

Exploring teacher and learner perceptions of value around peer-teaching of vocabulary: convergences and divergences.**Chris Banister**Regent's University London, Inner Circle, Regent's Park, London, NW1 4NS, UK.
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Abstract: This paper describes a teacher-research project exploring the perceptions of a business English lecturer and his undergraduate learners around 'value' in peer-teaching of vocabulary. Peer-teaching and learner generation of materials and content are now commonplace in both language teaching and higher education as techniques for boosting learner engagement. However, learners' decision-making whilst empowered in these ways can often remain submerged. Demystification of learners' hidden rationales when selecting vocabulary to focus on in their business English studies can prove beneficial for all classroom participants, enhancing their quality of life as they achieve a better mutual understanding. The interplay of convergence and divergence in the rationales of both lecturer and learners in vocabulary selection are unpacked and brought to the surface in line with the principles of the adopted research approach, Exploratory Practice. This paper concludes by reflecting upon the research approach and process itself and with some observations on the impact of the research journey on the practitioner-researcher and his future practice.

Keywords: Business English; Teacher research; Exploratory Practice; Vocabulary teaching and learning; Peer-teaching.

1. Introduction

Many higher education courses, including those in English for Academic Purposes (EAP), incorporate learner-led components, learner-generated materials and peer-teaching. Underlying this is the common sense notion that empowering learners in this way can boost engagement levels. Whilst this may provide learners with opportunities to bring topics, materials, and language selections into the classroom, the way that such approaches play out in the classroom may not be straightforward. The classroom research in this chapter explores learners' rationales when choosing vocabulary to peer-teach. I start with background and my teacher-researcher's perspective, then draw in relevant literature, describe the research methodology before a presentation of the understanding and a brief discussion. Finally, I reflect upon the research process itself.

2. Background

2.1 Contextual issues

On the business English modules, peer-teaching constitutes an integral part of a module component known as the 'Weekly Discussion Board'. Learners are tasked with the delivery of a short oral presentation to their peers about a current business news story (e.g. 'London's Housing in Crisis'). In-class discussion is extended via written contributions to an online discussion board. This provides learners with the opportunity to bring topics of interest into classroom discourse and at the same time practise their business English. As part of their presentation, learners choose five vocabulary items (words or phrases) to peer-teach with a definition and example sentence. Items selected tend to be from business magazines or business sections of UK broadsheets. From my teacher's vantage point, intuition suggested that learners' lexical selections only sometimes appeared 'valuable'. In other cases, I felt an opportunity for learning had been missed by focusing on these items rather than others.

For me, vocabulary knowledge is of central importance in successful language learning. This conviction is intertwined within my constructed teacher identity, that is, my identity shaped "across space and time... in relationship to the world" (Barkhuizen 2016: 30). As a teacher, I like the words of my language with all their quiriness and within the rich diversity of the English lexicon. I am constantly interested in collocations arising in lessons: Why are 'sprees' linked to 'shopping' and 'killing'? As a teacher, I embraced the Lexical Approach and conducted postgraduate research examining teachers' practices, beliefs and attitudes around a popular EAP word list (Banister 2016). The desire to explore my learners' decision-making around vocabulary alongside my interest in the lexical dimension underpin this current research project. Added to this, is an interest in understanding the processes at work when learners are empowered and positioned as teachers.

2.2 Initial thoughts

At the outset of this research process, I attempted to go beyond intuition and unpack what 'valuable' represented to me, I analysed vocabulary selections made by recent cohorts, grouped them into 'valuable' and 'less valuable', then reflected at length on the differences. On the one hand, some vocabulary such as 'inflation' or 'partnership' seemed to me to lack linguistic challenge for learners already on the second or third year of a degree in business. However, I also realised that learners' L1s would also likely influence what represented a linguistic challenge. On the other hand, some vocabulary, often proper nouns or acronyms, seemed so specific as to preclude broader application. For example, 'the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA)' might be central to studying sustainability, but does not seem widely usable and might well be learnt from context or glossed by a business lecturer. By contrast, the valuable vocabulary seemed to be more widely deployable (e.g. 'pledge', 'grapple with something') and to project linguistic complexity and sophistication (e.g. 'tax loophole', 'global governance'). Interestingly, when I checked to see how some of the vocabulary I saw as 'valuable' was classified on the Academic Vocabulary List, the majority of items, 11/15 items were not in the top 3000 academic words. This left me more confused than previously so I turned my focus to the task my learners had been set.

