4	9	1	1
19. Making up sentences using the words	1	2	8	6	1

Note: Only VLSs that students reported using at all are included in the table

The participants' responses revealed that most students recognized the importance of regular vocabulary review in foreign language learning. However, as illustrated in Table 1, their preferred strategies were limited and primarily involved repeating words aloud or using flashcards. In response, we incorporated structured repetition techniques into the workshop design, enabling students to adopt more effective review strategies during independent study. These included guided use of digital tools, particularly Quizlet's Learn and Test features, which offer multiple-choice questions, spelling tasks, and low-stakes quizzes to support retrieval practice. Also, given that traditional flashcards often lack contextual depth and are therefore less effective for retrieval, students were instructed to create semi-contextualized flashcards for more challenging vocabulary, as described later.

Vocabulary Learning Workshops

Our goal was to leverage a combination of memorization strategies to design practical workshops that could foster vocabulary retention outcomes. By incorporating spacing, repetition, retrieval practice, and digital tools, we attempted to design an optimized study system that students could use independently. We used the information gained from the needs analysis to inform our workshop content. The schedule of the workshops is presented below.

Figure 1
Schedule of Workshops for Vocabulary Learning Strategies

Week 1 Focus: VLSs for Initial Exposure to New Words: VLSs for word form, meaning and use	Workshop 1 Content: Russian Basic Course, Lesson 3 Diagnostic Survey Word Recognition (L1-L2, visual, auditory) Phonological form recognition Salient word parts Defining words from mini context Vocabulary Journal Intro	Workshop 2 Content: Russian Basic Course, Lesson 3 Word Recognition Labeling pictures Associations (items-their locations) Anki Cards (words in context) Quizlet features: flashcards, multiple choice, test	Workshop 3 Content: Russian Basic Course, Lessons 3-4 Spaced Repetition Quizlet writing feature Word Manipulation Word Recognition (L1-L2, visual, auditory) Listen & Do Vocabulary journal review Group Interview 1
Week 2 Focus: VLSs for Retrieval Practice: VLSs for word processing and retention	Workshop 4 Content: Russian Basic Course, Lessons 4-5 Spaced Repetition Quizlet writing feature Word/Concept Associations Oral/Visual/Imagery Anki Cards (words in context) Quizlet features: flashcards, multiple choice, test	Workshop 5 Content: Russian Basic Course, Lesson 5 Keyword method Word Bag Listen & Do Semi-contextualized flashcards for difficult words Anki Cards (words in context) Quizlet features: flashcards, multiple choice, test	Workshop 6 Content: Russian Basic Course, Lessons 5-6 Spaced Repetition Word Recognition and Word Grouping: Common features/positive/negative Word pairs/collocations Vocabulary activation: crammed stories Vocabulary journal review Group Interview 2
Week 3 Focus: Putting it All Together:	Workshop 7 Content: Russian Basic Course, Lesson 6 Spaced Repetition Word Grouping	Workshop 8 Content: Russian Basic Course, Lessons 6-7 Word chains Creating Quizlets	Workshop 9 Content: Russian Basic Course, Lessons 6-7 Spaced Repetition

Semi-contextualizing and contextualizing VLSs	Mind Maps Quizlet features: flashcards, multiple choice, test	Semi-contextualized flashcards for difficult words Vocabulary activation: crammed stories	Sharing algorithms for vocabulary study Quizlet features: multiple choice, test End of project survey Vocabulary journal review Group Interview 3
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As can be seen in Figure 1, workshop series were structured around several training regimens, addressing both the initial exposure to new vocabulary and subsequent retrieval practice.

VLSs for Initial Exposure to New Words (Week 1)

During the initial exposure phase, students engaged mostly in memorization strategies such as studying word lists, using flashcards, and consulting monolingual or bilingual dictionaries to build a foundational vocabulary base.

The key instructional goal was to raise participants' awareness of the diverse range of vocabulary learning strategies available to them, enabling them to select approaches that best aligned with their individual learning preferences and needs. The seventh-hour workshop, which preceded each new textbook lesson, was designed to guide students through a structured set of the following strategies:

- **Word recognition** focusing on form, meaning, and use
- **Identifying salient features** of the words (e.g., parts that stand out)
- **Engaging with Quizlet's Learn feature** for multiple-choice and spelling activities
- **Word manipulation exercises** using mini-contexts to explore how words function in different sentence structures and meanings
- **Specially designed Anki card sets** where learners listen to new words in mini-contexts and check their comprehension

The primary teaching implication was to have participants practice these techniques in short increments (approximately 10 minutes) during workshop sessions, with immediate feedback from instructors. This approach enabled focused practice and timely correction. Learners subsequently integrated the strategies they found most effective into their individual study routines. To support metacognitive awareness, participants also reflected on the usefulness and impact of each strategy in their daily vocabulary journals.

A key focus during this stage of the project was the strategic integration of digital tools to support vocabulary learning. Students were introduced to the full suite of Quizlet features following an initial familiarization phase, which involved listening to recorded word lists with English

translations and reviewing the words in simple contextual sentences. After this introduction, participants used the Quizlet *Learn* feature, beginning with multiple-choice quizzes that allowed them to choose their preferred question formats. They then progressed to writing and spelling exercises to reinforce retention. In addition, learners used Anki card sets specially designed by the instructional team, which presented new vocabulary in contexts that allowed students to hear the words used in short, meaningful sentences. This approach supported contextual understanding and offered opportunities for self-assessment through comprehension checks. Both Quizlet and Anki utilize spaced repetition algorithms that prioritize the review of more challenging vocabulary items at optimal intervals.

During regular classes, instructors reinforced the techniques introduced during the seventh-hour workshops. They incorporated various engaging activities, including team-based Quizlet review games, rapid-fire drills using Anki card sets, and word recognition exercises developed by the instructional team.

VLSs for Retrieval Practice (Week 2)

Following the initial introduction to new vocabulary, the focus shifted to the integration of semi-contextualized and contextualized VLS to reinforce retrieval practice. This phase aimed to deepen learners' understanding of vocabulary by embedding words in meaningful contexts and encouraging active recall.

A typical study regimen during this stage included the following strategies:

- **Word and concept associations** to enhance memory retention
- **Creating semi-contextualized flashcards** for difficult words
- **Using the keyword method** to form associations between new vocabulary and familiar concepts
- **Spaced repetition** through digital tools and personalized review schedules
- **Listen & Do tasks** designed to prepare learners for shadow listening
- **Word activation tasks** encouraging learners to use new vocabulary in speaking and
- **Low-stakes testing on Quizlet** promoting retrieval in a stress-free environment

Beginning in Week 2, the instructional design incorporated spaced repetition as a core strategy to enhance vocabulary retention. Research suggests that longer inter-repetition intervals—also known as temporal spacing—can lead to greater long-term retention compared to shorter intervals (Cepeda et al., 2008). Within the framework of this project, spaced repetition was implemented every other workshop with Anki sets containing previously learned vocabulary. In addition, participants were encouraged to develop personalized review schedules, selecting time intervals that best suited their individual learning rhythms.

Semi-contextualizing strategies were introduced during this training regimen; these were designed to scaffold learners from isolated word recognition toward more meaningful vocabulary use within limited contexts. Given that students at this early stage lacked sufficient

vocabulary to generate synonyms or antonyms, they were initially guided to use word and concept associations—including visual, mental, and aural links—to support lexical retention and recall.

As learners gained confidence with these techniques, they advanced to practicing the keyword method, which involved forming acoustic and imagery-based associations between Russian and English words. For example, students linked the Russian word *диван* (*divan*, meaning “couch”) with the English-sounding cue “*divine*”, or *спасибо* (*spasibo*, meaning “thank you”) with the familiar English word “*spa*.” These mnemonic devices served as cognitive bridges, making unfamiliar words easier to retrieve.

To further support the acquisition of challenging vocabulary, participants were guided in creating enhanced, semi-contextualized flashcards. Each flashcard included four key elements: the target word, its translation, a meaningful association, and a collocation or brief example. To promote consistency and facilitate retrieval, learners were instructed to organize these elements in a fixed layout—for example, placing the translation in the top-right corner and the collocation in the bottom-right. This structured design enabled eight distinct retrieval opportunities through vertical and horizontal pairings, allowing learners to recall:

1. The target word from the association or translation
2. The association or translation from the target word
3. The translation or association from the collocation, and
4. The collocation from the translation or association

This approach aligns with Folse’s (2017) findings on the benefits of multi-directional retrieval cues in vocabulary learning. According to teacher observations, enhanced flashcards were significantly more effective than standard ones in promoting active recall and contextual understanding, particularly for challenging vocabulary items. In addition, students were encouraged to maintain a compact vocabulary notebook that could be kept readily accessible. This notebook served as a personal vocabulary bank for challenging or newly encountered words, allowing learners to record items for later lookup and review at their convenience. This fostered ongoing engagement with vocabulary beyond structured workshops and supported self-directed learning habits.

As learners progressed through the project, they gradually increased their exposure to context-rich input through reading, listening, and speaking activities, all of which facilitated repeated vocabulary retrieval. While reading tasks were integrated into regular class sessions, the seventh-hour workshops were designed to prepare students for shadow listening—a technique aimed at improving auditory processing and fluency. To support this, instructors implemented *Listen and Do* activities, which were aimed at building selective attention. For instance, participants were given transcripts of audio passages and instructed to listen attentively while highlighting target vocabulary. This approach enabled learners to notice lexical items in real time, reinforcing the connection between form and meaning.

To promote productive use of vocabulary, students also engaged in speaking tasks that required them to create short stories using either visual prompts or vocabulary groupings from the textbook. These activities encouraged learners to link new lexical items with existing schemata, thereby enhancing both encoding and recall of new L2 vocabulary.

Toward the end of each retrieval-focused workshop, we implemented low-stakes tests using Quizlet's built-in features—including true/false, multiple choice, matching, and written response formats—to reinforce learning and celebrate student success. These assessments provided a supportive environment for learners to demonstrate progress, while also reinforcing vocabulary through varied retrieval formats.

Putting it All Together with VLSs (Week 3)

A combination of digital tools, spaced repetition, and retrieval practice in a gamified, interactive setting over the 3-week project enabled instructors to manage student cognitive workload. By gradually increasing the level of processing, this approach facilitated the transfer of vocabulary from working memory to long-term memory. This helped participants develop mental structures to hold information and build the new knowledge more effectively.

DATA COLLECTED

End-of-Project Survey

The *End-of-Project Survey* (Appendix B) collected quantitative data regarding participants' perceived effectiveness of the structured VLSs for better retention, as well as qualitative data regarding participants' experience with vocabulary journaling and their deeper insights into how they believed they could improve word memorization at the beginning of the language program while studying independently.

Interviews and Students' Journals

We collected qualitative data through face-to-face weekly group interviews and daily journaling through individual discussion threads in Canvas groups. During group interviews, we explored which retrieval practices participants found most effective, what challenges they encountered, as well as how the project could be improved. In their daily vocabulary journals, participants responded to a provided prompt and shared which vocabulary they practiced independently, what strategies they used, their emotional responses, and their goals for future learning (Appendix C). These data were intended to capture students' progression through the project, their reasoning, and personal application of recommended strategies.

Teacher Observations

To round out our data collection, we observed students' behavior during the workshops, reflecting on their progress and challenges and noting areas where they needed more practice.

We reviewed these notes as a research team regularly and used the information to guide workshop content.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Our research questions for this project were to identify the most commonly used VLSs by students when they first entered the program and their perceptions of the usefulness of the vocabulary learning strategies they learned and practiced in this 3-week workshop. As shown in Table 1, the most common strategies were repeating the words aloud, using flashcards, taking notes of the new words for later look up, using associations with English words, and writing the new word repeatedly and memorizing its spelling letter by letter. These strategies were limited and primarily involved repeating words aloud or using flashcards, which informed the content for the workshops. The following section discusses students' feedback and perceptions.

Students' Perceptions of VLSs After the 3-Week Workshop Program

The following perceptions come from the *End-of-Project Survey*, the student journals, interviews with students, and teacher observations.

Overall Perception of Usefulness

Importantly, students overall felt that the workshops increased their awareness of the vocabulary learning process and helped them retain words more effectively (mean 4.0/5.0); they also perceived that the vocabulary journals helped them understand which vocabulary learning strategies work best for them (mean 3.7/5.0). Furthermore, a thematic analysis of participants' reflective comments revealed several recurring patterns related to the usefulness of vocabulary learning strategies introduced during the workshops. Many participants reported that Quizlet's *Spelling* feature was particularly helpful for vocabulary production, alongside the practice of using new words in context through sentence creation. While the structured nature of the workshops and instructor support were widely regarded as effective, several participants suggested incorporating more opportunities for peer learning in future training sessions. Table 2 illustrates the key findings from the data collected during the *End-of-Project Survey*.

Table 2

Student Self-Reported Most Useful VLSs for Word Memorization: End-of-Project Survey Results

Vocabulary Learning Strategy	% Reporting the Strategy as Useful
Low-stakes tests on Quizlet	86%
Semi-contextualized flashcards	71%
Spaced repetition (Quizlet & Anki Cards)	57%
Sentence building and word manipulations	50%
Flashcards effectiveness	43%
Word activation	36%

Analysis of the data collected from the *End-of-Project Survey* suggest that the integration of structured memorization strategies during the workshops expanded students' use of and appreciation for these strategies. Whereas at the beginning of the workshop, students reported that they used traditional flashcards quite a bit, by the end of the workshop, the percentage reporting that strategy as useful was 43%. In contrast, there was an appreciation for semi-contextualized flashcards—custom-created by learners for difficult words, which offered multiple retrieval opportunities. Furthermore, participants demonstrated an increased awareness of a variety of vocabulary learning strategies and, according to teacher observations, regularly applied these strategies to support their learning. Among these, low-stakes tests on Quizlet emerged as the most frequently utilized tool, providing effective retrieval practice through varied question formats. In addition, students benefited from using Quizlet's *Spelling* feature, which aligns with existing research that advocates for digital learning tools in promoting autonomous and active learning. Using words in mini contexts stood out as an active learning strategy, as creating meaningful sentences not only aids memory but also enhances understanding and application of vocabulary. Many participants also viewed structured workshops as valuable, and their feedback reveals that there is more room for integrating peer study groups into future iterations.

As the primary goal of the training workshops was to progressively increase students' ability to use vocabulary in context, facilitators also observed varying levels of difficulty across different strategies. Activities such as "listen and do" and word recognition involved minimal difficulty for intro-level participants. In contrast, strategies that required active recall and use of vocabulary in speaking tasks were reported as the most challenging. In response to these observations, more tailored classroom training could be implemented to support improved vocabulary retention and address the specific challenges faced by learners.

Findings from the weekly face-to-face group interviews suggested that students perceived the project as beneficial and engaging. In their feedback, they reflected on their vocabulary learning throughout the week, highlighting the most effective strategies practiced during workshop sessions, the biggest challenges, and suggestions for project improvement. Participants valued clear instructions and instructor support, as well as a variety of vocabulary learning strategies that they could practice independently. Using this input, researchers made adjustments to the program as needed. For example, the keyword method was introduced into the workshops after students expressed a desire to associate new vocabulary with English words but found it challenging to do so independently. A recurring theme throughout the project was the request to extend its duration, a suggestion that has been considered for future iterations.

Value of Digital Tools

Our analysis of vocabulary journaling responses revealed several recurring themes among participants in response to the given prompt (Appendix C). One prominent theme was the use of digital tools—particularly the complete suite of Quizlet features—for enhancing vocabulary retention. This theme emerged in response to the question about how students approached vocabulary learning at home. Under this main theme, two sub-themes were identified: the

effectiveness of a structured learning sequence (i.e., flashcards → Learn feature → Test feature), and the value of immediate feedback provided by digital platforms. Digital tools also add the value of helping students easily do spaced repetition for reviewing previously studied vocabulary through listening, particularly when using Anki sets. One participant emphasized that neglecting spaced repetition could negatively impact long-term retention, so Anki was particularly helpful.

