

A Report on Vocabulary Quizzes and Learning Strategies of Students

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Abstract

This paper attempts to explore the vocabulary knowledge of Japanese college students who learn English as a second language. In examining the patterns of their English vocabulary ability, the data of weekly vocabulary quizzes conducted through a semester and that of a term-end review examination are comparatively analyzed. The results suggest that students tend to memorize the meanings of English words by rote without considering their usage. To improve English vocabulary knowledge, it will be better to encourage students to learn words paying attention to their collocations and derivatives as well as their parts of speech. Thus, firstly, the percentage of correct answers drops sharply when the words are embedded in sentences, and secondly, those students who mark relatively low scores in this form of vocabulary quiz also show relatively short retainment of the words.

Introduction

This paper examines the vocabulary knowledge of Japanese college students learning English as a second language, presenting the data based on the vocabulary quizzes. Since vocabulary knowledge is an important factor for improving English skills such as listening, speaking, reading and writing, surveying Japanese students' patterns of English vocabulary ability will be helpful for designing courses in teaching English.

With the aim to improve students' English vocabulary ability, vocabulary quizzes were given every week to the students who attended either TOEIC II class or TOEIC III class. While TOEIC I is a required course for freshmen, TOEIC II and TOEIC III are more advanced elective English classes for the TOEIC test. The two classes are different in level; the TOEIC III class is higher than TOEIC II class. Accordingly, the

vocabulary book used in TOEIC III is more advanced than that of TOEIC II. The class size of TOEIC II is twenty-nine and that of TOEIC III is twenty-one.

In both classes, each test consisted of around forty English words, taken from each lesson on the vocabulary books. In a semester, the number of words which the students have learned amounts to about four hundred. At the term-end examination, the students were tested about fifty English words, which had been dealt with in the weekly quizzes as a review.