2.3 Literature

In effect, when choosing vocabulary to peer-teach, learners are positioned as teachers to select the vocabulary they believe worthy of their classmates' attention. Teaching words with attention on the target item represents a deliberate approach (Nation and Meara 2010). Deliberate instruction can be contrasted with an incidental approach whereby learners acquire vocabulary through repeated exposure such as extensive reading (Nation and Meara 2010). Ultimately, it is important to incorporate both strands into effective instruction (alongside fluency and through message-focussed output (Nation and Meara 2010). Deliberate teaching is embodied in the use of vocabulary cards and vocabulary lists. In EAP the latter Gardner and Davies' (2014) Academic Vocabulary List (AVL) (mentioned earlier). These frequency-based lists claim to focus learners' attention on the words worth knowing and are popular in time-pressured EAP contexts but in my experience they are not tools that my learners are generally aware of and use autonomously.

3. Research methodology

3.1 Research approach

This research adopts the principles of Exploratory Practice (EP), a form of practitioner-research which encourages teachers and learners to mutually engage to co-shape research and enhance classroom quality of life. EP promotes scholarly inquiry via exploration of teaching and learning 'puzzles', counter-intuitive classroom phenomena (Allwright 2005). Through the development of Potentially Exploitable Pedagogic Activities (PEPAs), which integrate teaching, learning and research, EP offers the practitioner-research endeavour an inclusive and sustainable theoretical underpinning (Allwright and Hanks 2009) and represents a confluence of teaching, learning and research. Furthermore, EP has been demonstrated to impact positively on the professional identity of the teacher-researcher (Rolls and Kiely 2017) and teachers' self-efficacy (Wyatt and Dikilitas 2015). The murky waters surrounding my learners' choices when peer-teaching vocabulary saw this puzzle emerge:

'Why do my business English learners select particular vocabulary items and not others to teach their peers?'

3.2 Participants

The research participants were undergraduates in their early 20s on exchange programmes at a UK university studying business English alongside their business modules. The participants came from a range of LI backgrounds but Latin-based languages, especially French and Spanish predominated. Two cohorts participated in across the autumn 2016 and spring 2017 semesters. Learners sometimes worked alone and sometimes in pairs when providing data for this project.

3.3 Tools

To gain insights into learners' selection rationales, it made sense to ask them directly. The small class sizes made open-ended survey questions feasible. Three questions (listed below) about the peer-teaching process were embedded into a pre-existing review activity, constituting a short qualitative survey and a PEPA with which to explore my puzzle.

1. Why did you choose this particular vocabulary rather than other items to teach to your peers?
2. Did you use any tools (online dictionaries, websites etc.) or rely on your own judgement when selecting this vocabulary?
3. Upon reflection, do you still think the key vocabulary you taught was useful or not? Which? Why/not?

The first question aimed to unpack learner rationales, the second asked about how they reached a decision and the third question was intended to retrospectively gauge their confidence levels. Further questions asked learners to connect the business news story chosen to other lexis from the class vocabulary card bank and consider additional vocabulary useful when discussing this story and its recent development.

In addition to learners' written responses to these questions, a teacher reflective journal was kept and provided additional data alongside ad-hoc classroom discussion.

3.4 Ethical procedures

In adherence to the principles of informed consent, consent forms were completed and learners introduced to EP and my puzzle. In line with EP's ethics, puzzle exploration was incorporated into regular classroom activities to ensure that research did not 'take over'. Anonymity was maintained in the reporting by referring to the participants by student number and cohort, e.g. S1 2016 = Student group 1 from autumn 2016.

Learners' written responses were manually coded using content analysis and my reflective journal was completed on a weekly basis. As with much teacher-research, this project celebrates its subjectivity and leverages my privileged position as teacher in the research setting. With any qualitative research based around open questions in a small group setting, anonymity is often a myth but in an attempt to mitigate this, I reassured my learners I would take all comments as an opportunity to develop the module and my teaching.

4. Understanding* and discussion

*EP prefers to use the term 'Understanding' rather than 'Findings', which might indicate a results-driven agenda.

There were four responses in autumn 2016 and three in spring 2017 constituting the dataset. These were collated and analysed to understand my puzzle around why learners select particular vocabulary to peer-teach.

4.1 Convergences and divergences around teacher and learner perspectives on 'value'

In Q1 learners were asked about their rationale in choosing vocabulary to peer-teach. Learner responses were collated and analysed to see which rationales were mentioned. Please note that most responses featured more than one single reason. Responses to this item coalesced around three central areas of perceived value:

1. **Novelty** (of the lexical item for peers): learners believed the vocabulary would be new or interesting for their peers. "We have assumed the rest of the class is not familiar with such...vocabulary" (S2 2016). "They look [like] sophisticated synonyms to some easy vocabulary we would usually select instead..." (S3 2017).
2. **Necessity** (for comprehension of the business news story) "For them to better understand our research." (S4 2016)
3. **Transferability**: "I thought that words like blueprint and bespoke were simple words that are often employed in many contexts..." (S3 2017)

