

# Vocabulary Recall in Young Learners: An Action Research Project

Darlene  
Reed-Yamauchi  
Niigata University  
of Health and Welfare

## Reference Data:

Reed-Yamauchi, D. (2014). Vocabulary recall in young learners: An action research project. In N. Sonda & A. Krause (Eds.), *JALT2013 Conference Proceedings*. Tokyo: JALT.

In this paper I present the results of an action research project involving a class of 25 students in a Japanese kindergarten. The purpose of the project was to investigate the degree of oral recall of new vocabulary in 5- to 6-year-old learners of English using three types of oral repetition teaching techniques, specifically drills, chants, and song. Although the quantitative results proved inconclusive as to which of the three techniques was most effective, the constructive nature of action research proved to be a positive experience for both the researcher and the participating students.

本論文では、日本国内にある幼稚園で約25人の児童を対象に行ったアクションリサーチプロジェクト(AR)の結果を説明する。このARの目的は、3種類の口述反復による教授技術、具体的には歌、チャンツ、ドリルを使用して、5~6歳の学習者を対象に英語の新たな語彙の修得の程度を調査することであった。その3種類のうちの教授技術がもっとも効果的であるかについては、定量的分析の結論は出なかったが、ARの建設的な特質を鑑みると、研究者および参加した生徒の両方にとって有益な経験であるということが証明された。

**T**HE JAPANESE Ministry of Education's guideline of approximately 8 hours per month, in principle, devoted to English instruction for 5th and 6th graders has meant that students are learning English at an earlier age. In recent years, English instruction in kindergartens and nursery schools has increased annually (MEXT, 2011). Looking toward the future, with the increase of young learners (YLS) learning EFL, it is beneficial to investigate the techniques and methods used in the classroom to ascertain their value and work toward improving educational tools.

This small-scale study was an action research (AR) project. The goal was to determine whether different types of teaching techniques aimed at eliciting oral repetition assisted 5- to 6-year-old Japanese learners of English with orally recalling new vocabulary (Stake, 1995).

## Young Learners and L2 Vocabulary

As YLS are thought to acquire foreign languages in the same way they learn their L1, the vocabulary taught to these students should be both age and developmentally appropriate (Donaldson, 1978). It is also theorized that if foreign language vocabulary introduced at an appropriate point in YLS' development consists of words that are of immediate interest to the



students and are easily demonstrated (with importance placed on the meaning, pronunciation, and usefulness of the word for future use), the probability of successful learning of vocabulary may be increased (Brewster, Ellis, & Girard, 2002).

When YLs learn a new language, the accumulation of functional words is instrumental in their language development (Cameron, 2001). Concrete structured classroom activities give YLs greater ability to learn and retain vocabulary, a valuable step to aid future grammar acquisition and general language learning (Cameron, 2001). Additionally, with regard to the selection of teaching techniques in the foreign language (FL) instruction of YLs, an acknowledgment that these learners have the ability to learn in various ways and possess different learning styles seems beneficial to successful language learning. Researchers such as Gardner (1993) and Vouillemin (1994) have commented that there are different learning styles and intelligences that may explain the mechanisms by which learners including YLs acquire knowledge (Cameron, 2001). In other words, YLs, like any language learner, have different learning styles, so they need to be given different opportunities to process input through different channels.

With respect to teaching techniques, the repetitive nature of songs, chants, and drills are an indispensable tool for successful learning by YLs (Hughes, 2006). For example, the use of drilling is an effective way to learn new vocabulary and engage YLs in speaking practice, particularly with larger class sizes, in which it may be difficult for learners to participate in individual speaking practice (Cameron, 2001). In short, vocabulary should be developmentally appropriate and presented in a variety of ways in order to expand learning opportunities.