While students highly value and appreciate digital tools, it became evident that many lack specific knowledge or experience in using them. We addressed this initial gap in vocabulary learning by equipping intro-level students with the skills to utilize all features of Quizlet, use recorded sets of Anki cards, and engage with supplementary recorded audio materials containing new vocabulary.

Value of Student Self-Reflection and Faculty Communication

The data showed that vocabulary journals proved to be useful both for instructors and students and promoted continuous self-evaluation and open communication between them. Participants' daily entries enabled instructors to measure the number and the efficiency of the tools used by students daily during their self-study time and guide them through the process of developing their algorithms for vocabulary learning that they shared in their journals at the end of the project (Appendix D). At the same time, daily journaling proved to be overwhelming for students, and over time, their answers became repetitive. In future workshops, we would opt for weekly reflective activities.

Limitations and Recommendations

While the proposed action plan has proven effective in equipping language learners with essential tools and strategies for vocabulary retention at the beginning of the language program, the study has several limitations and areas for further development. First, the action research involved a relatively limited number of participants and was conducted over a brief period during the initial phase of the first semester. By mid-Semester II, students often struggle with retaining more complex, structured, paragraphed, or idiomatic language. Therefore, it is recommended that a second series of vocabulary workshops be conducted later in the course. These workshops should focus on advanced conceptual skills, enabling learners to develop additional strategies such as uncued recall, synonym/antonym pairing, structural reproduction, collocation usage, and storytelling. Moreover, the action plan was tailored to a specific class based on a targeted needs analysis. As such, it may require further adaptation to suit other student groups with different learning experience. Finally, the study employed a limited range of vocabulary learning strategies through listening, constrained by the project's timeframe and the lack of tools suitable for introductory-level students. Given that listening remains one of the most challenging skills at DLIFLC, incorporating additional tools and strategies could enhance students' ability to recognize and retain vocabulary in audio formats.

In response to the findings, our teaching team, in collaboration with colleagues from another Russian Department, is finalizing the development of new content for the Language Technology

Evaluation and Application product called the *Russian Basic Transcript Trainer*. This tool is specifically designed to provide sufficient audio language samples aligned with the curriculum and to address the current gap for vocabulary retention tools for the Russian Basic Course. It will be integrated into future iterations of the vocabulary retention programs.

CONCLUSION

Supporting our students with effective vocabulary learning strategies and improving their learning experience were the goals that inspired and motivated our teaching team to develop this action research. Our study suggests that an optimized approach of combining word recognition and word manipulation with other memory enhancement vocabulary learning strategies, such as repetition, spacing, and word activation, could enhance vocabulary retention at the beginning of the language program. Additionally, mastering these vocabulary strategies through concrete experience during the structured framework of workshops enabled students to create individual plans of action to learn vocabulary, which they shared in their feedback. This approach encouraged student confidence and motivation as well as created the feeling of success at the beginning of the course. Furthermore, the integration of the digital spaced repetition systems with traditional vocabulary learning tools that were used in the study represented the demands of modern learning. The findings derived from this action research may become applicable for improving foreign language word learning and retention in the DLIFLC setting.

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APPENDIX A

Intro Diagnostic Questionnaire

Instructions: The purpose of this survey is to collect information about the strategies you use when you memorize new foreign language words. Please read each statement carefully and then circle the answer that applies to you. There are no right or wrong responses to any of the items on the survey; for this reason, it is very important that you express your true opinion in this survey.

1. I take notes of new important words for later look-up.
Never - occasionally - sometimes - usually - always
2. I keep a neat and spacious vocabulary notebook for new, important, or difficult to remember words.
Never - occasionally - sometimes - usually - always
3. I use flash cards of the new words you learn and review them regularly (you can use paper cards or/and such apps as *Quizlet*, *AnkiDroid*, *Cram*, *MemMe* etc.)
Never - occasionally - sometimes - usually - always
4. I review words repeatedly over time.
Never - occasionally - sometimes - usually - always
5. I repeat the word out loud to myself.
Never - occasionally - sometimes - usually - always
6. I write the new word repeatedly and memorize its spelling letter by letter and/or write both the new words and their English equivalents repeatedly.
Never - occasionally - sometimes - usually - always
7. I think of a person, place, time of the day, physical sensations that the new word associates within my brain.

Never - occasionally - sometimes - usually - always

8. I write lists of words over and over.

Never - occasionally - sometimes - usually - always

9. I associate the spoken foreign word to an English word (keyword) that sounds approximately like a foreign word and form a mental image of the keyword "interacting" with the English translation (**keyword** method).

Never - occasionally - sometimes - usually - always

10. I act out a word to remember it better.

Never - occasionally - sometimes - usually - always

11. I visualize the new word or associate a new word with a known English word that looks similar (even though the meaning may be different).

Never - occasionally - sometimes - usually - always

12. I remember together words that sound similar and /or associate a new word with a known English word that sounds similar.

Never - occasionally - sometimes - usually - always

13. I listen to recordings of words over and over.

Never - occasionally - sometimes - usually - always

14. I label items (furniture, utensils, etc.) to help me remember foreign words for them.

Never - occasionally - sometimes - usually - always

15. I organize words in groups (mind maps/word clouds/graphic organizers).

Never - occasionally - sometimes - usually - always

16. I remember words through common expressions/idioms.

Never - occasionally - sometimes - usually - always

17. I read for pleasure in a foreign language as much as possible so that I can make use of the words I learned.

Never - occasionally - sometimes - usually - always

18. I read the text to find new words.

Never - occasionally - sometimes - usually - always

19. I make up my own sentences using the words that I just learned.

Never - occasionally - sometimes - usually - always

20. Please describe any additional strategies that you use to memorize new words.

APPENDIX B

End of Project Survey

Instructions: The purpose of this survey is to collect information about the strategies that you found effective for vocabulary retention throughout the project. Please read each statement carefully and then circle the answer that applies to you. There are no right or wrong responses to any of the items on the survey; for this reason, it is very important that you express your true opinion in this survey.

Question 1

The sequence of vocabulary learning strategies taught and practiced during the project (word recognition, word manipulation, repetition through all Quizlet features and ANKI, including low-stakes Quizlet tests, spaced learning, vocabulary activation) increased my awareness of the vocabulary learning process and helped me retain words more effectively.

- Strongly Disagree
- Disagree
- Neither Agree nor Disagree
- Agree
- Strongly Agree

Question 2

Writing a *Student Vocabulary Journal* helped me better understand which vocabulary learning strategy works better for me and develop an effective action plan.

- Strongly Disagree
- Disagree
- Neither Agree nor Disagree
- Agree
- Strongly Agree

Question 3

What are your most effective vocabulary learning strategy/strategies for effective memorizing and word retention? Choose as many strategies as you wish.

- Listening and repeating the words
- Word cards/ flashcards
- Spaced repetition through all Quizlet features and ANKI
- Low-stakes tests on Quizlet
- Flashcards for difficult words (with relevant associations, visualization, synonyms/antonyms, collocations, etc.)
- Sentence building/word manipulations
- Vocabulary activation
- Something else

Question 4

Please share any additional ideas about your experience in the project.

APPENDIX C

Example of Participants' Daily Vocabulary Journal Entries

Prompt:

Dear students, please reflect on your vocabulary learning process and create your Vocabulary Reflection Journal. You should submit your entries daily. Write your entries and answer the following questions:

1. What vocabulary did I study and for how long?
2. How did I study it?
3. How do I feel?
4. What do I do next?

Participant 1:

Feb 27, 2024 8:02pm | Last reply Mar 1, 2024 4:54pm

- Tonight, I created my own physical flashcards to study vocabulary 5 and 6. I spent 15 minutes studying.
- I used word association and grouped them based on their themes (colors, family, furniture, weather, etc.). This has helped me in the past when learning Spanish.
- I feel good about this method, and I will continue to use it.

Participant 2:

Feb 27, 2024 3:46pm | Last reply Mar 4, 2024 9:16am

- I studied vocab 4 and 5 for about 3 hours.
- I studied vocab 4 with the Quizlet function and vocab 5 I just listened to the audio on repeat and tried to guess the meanings before they said them.
- I feel good on vocab 4. It seems I missed quite a few soft signs on my vocab test so I need to work on that. As far as vocab 5 I think listening to it while doing things works well for me to give meanings to the words.
- I will try out more of spaced repetition of vocab 3 tonight to see how it works for me.

Participant 3:

Feb 28, 2024 7:46am | Last reply Mar 4, 2024 7:43am

- I studied vocal from lessons 3, 4 and 5 for about 90 minutes in total.
- I read from my textbook and practiced writing down words I struggle with in cursive in my notebook. I made some sentences with words that went together and practiced using the prepositional and genitive cases.

- I am still not retaining as much as I need to, but I feel more confident with the words I did not know before. Lesson 5 vocabulary is being retained so far better than the previous lessons, which I believe is progress.
- I need to continue studying with repetition and reading the words, to improve my vocabulary retention and speaking speed.

APPENDIX D

Examples of Vocabulary Journal Entries on the Effective Plan of Action for Vocabulary Learning

Prompt:

Please share your effective plan of action/algorithm for vocabulary learning that you developed at this early stage in the Russian program.

Participant 1:

Mar 7, 2024 3:13pm | Last reply Mar 10, 2024 1:57pm

My vocabulary survival guide:

1. Begin each lesson with listening to each word, audio can be found on Quizlet sets or in the SharePoint (Pt. 2 Textbook audio). Read each word aloud while listening to the correct pronunciation. I've found this works especially well after 2-3 repetitions.
2. Flashcards. Quizlet is the easiest method as handmade flashcards are time-consuming to make. This helps learn and cement the definitions of each word and receive immediate feedback. This is an important step after "learning" the vocab set. In later lessons, or after a period of time, the flashcards provide an excellent refresher.
3. Spelling practice. Quizlet spell has been extremely effective. Use the spell feature to practice the set in its entirety at least twice. For endings (conjugation/agreement), I have found its best to study in a group setting. Quizzing different words with sentences/scenarios helped learn to recall the endings.
4. Hard words/Phrases. I reserve handmade flashcards for words I struggle spelling or remembering.
5. Sentences/Anki. After I feel comfortable with the set my favorite way to study further is sentences or Anki. My favorite way to learn is in context or while actually practicing the concept. Anki or group sessions provide a perfect way to receive problems or scenarios to actively utilize the vocabulary set that was just learned.
6. Spaced repetition through ANKI. I have found that I best remember the concepts/words while forming sentences or practicing agreements/conjugation.

Participant 2:

Mar 7, 2024 3:09pm | Last reply Mar 10, 2024 1:51pm

Throughout my time figuring out how to study for Module 1, I've developed several strategies that work well for myself and for others as well. Studying with a group can definitely help, even studying one-on-one with someone can be of good use. With a group, one is able to compare and contrast ideas and understand the content from a different perspective. Always make use of all the resources provided, programs such as Quizlet, Reverso, and Russiandict definitely help in the long run. The spell/write feature on Quizlet helps to keep me accountable for my spelling mistakes, so that I wasn't only looking at the definitions on flashcards.

I turned on the Russian language feature in Safari so that one browser could be in Russian; this helped my brain connect words to certain features in the browser. Making word connections and making sentences or short stories is also a good strategy. Your brain will remember something better after making those connections.

Faculty Forum

When Faculty Become Learners: Faculty Perceptions of Navajo Vocabulary Instruction

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Prompted by learner feedback and by my own difficulties learning vocabulary in other languages, I reviewed the scholarship on vocabulary acquisition. On Indigenous People's Day 2024, I presented five individual lessons in which faculty/staff in attendance became learners of the Navajo language. Each lesson was designed with a unique set of target vocabulary and allowed attendees to experience different methods of vocabulary instruction. Secondly, to gain an understanding of their preferences, I distributed a feedback sheet on which participants rated their retention of the targeted vocabulary following each lesson and other comments they wished to report. Reviewing this data revealed faculty found the method requiring use of the English-Navajo dictionary to be slightly more effective than other methods, while the method utilizing participants' induction from "e-realia" was overwhelmingly viewed the most positively. Findings of this modest project suggest that effectiveness at retention and enjoyment may be orthogonal, but both may be important for DLIFLC learners. This project afforded faculty an opportunity in experiential learning, which may inspire instructors to vary their methods of vocabulary instruction. Moreover, positioning faculty as learners, however briefly, may enhance instructors' empathy for their learners.

Keywords: *Vocabulary Acquisition, Second Language Acquisition, Teacher Education, Experiential Learning*

INTRODUCTION

The DLIFLC Faculty held a professional development day in October that coincided with Indigenous People's Day/Columbus Day. As an instructor of French, I presented a 50-minute lesson on vocabulary acquisition to attendees from the Multi-Language School. I selected this topic because French learners' feedback on the End of Semester Questionnaires (ESQs) in Spring

2024 had refocused my attention on the mechanics of vocabulary instruction. Multiple learners viewed their vocabulary acquisition as a problem area. One student wrote:

We are not given vocabulary for the following day's lesson and as a result, we spend hours listening to drills that are not comprehensible input. It seems like most other language programs have a robust vocabulary learning methodology. ... We do not revisit the vocabulary learned in listening drills and it is difficult to retain whatever new vocabulary we have learned.

This view reflects a general trend within language teaching in which vocabulary is assumed to happen gradually, needing little in the way of pedagogical intervention. Only in the 2010's did scholars note, "in recent years, vocabulary has been considered to play a more central role in second language learning than was traditionally assumed" (Richards & Rodgers, 2014, p. 179). I found myself empathizing with the student's views, rooted in my extracurricular language studies of Mandarin, Farsi, and Spanish. To sensitize faculty to the challenges learners face in acquiring vocabulary, I provided attendees of my presentation the opportunity to become learners of the Navajo language, albeit within a short timeframe. I presented five sets of vocabulary using five methods that included or excluded various aspects of vocabulary instruction that align with recent research findings in cognitive linguistics. Concurrently, I conducted a simple poll to collect faculty's opinions on each method. I later reviewed this feedback and presented the findings and implications for vocabulary instruction across the DLIFLC.

Identifying and Teaching an Unfamiliar Language to Faculty

The Navajo language (*Diné Bizaad*) is the most spoken indigenous language in the United States today. Estimates of speakers range between approximately 120,000 (Endangered Language Project, 2024) to 167,000 (Eberhard et. al., 2021). Because the language is seen by some as endangered, others within the Navajo community are reluctant to recognize its vulnerability (Hozien, 2024). The Navajo language has a singular place within U.S. military history—having served as an impenetrable code for American military personnel¹ during World War II (Library of Congress, 2024). When introducing Navajo, I informally polled attendees and found that all but two had no ancestral connection to American Indians². None of the attendees claimed any Navajo proficiency. This meant that all learners would be equally unfamiliar with the target vocabulary items I used during the lessons.

Author's Positionalities

I am not an American of indigenous ancestry, but I support educational efforts to promote American Indian culture through my travels and writing (Anderson, 2023a; Anderson, 2023b). I

¹ This article is dedicated to the memory of John Kinsel, Sr. and his fellow Code-Talkers, who lent their language, culture, and bravery to the United States during World War II, despite enduring the inequities of American society of that era.

² I use the term American Indian in accordance with prescriptions of the Smithsonian Museum of the American Indian (Smithsonian, 2024).

grew up along Lake Erie in Ohio, a state in which place names commonly reflect indigenous heritage. This instilled in me a curiosity for the peoples and cultures indigenous to North America. Having no connection to Navajo culture or language, I lacked expertise in this language. After my presentation, one written comment that I received pointed out my mispronunciation of Navajo. This comment likely came from an erudite language learner who had researched Navajo phonetics during my presentation. Nonetheless, this comment offers the opportunity to acknowledge my identities and linguistic privileges and apologize if the lesson offended.