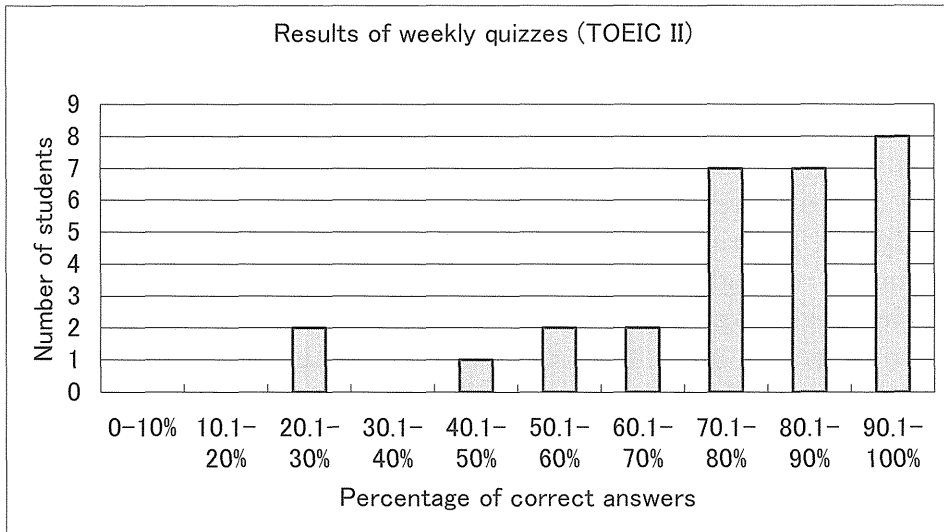


Figure 1. The percentage of correct answers in the weekly quizzes for TOEIC II

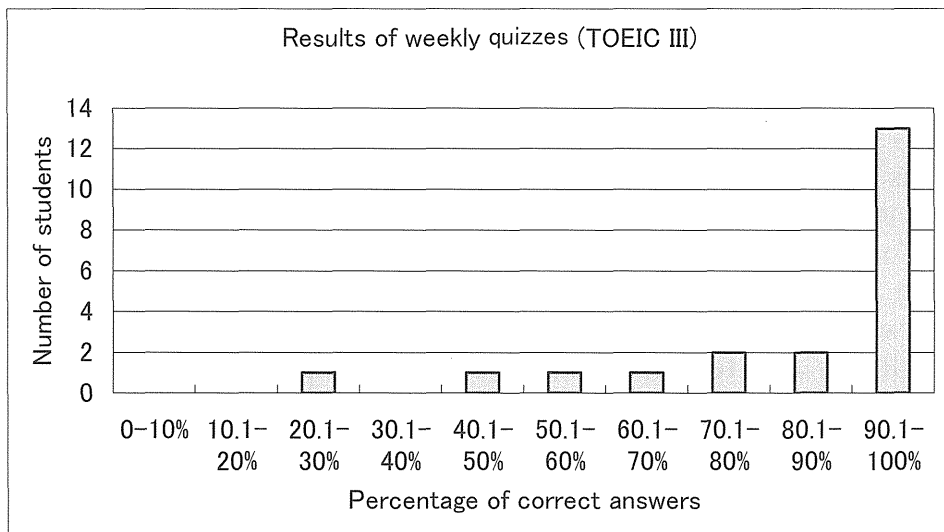


Figure 2. The percentage of correct answers in the weekly quizzes for TOEIC III

First, the results of the weekly quizzes through semester are presented. The percentage of correct answers in the weekly quizzes for TOEIC II and for TOEIC III are respectively shown in Figure 1 and Figure 2. From the comparison of the two charts, it is clear that there is not so big a difference in the scores between the two classes; over half the students in TOEIC II as well as in TOEIC III got the score of over 80% of correct answers. This is also the case with the average percentage of correct answers in the weekly quizzes; the average percentage of correct answers for TOEIC II is 76.17% and that for TOEIC III is 83.85%.

Nonetheless, as shown in Figure 3 and Figure 4, when it comes to the term-end examination, the results of the two classes differ considerably. It is noteworthy that while more than half the students in TOEIC III class got the score of over 90%, less than one fourth of the students in TOEIC II class scored over 90%. In addition, the average percentage of the score in the term-end examination for TOEIC II is 55.93% while that for TOEIC III is 76.95%.

A possible reason for the difference in the results between the two classes will be as follows: since about half the students in TOEIC II took the course of TOEIC I, a required English course, just in the next school period of TOEIC II, and the term-end examinations of TOEIC I and TOEIC II were held on the same day. Therefore, it can be considered that the students did not have enough time for studying for the term-end examination of TOEIC II.

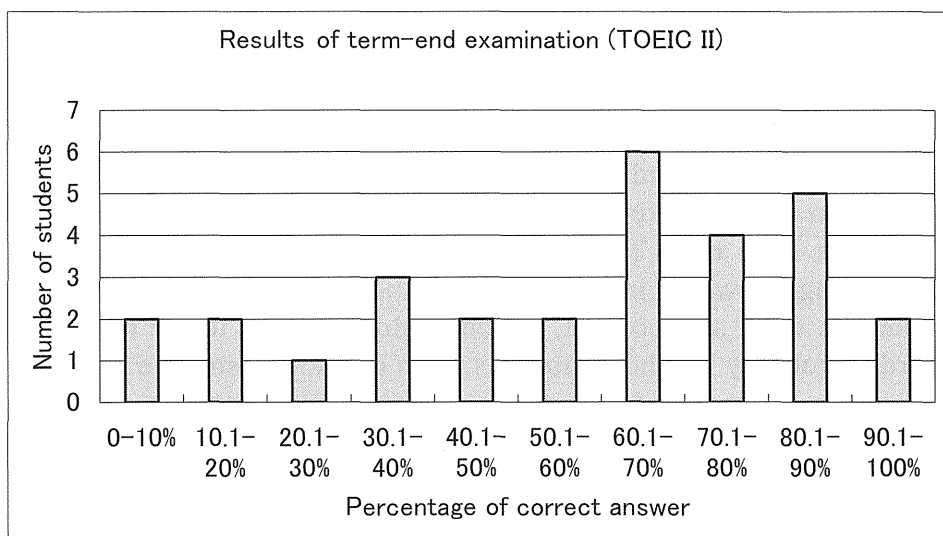


Figure 3. The percentage of correct answers in the term-end examination for TOEIC II

