

# Benefits of Using Vocabulary Flash Cards in an EFL Classroom

## 語彙カード使用の利点

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### Abstract

This paper was written to research and advocate the use of English word cards with regard to vocabulary acquisition and English productive and receptive competency. Also, student perceptions of using and making word cards will be examined to show the importance of including a word card policy in an EFL classroom. Despite all the positive research done on word cards, it is surprising how many Japanese EFL students do not utilize word cards in their English studies. For this research, 108 students from two Japanese Universities were surveyed on their usage of word cards, many of which have just started using word cards. The results show that students have a positive perception towards using word cards and feel word cards increase their test scores, confidence and motivation to learn English.

### 1. Introduction

The research looks at the perceptions Japanese university EFL students have on using word cards and examine if word cards motivate and enhance their performance socially and scholastically. Word cards are a great way to increase vocabulary quickly in a short semester and allow students to develop good study habits. Having a limited vocabulary can hinder students' ability to express themselves, and slows down their comprehension significantly (Nation, 2001). Therefore, word cards are especially important for beginning and intermediate students with a limited vocabulary. A lot of Japanese university students, and students surveyed in this research are in that category. A good inquiry is why Japanese EFL learners at the university level have a limited vocabulary after at least six years of English education in the public schools. One possible answer is bad study habits and limited opportunities to review new words without using word cards.

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Swanborn and de Glopper (1999) referred to learning a word as a cumulative process. They expected knowledge of a word to be gradually built up as the result of numerous spaced meetings with the word. Griffin (1992) found that most forgetting seems to occur soon after learning, hence the importance of frequent reviewing. Word cards are conveniently accessible for reviewing almost anywhere. Japanese teachers do a lot of repetition in class but research by Baddeley (1990) determined that spaced repetition resulted in more secure learning than mass repetition.

Word cards can be used for not just words, but grouped into colloquialisms, half utterances, reduced speech, phrasal verbs, etc. Word cards have the potential to increase receptive and productive confidence dramatically, but how do the students perceive word cards and how efficiently do they make and use them? The following research will examine these inquiries.

## **II. Methods**

### **1. Participants**

108 Japanese students from two universities were given the survey. The participants were 1st and 2nd year students with varying majors. The surveys were with regard to the English classes they were currently enrolled in. Each participant was taking English courses, either as part of their requirements as an English major or as a required English course in the case of non-English majors. The courses were academic reading, academic listening, and oral communication.

### **2. Instrumentation**

The questionnaire contains 7 statements and 4 questions divided into 2 sections. The first section has 7 statements pertaining to the perception students have about using word cards. The second section asks 4 questions to find out their general study habits with word cards. For the perception section, a statement was given such as, "Word cards are the best way to learn new vocabulary." Students then decide if they agree, are neutral, or disagree with the statement. The general question section asks questions to find out their study habits. One of the questions asks "How often do you review your word cards?" This would have a favorable response, "everyday".

Response choices for the first section were on a 5-point scale. Students choose from strongly agree, agree, neutral, disagree, or strongly disagree. For ease of interpretation, that data was merged to a 3-point scale, For example, strongly agree and agree was labeled as agree in the data, along with strongly disagree and disagree labeled as disagree. The general questions in the second section gave 3 choices to the students with the desired response being on the left and the least desired response on the right. For example, "How many word cards do you make every week?" The response choices are, "Over 50 a week,"

“between 20 and 50 a week,” and “under 20 a week.”

### III. Results

**Table 1. Students' perceptions on using vocabulary word cards**

	Agree		Neutral		Disagree	
	f	%	f	%	f	%
IncreasesmotivationtolearnEnglish	102	94	1	1	5	5
Improvesspeakingconfidence	94	87	8	7	6	6
Improvetestscores	89	82	5	5	15	13
Easytomake	79	73	12	11	17	16
Easytouseanywhere (ex:subway)	93	86	10	9	5	5
MakeslearningEnglishmoreenjoyable	99	92	3	3	5	5
Bestwaytoacquireandreviewwords	100	93	4	4	3	3

n (total number of respondents) = 108

Generally, the results were very positive. Table 1 shows that word cards not only increase vocabulary and improve test scores, but increase overall English productive and receptive competence and desire to learn English. Specifically, 94% thought using word cards was motivational to learning English. 87% of students surveyed felt that word cards improved their speaking confidence. 82% of students felt their test scores improved from using word cards. 73% thought word cards were easy to make, while 86% of students thought word cards were easy to review with on the subway, bus, etc. 92% felt that words cards make English more enjoyable. Finally, 93% believe that word cards are the best way to acquire and review new vocabulary.

