

What English vocabulary do you think is easiest for students to learn in a university English class?

For instance, in one university English class, the following words were covered.



cons

dull

hand-eye coordination

knight

Q1

Which words do you think were learned?

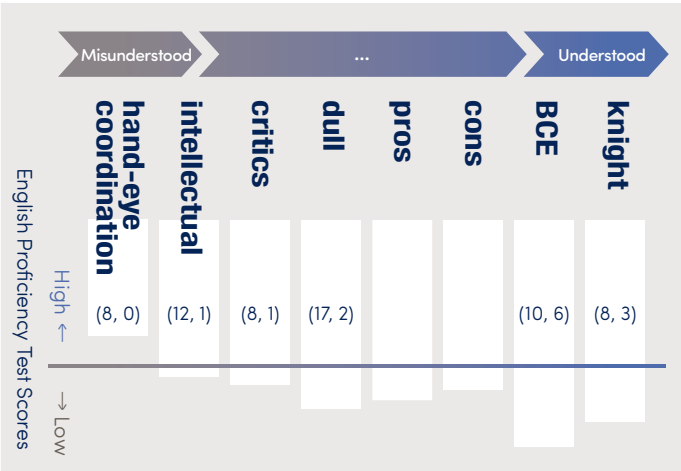
Flip the page to check the answers on page 2. —>

*All lessons were conducted in English. See the inside pages for details of the lessons. According to the pretest results, the learners either did not know or did not understand these words very well (5-14% correct answer rate). For *knight*, the rate was 38%.

Q1

Which English words were learned in a university English class?

*For details of Q1, see the cover page



*Numbers in parentheses: (No. of times the word was said in English by the teacher and/or students in class, No. of times its Japanese translation was said by the teacher and/or students in class)
*Pros and cons were frequently mentioned in discussion activities
*Calculated based on the vocabulary pretest and posttest results

A1

Knight was the easiest to understand.

Hand-eye coordination was the most misunderstood word.

Q2

Why did the results look like the ones above?

*See details of the lessons and research methods on page 3

As shown in the figure, it does not seem to be the case that “the main factor is the frequency with which the English word is uttered in class by the teacher and/or students.” For instance, both *critics* and *hand-eye coordination* were mentioned by the instructor in English 7 to 8 times, but the learners’ levels of understanding varied.

See the answers of Q2 on page 4

Research methods

This study’s lesson schedule and data collection schedule are as follows:

	Lesson schedule	Data collection schedule
April 2015		• English proficiency test (Pretest)
July		• English vocabulary size test (July 15) • Consent form
October	History (Trip to Antarctica) Biology (Genetically modified food)	• Vocabulary pretest (October 28)
November	Original book vs. Movie Media (SNS)	• Begin recording lessons
December	Technology (Robots) People and Technology	• Vocabulary posttest (December 4)
January 2016		• English proficiency test (Posttest) • Vocabulary delayed posttest (January 22)

*The vocabulary size test employed was that of Nation & Beglar (2007) and Nation & Gu (2007)

The same teacher taught English for a year. When teaching the meaning of an English word, its Japanese counterpart was also mentioned sometimes.

The learners studied the main theme of this English course “People and Technology” and engaged in activities related to topics such as “Genetically modified foods” and “SNSs”.

In the study, the following data was analyzed:

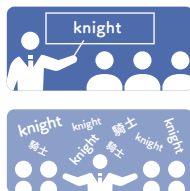
- English proficiency test scores (pretest • posttest)
- English vocabulary size test scores
- The instructor and students’ utterances in class (audio-recorded)
- Transcriptions of classroom interactions
- Target English vocabulary test scores (pretest • posttest • delayed posttest)
*Target English vocabulary: Words the instructor had planned to teach in class
- Students’ questionnaire answers (After each lesson, the students individually recalled and wrote words which they believed they had learned during the lesson.)
- Vocabulary test scores of the words collected via the questionnaire (pretest • posttest • delayed posttest)

A2

The following three main points were discovered in the study:

1 Understood words

After the teacher introduced an English word in class, many learners produced the word (both its spoken and written form) and its Japanese translation.



The teacher and the learners communicated with each other, actively using the English word in class activities.

2 Words understood to some extent or misunderstood

After the teacher introduced and explained an English word in class*, several students explained the meaning or translated the word, and several students used the word in class.



If the word was a technical term, had homonyms, or was an abstract word, it was difficult for the instructor to convey the meaning verbally*.



The teacher mainly stood at the front of the room and explained the word to the students. Or, only one or two groups used the word during group work.



*The teacher used English only

3 The effects of English proficiency test scores

Students with higher scores understood the word better.

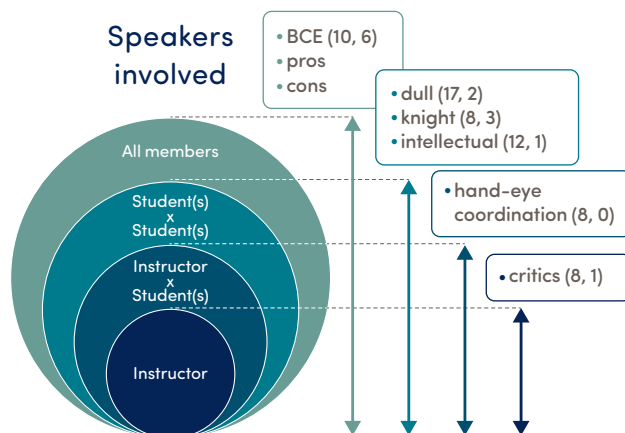


Students with lower scores had more blanks on the vocabulary tests. Their incorrect answers showed that they tended to focus on a certain aspect of the word (e.g., translating *cons* as *corn*, or *knight* as *night*).



*Translate *cons*

What are the utterances that led to vocabulary comprehension, and utterances that did not lead to vocabulary comprehension?



*Numbers in parentheses: (Number of times the word was said in English by the teacher and/or students in class, Number of times its Japanese translation was said by the teacher and/or students in class)

The words that the students **performed well** with (e.g., *BCE*, *pros* and *cons*) were the ones the teacher and students **had actively used** in class tasks. In this process, they had produced, read and/or listened to the word while also paying attention to its written and spoken aspects.

On the other hand, the words that the students **did not perform well** with (e.g., *critics*, *hand-eye coordination*, and *intellectual*) were the ones the teacher had mainly explained to the whole class. These words were also technical terms, homonyms or abstract words whose meaning was difficult to convey through oral explanation.

The details of the lessons

Twenty-two first-year students (CEFR A2 level; 16 males and six females) attending a university in Tokyo took this required English course. The lessons were conducted using an educational approach called the Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL). The students attended the course twice a week, each lesson lasting 90 minutes.

*See page 3 for more details of the lessons

Vocabulary is essential to improve communication skills.

To learners:

Let's focus on developing the four skills to improve your language proficiency.

To practitioners and educators:

Let's work together to realize education in which learners utilize their four skills.

* The four skills include listening, reading, speaking and writing skills



More information for learners, teachers and educators is available on the following site.

Satomi Lab <https://satomilab.com/>

Please access the site, scanning the QR code. Research papers on the present study can also be obtained on the site.



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I teach English to senior high school and university students in Japan. The research I have conducted is also mainly related to foreign language education in higher education institutions. Currently, I am teaching English and Applied Linguistics at Juntendo University and Sophia University Graduate School.