### Focus and Rationale

The rationale behind conducting an AR project is linked to a desire to improve professional conditions as well as educational

practice by continuously appraising and reviewing outcomes with the aim of applying the results to improvements in a feedback loop, creating a framework for further investigation (Bell, 2010). An AR project may be conducted on a small scale, such as in one classroom, and over a short time span, such as a four-class sequence (Carr & Kemmis, 1986), as was the case in the current study. The reasoning behind the choice of this topic originated from the desire to improve the techniques used in teaching vocabulary and use time more effectively to improve learning with this class of YLs.

Three vocabulary categories were chosen: animals, vehicles, and sports, with each category consisting of six words. Practical considerations, such as word groups and allotted instruction time, aided in the creation of a more succinct approach to introducing vocabulary (Wallace, 1998). Singing, chanting, drilling, and employing flash cards and objects were the main techniques normally utilized in this classroom as part of the usual lessons to motivate students to learn vocabulary. As these techniques were being used on a continual, regular basis in the classroom, the researcher wanted to ascertain which techniques were most effective with this group of YLs and to determine how the techniques might be improved to benefit current and future students. In the current project, to increase the reliability of the observations, an independent researcher was used.

### Context

This project was conducted in a private kindergarten class of approximately 25 students, aged 5 to 6 years, living in rural Japan. For all students, Japanese was their L1, and this class was their first formal experience learning English. There appeared to be no other outside English influences. As the students were at the same level in terms of English experience, a sample of eight students, four boys and four girls, was chosen randomly and the results from these were used in the data collection. The teacher-

researcher had more than 20 years teaching experience and had taught the class for approximately 8 months.

Permission to conduct the project was obtained from the kindergarten administration as well as all the students' parents, including the eight students used in the sample. Individual student privacy was ensured by maintaining students' anonymity throughout the project. In an effort to maintain students' normal study patterns, the eight sample students were not informed specifically of their precise role in the AR.

### Method

The project focused on three groups of six vocabulary words that were age appropriate, of concrete interest to YLs, and not previously introduced in this class (Table 1). Oral recall was considered achieved when a student successfully verbalized a word that was previously introduced, either without cues as free recall or by cued recall, utilizing various hints and suggestions (Richards & Schmidt, 2002). Cued oral recall was achieved when a student was able to recognize verbally a word with the aid of a prompt, such as a card, sound, or action. Quantitative descriptive data summaries, namely checklists, were completed by the teacher and independent observer. These were collected, and descriptive statistics for the eight-student sample were averaged. The observer's findings were compared with those of the teacher in an attempt to increase reliability and reduce subjectivity (as recommended by Hopkins, 2008).

Table 1. Word List

| Cycle/category    | Vocabulary words  |
|-------------------|---|
| 1. Transportation | bicycle, helicopter, motorcycle, truck, airplane, boat    |
| 2. Sports         | baseball, basketball, golf, ping pong, tennis, volleyball |
| 3. Animals        | monkey, kangaroo, tiger, elephant, zebra, lion            |

### General Explanation of Cycles

A base cycle was conducted during one class to ascertain oral recall of the chosen vocabulary. The students were asked if they knew the words in each of the three groups, and it was established that all six vocabulary words for each of the three cycles were unknown to the students, including the eight-student sample. Following this base cycle, the three individual action cycles were carried out to investigate the extent to which different teaching techniques, specifically chants, drills, and songs, influenced YLs' oral recall of vocabulary. Each cycle followed the same format, with the three individual techniques administered using a preplanned lesson format and allowing the same amount of practice time. Thus, the investigation consisted of an initial cycle and three action cycles performed in three separate classes for a total of four class periods over a 2-month period. Each cycle was completed in one class of approximately 45 minutes. Upon completion of each cycle, the number of target vocabulary words orally recalled by the students at the end of the lesson was tallied and recorded by the researcher and the independent observer, along with the number of words that were remembered by each of the eight students in the sample. At the end of each cycle, the independent observer and researcher discussed their observations and impressions of each cycle, and

improvements that might be made for upcoming cycles were documented in a cycle observation report.