My objectives for this presentation were to provide an experiential learning opportunity for DLIFLC faculty in which they would be exposed to various methods of vocabulary instruction. Such exposure would hopefully spark critical reflection on their vocabulary instruction practices.

Falling on Indigenous People's Day, I also hoped this presentation using the Navajo language would modestly raise participants' awareness of the legacy and continued presence of American Indians in California and the U.S. generally. To this end, I started the presentation by asking participants for the names of the peoples who called Monterey and California home before us. There was no response beyond "American Indians." I then led a short activity identifying the indigenous peoples of Monterey Bay and of California and I shared some resources for participants' extracurricular exploration of American Indian cultures.

Indeed, I could have designed such activities using Esperanto (an artificial language constructed in 1887), which would likely have been as equally unfamiliar among the attendees. In some ways, using an invented language with no native speakers would have simplified the complexities that accompany cultural and linguistic contacts, particularly between historically marginalized peoples and cultures and the language and culture that marginalized them. However, doing so would have squandered teachable moments like those described above.

My Pedagogical Lodestars for Vocabulary Instruction

Every instructor has ideologies and principles that knowingly or unknowingly inform their behavior in the classroom. As a language learner, instructor, and applied linguist, I recognize the complexity of learning a new language (L2). Understanding this complexity requires a transdisciplinary approach (Douglas Fir Group, 2016). Although my research interests generally lie in socio-cultural issues of second language acquisition (SLA), I value the contributions to SLA made by cognitive linguistics. Three such works that inform my understanding of vocabulary acquisition are Barcroft's (2012) *Input-Based Incremental Vocabulary Instruction (IBIVI)*, Gibson et al.'s (2020) *Learning that Sticks: A Brain-Based Model for K-12 Instructional Design and Delivery*, and Wong et al.'s (2020) *Liaisons*, a textbook series for elementary French learners that implements Barcroft's IBIVI principles.

Taking each in turn, *Learning that Sticks* is a readable book designed for educators that brings together findings of cognitive research on learning generally—not specific to language learning. From them, it enumerates actions that classroom teachers can implement within their pedagogy. The book centers on the notion that forgetting is a natural, healthy process, and that different

techniques can help slow forgetting and enhance learners' retention. Another slim volume intended for educators, Barcroft's (2012) *IBVI*, provides strategies for teaching vocabulary in ways that align with findings of research into input processing (within cognitive linguistics). Key principles in *IBVI* include encouraging implicit and explicit vocabulary teaching, stressing the importance of input, and limiting semantic output during the early stages of acquisition (Barcroft, 2012).

One textbook that utilized Barcroft's *IBVI* principles is *Liaisons*, for undergraduate learners of French. I used it successfully as a French instructor for four years at two public institutions in the Midwest. Beyond its embrace of Input-Based Incremental Vocabulary Instruction, its grammar and vocabulary lessons, which alternate in each chapter, are contextualized within the plotline of a short film produced by the publishers. Such contextualization aligns with ACTFL's guiding principles for language learning (ACTFL, 2024). Furthermore, the focus of its exercises alternates from the film to learners' own lives and preferences, which are to be exchanged with classmates, aligning with communicative language teaching (Brigham Young University, 2024). *Liaisons* offers abundant, diversified input, and sequences learners' exposure to input prior to output (production). These elements rendered the textbook effective in facilitating learners' French acquisition.

EXPOSING FACULTY TO VARIOUS METHODS OF VOCABULARY INSTRUCTION

This presentation/article aims to expose faculty to different methods and aspects of vocabulary teaching. Each method aligned, or intentionally misaligned, with theories or research findings from cognitive linguistics, which will be explained in turn within the following section. Each lesson involved a different set of five Navajo words or phrases (hereafter, "tokens"). Tokens were selected in part from the design of each lesson and on their presence within available, free, online tools. Admittedly, my unfamiliarity with Navajo guided the selection as well. I avoided selecting only singular words but opted to include expressions, which reflects the diversity of vocabulary acquisition our learners must undertake. Many expressions across languages must be learned as vocabulary—more so than as a grammatical construction—since they may communicate a message that does not reflect the sum of their constituent words (e.g., Mandarin: "have you eaten?" and Levantine Arabic: "What's your color?", both meaning "How are you?"). See Appendix A for the complete list of tokens. For each set of tokens, I prepared slides and projected them for participants. Each lesson provided an example of what participants were expected to do or produce.

Collecting Feedback

To understand participants' perspectives of each method, I distributed a printed feedback sheet that participants completed anonymously. It contained one Likert scale question to evaluate their retention of each lesson's tokens, ranging from 0 (no retention) to 5 (good retention). After each question was a section for comments in which I instructed participants to offer any thoughts, feelings, or comments on each specific lesson. Following each lesson, I provided 1–2 minutes

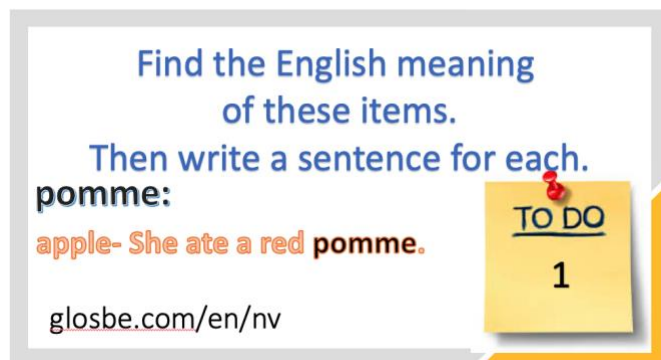
during which participants (n=18) completed this self-assessment, which I collected at the end of the presentation. I also provided separate sheets of blank paper on which participants could complete each vocabulary lesson. Participants were actively engaged and seemed to enjoy the opportunity to be language learners. If designed as an empirical, psycholinguistic experiment, more control would have been implemented regarding sampling of participants, selection of tokens, consistency of difficulty, etc. The simple self-reported polling I conducted provided only a modest dataset of participants' perspectives on vocabulary instruction. Future studies could further explore vocabulary acquisition using more robust research methods under the leadership of researchers with more expertise in quantitative design.

Five Distinct Lessons: Design and Implementation

Each of the five lessons is intended to teach participants new Navajo tokens. The design of each lesson will be described here, with participants' responses described in a subsequent section. In the first lesson, participants were shown five tokens and a link to an online English-Navajo dictionary. No title or context was given. They were instructed to find the meaning of each token using the dictionary, then to create a sentence using the token. Because we lacked proficiency in Navajo, participants could only embed each Navajo token within an English sentence. For example, if the token was "tooh," which means "river," participants wrote a sentence like, "The Mississippi is the longest *tooh* in the U.S." Blending English and Navajo was imperfect, but successfully simulated the experience of learning new, unfamiliar vocabulary and integrating it into the language they already possessed and could easily deploy. See Figure 1.

Figure 1

Lesson 1 Presented Decontextualized Items, Requiring Participants' Semantic Elaboration and Use of a Dictionary



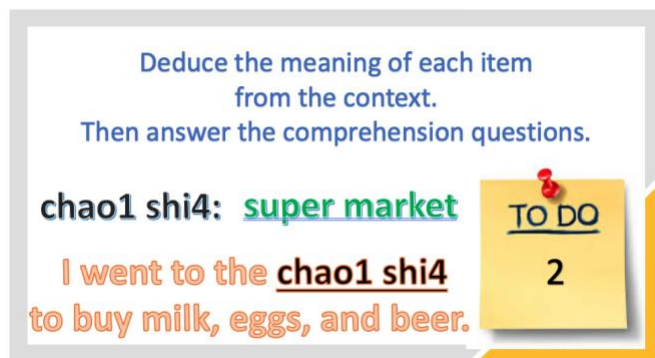
Pedagogically, the first lesson sought to facilitate participants' experience of a commonly used method of vocabulary instruction—semantic elaboration. In other words, learners embed the token within their content. While instructors may perceive such a method as facilitating learners' transfer, or application of learning into novel contexts (Parker et al., 2020), research cautions against it. According to IBIV's principles, semantic elaboration should be limited during initial stages. Barcroft (2012) found that such elaboration has a strong, negative effect on vocabulary

learning because it obstructs learning of the token's form. Semantic elaboration may be useful in vocabulary acquisition, but not during initial stages (p. 38). Secondly, Lesson 1's lack of a title, which would represent a modicum of context, also violated the principle that vocabulary instruction provides contextualization of the learning (Derewianka & Jones, 2016). Researchers have concluded that learning sticks when goals are clearly explicated (Gibson et al., 2020).

For the second lesson, participants were not given tokens but rather a dialog entitled "At Home." Five tokens had been inserted and underlined within it. See Figure 2. Participants were instructed to infer the meaning of each token. Before reading the dialog, participants were shown five multiple-choice questions (MCQs) that ranged from Inter-Agency Language Roundtable (ILR) levels 1–3 and instructed to prepare to answer them during the reading. Next, three participants read the dialog aloud. We then answered the MCQs and verified the English meaning of each token.

Figure 2

Lesson 2 Presented Contextualized Items, Requiring Participants to Deduce Meaning from a Dialog



Pedagogically, Lesson 2 embedded the tokens within a context, the extraction of which required induction. Inductive teaching requires learners to discover for themselves the pattern or meaning, in contradistinction to deductive teaching, in which it is given to them (British Council, 2024). The tokens underlined within the dialog align with the principle of explicit vocabulary teaching by enhancing the tokens (Barcroft, 2012). Some tokens were repeated in the dialog, which nonetheless insufficiently reflected the IVIBI principle that new words be utilized frequently and repeatedly within meaning-oriented input (Barcroft, 2012, p. 19). Tokens were not grouped semantically (e.g., expressions of emotion, colors, animals). Research has found that semantically grouped items are learned less effectively than those thematically-grouped (e.g. frog, green, pond, water, swim) (Barcroft, 2012). Notwithstanding, I wanted participants to experience encountering both easily-inferable and less-easily-inferable tokens, so I wrote the dialog to include both. In doing so, participants could learn experientially the importance of the IBVI principle that, "if input is largely incomprehensible, a learner is less likely to infer the meaning of a new word as compared to input that is completely comprehensible" (Barcroft, 2024, p. 24–25).

Moreover, that MCQs were assigned before the reading could constitute a sort of goal-set to guide learners through the activity, which has been identified as facilitative of learning that sticks (Gibson et al., 2020). The MCQs were designed using my knowledge of formulating such questions, which I gained in a Faculty Development workshop on the topic. Most of the questions only required participants to retrieve information, while two questions required that participants infer. These tasks correspond to ILR levels 2 and 3, respectively. In completing a reading with MCQs, participants experienced a simulation of what DLI students experience when taking the DLTP, which is similarly text-based (aural/written) with an accompanying set of MCQs.

In the third lesson, participants were informed that this lesson's tokens would be needed for a reading comprehension text entitled, "Julie's Big Day at Work," represented by the image of a woman in a business setting. See Figure 3

Figure 3

Lesson 3 Presented Items in a Context with their Meanings Explicitly Given, Tasking Participants with Writing Personalized Sentences Using Each Token

Write 1-2 sentences using each item.
Each sentence should be about:
you, your career/ life/ family/ friends.

kazi: work (v.)
I must kazi
on my presentation.

RC: Julie's Big Day at Work

TO DO
3

Next, the five tokens were displayed alongside their English equivalents (see Figure 4). Participants were then asked to write a sentence that pertained to their life using each token. Research has found that making connections to prior learning or one's experiences facilitates retention (Gibson et al., 2020). Participants then shared orally their example sentences.

Figure 4

Lesson 3's Tokens: Meanings Were Explicitly Provided to Participants

RC: "Julie's big day at work"

English	Navajo
I don't believe it	dooda sha'shin
I hate you.	nijooshtaah
good morning	yá'át'ééh abíní
I forgot	Beisénah
I love you	yóó'ánínínish'ní

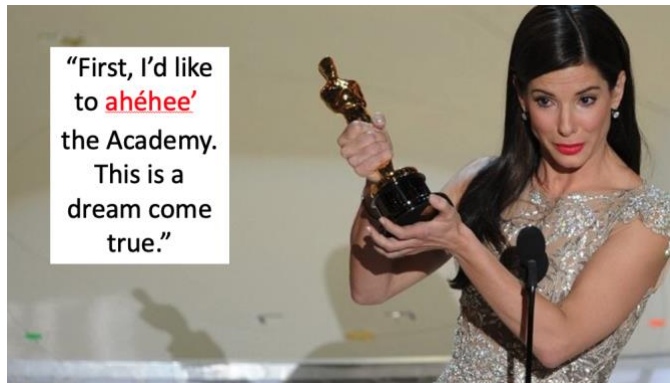
Pedagogically, Lesson 3 provided a very modest context. Like Lesson 2, it required participants' semantic elaboration. In this way learning became connected to their own lives, which is recommended if learning is to stick (Gibson, 2020). Nevertheless, as with Lesson 2, Barcroft (2012) advised against such semantic elaboration during the early stages of learning new tokens (Gibson et al., 2020). While Lesson 3 constituted explicit vocabulary instruction, which is supported by research (Barcroft, 2012), it was void of images, which research has also found to be supportive of learning (Gibson et al., 2020).

The fourth lesson took the most time to design. In it, participants were instructed to use the images displayed to induce the meaning of each word, then complete the activity. For each of the five tokens, I showed four images I collected from the internet and then modified. These images may include signs, memes, film posters, magazine covers, screenshots of news sites headlines, etc. Because of our collective unfamiliarity with (any) Navajo, I had to modify these images, using images in English then overlaying or embedding the Navajo tokens within it. For example, for the token *ahéhee* ("to thank"), I used the image of a famous Hollywood actress giving her acceptance speech after winning an Academy Award. I overlaid the word *ahéhee* atop "thank you," with the rest of her English speech visible (see Figure 5). Pedagogically, these images, despite inauthentic code-mixing, succeeded in simulating the moment when learners encounter an unfamiliar word within the target language.

Such inauthenticity resulted from our (the participants' and mine) collective lack of proficiency in the Navajo language. Facilitating these lessons in Navajo fulfilled the two objectives that I had for this training: 1) to create opportunities for faculty to experience vocabulary instruction through various methods—which required the selection of a language with which no UML faculty was familiar and 2) to honor Indigenous People's Day and potentially enhance faculty's awareness of the importance and intricacy of native cultures. As mentioned previously, the Navajo language holds a cherished place within U.S. military history.

Figure 5

A Sample of E-Realia Presenting A Navajo Token (Meaning “Thank You”) Within an English Sentence to Simulate Encountering a Novel L2 Word; This Token’s Meaning Was More Easily Deducible by Participants



Such modifications and codemixing are not necessary when I design similar lessons for my French learners. I can locate authentic images from the internet that were created in French, by/for French speakers, that feature a specific French token. I would only select e-realia that includes familiar, comprehensible vocabulary and grammar that surround the French token.

Within this Navajo lesson, I displayed the four images using the word “to thank” consecutively, but intentionally manipulated the images and the order of their presentation. For example, if I wanted to increase the difficulty of learners’ deduction of “thank you,” I would first show Figure 6, in which the meaning of the token is much more ambiguous than in Figure 5’s image of a thankful actress.