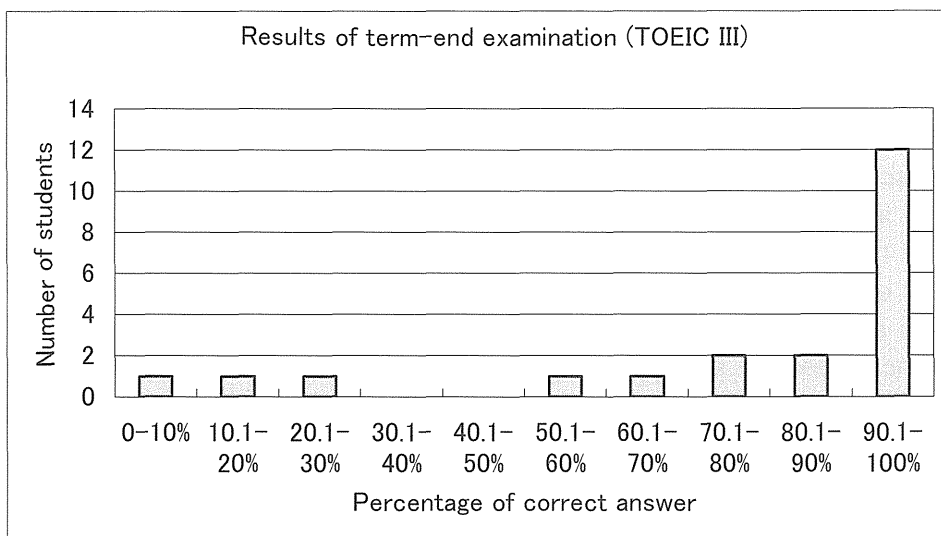


Figure 4. The percentage of correct answers in the term-end examination for TOEIC III

Moreover, in the term-end examination, the vocabulary quiz was given in two forms: in one form, each English word was independently given (Type A), while in the other, each word was embedded in a sentence (Type B). The example of each type is as follows:

[Type A.] 1. global 2. overseas 3. audience

[Type B.] 1. Amy was conscious of the stain on her dress.
 2. The fact eased my tension.
 3. Please remain seated.

Each type includes twenty-five English words. Concerning the scores on both types, the average number of correct answers in the term-end examination in two types for TOEIC II and TOEIC III is shown in Figure 5 and Figure 6.

These two charts make it clear that the students did better in Type A than in Type B in both TOEIC II and TOEIC III. Being embedded in sentences, English words in Type A should be easier to be recalled because the sentences work as a context, which could be a clue to the meanings of the words. Probably for those students, who did not master the words dealt in the weekly quizzes but just memorized them temporarily, the context was not a clue, but rather worked as a disturbance. In other words, students just tried to memorize the meanings of words, as a whole, without paying any attention to their usage or collocation.

In the term-end examination, students in both TOEIC II and TOEIC III

answered a questionnaire. They were asked about such questions as “How long did it take you to memorize English words for the weekly quiz?” and “Did the time to memorize English words become shorter or longer, or remain unchanged in the later quizzes?” To these questions, most of the students answered that they spent about one hour in studying for each weekly vocabulary quiz and the time for it became shorter after each quiz. These answers prove that students possess good ability to memorize English words and that it can be further improved.