### **Cycle 1: Chants**

To determine whether or not the vocabulary words were known to the students, the vocabulary items were introduced via a chant designed by the researcher containing six vocabulary words. The independent observer and the researcher recorded that there was no oral recall of the target vocabulary prior to demonstrating the chant (see Appendix). The original chant was then repeated five times, and the students' participation was encouraged. The sixth presentation of the chant was done in the form of a verbal fill-in-the-blank test with no verbal cues from the researcher, only hand-clapping at the timing of the expected vocabulary. The orally recalled words from the sample of eight students were then recorded by the observer and the researcher.

At the conclusion of Cycle 1, the researcher's field notes were reviewed in order to improve further cycles. During Cycle 1 there were no specific problems encountered with students' ability to see the teacher's presentation, but both the researcher and the observer noted that some of the students may have had a better view of the teacher than others. It also appeared that the teacher may have been giving more attention to the students located in the first two rows. The observer suggested that the "teacher's action zone" could be widened if the chairs were placed in a semi-circle as opposed to the usual rows, increasing direct contact with the teacher and improving eye contact, which is instrumental in increasing student participation (Richards & Lockhart, 1996). The seating plan was altered for future cycles.

### **Cycle 2: Drilling**

The intention of Cycle 2 was to determine the effect of drilling on students' oral recall of the target vocabulary. Cycle 2 em-

ployed drilling, in which students were first shown six flashcards (MES-English, n.d.) without any verbal cues to determine whether or not any of the vocabulary words could be orally recalled by the students without help. No words were found to be orally recalled, and these results were recorded. The flashcards (see Appendix) were then presented to the students in the original presentation order an additional five times, with the researcher repeating the words to the students, and the students repeating the target vocabulary. In the sixth presentation, the students were shown the flashcards only, without any verbal cue from the researcher. Upon completion of the second cycle, the orally recalled vocabulary was documented by both the observer and the researcher.

Upon completion of Cycle 2, a review of the teachers' field notes suggested that in terms of improving the students' ability to orally reproduce the presented vocabulary, the researcher could have spoken at a slower speed, which would have allowed for clearer pronunciation, and this was noted for the presentation of Cycle 3.

### **Cycle 3: Song**

In Cycle 3, the researcher aimed to discover the effect on oral recall of teaching through song. The song chosen was "I am a monkey" (Richelson, 2011; see Appendix). As explained earlier, the researcher and the observer surmised that the students' oral recall might improve if the researcher's speaking speed was reduced. As this cycle relied on an audio CD, rather than on the researcher's voice, the CD track was slowed down by one increment (approximately 1.6 seconds) in an effort to aid oral recall. The students were first played the CD of the song containing the six target vocabulary words. Both the independent observer and the researcher recorded oral recall of the target vocabulary for each student. The song was then repeated five times and the students' participation was encouraged. The sixth presentation

of the song was done with the CD, but the expected vocabulary was deleted from the CD track and there were no verbal cues from the researcher, aside from a 2-second pause in the CD at the timing of the expected vocabulary. The words orally recalled by the sample were then recorded by the observer and the researcher.

As in Cycle 2, it was observed that the speed of the prerecorded song may have been too fast, which may have consequently affected the students' oral recall of vocabulary. The independent observer commented that slowing the CD track further may have resulted in more recall of the vocabulary.

## Results

In each cycle, both the independent observer and the researcher recorded the rate of the target words orally recalled by the sample students. The tallies recorded by both the independent observer and the researcher were found to be in agreement. The average number of words that were orally recalled or not recalled by the sample group was calculated for each cycle. The results are presented in Figure 1. Students orally recalled vocabulary 81.25%, 91.67%, and 77.08% of the time in Cycle 1 (chant), Cycle 2 (drill), and Cycle 3 (song), respectively. However, this quantitative data alone does not adequately summarize the results of this project. Further examination of the qualitative data and the ensuing reflective cycles helps clarify contributing factors to the YLs apparent increase in oral recall. As the observer remarked, the students seemed more familiar with and enthusiastic about the drilling technique than the other techniques, which may have contributed to their recall of the target vocabulary.