Figure 6

A Sample of E-Realia Presenting a Token (That Means “Thank You”) Whose Meaning is Less Easily Deduced by Participants



Pedagogically, these images are *realia*, or authentic materials created by and for native speakers/target community members, which have been used within U.S. foreign language classrooms for

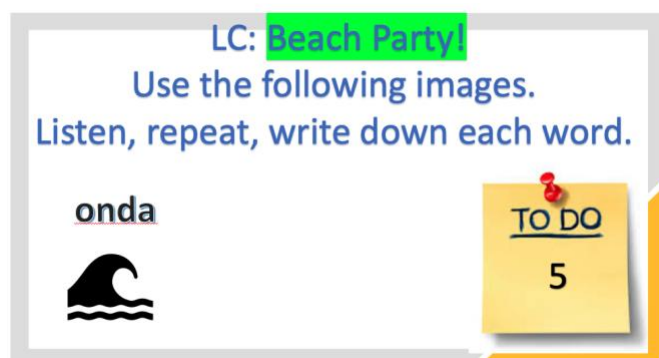
almost a century (Pfeffer, 1937). This internet-based realia can be called “virtual realia” or « e-realia ». I hoped to facilitate for attendees the experience of inferring tokens’ meaning from easy and enjoyable examples, but also difficult, unsettling examples. I did this to convey to faculty that, 1) attentiveness is needed when selecting e-realia for learners, and 2) a single image may not be sufficient, or even misleading, when inferring a token’s meaning. To do so, I ordered harder, more ambiguous images before easier, less ambiguous images, which violates IBIVl’s principle that activities progress from less to more demanding activities (Barcroft, 2012, p. 38).

This lesson enacts many points identified in cognitive science as facilitative of retention. If learning is to stick, researchers urge that images and realia be used to reinforce vocabulary learning (Barcroft, 2012). Moreover, the use of images reinforces the connection between the token and the concept (Gibson et al., 2020). While no overarching contextualization was present, one could argue that each image provided its form of context. Each set of images offered a gamification aspect to this lesson, piquing participants’ curiosity and requiring their engagement. Exploiting curiosity is a tool of instructors that facilitates learning that sticks (Gibson et al., 2020). The lesson also sought to avoid student boredom, which can develop in the language classroom from a dearth of stimuli (Larson & Richards, 1991).

For the fifth lesson, participants were instructed that the tokens would eventually be used in a listening passage called “Beach Party!” Participants viewed the displayed image and listened to the token being spoken (by me). Then, the written form of the token appeared on the screen. Next, participants were to repeat the token aloud, then write it on their paper. Figure 7 shows the example, in which participants viewed the image of a wave, heard me speak the word “onda,” then viewed the written word “onda” on the screen. They then repeated it chorally, then wrote it themselves.

Figure 7

Lesson 5 Presented Items in a Context, Gradually Focusing Participants’ Attention on Tokens’ Meaning, Pronunciation, and Spelling



This process was repeated for each token. Figure 8 provides an example token from Lesson 5.

Figure 8

Sample Token from Lesson 5: Participants Saw the Images, Then Heard the Token, Then Saw the Token



Pedagogically, this contextualized lesson offers the advantages of using images (Gibson et al., 2020), but more importantly follows IBIVl's principles of allowing learners' cognition to focus exclusively on mapping a token's concept ("hello") with its phonetic and orthographic forms (Barcroft, 2012, p. 29). What's more, it follows IBIVl's prohibition on copying or repeating tokens without having access to their meaning (Barcroft, 2012). Finally, the lesson also benefitted from the brain's attention to novelty, which only follows emotion within the order of phenomena to which our brains attend (Gibson et al., 2020). Creativity, the twin sister of novelty, has also been found to be generative of SLA (Jones & Richards, 2016).

PARTICIPANT FEEDBACK

Participants' reactions to each of the five lessons were measured in the form of written feedback they provided via the questionnaire provided. Feedback from participants (n=18) on each lesson is shown in Table 1. Both the frequency and averages of Likert scores are displayed. In addition to scoring their retention, participants were asked to write any comments on each lesson. Most lessons among most participants went unremarked upon. Nonetheless, comments were coded as positive or negative about the lesson's method, or as unrelated to the method. This third code was attributed to comments describing the length or character of the tokens (e.g., "easiest due to concrete terms"). Conversely, self-descriptions were counted within the lesson's method (e.g., "I'm good at memorizing words" or "I'm bad at this"), interpreting the lesson as making the participant feel that way. An overall net score was calculated to assess the nature of the aggregated comments. Unrelated comments were excluded from this calculation.

Table 1

Results of Participant Feedback on Each Lesson (0=no retention, 5=good retention)

Lesson	Avg	0	1	2	3	4	5	Pos. Comm.	Neg. Comm.	N/A Comm.	Net Comm.
1	2.38	2	4	1	7	4	0	8	4	2	+4
2	1.44	4	5	7	1	1	0	3	9	1	-6
3	1.27	6	4	5	3	0	0	3	8	2	-5
4	2.16	1	5	5	3	3	1	12	0	2	+12
5	1.65*	3	5	5	1	2	0	5	5	1	0

*In calculating this average: one participant selected both 1 and 2. I opted to count the higher. Second, only 16 out of 18 participants scored their retention on Lesson 5. The average was adjusted accordingly.

DISCUSSION

Two primary findings emerge from the participant feedback. First, Lesson 1 was identified as the most effective lesson for vocabulary retention. Lesson 1 required participants to use the Navajo-English dictionary and create their novel sentences. Nevertheless, Lesson 4 was overwhelmingly seen the most positively, according to participants' comments. Lesson 4 required induction from e-realia. Conversely, the least effective lesson was Lesson 3, in which tokens and their meanings were simply given. According to the comments, the most negatively viewed lesson was Lesson 2, which involved a dialog.

Findings suggested that a substantive difference may exist between what participants perceived as effective on one hand and enjoyable on the other. This suggests that participants, like their students, may find some lessons more enjoyable but not necessarily most helpful with vocabulary retention; both merit our attention. First, Lesson 1, which required participants to use a dictionary, was viewed as the most effective. Usage of both monolingual and bilingual dictionaries brings unique affordances to the language classroom but also brings unique limitations. White's (1997) thorough, albeit dated, article in *Dialog* detailed each, but did not mention the time required in using dictionaries, even online ones (White, 1997). DLIFLC instructors know well how critical time is when advancing learners from zero to even intermediate proficiencies, particularly within a 36-week program. As for enjoyment, Lesson 4's use of e-realia was deemed most enjoyable. During this lesson, participants viewed slides with images in which tokens' meanings were obvious and some were ambiguous. Participants voiced their guesses as to the meanings, meaning that their curiosity was engaged.

Language learner enjoyment, like language learner anxiety, has been studied extensively (Shen, 2021). The finding that e-realia was experienced positively comports with recent research on English as a foreign language learners who appreciated digital realia in vocabulary acquisition (Castro, 2022). Findings thus align with empirically-informed recommendations that pedagogy incorporate activities that boost enjoyment and minimize boredom (Li, 2022).

The bifurcation of efficacy and enjoyment signals that both should be prioritized as pedagogical goals. Recent research has identified the existence of a “positive feedback loop” between enjoyment and gains in performance (Dewaele & Li, 2021). This positive correlation between learners’ enjoyment and enhanced performance has also been found to enhance instructors’ enjoyment (Yang et al., 2023). Thus, enjoyment is not superfluous to language learning, but critical to learners’ investment in their language learning. Instructors could experiment with various approaches and activities and their impact on learners’ enjoyment via modest action research projects. Taking the modest findings of this project as a starting point, learners may similarly enjoy (e-)realia, deductive approaches such as the PACE Model (Adair-Hauck & Donato, 2002), or exercises requiring higher-order thinking rather than lower order ones (Brehm, 2025).

Activities targeting enjoyment may also facilitate learners’ investment in language learning. Moving beyond the binary of motivated and unmotivated, the concept of investment sees language learning as mediated by a constellation of socio-cultural factors. These include learners’ identities, their various ideologies about the L2 and L1, cultures, the learning environment, etc., and the capital they perceive they are, will, or could acquire from SLA (Darvin & Norton, 2015). What’s more, repeated instances of enjoyment, combined with gains in self-efficacy, may help facilitate the development of a learner’s identity as a legitimate L2 participant (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Just as Nation (2001) argued for a language course to balance input, output, language-focused learning, and fluency-development, so should instructors aim to blend efficiency with enjoyment.

Turning to outcomes regarding the worst-perceived methods, the least effective method was identified as the lesson that tasked participants with writing novel sentences using tokens that were explicitly provided both in English and Navajo. Interestingly, explicit and implicit vocabulary instruction together are supported by research (Barcroft, 2012). Despite being tasked with semantic elaboration, this method seems antithetical to active learning strategies, which require learners’ engagement *beyond* reading, memorizing, or listening (Harvard University, 2024). This finding, together with the previous, suggests that task-based activities or activities that involve creation or invoke curiosity seem most facilitative of vocabulary acquisition. This implies then that pedagogy should engage learners in activities requiring higher-order thinking for two reasons: not only are they perceived as the most enjoyable method, but they are also the opposite of methods perceived as the most ineffective.

These findings did not result from an empirical study but rather a modest action research project. Critically, it evaluated perceptions of effectiveness rather than effectiveness itself. Both concepts merit exploration. If replicated with greater empirical rigor, a future study would require more expert design, more precise participant sampling, a singular focus on a principle under investigation, involving tighter selection of materials and administration of exercises. Specifically, more attention would be paid to the selection of tokens to ensure their consistency (length, difficulty, etc.). In short, this project hopes to inspire subsequent projects.

To test these findings amongst faculty and/or DLIFLC learners, future work could explore the various approaches within the classroom. Both quantitative and qualitatively-oriented projects

could be elucidating. Purely experimental exercises could be implemented within the Institute. Such work must be mindful of the differences that exist between faculty and learners in terms of demographic differences (age, educational attainment, cultural background, etc.). Notwithstanding, it is worthwhile to not neglect faculty's views on what constitutes enjoyable, effective vocabulary instruction. Instructors' preferences and ideologies inevitably find their way into the classroom, as do their identities (Robertson & Yazan, 2022) and emotions (Yang, 2024). In short, instructors play pivotal roles in how learners invest in their language learning (Anderson, 2022).

Qualitative projects could examine what learners value in vocabulary instruction and what they enjoy in language learning generally. Learners' enjoyment will never be given free reign in our institution, but to ignore learners' enjoyment and preferences is to do so at our peril. Departments could design modest projects exploring learners' preferences in instruction, similar to the one discussed here (pending appropriate approvals). Findings generated therein could help guide curricular and materials design. More generally, an empirical understanding of how DLIFLC learners perceive vocabulary acquisition, and how they go about learning vocabulary (how, with which tools, when, in which circumstances, etc.) would be insightful. Learners of different languages likely have very different methods and perspectives. Data-based observations and findings regarding vocabulary acquisition could prompt evaluations of current practices and the success thereof. A distinct tract of exploration could examine realia, focusing on how it facilitates learners' identities as legitimate users of the language, as well as learners' preferences for/against using authentic materials relative to that which is pedagogically created.

Finally, future work should also focus on DLIFLC instructors themselves. Anecdotally, my positioning of instructors as learners seemed effective in raising instructors' awareness to the importance of and possibilities within vocabulary instruction. Personally, I believe that my language teaching skills are constantly sharpened by my extracurricular participation in additional language courses beyond the one I teach (Anderson, 2024). Research has demonstrated the benefits of adult learners learning two new languages simultaneously, particularly their excelling in information management (Huang et al., 2020). Beyond this, studying multiple languages makes me grow intellectually and inter-culturally. DLIFLC scholars have cited the benefits of promoting among learners a growth mindset (Murtic, 2021). Instructors could model developing a growth mindset through undertaking additional language study. Of course, the Institute could take measures to facilitate such activity. For example, DLIFLC could not only continue to offer faculty the Department of Defense Education Benefit, which reimburses the costs of a job-related course, but also incentivize instructors to seek such opportunities. Ultimately, the institution and departmental leadership must decide what kind of instructors its learners need (Hill et al., 2020).

CONCLUSION

The fifty-minute training activity I led exposed attendees to various methods of vocabulary instruction. Through this exercise in experiential learning, instructors became learners of some

Navajo vocabulary. The complexities and subtleties of the second/foreign language classroom are experienced differently from the learners' desks than from the instructor's chair. These lessons served as an invitation for the faculty to renew their relationship to SLA by endeavoring to learn a new language. Even modest amounts of an additional language beyond those with which they are familiar may kindle greater empathy among faculty towards their students and renew their sense of activities that work, tedious activities, etc.

Positioned as learners, albeit for a short duration, faculty attendees self-assessed their retention of Navajo tokens in five distinct lessons and provided comments of their choosing. They identified as the most effective format for vocabulary retention the lesson requiring English-Navajo dictionary work. It also identified the lesson utilizing e-realia as the method with the most positive comments. These findings suggest firstly that vocabulary acquisition matters. Assumptions that vocabulary acquisition unfolds in some automatic way seem implausible. Secondly, instruction that tasks learners with either actively doing something or piquing their curiosity seems preferable to those in which learners are positioned to be passive. Thirdly, there is great potential in using authentic (e-)materials, or (e-)realia, if not for its effectiveness, for the enjoyment it affords.

Findings from this modest project suggest that vocabulary instruction be done with intentionality and in alignment with recent research. For keen instructors or departments, actionable steps would be to examine learners' relationship to vocabulary. Reviewing current pedagogies of vocabulary instruction is especially needed if either the instructors identify learners' vocabulary as insufficient at their given level or learners themselves flag vocabulary acquisition as a weakness in the ESQ's. In such cases, departments should pay particular attention to the quantity and quality of current practices regarding implicitness/explicitness, induction/deduction, (e-)realia and images/pedagogically-created materials, ambiguousness/obviousness, and (higher/lower) order thinking embedded in subsequent activities.

At a minimum, additional materials could be created that target vocabulary acquisition. Opportunities abound for collaboration between learners and faculty to create materials: one could envision unique projects being assigned to mentees or to Special Assistance students in which a list of challenging vocabulary is amassed and divided amongst students. Under an instructor's supervision, the learners could create material (e.g., slides using images/e-realia they assemble, book widgets, Canvas projects, etc.), which could be retained by the department for future use with future cohorts/other classes. In this way, learners would be actively contributing to or co-creating materials. This would be a nice legacy for future generations.

For instructors who decide to revisit their vocabulary instructional practices, a wealth of research exists beyond sources here cited which focuses on input processing (Barcroft, 2024) and cognitive issues of SLA on one hand and investment (Darvin & Norton, 2015) and socio-cultural issues on the other. DLI faculty and staff should neglect neither, recognizing that SLA requires an ecology of factors (Douglas Fir Group, 2016). Once again, instructors with a growth mindset could gain invaluable insights into teaching through their extracurricular study of an additional language.

Ultimately, a more empathetic faculty, i.e., more aware of SLA theories and research findings, will be a more effective faculty.

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APPENDIX A

Tokens by Lesson

Lesson 1	
horse	lin
mountain lion	náshdóitsoh
condor	jeeshóó'
tree	t'iis
river	tooh
Lesson 2	
I need ...	yinízin
shut up	nizghée'
come here	hágo
wait	át'ah
maybe	daats'í
Lesson 3	
I don't believe it	dooda sha'shin
I hate you.	nijooshlaah
good morning	yá'át'ééh abíní
I forgot	Beisénah
I love you	yóó'áníinísh'ní
Lesson 4	
stop!	ni'níftláád
thank you	ahéhee'
bon appétit! (have a good meal)	Nizhónígo adíiyíł
please	ąą' ha'íi baa naniná
good day!	Nizhónígo ch'aanidíinaat
Lesson 5	
how are you?	ąą' ha'íi baa naniná
hello	yá'át'ééh
what's your name?	dóó haash yinilyé?
where is the toilet?	ańda'aldáhíshą'?
I don't know	doo shił bééhózin da

Faculty Forum

The Power of Expectations and Implications for DLIFLC Teachers and Students

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This paper explores the crucial role that instructors' explicit and implicit expectations play in students' learning and performance and their transmission from the instructor to students in the classroom. Strategies to prevent or interrupt the damage that low expectations may cause are recommended to foster more inclusive classrooms.