**Table 2. Students' word card study habits**

	Everyday		3~5/week		Rarely	
	f	%	f	%	f	%
Frequencyofreview	41	38	57	53	10	9
	Over50		Between20~50		Under20	
	f	%	f	%	f	%
Quantityofcards	40	37	53	49	15	14
	Everywhere (ex:subway)		Schooland athome		Only atschool	
	f	%	f	%	f	%
Reviewlocations	94	87	12	11	2	2
	L1translation+ examples+word		L1translation +word		Onlythe word	
	f	%	f	%	f	%
WordCardContent	100	92	8	8	0	0

n (total number of respondents) = 108

Table 2 generally showed positive study habits among surveyed students. Specifically, 38% of students reviewed their cards every day, while 53% of students reviewed their cards 3 to 5 times a week. 37% of students made over 50 cards a week, while 52% made between 20 and 50 cards a week. 87% of students said they could review their word cards anywhere including on the subway or bus on the way home from university. In regards to how detailed their word cards are, 92% of students put the word on one side of the card with the Japanese translation and example sentences in context on the reverse side of the word card.

#### IV. Discussion

The results clearly indicate that word cards are beneficial to Japanese university English students. Generally, the results showed that students have good study habits with word cards and have positive perceptions to using word cards.

Word cards are very motivational when used complimentary to other ways of learning, which overlap and reinforce each other. Nation (2001) said vocabulary is best acquired when it is used both receptively and productively. To accomplish this, allow students to practice their new words productively in class with a partner. Play word card games where they have to generate a sentence with a randomly chosen word from their collection. Allow them to do extensive reading with graded readers at their level to allow them to encounter some of their high frequency words they are studying. As a teacher, keep a list of the new vocabulary that students have learned and use them as much as possible in your class.

Word cards are easy to make when they are not too elaborate. Adding a L1 translation on the reverse side of the word card is very beneficial. Adding a contextual example to a word card allows students to see the generative use of a word in a sentence. Examples are extra helpful for words that don't directly translate from L2 to L1. There is no specific number of cards students should make every week because it is very determined on their present vocabulary size, however many students make over 50 new cards a week so it is better not to spend too much time making one card.

Concerning the frequency of vocabulary review, it is so important that students try to review their word cards daily. It is more effective to study words regularly over several short sessions than to study them for one or two longer sessions. Hunt and Beglar (1998) emphasize that the more frequent the review sessions, the quicker these words will develop into sight vocabulary. The survey showed that most students felt comfortable reviewing their word cards anywhere, including on the subway. Seeing the word cards daily and self-testing are good strategies to acquiring the words. Hunt and Beglar (1998) say that fluency partly depends on developing sight vocabulary through studying high frequency vocabulary. With sight vocabulary, students will be instantly able to recognize certain words in a book, hence, increasing receptive knowledge.

Words cards do not go without criticism. Anderson and Nagy (1992) criticized the use of

word cards saying there are so many words in the language and it takes so much time to efficiently learn a word that direct study is an inefficient procedure for vocabulary growth. Learners are better off concentrating on reading because they will learn through incidental learning from context. This generally applies to advance students who already know the 2000 or 3000 most frequently used words. Nation (2001) said incidental learning from meaning focused input can best occur if learners are familiar with at least 95% of the running words in the input they are focusing on. Students should focus on beginner level graded readers where they will encounter mostly high frequency words that they can put on their word cards. These high frequency words will probably be encountered frequently, by which time students will already have developed sight vocabulary for the word due to frequent reviewing the word on their word card. Once they have developed sight vocabulary, they can discard that word from their word cards. This will increase the learners' reading efficiency and confidence.

## V. Conclusion

The research showed that word cards are perceived highly by Japanese university students and help build their receptive and productive confidence, along with achieving higher test scores. A teacher has the option of implementing a compulsory word card strategy that should help their students tremendously. It is important to recognize that word cards should be viewed as a useful and effective complement in a well-balanced vocabulary-learning program, which may include receptive learning by way of extensive reading and listening, as well as ample time for productive use of vocabulary through speaking and writing.

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