Whatchamacallit?: An Autodidactic Tool for Eliciting Unknown Vocabulary

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, the author draws upon his experience learning Japanese in order to create a tool for learning English vocabulary. This tool gives students the opportunity to elicit unknown or forgotten words from native and non-native English speakers while engaged in conversation. In this regard, students are able to utilise the insight of others in order to increase their own language lexicon.

INTRODUCTION

One of the biggest challenges for language learners is acquiring an extensive vocabulary in the target language. Many teachers suggest reading books, making vocabulary flashcards, or even translating words from one's native language. However, these methods make a few assumptions on behalf of the student. For instance, they assume that the student is literate in the target language, that they are willing to invest time creating flashcards, or that they are able to anticipate which words are necessary for study. They also expect students to study vocabulary in a solitary and uncommunicative way.

Students who actively study vocabulary ultimately have a much larger language lexicon (Carter & McCarthy, 1988; Laufer, 1986, Lord, 1974; Meara, 1980). This is quite unsurprising. Regardless of this evidence, in a study conducted in 2006, it was found that many English language textbooks in Korea and Japan limited their vocabulary instruction to a few common verbs, irregular verbs, or nouns (Takeda, Choi, Mochizuki, & Watanabe, 2006). They rarely taught synonyms or antonyms and considered the study of these lexemes to be extracurricular. They also considered pronunciation instruction to be more within the purview of the classroom teacher than the classroom textbook.

One issue regarding the teaching of vocabulary is that it is not always clear which words may be required by students in a future spoken exchange. For instance, it may be possible for a teacher to anticipate which words would be useful for a shopping trip or a taxi ride. However, this is not always the case for a natural conversation, debate or discussion. These types of interactions are, by their very nature, unpredictable as they require the cooperation of multiple speakers and can span a range of topics.

There are also issues regarding the self-study of English vocabulary and, for the language learner, the sheer volume of words within the English language can be quite daunting. For instance, *The Oxford English Dictionary, 2nd Edition* (1989) lists over 500,000 headwords that can be broken into two main categories: high frequency and low frequency words (Kennedy, 2003). However, it is not necessary for a speaker to learn all of the words within the English language in order to achieve fluency. Therefore, it would be wise for the English learner to focus on the words that they consider themselves most likely to hear or require when conversing in the English language. Again, this is not always that easy to predict.

While living and teaching English in Japan, the author of this paper often found himself in situations where he could either not understand a word or did not know how to say a word in Japanese. Not wanting to rely on a translation dictionary, it could be quite challenging for this non-native speaker to produce or understand an unknown word in Japanese. The logical solution was to ask the interlocutor with whom he was speaking. Drawing from these experiences, the author created a tool that could be used by English language students to learn vocabulary from

other speakers. The tool was named *Whatchamacallit?* (See Appendix) and it was introduced to thirteen classes of Japanese students at the start of the Fall 2018 semester of Rikkyo University's English Discussion Class (EDC).

EDC is a compulsory course for all freshman students at Rikkyo University and lessons occur once per week for two consecutive 14-week semesters. The aim of this course is to improve the students' discussion skills and it views Schmidt's (1992) definition of fluency as a vehicle for autonomous development (Hurling, 2012). As such, there is no grammar or vocabulary instruction built into the course material and students are encouraged to resolve any communication breakdowns themselves.

During their discussions, students can make appeals for help, clarification requests, comprehension checks, and confirmation checks (Nakatani, 2010) using the Communication Skills introduced at the beginning of the course and reviewed in lessons 4, 8, and 12. These skills are presented in the form of phrases that students can utter whenever they are confused or would like to negotiate meaning and are included in the back of the course textbook.

The use of Japanese in class is strictly forbidden and every effort is made to encourage the students to use English in class. For instance, during the discussion tests that occur in lessons 5, 9, and 13, students receive a grade-point penalty any time they speak Japanese. Moreover, the excessive use of Japanese in regular lessons could result in the reduction of a student's grade. To an outside observer this approach may seem draconian, however, it serves to incentivise the exclusive use of English and deter students from code-switching whenever a communication breakdown occurs.

At the end of each semester students complete a 'Student Survey Form.' This gives students the opportunity to suggest ways of improving the English Discussion Class in the future. Feedback is always overwhelmingly positive, however, many students said that their lack of vocabulary hindered their ability to adequately express their ideas in English.

Based on this feedback, this teacher created Whatchamacallit? to encourage the autodidactic study of vocabulary in a communicative way. This tool can be used in real-world situations or at any point during a lesson to elicit unknown or forgotten words from other speakers.

