How EFL learners react to a learning framework integrating learning records on multiple systems

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Abstract. This paper reports on the learning framework integrating a web e-portfolio and two mobile applications. It also reports on a preliminary study on how learners used different systems or materials to study for vocabulary tests in a particular general English course at a Japanese university, and how they recognized the usefulness of each system and material. Participants were 66 Japanese English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students from two intact classes who completed a questionnaire survey at the end of the course. The results of the survey revealed that, although the participants generally evaluated the usefulness of the different systems and materials in a similar way, one of the mobile applications was most often used to prepare for the in-class vocabulary tests followed by the e-portfolio and the wordlist.

Keywords: vocabulary learning, e-portfolio, mobile learning, EFL.

1. Introduction

Although vocabulary learning is of critical importance to language learners, it can also be a long and arduous process, especially in foreign language learning settings. Focusing on Japanese EFL learners, they typically study about 3,000 words through six years of junior and senior high school education (MEXT, 2009). If they choose

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to study at a college level, they are required to learn more words depending on their needs and sometimes even to review or learn the words they should learn before they come to college, which involves both their independent and continuous efforts. In order to help such EFL learners and their instructors, this research project aims to build a learning framework by developing multiple e-learning systems according to both the learners’ and instructors’ needs and integrating the learning records on those systems so that the learners can metacognitively control their vocabulary learning over time. More specifically, we developed a web e-portfolio, Lexinote, a mobile application to implement a word rehearsal function of the e-portfolio, Lexinote Word Rehearsal (WR), and another mobile application for self-regulated vocabulary learning, DoraCAT. The learning framework using these three applications integrates the learning records of each system in the e-portfolio of each learner on Lexinote.

Lexinote can be used by an instructor as a tool to feed various forms of assignments and tasks and by learners as a self-study tool (Tanaka, Yonesaka, Ueno, & Ohnishi, 2015). Through in-class tasks, learners write essays, post comments to threads, search and record the words they want to learn, and rehearse them in step-by-step practice. Learners can use these recording and rehearsing functions in their self-study. In addition, they can also choose a text to study and compare it against their learning records to see the words they have learned or used and those designated by their instructor to study.

Using Lexinote WR on their mobile devices, learners can practice target words designated by their instructor as an assignment. DoraCAT is another mobile application for self-regulated vocabulary learning. Learners diagnose their vocabulary knowledge, choose the target words to learn, and rehearse them in a training mode. Whichever application they use, all the learning records are saved in the learner’s own e-portfolio on Lexinote so that they can monitor and control their own vocabulary learning process and outcomes. In order to investigate how EFL learners actually study within this framework and other classroom materials, we conducted a small-scale empirical study with Japanese EFL learners.

The research questions in this study were:

1. How do Japanese EFL learners use multiple systems and materials to prepare for in-class vocabulary tests?
2. How do Japanese EFL learners evaluate the usefulness of multiple systems and materials for their vocabulary learning?
2. Method

Participants were 66 Japanese college students (30 females and 36 males) enrolled in a general English course from two intact classes. A 90-minute class was held once a week in a 15-week semester. The participants were required to study nine sets of 21 words, 189 words in total, as a vocabulary learning component of the course. They also took 12 in-class vocabulary tests based on these words. Besides these tests, they engaged in various activities using Lexinote.

For the vocabulary tests, the participants were guided to use (1) a PDF wordlist, which they could also print out, (2) Lexinote, with which they could practice the target words on a PC using the word rehearsal function, and (3) Lexinote WR, on which they could do the same Lexinote practices using their own mobile devices. Some of the participants used notebooks or memos on their own to prepare for the tests. The participants were also introduced to DoraCAT and were encouraged to use it for their self-study. The instructor of the course ensured that the learning records on DoraCAT were counted as additional points in the course grading if they achieved the goal of studying 300 words during the semester.