Keywords: Explicit Expectations, Implicit Expectations, Student Performance

INTRODUCTION

On the final day of every Instructor Certification Course (ICC), Faculty Development (FD) facilitators traditionally provide a “tips from the field” session: Military Language Instructors (MLIs) attending the course are invited to form a panel for the new civilian instructors to offer advice and answer questions based on their experience as former DLI students. I recall one of these sessions when the MLIs urged teachers not to form hasty judgements of their students' language learning abilities: teachers may develop opinions of how students will do in the course early on and may then inadvertently communicate subtle cues and unspoken expectations to students about their performance. These MLIs mentioned from their own experience as DLI students that such expectations are soon internalized by learners on the receiving end, reducing or raising their motivation and self-belief, and affecting their performance. What these MLIs were saying about the power of expectations resonated with me and is the impetus for this article.

How much influence do the expectations of teachers have on a student's learning and performance? Research illustrates the transformative impact of high expectations on student achievement (Robson, 2022). But what happens when expectations are low? And how can we as DLIFLC educators leverage the power of expectations to maximize student success? This article will cover these points:

1. Research Insights: Explore how teachers' explicit and implicit expectations play a crucial role in students' learning and performance, backed by research.
2. How expectations are transmitted from teacher to student in the classroom.
3. Strategies for how educators can prevent or interrupt the damage that low expectations may cause, fostering more inclusive classrooms.

THE IMPACT OF EXPECTATIONS ON STUDENTS—HIGH OR LOW

How much influence do the expectations of teachers have on a student's learning and performance? The answer may be found in a fascinating study from the 1960s that forever altered our understanding of the power of expectations—and still rings true today.

The researchers Rosenthal and Jacobson in 1968 informed a group of elementary school teachers that some of their students had been identified as potential high achievers who would blossom over the academic year. In reality, these students were chosen at random. And yet, by the end of the year, these randomly selected students had made significantly more progress than their peers (Rosenthal & Jacobson, 1968).

This phenomenon became known as the Pygmalion Effect, illustrating the transformative impact of high expectations on student achievement. But what happens when expectations are low? And how can we as educators leverage the power of expectations to maximize student success?

The Pygmalion Effect: The Power of High Expectations

The term "Pygmalion Effect" originates from Greek mythology. Pygmalion, a renowned sculptor, fell in love with a beautiful statue he had carved out of ivory. His deep affection for his creation was so profound that the statue transformed into a living being. In an educational context, the Pygmalion Effect refers to the phenomenon where students rise to meet the high standards and expectations set by others (Timmermans et al., 2018).

The Golem Effect: The Negative Impact of Low Expectations

Conversely, the Golem Effect demonstrates the negative consequences of low expectations. Named after the Golem from Jewish myths, a creature made of unfinished and raw clay which eventually became a violent monster, this effect highlights how students may underperform when little is expected of them. According to the study by Timmermans, Rubie-Davies, and Rjosk (2018), when teachers held low expectations for students, they not only reacted more negatively towards those students, but the students themselves also performed worse academically. This study demonstrates a classic example of the "Golem Effect" where low expectations lead to a self-fulfilling prophecy.

EXPECTATIONS ARE EVERYTHING

The evidence of the impact of teacher expectations on student learning is both broad and deep. John Hattie (2009) analyzed over 800 studies on teacher expectations as part of the Visible Learning database and found that students' achievement tracks closely with teacher expectations. In some cases, race, ethnicity, language proficiency, disability, gender, and even appearance can subconsciously influence the expectations of a student. John Hattie's Visible Learning analysis, which includes a vast number of studies on student achievement, highlights the significant impact of teacher expectations on student learning. His research demonstrates a strong correlation between teacher expectations of student learning and student achievement, suggesting that teachers' beliefs about student ability can influence their performance. The key takeaway is that teachers should have high expectations of all students and avoid labeling them. Hattie emphasizes the importance of teachers believing in the potential of all students, regardless of their past performance or perceived abilities.

HOW EXPECTATIONS ARE TRANSMITTED FROM THE TEACHER TO THEIR STUDENTS IN THE CLASSROOM

David Robson (2022) mentions that the most obvious means would be overt praise or criticism; we all know that encouragement can be helpful and criticism hurtful. But someone's expectations are also evident in the goals they set, which can affect performance. If a teacher continually chooses more ambitious tasks for their favorites, that provides further learning opportunities, while the rest of the group misses out on those opportunities.

Other signals may be subtler. Imagine you are asked a question and make an error while answering. If someone has high expectations of your abilities, they might rephrase their question or talk you through the problem. Someone with lower expectations, however, may simply move on, subtly hinting that they don't think you are going to learn from the mistake (Brophy & Good, 1970).

Perhaps most important are the nonverbal cues. People are less likely to smile, and they make less eye contact, if they have lower expectations of you; for example, small differences in interaction that are nevertheless easily perceived by children and adults. Even silence can be important. If someone leaves a short pause after you have given a quick response to a question, it can give you a further chance to expand on your ideas and refine your thinking.

However the expectations are communicated, the research shows that they are soon internalized by the people on the receiving end, reducing or raising their motivation and self-belief, and affecting their performance (Robson, 2022).

STRATEGIES FOR HOW EDUCATORS CAN PREVENT OR INTERRUPT THE DAMAGE THAT LOW EXPECTATIONS MAY CAUSE, FOSTERING MORE INCLUSIVE CLASSROOMS

So, how might we prevent or interrupt the damage that low expectations cause, thereby fostering more inclusive classrooms? The Australian educator Christine Rubie-Davies (2015) has researched how high-expectations teaching is manifested in daily practice:

- Recent research has found that the **effect of expectations is the most prominent at the beginning of the school year**. This is because students have no preconceived notions and seek support on what is realistically achievable. If you give students affirmation that they can do well before they start doubting themselves, it allows them to internalize this belief, which becomes a huge advantage. While most of the research on the impact of teacher expectations exists at the elementary and secondary school level (K–12), some research has explored the impact of professors' expectations on student motivation and study skills in university settings. In higher education, research has suggested that student variables, such as previous academic achievement, motivation, study skills, and discipline in carrying out academic activities, are relevant and a source of expectations (Li & Rubie-Davies, 2018). The bottom line is that instructor expectations significantly impact student achievement and educational outcomes at all levels. These expectations influence academic performance, students' sense of belonging, motivation, and the overall learning experience.
- As teachers, try to **think about the ways your behavior may be transmitting your expectations to your students**, both verbally and nonverbally. A reflective teaching tool that might be useful for this is a teaching journal, an ongoing account of your teaching experiences with a particular class, recorded in a notebook or electronically. It can include summaries or brief notes of what happened during a lesson, any classroom incidents, accounts of successes or problems pertinent to a lesson. For example, you might focus on class dynamics, what you have noticed about your students in terms of their participation and behavior in interactions, how you interact with different students, questioning techniques that you use and how students respond and how you react, strategies you have tried that seemed to motivate or shut down the various students. Journal keeping clarifies one's own thinking and allows one to become more aware of how you are interacting with your students and explore other ways of working with them that may be more effective.
- You may not be conscious of your body language or tone of voice, so it could be helpful to **ask a trusted colleague to observe your interactions with students**. To set up such an informal peer observation process, meet with your peer observer to discuss the observation goals, in this case, a focus on class dynamics: For example, ask your observer to make objective notes on students' engagement, questioning techniques, your verbal and nonverbal interactions with individual students, how students respond and how you reacted to the various students, quality of small group work, do all students have opportunities to participate, what you did to try and engage quiet students, what did and didn't work, what you might change or do to improve the class dynamics. In the post-observation meeting, the

observer uses the notes collected during the lesson to lead the discussion and to refer to for evidence for the different points being discussed.

- Another option is to **record yourself interacting with your students** using MS Teams.¹ You can later watch yourself and observe your actions, interactions with students, and classroom management strategies. You can analyze how students react to your teaching, both visibly and nonverbally, and identify areas that need further attention.
- **Incorporate questioning techniques to make the class more inclusive**, so everyone has regular opportunities to participate. Asking questions to the whole class and then calling on students who raise their hands can become a problem when the same students routinely answer, and other students are quiet. Another way is to train your students to use the Cold Calling strategy, randomly calling on students to increase student engagement and not letting them sit passively. Cold Calling essentially means *no hands up and no calling out*; the teacher chooses the students who will respond and establishes the routine that this could be anyone for any question. You ask everyone the question, pause, giving them thinking time, and then warmly invite someone to give their answer or share their thoughts. It's a strategy promoted strongly by Doug Lemov (2021) and incorporates a five-step process:
 - 1) Ask the question: Ok, everyone, what is the main idea in the reading passage?
 - 2) Giving thinking time: (no hands up, no calling out; scan the room as the students think, keeping the focus).
 - 3) Select someone to respond: So, John, what were you thinking? (warm, invitational). "I think..."
 - 4) Respond to the answers. Yes, that's right. Can you add anything? "Yes,"
 - 5) Select and call on another student: Great. And Sarah, what do you think?

Using the Cold Call questioning strategy, all students anticipate being asked; they think and engage; it's the norm. Students need to be trained in using it from early in the course so they know what is expected of them. It's safe, friendly, supportive, and inclusive. If students are wrong or not sure, the teacher finds out and can respond, offering appropriate support or instruction. I have observed the Cold Call questioning strategy used by a few DLI teachers, and it seemed to work well. These teachers wrote each student's name on an index card and rotated through them when calling on students to answer questions, so all students had opportunities to respond. You can also use free online tools that allow you to input your students' names and then generate a random selection. Wooclap: offers a visual wheel that students can see when someone is called on. Random Word Generator: Provides a simple name generator. Classroom screen: has a widget that can be used to select students at

¹ DLIFLC guidance allows a teacher to record class as long as the instructor notifies the students (and anyone else who might be in attendance at that moment) and there are no objections. The instructor must ensure that the recording is stored on Teams/SharePoint with no share privileges so that it can't be downloaded by anyone. Once the need for the recording is ended, the file must be erased.

random. Wheel of Names: A popular website for creating and using a random name picker wheel.

- **Think-Pair-Share** is a collaborative learning strategy where students first individually think about a question, then discuss their ideas with a partner, and finally share their findings with the whole class. This approach encourages active participation and gets all students engaged. Here's how it works:
 - 1) **Think:** Students are given a question and are instructed to individually think about their answers.
 - 2) **Pair:** Students are then paired up with a classmate and discuss their responses, sharing ideas and clarifying their understanding.
 - 3) **Share:** Finally, pairs or selected individuals share their findings and insights with the entire class, fostering a larger discussion facilitated by the teacher.
- **Capitalize on small group work.** A typical DLIFLC class is composed of six students, so small group work would entail students working in pairs or groups of three. To manage small group work more inclusively so all group members are engaged and participating, you can try several strategies: assign roles within groups, actively monitor interactions, use structured discussion techniques, provide opportunities for individual contribution, and explicitly teach collaborative skills. Doing purposeful group composition can help ensure that everyone feels valued and has a chance to participate meaningfully.

There is no one best way of grouping or pairing students to ensure that all maximally participate. The key is knowing your students well, their personalities, how they interact, their proficiency levels, and so on. Sometimes you may deliberately create groups with a mix of abilities, personalities, and learning preferences to encourage mutual support and diverse perspectives. Or you may find that grouping the dominant students and the quieter students in another group works better. Depending on students' personalities and interactive dynamics, sometimes pairing a stronger student with a less proficient student can work. You might try different options to see what works most effectively with your students.

- **Explicit Role Assignments.** Designate specific roles within each group, such as facilitator, notetaker, and timekeeper, to ensure everyone has a defined responsibility.
- **Structured Discussion Protocols.** Utilize techniques like "round robin," where each student shares their thoughts in turn, or "think-pair-share" to give everyone a chance to formulate ideas before sharing.
- **Active Monitoring.** Regularly circulate the room to observe group dynamics, identify potential issues, and provide timely support to struggling groups.

- **Direct Feedback.** Provide specific feedback on group interactions, highlighting positive collaborative behaviors and addressing instances of dominance.
 - **Teach Collaborative Skills.** Devote time to explicitly teaching students how to listen actively, respect different viewpoints, build consensus, and provide constructive feedback.
 - **Positive Reinforcement.** Acknowledge and praise students who actively engage others, share their ideas thoughtfully, and demonstrate patient, respectful listening.
 - **Other Important Considerations.** Provide clear expectations: ensure students understand the specific goals, assessment criteria, and collaboration expectations for group work activities. Finally, flexibility—be prepared to adapt your approach based on the unique dynamics of each group and individual student needs.
- Set goals with students and assist them in monitoring their progress. Too often, students have vague and distant goals with little sense of the actions and incremental steps needed to get there. When meeting with students one-on-one, work with them to set goals that are measurable, attainable, and progress toward long-term outcomes. For example, we all know it is a challenge getting some DLIFLC students to higher levels in listening. Instead of setting a general goal such as “improve listening comprehension,” target specific skills that pose difficulties for students. It’s important to break down complex listening skills into smaller, manageable steps and provide frequent, supportive feedback. Make the goal measurable, for example, “summarize three main points from the audio in your own words,” and provide explicit instruction that the student can practice, such as teaching students to identify key vocabulary, providing pre-listening questions, guiding students in note-taking, and having them paraphrase the information. Make sure the goal is achievable within a reasonable timeframe, avoiding unrealistic expectations. Be prepared to modify goals and strategies based on student needs and progress.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the power of teacher expectations significantly impacts student outcomes and educational success. Teachers’ beliefs and behaviors, shaped by expectations, can create a self-fulfilling prophecy, where positive expectations lead to higher achievement, and vice versa. For DLI teachers, understanding this influence is crucial for fostering positive learning environments and providing equitable opportunities for students.

- **Reflect on Beliefs.** Teachers should reflect on their own beliefs and expectations about their students, recognizing that their perceptions can influence their interactions and teaching practices.

- **Challenge Biases.** Teachers need to be aware of potential biases and stereotypes that may shape their expectations. Recall those MLIs mentioned in the Introduction who cautioned new DLIFLC teachers not to form hasty judgements of their students' language learning abilities: teachers may develop opinions of how students will do in the course early on and may then inadvertently communicate subtle cues and unspoken expectations to students about their performance.
- **Cultivate a Growth Mindset.** Fostering a growth mindset in the classroom, where students believe that their abilities can be developed through effort and perseverance, can help mitigate the negative effects of low expectations.
- **Provide Equitable Opportunities.** Teachers should ensure that all students have opportunities to participate, access to challenging learning experiences, and adequate support, regardless of their prior academic performance.

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Faculty Forum

Reflection on Variables of Vocabulary Acquisition in the DLIFLC Learning Context: Language Anxiety, Motivation, Learning Strategies, and Teaching Methods

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Vocabulary acquisition is crucial to language learning, yet is also quite challenging. To master a word means not only to know its general and specific meanings in isolation but also its written forms, phonological representations, syntactic categories, sociolinguistic connotations, and other features. Vocabulary acquisition is a long-term learning process affected by various factors, such as language anxiety, motivation, learning strategies, and teaching methods. This article summarizes valuable vocabulary learning strategies and pedagogy, discusses theoretical aspects of two affective variables of vocabulary retention (language anxiety and motivation), identifies their relevancy to DLIFLC students, and proposes rules of thumb to alleviate language anxiety, develop motivation, and improve vocabulary learning and teaching.

Keywords: Language Anxiety, Motivation, Learning Strategies, Teaching Methods

INTRODUCTION

Vocabulary acquisition is crucial for students' academic success, effective communication, and cultural awareness. A grasp of a basic vocabulary is an important achievement in L2 acquisition. Vocabulary was "the most statistically significant predictor" to DLIFLC's Korean language students' listening comprehension performance and "played a vital role in both reading and listening" (Bae, 2021, as cited in Bae et al., 2023, p. 20). Having a large vocabulary size does not guarantee that students will pass the DLPT/OPI, but not having a large vocabulary will certainly negatively impact a student's chance of success. Many current academically recycled or recently disenrolled Chinese Mandarin students experienced challenges in passing vocabulary quizzes, recognizing textbook glossaries in reading and listening practices, and retrieving and using them in written and oral communications.