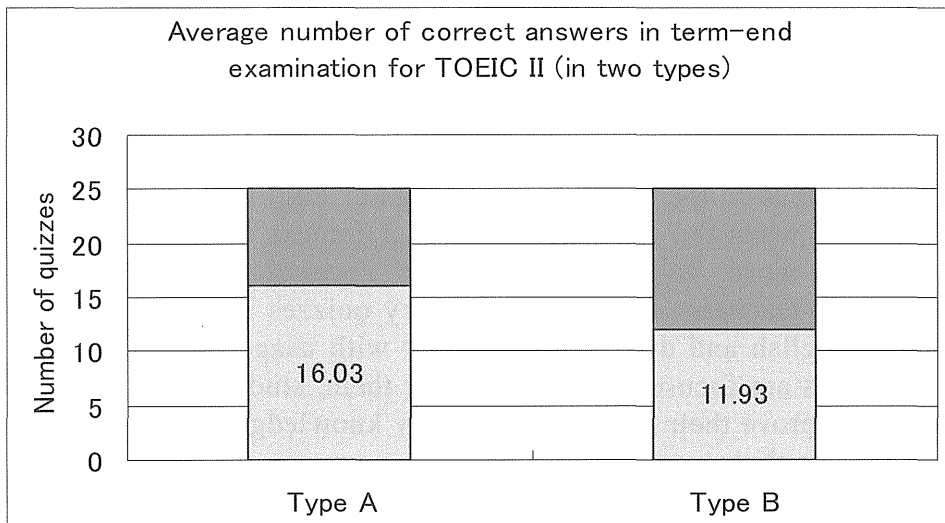


Figure 5. The average number of correct answers in the term-end examination in two types for TOEIC II

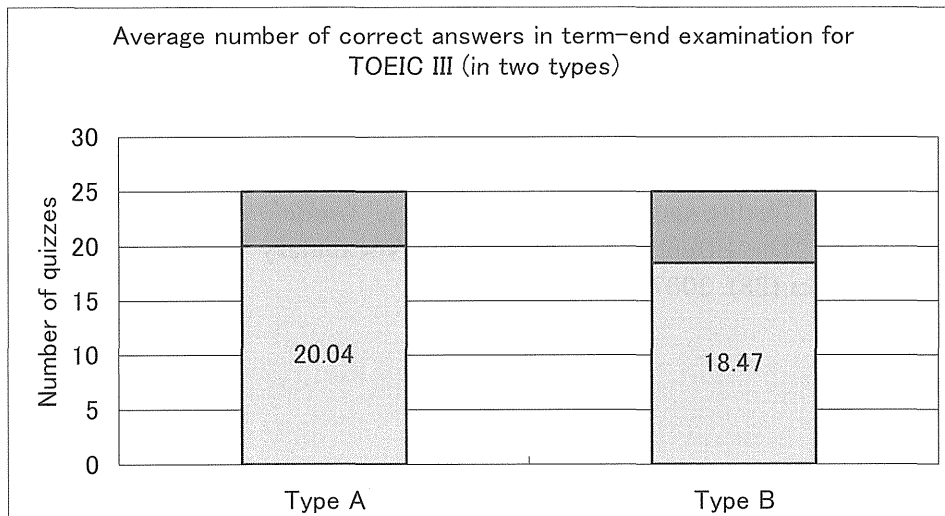


Figure 6. The average number of correct answers in the term-end examination in two types for TOEIC III

Nonetheless, students, being able to memorize English words in a short time, had a problem as mentioned above; their way of rote learning in English vocabulary results in their indifference toward the parts of speech. It is noteworthy that they often cannot make out to which part of speech the relevant each English word in the vocabulary quizzes belongs even though they give correct answers about meanings. In addition, they are not conscious of derivatives of each English word. In short, they cannot make good use of their vocabulary knowledge. It can be regarded that to improve their vocabulary knowledge effectively, students have to study the part of speech in English and derivatives as well as usage and collocation of each word when memorizing English words.

Conclusion

From the results of the researches presented above, it becomes clear that students tend to memorize the meanings of English words by rote. As a result, even when the sentences work as a context, they cannot identify each English word. To improve students' vocabulary knowledge, it is necessary for teachers to design vocabulary quizzes in which the part of speech in English and derivatives together with usage and collocation of English words are focused on. By learning them, students are expected to be able to improve their English vocabulary knowledge and, consequently, come to use English words practically.

Bibliography

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