DISCUSSION

What is Whatchamacallit?

Whatchamacallit? is a tool that English language students can use to learn vocabulary through informant elicitation. In instances when a student is unsure of the meaning of a word, how to say an unknown word, the synonym or antonym of a word, how to spell a word, or how to pronounce a word, they can use Whatchamacallit? to elicit the answer from another speaker. In this regard, Whatchamacallit? encourages the self-study of vocabulary in a communicative way and reduces the need for users to refer to translation dictionaries when speaking in English.

To make it user friendly, Whatchamacallit? was broken into five sections and each section was given a simple, clear and concise classification to explain its function to the students. The sections were as follows:

1. Words you see or hear
2. Words you want to know
3. Increasing vocabulary
4. Spelling
5. Pronunciation

The first section, words you see or hear, can be used whenever students encounter a spoken or written word and are unsure of its hermeneutic meaning. By using this section, students can utilize the knowledge of others to elicit the meaning of any new word they encounter.

The second section, words you want to know, is for use when students are thinking of a word in their native language but are unsure how to say that word in English. In such cases, students can use relative clauses to elicit words from others. This section also aims to surreptitiously reinforce the students' understanding of relative clauses through use and input. As VanPattern and Williams (2008) describe, input is the *sine qua non* of language acquisition and operates as a basis for what is possible within a language. In this case, the use of relative clauses to describe unknown people, objects, places, or situations is demonstrated.

The third section, increasing vocabulary, gives students the opportunity to elicit the synonyms or antonyms of English words that they already know. In this regard, students are able to increase their language lexicon and express themselves more accurately when speaking.

The forth section, spelling, merely enables students to request the correct spelling of words. These words can be recorded or written down in a separate notebook or the students' textbooks.

Finally, the fifth section, pronunciation, helps students to learn the pronunciation of words from other speakers. Students are most likely to use this section whenever they encounter an unknown written word, but it can also be used to elicit the correct pronunciation of difficult words previously spoken by others, or as a comprehension check.

Together, these sections form Whatchamacallit?, a tool which can be used at any point inside or outside of the language classroom to elicit vocabulary. The phrases within each section have also been organised by difficulty with the more difficult phrases appearing nearer the bottom of each section. This design is based on the belief that the students are more likely to remember the shorter phrases first. Once the students are accustomed with using the shorter phrases, they can focus their attention on the longer phrases in each section.

PROCEDURE

In the first lesson of the semester, students should be given a copy of Whatchamacallit? to paste into the back of their textbooks. This is to ensure that every student has their own copy that they can refer to when needed. Once this is done, the teacher should then select a student to model each section of Whatchamacallit? to the class. For instance, to demonstrate how to use relative clauses in section two "Words you want to know" the teacher should practice eliciting Japanese words from the chosen student.

A good word to elicit from Japanese students is 'florist' (お花屋さん) as it is fairly unlikely that they will know this word in English. To do this, the teacher should ask the student "What's a word for someone who sells flowers? Please teach me in Japanese." Once the student has answered in Japanese (お花屋さん), the teacher can then ask the student if they know this word in English.

If the student does not know the answer (florist), the teacher can then prompt the student to elicit the English word by asking the same question. See below:

Teacher: "What's a word for someone who sells flowers? Please teach me in Japanese"
Student: "お花屋さん"
Teacher: "Great! Do you know how to say that in English?"
Student: "No."
Teacher: "Okay, please ask me. Use Whatchamacallit?"
Student: "What's a word for someone who sells flowers?"

Teacher: "Florist"

If the student does know the answer, they are congratulated and a new student and a new word to elicit is selected. It is recommended that the teacher tries to elicit words that they already know in Japanese as this will function as a comprehension check. After the teacher has finished demonstrating how to elicit unknown words for people, they should demonstrate how to elicit unknown words for objects, places, and situations.

Once the teacher has finished modelling section two, the teacher should then move on to section three, increasing vocabulary, and model how to ask for synonyms and antonyms. For instance, in practice, the author of this paper elicited synonyms for the word 'big' as there are multiple synonyms for this word in English but hardly any in Japanese.

After modelling each section, the teacher should encourage the students to use Whatchamacallit? whenever they would like to elicit the meaning of a word, how to say an unknown word, the synonym or antonym of a word, how to spell a word, or how to pronounce a word. The students should be specifically instructed to elicit words from each other rather than their teacher. The teacher should only be consulted as a last resort after they have exhausted all efforts to negotiate meaning amongst themselves.