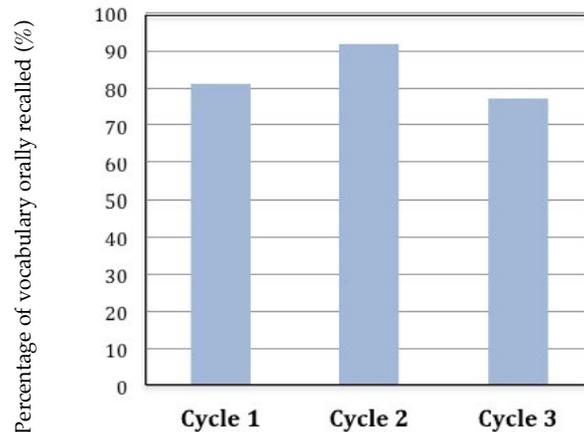


Figure 1. Vocabulary orally recalled by a sample group of students.

## Discussion

Based on both the quantitative tallies and qualitative observations, all three teaching techniques appeared to have a positive effect on the ability to orally recall new vocabulary. Cycle 2, which utilized drilling, appeared to be the most successful technique, producing the highest percentage of orally recalled words (91.67%). The technique in Cycle 3 using song appeared least successful, as this cycle yielded the smallest number of orally recalled words (77.08%).

Appropriate word choice may also be a contributing factor in successful oral recall. The words selected for this project may be judged to be basic level words falling between the general, superordinate, and the more specific subordinate hierarchies (see Cameron, 2001). The observer commented on this point, suggesting it also may have contributed to the students' recall. The results of the quantitative data may be viewed as supporting

this observation. Additionally, another factor that might have affected the YLs' successful oral recall of the vocabulary may have been the number of times the word was presented to them. It has been suggested that the more frequently a student is exposed to a word, the easier it may be to learn (Cameron, 2001). In addition to the frequency with which new words are presented, the context in which they are presented may be significant in aiding oral recall (Brewster et al., 2002). As new words are often remembered in groups, presenting new vocabulary in sets that are logical to YLs would be helpful in aiding oral recall (Brewster et al., 2002). Although the observer noted that some of students during the drilling cycle recognized the words as being part of a group, in the present project it is difficult to comment indisputably on how this might have assisted with recall. Another factor that may also have affected the reliability of the investigation was that although results of the baseline tests demonstrated that the words presented were unknown to the students, the observer noted that oral recall may have been aided by the fact that all the words in Cycle 2 could be considered loan words in Japanese, and they are similar in English and Japanese. The only exception is *baseball*, which was the least recalled word, with only five of the eight students demonstrating successful oral recall.

## Conclusion

Although the investigation did not yield clear results regarding which technique was best, the combination of observations and testing provided a number of insights that became valuable for future lesson planning (see Hopkins, 2008). As the researcher regularly utilizes the three techniques used in this study, examining them with an independent observer in the classroom was enlightening. Often teachers work in isolation. Having another professional opinion was instrumental in offering specific advice on various issues in the classroom, including comments

on the benefits of the techniques employed. The independent observer in this case was also able to confirm the tallies of words recalled.

A limitation of this study is that permission was not granted to videotape the class. In retrospect, it would have been beneficial to do so, as post cycle video viewing would permit observation of the participating students more closely. Additionally taking lesson transcripts might have also been advantageous. Nevertheless, the opportunity to design and conduct this project has given me as a researcher invaluable insight into teaching practices used with YLs. Thus, although the quantitative results were not conclusive, the constructive nature of action research created a positive experience for the participating students and contributed to my professional development.