Vocabulary isn't acquired instantly. Vocabulary acquisition is a protracted task that demands patience and persistent efforts and is affected by a variety of variables, among which language anxiety, motivation, learning strategies, and teaching methods are most significant in the DLIFLC learning context. Given their stress and anxiety levels, students need constant encouragement and deserve the most appropriate learning and teaching approaches to grasp vocabulary. In this article, I will (a) review vocabulary learning strategies and teaching methods in general, including those from an influential second language (L2) teaching handbook chapter; (b) discuss the role of language anxiety and motivation in vocabulary learning; and (c) conclude with concrete examples to help students cope with language anxiety and develop motivation, and help teachers and students improve vocabulary teaching and learning.

VARIABLES OF VOCABULARY ACQUISITION

Strategies and Teaching Methods

In order for students to learn new words, they need to engage in self-study, be taught in direct instruction, and be exposed to the words via natural exposure. Students need to understand the meaning of words, go over their meaning and use frequently, and see them in context (Hulstijn, 2001). In order for this to occur, students must engage in different learning strategies. O'Malley and Chamot (1990) summed up three categories of vocabulary learning strategies: (1) metacognitive strategies, such as time management, emotion management, and advance preparation; (2) cognitive strategies, such as taking notes, using dictionaries, creating word maps, guessing meaning from contextual cues, requesting corrections and clarifications, applying mnemonic devices; and (3) social strategies by working with teachers and peers to check understanding and use communicative opportunities. These strategies move from what students can do on their own to what teachers can do in class, helping students engage in the social aspect of learning.

Also important to vocabulary retention is ensuring that students learn words at the right level. Vygotsky's (1978) concept of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) is helpful here. The ZPD is the "distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem-solving under adult guidance, or in collaboration with more capable peers" (p. 86). Regarding L2 vocabulary acquisition, teachers may interact and provide students with individualized feedback to help move them from their current performance level to the next achievable goal. This can occur via negotiating the meaning of new words to develop lexical breadth and depth for a deeper understanding of word complexity and sophistication, e.g., to distinguish what is said from what is meant in context.

Learning and Teaching Vocabulary

Beyond general learning strategies, students need extra support as they struggle to learn many new words in a short timeframe. Teachers can consider various points (Cook, 2016):

- Mastering a word means not only knowing its general and specific meanings, but also the orthography (writing system), phonology (sound system), semantics (making meaning), morphology (grammar), lexical combinations, register (level of formality), and other aspects of the word. Many students struggle to learn the meanings of words in all these areas.
- Most words in languages are polysemous (i.e., have multiple meanings); thus, words should be learned through meaning components. For example, “girl” can be learned via the semantic components of “female,” “human,” and (usually) “non-adult.”
- The most important words in a speaker’s native language that the human brain automatically processes in early childhood are concrete words; therefore, basic level target language words should be taught before more general, superordinate level words. Teachers can help structure the learning of vocabulary in this way.
- Students are often keenly aware of not knowing words, more than they might be aware that they struggle with grammar or phonology. This awareness of being less proficient in vocabulary can lead to increased anxiety for students.

Language Anxiety and Motivation

A notable affective variable that influences vocabulary retention is language anxiety, the negative emotional response characterized by fear, tension, worry, and uneasiness while processing L2. According to Horwitz and colleagues (1986), language anxiety manifests as communication apprehension, test anxiety, and fear of negative evaluation. Language anxiety functions to activate a “mental filter” that obstructs linguistic input and impedes learning (Krashen, 1981, 1982). It significantly distracts learners’ attention and causes serious efficiency issues in vocabulary recall and other learning activities. Factors like learners’ self-assessment on language aptitude, classroom experiences, and difficulty levels may trigger language anxiety (Alamer & Almulhim, 2021). Teachers can work to help students reduce their anxiety over vocabulary and language learning.

Another notable affective variable in vocabulary acquisition is motivation. Many students come to DLIFLC motivated but begin to lose motivation as time goes on and stress rises. Students can be taught about the types of motivation and how it impacts their learning. For example, students with *intrinsic motivation* learn for learning’s sake, inherently enjoy learning itself, and are prone to working diligently with increased levels of autonomy and decreased levels of anxiety (Koeske & Koeske, 1989). Students with *extrinsic motivation* are prompted by practical and instrumental goals like reward, threat, and usefulness with a strong sense of success and failure and higher anxiety levels to meet performance standards. The third category is *amotivation*, which refers to those who lack the intent to act. As students understand these categories, they can learn to become aware of and manage their own motivation levels and ability to study. Interesting and challenging learning tasks intrinsically motivate learners (Ehrman et al., 2003), and learning atmosphere, course contents, and teachers’ personality traits, teaching styles, and communication skills impose a profound impact on motivation (Heydarnejad et al., 2022).

TEACHING VOCABULARY AT DLIFLC

DLIFLC Basic course students typically experience a large amount of stress from the intensive language programs, miscellaneous military obligations, and social and family commitments. As a Chinese Mandarin teacher, I have witnessed students who suffered from mood swings seemingly from stress and anxiety and who developed severe insomnia and at times could only catch a couple of hours of sleep per night. This impacts their ability to learn.

Mastery of a word is much more than knowing its meaning and pronunciation in isolation. In a listening class during the 45th week of instruction, after listening to a news report about a Chinese city's preferential policy for military personnel, a student promptly responded that though he didn't get all details but was confident it was something about "house moving" since he caught the word as 搬家 (bān jiā); it turned out the word he heard should have been 半价 (bàn jià) instead, i.e., giving Chinese service members a half-price discount for boat and train tickets. Minutes later, after listening to another report on Chinese military personnel's insurance policies, the same student responded again and told the class it was about "internet surfing," as he heard the word as 上网 (shàng wǎng); however, it should have been 伤亡 (shāng wáng), related to a casualty policy. This 19-year-old trainee was highly disciplined and motivated. I praised his learning attitude and active participation: he was very attentive, responded quickly, understood all the pronunciations right but the tones, and knew the meanings of those words. What he needed to improve was the ability to continuously broaden and deepen the understanding of the words and differentiate them in context.

It was time to test out possible solutions and use effective learning strategies and pedagogy to effectively mitigate UGE students' learning-related stress and anxiety and help them establish realistic self-expectations and develop intrinsic and extrinsic motivation to improve vocabulary learning.

RULES OF THUMB

To assist students in the acquisition of a basic vocabulary demands teachers' extended dedication. A teacher's awareness of a students' personal background and personality traits, considerate pedagogical planning, careful class preparations, and open-ended teacher-student communications all facilitate vocabulary learning. Based on my teaching practices, as well as on relevant literature, I came up with these rules of thumb as follows:

- *Give students enough exposure to new words.* A learner needs to be exposed to an L2 word at least six or seven times in different contexts to grasp it, regarding its meanings, lexical relations, written forms, phonetics, metaphorical use, register, and other features.
- *Help students understand word parts (i.e., radicals, roots, prefixes, and suffixes) and common words.* Structure lessons and homework assignments to focus on the most common words in your target language. For example, as Team Leader I selected the 48 most common Chinese

radicals and explained them to students. Radicals are the base components of each Chinese character. I focused on explaining meanings and pronunciations of these radicals and the way they combine into new characters. For example, the character 忍 is constructed by the meaning and pronunciation radical 刃 (rèn), which means “a sword” or “a knife,” on the top and the meaning radical 心 (xīn), which means “heart,” at the bottom. The character’s pronunciation follows that of the former radical as rěn whereas its meaning being the combination of the two: a knife above the heart, which means “bear,” “endure,” or “tolerate.” In your language, what are the most common words and how can you structure class to help students learn and remember those words?

- *Teach students vocabulary in groups.* For example, when you explain polysemous words (i.e., words with multiple meanings) to students, make sure you focus on semantic components. In my classes, I teach the extended meanings of words in our textbooks. For example, after students have memorized the original meaning of 疾 (jí), “illness,” as a noun, I introduce and explain the word’s extended meanings as (1) “suffering” or “agony” as a noun; (2) “hate” as a verb; and (3) “swift” or “violent” as adjectives, in different reading, listening, speaking, and communicative contexts. You can also teach vocabulary in groups or topics such as economic, social, political, scientific, and other themes to reinforce words in context. I try to point out to students words they have learned before that are related. In this way, they are reminded of words and their groups. Keep in mind that students can’t learn too many words at once. Discuss with your students and your teaching team and chair how many words are realistic for students to learn in one week. Giving students too many words is frustrating for them and might be counterproductive.
- *Structure lessons and homework so that students preview glossary and other course materials.* Students benefit from looking over new material before class. For example, for homework, you can ask them to look at a reading text and mark any unknown words before class. You can also ask them to look up five to ten of what they think are the most important unknown words and write down what they mean. That way, they come to class prepared for the day. Or, you can ask students to listen to a passage before class, asking them only to focus on main ideas. If there is a transcript of the listening, students can read it and also identify unknown words so that they can bring questions to class. Another option is to start class by asking students to skim a reading passage and mark words they don’t know. The key here is not to spend too much time on previewing. Students need to be taught how to preview and not get frustrated or stuck on what they don’t know.
- *Ask questions to students that match their proficiency and confidence level.* Some students’ proficiency level in class will be higher than that of others. For lower-proficiency students, I ask questions that are more fact-based and will be easier for them to understand. This allows them to build their confidence. For higher-proficiency students, I ask them questions that go beyond the facts, such as implication questions or background questions. In this way, I can include all the students in the discussion. Teachers can also recommend to students that they

write down anything they didn't understand during the discussion, so they can go over that topic or question during 7th hour or some other time during the class day.

- *Help students learn how to learn.* Many students don't have strong study habits. We as teachers can help them. We can ask them to identify any challenges or obstacles to their learning, such as time management problems or any mental roadblocks they face. We can then guide them through the process of setting up specific goals and processes to try to overcome those challenges. For example, if a student struggles with time management and concentration, we can teach them the "pomodoro technique." This is where the student decides on a specific task (e.g., studying a list of words) and sets a timer for 15 to 25 minutes and focuses on that task until the timer rings. Then, the student gets a short break of approximately five minutes. During the break, the student can do whatever they would like. Next, the student decides on another task and sets the timer again for 15 to 25 minutes. This process teaches students how to concentrate on specific tasks. The key is they need to practice until their concentration improves, and they can't allow themselves to take a break before the timer goes off. Teachers can practice this with students as appropriate.
- *Use positive reinforcement.* Students can become frustrated easily. I try to keep them motivated by acknowledging good quality homework/quizzes/tests, congratulating them if they help their peers, or noticing if they contribute to a club or newsletter or other departmental activity. At the same time, it is important to not overuse this technique. Students need to feel that it is genuine and that they need to earn the praise. It is helpful if teachers can be specific about what they are praising and not just say "Good job." Teachers can also encourage students to use new words with their peers or teachers, acknowledging and praising them when they do so.

CONCLUSION

Vocabulary is the key to DLIFLC students' OPI and DLPT results. Yet, vocabulary acquisition is a painstakingly long-term process that requires persistent hard work. Stress and anxiety can demotivate trainees. Our students deserve effective learning strategies and instruction to help them acquire a basic high-to-mid-frequency L2 vocabulary.

This article reviewed practical learning strategies and pedagogy in vocabulary acquisition and theoretical grounds of language anxiety and motivation, identified their relevance to the DLIFLC learning context, and proposed rules of thumb to lessen language anxiety, develop motivation, and improve vocabulary learning and teaching. These rules of thumb are far from being complete, and some may not necessarily apply to specific training conditions. Yet, the hope here is this would draw colleagues' attention to continuously exploring suitable learning strategies and teaching methods to assist students in vocabulary learning.

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Faculty Forum

Using Microsoft's *Immersive Reader* Tool to Enhance Students' Listening Comprehension

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Listening is a fundamental aspect of acquiring a foreign language, yet it is a challenging skill for many language learners to acquire. Not only must learners grasp pronunciation nuances, rhythm, and intonation, but they also need to understand the meaning of the passage or conversation they are hearing. This article recommends using transcription of listening passages with Microsoft's Immersive Reader tool to help foreign language learners attain higher listening proficiency levels. Specific examples of using Immersive Reader with Arabic language learners are given, and student feedback is provided.

Keywords: *Listening Comprehension, Bottom-Up Processing, Phonemes, Skill Development*

INTRODUCTION

Language acquisition is a complex process that requires the mastery of various skills, with listening comprehension being a cornerstone. Listening is complex, requiring the listener to capture and correctly interpret nuances in pronunciation as well as contextual cues (Goh & Taib, 2006). This skill is challenging for many students at DLIFLC, who must attain the required level of listening proficiency on the DLPT to graduate. One way to help students in honing their listening skill is using transcription of listening passages with Microsoft's Immersive Reader tool. Although it is an application designed to improve reading and writing for individuals of all ages and abilities, I used Immersive Reader in my classes to improve the listening comprehension skills of my students.

Listening comprehension is a complex process that involves decoding auditory input, understanding meaning, and interpreting context. Transcriptions of passages introduced after a listening activity provide learners with structured linguistic input, offering opportunities to encounter authentic language in controlled contexts (Vandergrift & Goh, 2012). Showing the transcription of listening passages after the listening activities can be useful in promoting active engagement and interaction in the learning process. This method fosters learner autonomy and

boosts confidence, as students actively engage with language input (Field, 2008). This practice also offers repeated exposure to target language structures and vocabulary, which helps internalize linguistic patterns and develop automaticity in listening comprehension. According to Lourdes and Ghandi (2019), transcriptions of listening passages introduced after listening activities help reduce linguistic complexity and help create a dynamic learning environment, accommodating diverse learning preferences and proficiency levels. Educators can scaffold listening activities to develop comprehension strategies and linguistic awareness. Linguistic input is presented in a structured format and learners can engage with the transcription while listening to audio recordings, deepening their understanding and helping them identify key linguistic features (Hartshorn & Stephens, 2023).

USING SCRIPTED TEXTS IN LISTENING ACTIVITIES: AN EXAMPLE WITH ARABIC STUDENTS

Arabic belongs to the Semitic languages family and is a cursive language, written right to left. Cursive writing is a style of penmanship where letters in a word are connected, generally for the purpose of faster writing. Connecting words in writing can confuse students during listening. Also, Arabic has prepositions that are attached to the nouns that they qualify, and some prepositions consist of only one letter/sound. In addition, the word “and” in English is one letter in Arabic that also attaches itself to the nouns, adjectives, verbs and adverbs that follow it. Consequently, learners of Arabic experience considerable difficulty in distinguishing the sounds in word boundaries while listening, which, in turn leads to miscomprehension. Students encounter additional difficulties in deciphering 12 similar sounds that do not exist in English, i.e., alif “ā” and ayn “‘ayn”, ha “Ḥā” & haa “Hā, qaaf “Qāf” & kaaf “Kāf”, ta “Tā” & taa “Ṭā”, dal “Dāl” & dhad “Ḍād, siin Sīn & saad “Ṣād.”

Microsoft’s Immersive Reader

I have been using the Immersive Reader for a year in two classes. When planning a listening activity for my class, I ensure that students have the necessary support to enhance their comprehension skills. To achieve this, I prepare the transcription of the listening passages in Immersive Reader.

Immersive Reader enables color coding in the transcription, automatically coloring each part of speech a different color. Nouns are coded in purple, adjectives in green, verbs in red, and prepositions and relative pronouns in black (see Figure 1). I use this color coding to address common challenges faced during listening activities and offer immediate support to clarify misunderstandings. It should be noted that Immersive Reader itself does not create the transcription of audios. The teacher can either transcribe the text or can use a tool to do so (e.g., Microsoft’s Transcribe tool); either way the transcribed text must be imported into Immersive Reader.