The participants took a total of 12 vocabulary tests in 12 weeks, although some of them missed a few tests due to absences from class. After completing all the tests, they answered a questionnaire regarding their appraisals of vocabulary learning, their use of various systems and materials, and their evaluation of usefulness of those systems and materials in a six-point Likert scale. Although the questionnaire was not anonymous, the instructor, who was also one of the authors of this paper, carefully explained the purpose of the study and assured that their responses would not affect their course grades. This paper reports on the results of the participants’ use (I used __ to prepare for the vocabulary tests) and their evaluation of the usefulness of the systems and materials for their study (I think __ is useful for my English study).

3. Results and discussion

The participants were first asked in the questionnaire how often they used each system and material in order to prepare for the in-class vocabulary tests. Table 1 shows the descriptive statistics of their use of systems and materials for the vocabulary tests (Research Question 1). The mobile application, Lexinote WR, was most commonly used by the participants, followed by the wordlist and Lexinote. The learner-made notebook and/or memo was least used. A repeated-
measures analysis of variance (ANOVA) with a Greenhouse-Geisser correction showed a significant main effect \([F(2.61, 169.93)=10.2, p<.001, \eta^2=.105]\). Post hoc tests using the Bonferroni correction revealed that Lexinote WR was significantly more commonly used than the wordlist \((t=3.29, p=.007, d=0.34)\), Lexinote on PC \((t=3.29, p=.007, d=0.34)\), and the learner-made notebook \((t=5.49, p<.001, d=0.73)\). Although it is impossible to identify the reason why Lexinote WR was most commonly used from the questionnaire results, it might be related to the environments the participants had. It can be fairly inferred that the participants always carried their mobile phone with them and Lexinote WR was the easiest choice when they had to prepare for the tests, especially just before them.

Table 2 shows the results of the items regarding the participants’ evaluation of the usefulness of each system and material, including their self-study and in-class tasks using Lexinote (Research Question 2). Although DoraCAT was not related to the in-class vocabulary tests, the item regarding its usefulness was included for comparison. The numbers in the columns ‘did not use’ show the number of participants who answered they did not use the system or the material. Although the main effect was found to be non-significant with a repeated-measures ANOVA with a Greenhouse-Geisser correction \([F(4, 180)=1.85, p=0.122, \eta^2=.021]\), the results here were somewhat different from those of their use because the participants evaluated the wordlist more positively than the other systems and tools, not Lexinote WR, which was most often used by the participants. The reasons for this will be further investigated with the other items in the questionnaire in the future.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics of learners’ use of systems and materials (N=66)

|          | Wordlist | Lexinote (PC) | Lexinote WR | Notebook |
|----------|----------|---------------|-------------|----------|
| M        | 3.85     | 3.85          | 4.89        | 3.15     |
| Mdn      | 5.00     | 4.00          | 6.00        | 3.00     |
| SD       | 2.05     | 1.81          | 1.59        | 1.83     |

Table 2. Descriptive statistics of learners’ evaluations of the usefulness of systems, materials, and activities

|          | Wordlist | Lexinote Task | Lexinote Self-Study | Lexinote WR | DoraCAT |
|----------|----------|---------------|---------------------|-------------|---------|
| N        | 62       | 65            | 62                  | 61          | 51      |
| Did not use | 4       | 1             | 4                   | 5           | 15      |
| M        | 4.77     | 4.58          | 4.42                | 4.57        | 4.25    |
| Mdn      | 5.00     | 5.00          | 4.00                | 5.00        | 4.00    |
| SD       | 0.98     | 0.97          | 1.11                | 1.01        | 1.20    |
4. **Conclusions**

This paper introduced an English learning framework that integrates the learning records of multiple applications and reported on Japanese EFL learners’ behaviors and evaluations of those systems. The participants in this study used one of the mobile applications, Lexinote WR, most commonly to prepare for the vocabulary tests. However, their evaluation regarding the usefulness of the systems and materials did not vary substantially. We will further investigate and report on learners’ behaviors and appraisals of vocabulary learning by analyzing their learning logs and the rest of the items in the same questionnaire in the future.

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