## Bio Data

**Darlene Reed-Yamauchi** (MATEYL) has been teaching English in Japan for more than 23 years and in addition to owning Eikaiwa DLS, a group of English conversation schools in Niigata catering to young learners (YLs), she is affiliated as an adjunct professor at Niigata University of Health and Welfare. Her research interests include content and language integrated learning (CLIL), English for specific purposes (ESP), young learners (YLs), and multiple intelligences (MI). <daryama2014@outlook.com>

## References

- Bell, J. (2010) *Doing your research project: A guide for first-time researchers in education, health and social science* (4th ed.). Maidenhead, UK: Open University Press.
- Brewster, J., Ellis, G., & Girard, D. (2002). *The primary English teacher's guide*. Harlow, UK: Pearson Education.
- Carr, W., & Kemmis, S. (1986). *Becoming critical. Education, knowledge and action research*. Abingdon, Oxon, UK: Deakin University Press.

- Cameron, L. (2001) *Teaching language to young learners*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Donaldson, M. (1978). *Children's minds*. London: Fontana Press.
- Gardner, H. (1993). The theory of multiple intelligences. In B. Moon & A. S. Mayes (Eds.), *Teaching and learning in the secondary school* (pp. 38-46). London: Routledge.
- Hopkins, D. (2008) *A teacher's guide to classroom research*. Maidenhead, UK: Open University Press.
- Hughes, A. (2006, August). *How do we think young learners learn languages?* Paper presented at the APPI (Portuguese Association of English Teachers) Conference, Portugal.
- MES-English. (n.d.). *Free printables for teachers*. Retrieved from [www.mes-english.com/flashcards.php](http://www.mes-english.com/flashcards.php)
- Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) (2011). The revisions of the courses of study for elementary and secondary schools. Retrieved from [www.mext.go.jp/english/elsec/\\_icsFiles/afieldfile/2011/03/28/1303755\\_001.pdf](http://www.mext.go.jp/english/elsec/_icsFiles/afieldfile/2011/03/28/1303755_001.pdf)
- Richards, J., & Lockhart, C. (1996). *Reflective teaching in second language classrooms*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Richards, J., & Schmidt, R. (2002). *Longman dictionary of language teaching and applied linguistics* (3rd ed.). Harlow, UK: Pearson Education.
- Richelson, M. (2011). I'm a monkey. On *Dream English best of kids' songs* (vol. 1) [CD]. Tokyo: Dream English.
- Stake, R. (1995). *The art of case research*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications.
- Vouillemin, D. (1994). VAK again. *Practical English Teaching*, 14(3), 22-23.
- Wallace, M. J. (1998). *Action research for language teachers*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

## Appendix

### Examples of Materials

#### Cycle 1: Chant

"Let's Go Chant!"

Airplane helicopter truck (clap)

Airplane helicopter truck

Airplane helicopter

Airplane helicopter

Airplane helicopter

Airplane helicopter truck (clap)

Let's Go! (clap, clap, clap)

Bicycle motorcycle boat (clap)

Bicycle motorcycle boat (clap)

Bicycle motorcycle

Bicycle motorcycle

Bicycle motorcycle

Bicycle motorcycle boat (clap)

Let's Go! (Clap, clap, clap)

## Cycle 2: Drilling

Flashcards



## Cycle 3 Song

"I'm a monkey" By Matt Richelson (2011)

What's that sound? Look over there!

I'm a monkey (x 4)

I'm a kangaroo (x 4)

Tip toe, tip toe, shh, shh, shh

Tip toe, tip toe, who are you?

I'm a tiger! (x 4)

I'm an elephant (x 4)

I'm a zebra (x 4)

Tip toe, tip toe, shh, shh, shh

Tip toe, tip toe, who are you?

I'm a lion! (x 4)

I'm a monkey

I'm a kangaroo

I'm an elephant

I'm a zebra

Tip toe, tip toe, shh, shh, shh

Tip toe, tip toe, who are you?

I'm a crocodile!