Using Immersive Reader for Listening Activities

In my listening comprehension classes, the listening activities take place in the following order:

1. I put students in pairs/small groups
2. I give students the comprehension questions to preview
3. Students listen twice to the audio to find the answers to the questions
4. Students discuss the answers in pairs/small groups
5. Students work with a member of a different group to compare answers
6. All groups share their answers with the class, which allows me to identify their listening challenges
7. I replay the passage, but this time while projecting its transcript onto the interactive whiteboard using Immersive Reader
8. I use the color-coded transcript provided by Immersive Reader to explain the sounds/phonemes that students misunderstood (based on their earlier incorrect answers)

The following examples illustrate how I use Immersive Reader to explain specific listening challenges students face with Arabic. The Immersive Reader effectively illustrates *nunation* in Arabic in the accusative case, particularly with adverbs. Nunation refers to diacritical marks indicating grammatical case and indefiniteness, as with the adverb **جيداً** meaning *well* (Figure 1 #1, marked green). This visual cue is particularly helpful for learners, as it enhances their understanding of the distinction between nunation **اً** (an)—a diacritic—and the Arabic letter *nūn* (ن), a consonant as in the noun **ملايين** *millions* (Figure 1 #9, marked purple). Hence, the Immersive Reader serves as a valuable tool in bridging the gap between auditory input and Arabic script.

Figure 1

Color-coding of Parts of Speech in Microsoft's Immersive Reader

هل تعرفين شخص يرسم **جيداً** 1؟
أنا أدرس اللغة العربية لأن انا أريد أن أشتغل في الشرق الأوسط .
نريد أن نفهم كيف يفكر العرب. أنا اسمي مرجان وأدرس 2 اللغة
العربية بسبب أحب ثقافة العرب واسرتي 3 تتكلم العربية.
أدرس اللغة العربية لأن المنطقة مهمة جدا. أريد أن أفهم مشاكل
المنطقة.

عدد الدارسين للغة العربية كان قبل الهجمات الإرهابية في 11 من
سبتمبر قد اقترب من ٥٠٠٠ **دارس** 4 على مستوى
الولايات المتحدة. وبدأ من عام ٢٠٠٤ وبعد أن انشأت الخارجية
الأمريكية 5 برنامجاً لمساعدة 6 تدريس اللغة العربية تضاعف 7 هذا
العدد عدة مرات وخصصت 8 لذلك ميزانية بملايين 9 الدولارات.

Note. This authentic audio conversation contains errors and is transcribed as such; the instructor pointed errors out to students and corrected them during class.

Another crucial aspect highlighted in the Immersive Reader is the conjunction و “Wāw” and, which is attached to the following word, as with the verb وأدرس and I study (Figure 1 #2, marked red), and with the noun وأسرتي and my family (Figure 1 #3, marked purple). This demonstrates how conjunctions are seamlessly connected to the verbs and nouns in Arabic. Many learners struggle with this concept, as Arabic script does not use spaces between conjunction و “Wāw” and the word that follows. Immersive Reader provides clear visual segmentation, ensuring that students can identify these elements and understand their functions when they read the transcript while listening to the sound file.

In Arabic, nouns are not pluralized after the number ten. For example, *one student* is expressed as طالب واحد, while *twenty students* is expressed as عشرون طالب, using the singular form of the noun; this often presents an additional challenge during listening activities, as students expect a pluralized noun. This phenomenon is exemplified in the transcription where the noun **دارس** student (Figure 1 #4, marked purple) follows the number 5000 **دارس** ٥٠٠٠. The Immersive Reader helps learners recognize that nouns remain singular even after large numbers except for the numbers from three to ten, which require the pluralized nouns.

When students listen to a passage while reading the transcription in Immersive Reader, they develop better phonemic awareness and accuracy in pronunciation. Arabic has 12 sounds that do not exist in English, and Immersive Reader helps students identify these phonemic differences. For instance, in distinguishing similar sounds such as س (Sīn) and ص (Ṣād) or أ (Alif) and ع (ʿAyn), which can significantly affect listening comprehension, when misunderstood. The verb خصصت specified (Figure 1 #8 marked red) contains the sound ص (Ṣād) and is confused with the noun مساعدتي assistants, which contains the sound س (Sīn) (Figure 1 #6, marked purple). Also, the verb تضاعف multiply (Figure 1 #7 marked red) contains the sound ع (ʿAyn) and is confused with the adjective الأمريكية American (Figure 1 #5 marked green), containing the sound أ (Alif).

This engaging combination of auditory input and transcription in Immersive Reader on the interactive whiteboard helps students comprehend the listening activity more effectively and easily, which in turn, helps them gain confidence in their listening abilities and pronunciation. This multi-sensory learning approach not only strengthens students’ listening comprehension but

also supports their overall language development by integrating auditory, visual, and interactive learning strategies. As I conduct listening comprehension activities 12 to 15 hours per week with the Immersion Reader, my students gain sufficient practice in the classroom with this strategy to utilize it on their own when I assign them additional tailored listening activities as homework.

STUDENT FEEDBACK

Four students were surveyed about using the transcription of audios in Immersive Reader with listening activities. All four students found this strategy very engaging. They added that this strategy helped them distinguish sounds in word boundaries, improve their listening comprehension, pronunciation, and their transcription and summarization skills, and increased their confidence in listening. In sum, it helped them navigate the complexities of listening more effectively, leading to improved comprehension and retention.

CONCLUSION

Student feedback offered valuable insights into the benefits of using transcriptions of audios in Immersive Reader during listening activities. Instructors can optimize the efficacy of transcriptions of audios by integrating them into their teaching and using Immersive Reader to craft interactive, engaging activities that help reinforce listening comprehension. The different colors in Immersive Reader help students distinguish the sounds in word boundaries. Immersive Reader also helps learners analyze sentence structures and understand how different parts of speech and grammar elements interact in a sentence. When reading a sentence with multiple nouns, adjectives, and verbs, students can immediately recognize their functions, further reinforcing their comprehension. This is a tool that is easily accessible and can also be utilized for reading or grammar skill-building, in addition to listening.

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Faculty Forum

Student-Created Videos for *Esprit de Corps* in an Arabic Classroom

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This article discusses how I utilized student-created video projects to enhance morale, increase student engagement and motivation, and foster active participation in the learning process. I collected informal feedback on the project through interviews with students, daily in-class observations, and coaching sessions with the teacher, both individually and in groups, as well as students' bi-weekly class presentations of video projects. Additional feedback was elicited from faculty and student comments after these videos were posted on Microsoft's Viva Engage (formerly Yammer), a communication platform that allows individuals in an organization to connect. I outline how I conducted the project and also share feedback.

Keywords: *Multimodality, Student-Created Video Projects, Motivation, Engagement, Active Participation, Group Work*

INTRODUCTION

Research has shown that project-based group work can bring motivation and engagement to the classroom, but which projects to choose and how to structure them is up to the teacher's discretion. One project-based option is for students to collaborate on creating videos. When students make videos on topics of interest to them, it can benefit the student by helping them "document their knowledge, reflect on the learning process, and teach their classmates to do new things" (Sears, 2018, para. 3). These projects can therefore increase student motivation to learn by engaging them and encouraging their active participation and collaboration in classroom activities, taking them out of their daily classroom routine. As students work collaboratively, they reflect on their learning, consider ways to improve their videos, and share classmates' feedback on the language and culture content of the videos.

Author's Positionalities

More than five years ago, I envisioned the benefits of having students practice writing scenarios they created and record them; in doing so, they build self-confidence and reinforce their target language use. The pandemic and the need to conduct online teaching became the spark to experiment with new opportunities that technology offered. In 2021, I started the practice of having students in my classrooms create videos and witnessed the blossoming of our students' enthusiasm and motivation to get on board with this initiative.

I started publishing my students' videos from different classes that I had taught throughout the years in *Chronicles*, a digital student newsletter, at the Arabic School and posted them in Microsoft's Viva Engage (formerly Yammer). In time, I also posted the videos of the students from other teams in my school, as well as other schools in DLIFLC's undergraduate education college.

Videos created by my students have covered topics such as immersions, cultural events at the Arabic Schools (then two, now one), students' hobbies and talents, scenarios, sketches, songs, dances, presentations, and traditions. Gradually, teachers from other DLIFLC language programs have joined this initiative, but it was heavily implemented in the Arabic program. I received positive and encouraging feedback from the management of the Arabic program, faculty members, students, and MLIs. In this article, I will share the steps I took to help students create their videos and the feedback I have received.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Project-Based Group Work

Properly organized group work can contribute to student learning, retention, and retrieval of content and overall college success. Well-structured group work helps students plan and manage their time productively, develop better communication skills, combine knowledge and different skill sets, delegate their roles and responsibilities to perform the assigned tasks, share varying perspectives, and negotiate their differences in opinion. Well-designed group projects can also help students build their communication skills and become more engaged in class as they create a shared identity (Astin, 1997; Tinto, 1998).

While the benefits of group work for learners are undeniable, instructors should plan, supervise, and assess group work in a way that enhances meaningful teamwork and collaboration; otherwise, it may not lead to the desired outcome. Instructors should assign as group work those tasks that accurately meet the learning objectives of the course and successfully lend themselves to student collaboration.

Student-Created Video Projects

Student-created video projects can offer many benefits. The key is in how they are viewed by the instructor. Sears (2018), in her work with younger learners, considered her students working in small groups not “just consumers of videos,” but as creators who work together to shape and “share their opinions and skills with the world” (para. 2). She found that student-made videos naturally fit the classroom and tapped into students’ interests and behaviors and easily related them to audiences so that they can not only share what they’ve learned but also reflect on the learning process and teach others. Student-created videos can improve student engagement, improve self-confidence, and enhance autonomous learning (Anas, 2019; Stanley & Zhang, 2018). Video sharing can also help build a sense of class community (Cowie & Sakui, 2021). Given the motivational and interpersonal challenges facing my students, I selected the project of student-created videos to support their engagement as well as language learning.

CONTEXT

The five students in the class involved in this project started their Arabic language studies at the DLIFLC in January 2023 with a different teaching team; I started working with them in their third month at the DLIFLC. They were reticent to speak the target language, and due to initial team experiences and low grades in the program, lacked self-confidence and motivation to learn Arabic; as a group, they suffered from low morale. Hence, in the first couple of months, our teaching team’s focus was on gaining their trust and building their motivation. We aimed to create harmony among the students and build a functional group of learners. One of these initiatives was the video project described here, following the guidelines for student-created video projects outlined in Anas (2019).

STEPS FOR STUDENT-CREATED VIDEO PROJECT

The following are the steps I followed for the project. All project discussion was conducted in the target language.

1. *Preparation and Project Orientation*: Starting in mid-Semester II, I showed the class student-created videos on a variety of cultural topics from previous classes posted on Viva Engage. I also explained that the purpose of the project was to develop Arabic language skills along with an increased motivation and interest in the language and culture.
2. *Project Assignment*: I assigned video projects according to their interests, with the first video project about Mother’s Day 2023. In the videos, they wrote cards to their mothers in Arabic and recited the content of their cards in front of their classmates (see Appendix A for a list of all topics). I provided each student with guidelines for their video projects (Appendix B) and followed up on their progress regularly so that I could answer questions and check on the quality of the content.

3. *Student Script Creation*: Students read materials to write their scenarios, which most of the time were part of their homework. I gave them feedback on their errors in the scenarios, and they rehearsed their narrations before recording and incorporating them into their videos. I read their scripts carefully and discussed the process with them to ensure they did not just copy and paste other content. I wanted to ensure their scripts were original.
4. *Individual or Group Assignments*: I assigned individual, pair, or group work depending on their interests and experiences, considering their learning styles and personality types so that they would work harmoniously with each other, keeping their other class work and duties in mind.
5. *Timelines and Homework*: I considered the timing of these projects so as not to overwhelm the class, as they had other responsibilities. Their video-related homework was generally assigned for longer weekends. I established deadlines for writing their scenarios and allocated a sufficient amount of time in class for corrections, practice, and rehearsals so the students could feel confident before the recording sessions.
6. *Video Creation*: Students recorded themselves or worked with a partner to make the video recordings. For pictures, students either took their own or used copyright-free images from Wikimedia Commons. To stitch the audio and images together, students used either iMovie or Quick Time Player (both approved for DLIFLC use). Students who had less experience with these tools worked in groups with more-experienced partners, to minimize the time spent on technology and maximize the time spent on creating and recording the content. In some cases, I did the final stitching together of a video to facilitate and streamline the process for the students. Each video took approximately one hour to assemble.
7. *Sharing the Videos*: With the students' permission, I posted their videos on the DLIFLC's Viva Engage so that other students and teachers could watch them. Since this tool is only accessible to DLIFLC faculty/staff, it is secure. I also instructed students not to share these videos outside DLIFLC for security reasons, and I instructed them to remove any recordings or images from their personal phones.
8. *Project Impact and Feedback*: Feedback for this project was gathered through interviews with the students, in-class observations of student progress by the researcher, individual coaching sessions with students by the researcher, and observations by the researcher of their bi-weekly presentations on their projects. I interviewed each student one-on-one before graduation to assess the benefits and challenges of the student-created videos initiative and gather feedback to improve this initiative for the upcoming classes.

The five students in this project produced eight videos (4–7 minutes in length) in total, both individually and in groups. As their instructor, I allocated a considerable amount of time for coaching them when they were working on their video projects, as it related to the information they would include, the writing of their scripts, and the speaking and pronunciation of Arabic. I focused on a team dynamic of motivation and enjoyment, but kept the focus on the language

skills and cultural information they were developing. I spent minimal class time on the actual technology, compared to the content and speaking practice.

REFLECTIONS AND FEEDBACK

I wanted to see if student-created videos could help students improve morale, build self-confidence, increase motivation and engagement, and encourage active participation of students in their learning process. Feedback from the students and teacher/researcher observations on this question follow.

Video Project Benefits

Based on the information gathered, these video projects appeared to have met my goal for building student engagement and confidence. All five students expressed that they liked this initiative because it helped prevent burnout, improved morale, increased motivation and engagement, and enhanced collaboration. They all said they were enthusiastic about writing scenarios and recording them.

Students mentioned that the video projects were helpful because some of them were naturally shy or lacked communication skills. They learned to trust each other when collaborating to make these videos. They thought these projects improved their pronunciation and helped them recognize their deficiencies in speaking ability when they watched the videos repeatedly. They also enjoyed the opportunity to critique each other's videos to improve them.

The students recommended this initiative for future classes because it broke the monotony, helped them share knowledge about the video topics, and distracted them from worrying about final graduation-requirement testing. They also felt the language they used when interacting with each other was useful for developing real-life proficiency, showed them that they knew more than they thought they did, also an opportunity to grow professionally and build confidence. The class leader considered the projects important because they were posted on Viva Engage, and they had to exert more effort to ensure that the spoken language they used was accurate in terms of grammar, word choice, and pronunciation.

My observations of the students revealed that over time, their behavior became more engaged; they became willing to collaborate and tried to speak more. Some students even became comfortable enough to improvise during recordings, when applicable, showing that they were becoming more fluent with Arabic. They also seemed to appreciate that they could share their talents; those with more technology skills could teach and help their peers. Students appeared to be very proud of their videos when they saw them on the shared Viva Engage and when other students or teachers commented on them. They were able to share their own experiences making the videos, and they could see the progress they made over time. This seemed to give them great satisfaction.

I also observed, and other teachers commented, that the students overcame their differences and wanted to study together as a class, rather than being taught Arabic in separate groups, which was the case when we received this class, when they didn't want to study together. Challenging and cheering one another about each other's accomplishments and improvement in their grades resulted in a positive change in their attitudes. They began to ask for more activities like this and were enthusiastic about showing their talents and skills publicly. Their enthusiasm for collaboration also became obvious in their discussions of their group projects. They worked as a team and enjoyed each other's company in and out of the classroom. In addition, their healthy competition resulted in high morale and joy from learning despite their heavy academic and military workload.