Learners' responses converged with my own rationales for choosing vocabulary for explicit instruction. Interest, need and potential for broader usage all matched my reasons. Borg (2003) notes that language teachers are influenced by their formal schooling and previous learning experiences. It might therefore be suggested that language learners positioned, albeit temporarily, as teachers engage in a parallel process, using their own past experiences of vocabulary instruction to gauge value. In the case of myself and my learners, it was in our enactment of these mutually identified rationales that we diverged. It could be argued that my constructed teacher identity, the facet of identity built over time and place (Barkhuizen 2016) predisposes me to value general vocabulary which is widely deployable more highly than technical business words, which by their nature are more narrowly used. By contrast, my learners, understandably focusing on their business studies, tend to select these technical items to peer-teach.

There were other issues around vocabulary learning unpacked by this research as well. My journal reflections and learners' responses reminded me that a tension exists between, for example, necessity and transferability. A word can be central to understanding a particular business news story yet simultaneously very specific, lacking wider transferability. Finally, the responses demystified learners'

thought processes and allowed submerged decision-making to resurface once more. This research laid out this potential mismatch and for me, it confirmed the value once again of teachers exploring issues like this with their learners for mutual benefit. As a result of this new understanding around peer-teaching vocabulary, I will make changes to some of the materials and instructions given to learners. It may be helpful to provide them with a list of considerations when choosing words to peer-teach, making the selection process more explicit, perhaps also considering vocabulary selected in relation to their own LI, establishing such links can in itself represent a promotion of deeper learning by getting learners to connect academic tasks with their wider world.

4.2 The pull of the familiar and ‘instinct’

Responses to Q2, ‘Did you use any tools (online dictionaries, websites etc.) or rely on your own judgement when selecting this vocabulary?’, revealed that in most cases learners used their own judgement when selecting words (4/7 cases). Dictionaries were used in tandem with learners’ own judgement in the majority of cases (5 overall, 3 monolingual, 2 bilingual). This exposed the reality that decision-making in this context rested largely on a ‘learner’s instinct’, combined with dictionary usage. I introduced my learners to online resources like the Word and Phrase tool, a web resource to browse vocabulary along with definitions, collocations, synonyms and examples of real life use via concordance data with a Key Word in Context (KWIC) feature. However, when asked to select words to peer-teach, my learners felt the pull of familiar resources and rejected the less familiar Word and Phrase. Further discussion of this in class, revealed that their favoured online dictionaries featured a translation element that the EAP word lists did not. Again, this tendency is something I share with my learners. Whilst I genuinely believe that tools like Word and Phrase and frequency based lists are useful, when it comes to the crunch, often my ‘teacher’s instinct’, with all its implicit assumptions about value, will take over and guide decision-making around which vocabulary to teach.

4.3 Missed opportunities for deeper learning

Finally, when asked to reflect on their lexical selections (Q3), confidence levels appeared to be high with all 7 responses indicating partial or total confidence in choices made. Learners felt that some vocabulary had been put into productive use: “Some of them became a part of our vocabulary base we can use e.g. in our writing exercise[s] (essays, reports, etc.) (S2 2016).” One respondent noted that three out of five items chosen had been “less useful because everybody already knew them” (S1 2017). This idea that a word can be fully ‘known’ prompted further reflection. My initial journal entries revolved around the idea that some learners’ selections lacked value, but perhaps I was intermittently guilty of this too, I was still, like the learner quoted above, judging selections on their novelty and failing to see the potential value in revisiting basic vocabulary items and encouraging depth alongside breadth of knowledge in vocabulary learning. As novelty is very tangible, such an approach can generate learner resistance, but it allows a focus on what Nation and Meara (2010) refer to as the deeper and richer aspects of word knowledge, and ones with which teachers may be well-placed to help learners.

5. Reflections and looking into the future

A strength of practitioner-research is the learning that typically results from the research process itself, about teachers themselves, their instructional setting and their learners. This project brought to the surface the way that my teacher identity can influence my teaching and my evaluation of my learners’ decision-making in the area of peer-teaching vocabulary. It is always timely to be reminded of potential divergences between myself and my learners as over time, these can easily become submerged and remain hidden from view. In addition, this research will foster my future development as a teacher-researcher by reminding me of the need to scrutinise the often deeply engrained assumptions I hold and that impact my daily practice. All in all, it should help me to maintain an ever-curious stance and be ready to adjust and reassess my understanding. Finally, the research journey proved powerful in itself, consolidating my belief in the value of keeping a reflective journal in future to record and capture temporal changes in my practitioner-researcher’s perspective and is a method I will look to reutilise and extend in future practitioner-research projects.

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