VARIATIONS

There are a number of variations on how Whatchamacallit? could be used within the classroom. One variation is to create information gap activities that give students the opportunity to practice using each individual section of Whatchamacallit? in pairs. Each activity could focus on how to use one section of Whatchamacallit? as it was observed when the author conducted this activity that students rarely used the 'increasing vocabulary' section in order to learn new words.

This may be in part due to the nature of the EDC discussion course. As the students' primary objective is to express their ideas within a group, there is little time to focus on increasing their individual language lexicons. Therefore, it might be beneficial to create an activity that encourages the students to use this section more actively. For instance, students could be given an information gap handout in which one student has a list of synonyms for a word while the other student has the antonyms. Together, the students could practice eliciting the synonyms and antonyms from each other in order to complete the activity. They could also use section four, spelling, to elicit the correct spelling of these new words from each other as they write down these new words on their handouts.

In addition, Whatchamacallit? could also be customized to suit the specific needs of different students or different lessons. For instance, the second section, words you want to know, could be adapted to include different examples of relative clauses depending on the lesson. For example, a phrase like "What's a word for a feeling when…" may be useful when discussing topics such as emotions. In a similar regard, a phrase like "What's a word for a piece of equipment you use to…" would be useful in a lesson in which the students discuss technology.

For students studying English outside of Japan, the teacher could also encourage students to elicit new and unknown words from their friends or host families. To do this, students could be given an image that they must describe to their friends or host family in order to elicit the English word outside of class.

To prevent students from copying each other, each student could be given a different image within the same category. For example, students could each receive an image depicting a different job, animal, or object, to elicit from native speakers as homework. Of course, it is possible that the students may cheat and check the translation of their word so this type of activity would have

to work on more of an honour system. However, if the students were to cheat, they would only be cheating themselves.

CONCLUSION

After one semester piloting this activity, it is clear that Whatchamacallit? could achieve its intended purpose of allowing students to elicit unknown or forgotten words from other speakers while engaged in discussion. During this time, student utterances were noted for subsequent reflection. On reflection, it is interesting to note that whenever a student seemed to have forgotten a word they had previously studied they would elicit it from their classmates. For instance, one student elicited the word 'farmer' from her classmate and laughed knowingly once she had received the response. However, for more complicated words the students were more inclined to plumb the depths of their teacher's knowledge than elicit these words from their classmates.

An example of this occurred when a student asked the teacher "What's a word for a memory event?" when discussing the importance of marriage. After the student received the answer "milestone" from his teacher, he turned back to his classmate and said "Marriage is [a] milestone." Another point to note was that context played a big role in helping listeners estimate which word the speaker wanted to elicit. For instance, out of context, the utterance "What's a word for words under the TV?" is not very clear. However, if you consider that the students were talking about how to understand movies in English, one could venture the guess that the student probably meant "subtitles".

In future lessons, it would be useful to refine Whatchamacallit? and consider new ways of demonstrating or encouraging its use within a classroom environment. As mentioned earlier, it was noticed during the activity's pilot semester that the students tended to use Whatchamacallit? to elicit unknown words from their teacher rather than their peers. It is believed that students would benefit from more encouragement to use Whatchamacallit? as a resource to negotiate meaning amongst themselves. This would help to reduce teacher-talk-time and increase student-talk-time in class.

Additionally, it would be interesting to observe more actively whether or not Whatchamacallit? could facilitate more risk-taking among students. As it is possible that the students may direct their discussions towards familiar topics based on the vocabulary that they have at their disposal. At present, the author is working on refining Whatchamacallit? to include more relative clauses and some extra sections. Moreover, the author plans to make custom activities to help students focus on each section of the tool.

These activities could lend extra focus and attention to the sections that students find most challenging to use. Each activity would be introduced in a different lesson as part of a program of practice. Over time, it is believed that students would begin to use Whatchamacallit? as a tool for their own autonomous learning both inside and outside of the classroom.

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APPENDIX – Whatchamacallit worksheet

...Whatchamacallit?   Name_____

Words you see or hear

What does _____ mean?

Words you want to know

What's a word for...

    ...a person who _____ _____?
    ...a (thing) that _____ _____?
    ...a place where _____ _____?
    ...a situation when _____ _____?

Increasing vocabulary

What's another word for _____?
What's the opposite of _____?

Spelling

Do you know how to spell it?
Can you spell it please?
How do you spell it?

Pronunciation

How do you pronounce it?