Video Project Challenges

One of the main challenges was time. The student-made videos initiative was extra work for the students in addition to their academic and military duties. I tried to minimize this concern by including the video projects as part of their homework and also by reducing the time spent on technology, but this continued to be a concern for some students, especially those less tech-savvy. Due to time requirements, in the future, it might be more beneficial to decrease the number of video projects or introduce the videos in Semester I so they would have more time. I also found out that students worked harder in preparing for their class presentations when they were for a wider audience, rather than just their classmates. In this way, the tool Viva Engage was crucial.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Properly structured group work helps students plan and manage their time productively, and combine knowledge and different skill sets to complete the assigned tasks, all while collaborating and building confidence and engagement. For the successful implementation of group work, I created a safe and comfortable environment for my students. In this safe environment, they opened up to each other and shared their strengths and limitations without any reservations. They expressed the types of topics that interested them in relation to their previous life experiences. I generally gave them the freedom to choose a classmate to partner with. As they were collaborating, they developed their voice. They listened to each other when solving problems to achieve successful outcomes. I supervised and assessed their group work to ensure it enhanced meaningful teamwork and collaboration on the quality of the work that they had produced. All these factors contributed to the successful implementation of group work in this class.

This project allowed me to meet my goals for building student confidence and class morale. The guidelines were provided by Anas (2019). The pre-task orientation segment allowed me to explain the purpose and steps of the project, along with the timeline and examples. The during-task phase included tasks ranging from groups planning their projects to recording and editing their videos. For post-task reflection, the class shared their videos with classmates, reflecting on

the task and how it impacted their confidence, proficiency in speaking, and motivation. Following these guidelines led to a successful project, where students were able to make meaning and be active participants in their learning, benefits also noted by Anas (2019).

With the student-created videos initiative, students put into practice all their skills and were surprised by how much they had learned from mid Semester II until end-Semester III. They collaborated, had fun, adapted to the changes in the script as they were improvising their scenarios using Arabic. Posting these projects on Viva Engage raised the bar high for this class; they worked harder for their classmates, faculty members, staff, and their families. For future iterations of this project, I would consider asking the students to create fewer videos, due to the time needed. An action research project on this topic would allow for a more complete understanding of the degree to which student-created content can help build student morale and engagement.

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APPENDIX A

Topics Assigned

1. Mother's Postcard 2023
2. Denim Day-Jeans in Arabic 2023
3. Halloween class activity 2023
4. Class break trip 2023
5. Class Presentations 2023
6. Thanksgiving class activity 2023
7. Christmas Tree Wishes 2023
8. Christmas Department Activity 2023

APPENDIX B

Guidelines Given to Students

1. You will abide by the set deadlines for every stage of the project
2. You will read relevant materials to prepare original scenarios, not just copy and paste,
3. You will submit your scenarios to me for feedback,
4. You will rehearse and then record the narrations of the scenarios once they are revised based on my feedback.
5. You will use copyright-free pictures for your video projects,
6. You will use applications approved by the DLIFLC.
7. You will not share these videos outside the DLIFLC for security reasons.
8. You will remove any recordings or images from your phones.

Quick Tips

Enhancing Classroom Understanding through Concept Checking Questions (CCQs) and Instruction Checking Questions (ICQs)

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INTRODUCTION

Creating an immersive target language environment is crucial for language learners. To achieve this, foreign language instructors should prioritize speaking the target language as much as possible. However, if the input is not comprehensible, it risks becoming background noise, potentially leading to student dissatisfaction and disengagement. In such cases, checking students' understanding is essential. Quick checks prompt instructors to repeat or rephrase instructions in more straightforward language. Educators can brainstorm effective checking methods independently or leverage generative AI tools like ChatGPT to support this process. Students are expected to provide quick and short answers in the target language or respond with movements. The primary goal of the strategy is to create an effective immersive environment in which students understand their instructors.

Over the past two decades, English educators such as Workman (2006), Darn and White (n.d.), Constantinides (2013), Heredia (2018a), and Gakonga (2021) have repeatedly pointed out that questions like "Do you understand?" "Is it clear?" or "OK?" are ineffective. First, out of respect, students may hesitate to suggest that their teacher's explanation was unclear (Constantinides, 2013). Additionally, they may not want to appear ignorant (Constantinides, 2013; Heredia, 2018a; Workman, 2006). Furthermore, students sometimes believe they understand when they do not (Gakonga, 2021; Heredia, 2018a; Workman, 2006). As a result, they may habitually respond with "yes" regardless of their actual understanding. Despite these shortcomings, many language teachers continue to regularly ask these questions.

An Evolution of the Terms CCQs and ICQs

How do we check students' understanding more effectively? Concept-checking questions (CCQs) and instruction-checking questions (ICQs) are highly recommended by language educators such as Marisa Constantinides (2013), Heredia (2018a; 2018b), and Gakonga (2021). Before these terms became popular, Workman (2006) defined concept questions as those generated to ensure students comprehend grammatical, lexical, or functional knowledge. Afterward, with an extension, CCQs were regarded as (a) questions instructors ask immediately after teaching something, such as grammar or expressions, and (b) questions instructors ask immediately after announcing a particular activity that may require further explanation (Constantinides, 2013). In recent years, the latter portion of Constantinides' (2013) definition above has been called instruction-checking questions (ICQs) (Gakonga, 2021; Heredia, 2018b) as it is about teachers' instructional directions instead of new knowledge.

CCQs and ICQs: Definitions and Examples

In this article, we adopt Heredia's (2018a; 2018b) definitions of CCQs and ICQs after reviewing the history of these terms.

First, CCQs (concept checking questions) are questions used to confirm that students fully understand the meaning of a vocabulary or grammar being taught (Heredia, 2018a). Unlike comprehension questions in reading or listening exercises, CCQs are specific to the lexicological and grammatical knowledge being inculcated. Note that they are not reading or listening comprehension *exercises* but rather are *interactions* designed to ensure the target point in the target language is explained effectively and understood by students. CCQs can be applied in various contexts, including checking students' understanding of language concepts, functions, vocabulary, and grammar.

For example, in a Chinese Mandarin class, we may introduce the term "996," which refers to working from 9:00 a.m. to 9:00 p.m., twelve hours a day, six days a week. This term reflects the long hours and high pressure of working in China. After introducing this concept in Mandarin, we may not be sure if the students fully understand it. If we simply ask, "Got it?" students may remain silent or give an unconvincing "yes." Instead, we can ask the following CCQs to check their understanding:

1. 第一个九表示什么？答案：上午九点。(What does the first nine represent?
Answer: 9 a.m.)
2. 第二个九表示什么？答案：晚上九点。(What does the second nine represent?
Answer: 9 p.m.)
3. 六表示什么？答案：一周工作六天。(What does six represent? Answer: working
six days a week.)
4. 这个短语暗示着什么？答案：工作时间很长，并且无法选择。(What is the
implication of the phrase? Answer: working for long hours without a choice.)

Second, ICQs (Instruction Checking Questions) are used to ensure that students understand the instructions or guidelines for an activity (Heredia, 2018b). These questions are particularly useful when the instructions are in the target language. ICQs can be employed in various contexts, such as information gap tasks, role plays, immersion activities, and more.

For instance, we may design an information gap activity in a reading class. The first question is for the whole class to answer, questions two through four are assigned to Group One, and questions five through seven are assigned to Group Two. It is possible that no student works on question one, or both groups work on the same set of questions.

Clear instruction is significant in such cases, but using a foreign language might complicate matters. This is where ICQs become particularly helpful. Examples of ICQs in this scenario include:

1. 谁做第一题？答案：每个人。(Who will work on Question One? Answer: Everybody.)
2. 第一组，你们做哪几道题？答案：一、二、三、四。(Group One, which questions do you work on? Answer: 1, 2, 3, 4.)
3. 第二组，你们做哪几道题？答案：一、五、六、七。(Group Two, which questions do you work on? Answer: 1, 5, 6, 7.)

If students do not answer correctly, the instructor should promptly clarify the information to prevent further confusion.

TIPS FOR CREATING CCQS AND ICQS MANUALLY

It might not be easy to initially think of CCQs and ICQs, and it probably takes time to prepare in advance. However, practice makes perfect, just like practicing a foreign language.

Use Simple Language

The most important tips are to avoid using complex language in the questions and ensure every student understands them. In other words, keep the questions simple and short (Darn & White, n.d.; Heredia, 2018a). The answers to the questions should also be brief so too much time is not taken (Darn & White, n.d.; Workman, 2006).

Learn about Possible Question Types

Regarding the question types, first, they could start with “what, which, where, who, and when” i.e., the wh-questions like the above examples in Mandarin class. When it is a “wh” question, teachers should be aware that students may need more time to process and should make sure the answer is not complex.

Second, it is crucial to note that the question could be, “Is ... a ...? Can ... do ...?” For instance, in Constantinides’ (2013) example of teaching the word “pet,” she asked, “Is a cat a pet? A dog? A

cow?” (para. 12). This questioning approach prevents the misunderstanding that “pet” only means “dog,” simply because the teacher used a dog picture to illustrate the word. We can further employ the structure, “Can they...?” for example, “Can they live in the wilderness without humans?” This question will lead to a simple answer: “No, they can’t.” These yes-or-no questions are particularly effective because they require minimal time and vocabulary to answer.

Also, the questions can begin with “Can you...” to request students show certain movement or point at an object or a picture. For example, “Can you point at something blue?” “Can you demonstrate stretching?” “Can you explain the activity in simple words?” These will check if students understand “blue,” “stretching,” and activity instructions.

Beyond questions, asking students to respond with true or false, saying partial sentences for students to complete, utilizing visual support such as pictures and timelines, requiring students’ physical responses, having students respond with antonyms, synonyms, examples, meanings in both the target language and English, and select the best translation can all contribute in various ways, provided they assess students’ understanding (Constantinides, 2013). Therefore, one caveat is that the checking methods may not be limited to questions alone, and other straightforward and less time-consuming approaches may be available. Questions that address metalinguistic concepts (e.g., discussing the result of a comparison) might be particularly challenging for students, in which case other comprehension checks may be preferred.

Predict Student Misunderstandings

Predicting challenges and possible misunderstandings will offer important clues when generating questions (Heredia, 2018b). For instance, the confusion in an information gap activity is predictable, so it is useful to ask ICQs to ensure teams are working on the correct task.

Specific Steps

Here are specific steps an instructor can follow when developing their own CCQs and ICQs independently, without using generative AI.

In the context of CCQs, consider the following:

1. *Identify areas where students might get confused:* What common misunderstandings might students have? What concepts are difficult for foreign language learners? [these can relate to grammar, vocabulary, cultural ideas, etc.]
2. *Brainstorm questions to uncover any student misunderstandings:* What questions might help guide their thinking on these issues? How can you tell if they really understand? [focus on specifics]
3. *Choose the best, most simple question to ask students:* How can I simplify this question further? Do students know all the words in the question and the grammar structure?
4. *Identify the correct answer(s) and ensure they will be clear for students:* Are the answers concise and straightforward? Will their answer tell me if they understand or not?

In the context of ICQs, consider the following:

1. What might students overlook in the instructions?
2. What questions might help them focus on this?
3. How can I simplify this question further?
4. Are the answers concise and straightforward?

AN EXPERIMENT WITH GENERATIVE AI


We can now use tools such as ChatGPT to generate CCQs and ICQs for convenience or inspiration. Note: all relevant DoD and DLIFLC policies and memos regarding the use of Generative AI in effect at the time of writing have been adhered to. We did not input any course materials developed by DLIFLC into a GenAI tool, and we checked all information for accuracy.

Figure 1 below is an example of the prompt given to ChatGPT and the CCQs it created for a grammar point “比 (to compare),” which some students at the beginner level might find difficult to understand. The English translation is also provided.

Figure 1

Asking ChatGPT to Generate CCQs for Grammar “比” Meaning “to Compare” (OpenAI, 2024)

请用简单的中文给我三到四个语法“比”的Concept checking questions

 以下是关于“比”字句的三到四个语法概念检查问题（CCQs），用简单的中文：

1. 比较的对象
 - 句子里有几个比较的对象？
(比如：“他比我高。”有两个：他和我。)
2. 比较的结果
 - 句子里谁更怎么样？
(比如：“这本书比那本书便宜。”谁更便宜？这本书。)
3. 是否可以加形容词
 - “比”后面能不能加形容词？比如：高、快、好？
(比如：“这辆车比那辆车快。”可以加“快”。)
4. 顺序是否正确
 - 比较时，先说谁，再说谁？
(比如：“她比他聪明。”先说“她”，再说“他”。)

这些问题简单明了，适合帮助学生理解“比”字句的基本用法。

English translation:

Prompt: Please provide me with three to four Concept-Checking Questions (CCQs) for the grammar point “比 (to compare)” using simple Chinese.

ChatGPT: Here are three to four CCQs about the grammar of “比 (to compare)” sentences, explained in simple Chinese:

1. **Objects of Comparison**

- How many objects are being compared in the sentence?
(For example: “He is taller than me.” There are two: He and I.)

2. **Result of Comparison**

- In the sentence, “Who is more [something]?”
(For example: “This book is cheaper than that one.” Which book is cheaper? This book.)

3. **Adding Adjectives**

- Can an adjective be added after “比”? For example: tall, fast, good?
(For example: “This car is faster than that car.” You can add “fast.”)

4. **Correct Word Order**

- When drawing comparisons, who is mentioned first, and who is mentioned second?
(For example: “She is smarter than he.” You mention “her” first, then “him.”)

These questions are simple and clear, making them suitable for students to understand the basic usage of “比 (compare)” sentences.

It is important to note that, overall, the above questions and answers generated by ChatGPT are inspiring and satisfying, but the answer to question three is not accurate.

CCQs one, two, and four are excellent questions for the following reasons. CCQ 1 emphasizes the objects of comparison, which are crucial for the sentence's meaning. CCQ 2 highlights the result, which is the main idea. CCQ 4 examines the word order, where English and Mandarin can be similar or different, potentially leading to confusion or errors.

However, in the sentence in CCQ 3, “这辆车比那辆车快 (This car is faster than that one),” the adjective does not directly follow 比, but instead the noun phrase “that car (那辆车).” Therefore, teachers need to be cautious and revise accordingly. We can change the answer to “not directly after,” highlighting the correct word order, or revising the question to below and emphasizing the part of speech. This revised CCQ3 can be seen in Figure 2.

Figure 2

ChatGPT's CCQ3 Revised by the Teacher for Accuracy

3. 比较用的词

- 句子里用什么样的词表示比较的结果？
(比如：高、快、好——它们是什么样的词？形容词。)

English translation:

3. Words Used for Comparison

- What kind of words are used in the sentence to show the result of a comparison?
(For example: tall, fast, good—what kind of words are they? Adjectives.)

Based on the experiment above, GenAI satisfactorily completed the task despite minor errors and provided concise CCQs in simple Chinese. Foreign language instructors can try it out, especially if they find it challenging to generate such questions themselves. An important tip is to ask GenAI to generate questions and answers in simple, easy-to-understand language. It is also important to carefully check the accuracy of ChatGPT output before using it with students.

CONCLUSION

The use of CCQs and ICQs has become a prominent topic in language education. Incorporating these techniques throughout lessons is a fundamental skill emphasized in the Cambridge CELTA program, which trains instructors to teach English as a second or foreign language. Similarly, this approach is highly effective for teaching other foreign languages, particularly in immersion settings and at the beginner level.

At DLIFLC, instructors can enhance students' understanding and ensure effective target language acquisition by utilizing CCQs and ICQs. Instead of relying on generic prompts like "Got it?" or "Understand?" teachers can employ these targeted strategies to promote comprehension and engagement. If you find it challenging to generate such questions, GenAI can serve as a helpful teaching assistant. However, these tools can produce inaccurate information, so teachers must review and refine the questions. With practice and experience, instructors will become more adept at spontaneously creating CCQs and ICQs during classroom interactions.

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