A Technique for Teaching and Learning English Vocabulary out of Context

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The purpose of this study is to describe the procedure of carrying out lexical practices and exercises with flashcards and to consider some problems of the teaching and learning of English vocabulary from the viewpoint of helping learners develop communicative skills effectively.

(1) The reason for the consideration of lexical practices out of context

In teaching and learning English as a foreign language, a communicative approach has been advocated during the past ten years. It is reasonable that various practices to develop communicative ability have been carried out by using a unit of a few sentences or a unit of a longer paragraph for each practice. Though those communicative practices are naturally important, they will not be successful unless lexical ability for them is developed enough.

As for the teaching and learning of vocabulary, it was insisted that lexical items should be learned in context (Fries, 1945; Krashen and Terrell, 1983). Recently Kojima (1986) stated that teachers should consider the ways of using sentences in word practices and in word
tests as often as they can in order that learners would memorize meaningful sentences. To be sure, lexical learning in context is very useful from various points of view. Generally speaking, learners studied lexical items in context in class so far.

However, I wonder whether most learners acquired appropriate numbers of lexical items in their coursebooks easily and steadily in class even if they did not do any lexical exercise out of context. I also wonder if most learners could always do contextualized active practices for four skills relatively easily and successfully without any lexical exercise out of context. If they did not succeed in those respects, one of the causes might be that they could not acquire steadily the active ability of lexical items only by doing contextualized practices for four skills in each lesson. Considering those points, I could say that there are some defects in lexical learning in context especially for Japanese learners of English.

On the other hand, there are some useful points in learning each individual lexical item separately. Richards (1974, 1976) emphasized that lexical meanings should be taught and used correctly. However, since capable communicative ability has been required in this international age, learners should learn to quickly understand or recall lexical items for productive use and to quickly understand lexical items for receptive use as well as to know and use those items correctly.

From those points of view, I considered the effectiveness of lexical learning out of context and described the necessity of using this lexical learning technique consistently in class (Sasa, 1987). This kind of lexical exercise is abbreviated as F. C. exercise since it can be carried out for each lexical item selected from coursebooks by means of flashcards.
The advantages of F. C. exercise are as follows:

① When learners try to understand or produce a sentence or a discourse, they have to pay attention to the lexical items and other various elements such as grammar and culture in the sentence or the discourse. However, in F. C. exercise they can concentrate on only the learning of lexical items.

② Since the purpose of F. C. exercise is simple and clear, the exercise is very easy for any learner at any level.

③ In F. C. exercise all learners can speedily repeat several times to learn a proper number of lexical items.

④ In F. C. exercise learners can learn any useful lexical items with relatively low frequency as often as high frequency lexical items without any relation to the frequency of lexical items presented in course-books.

⑤ Learners can easily and effectively do contextualized practices for four skills by using discourses after having done F. C. exercises as pre-teaching and mid-teaching of the discourses.

⑥ Learners can efficiently acquire lexical items by both F. C. exercises and contextualized practices.

The above possibility is included in F. C. exercise. However, it seems to me that the technique of F. C. exercise has neither been developed nor utilized widely enough. Therefore, in this article I will
describe the procedure of F. C. exercise and consider the method of teaching and learning lexical items by F. C. exercise from the viewpoints of lexical choice, practicing speed, pre-teaching, post-teaching, vocabulary expansion, the development of communicative ability, etc.

(2) The procedures of a lexical comprehension exercise and a lexical recall exercise

1. Learners can effectively learn lexical items in context. However, they can also effectively learn lexical items out of context by using flashcards, if they already understand the meanings of those lexical items correctly. That is, they can practice comprehending quickly each of several lexical items picked up from a reading discourse (e.g., anecdotes, ancestors, emerged, poverty, affluence, posterity) by glancing at each lexical spelling on one side of each flashcard. In another use of F. C. exercise they can practice recalling quickly such items as a chance, leave for, by the way, mostly, frankly, more nervous chosen from a communicative discourse by glancing at each cue of a rough native equivalent on each backside of the flashcards.

2. In a lexical comprehension or recall exercise, which can be carried out on the basis of some of the following items of the procedure, learners can concentrate on only some lexical items intently so that they will be able to comprehend or recall correctly and quickly each lexical item or each combination of a few lexical items presented separately one after another by flashcards.

3. In such lexical exercise with flashcards, which is described as
F. C. exercise below, learners can practice in any one of the following learning forms of teacher-centered teaching, group activities, peer-teaching, and individual practice.

4. As for lexical items taken up for each F. C. exercise, teachers can select some lexical items among the ones in any kinds of language materials used in class: those selected items would be some new lexical items for learners, some items related with those new items, or some items which some learners did not learn sufficiently in their previous lessons. And these lexical items for F. C. exercise can be selected from any discourses and contextualized exercises in the coursebooks adopted, from any exercises for four skills of English besides the coursebooks, or from some useful lexical items selected by teachers for vocabulary acquisition (Heyer, 1984).

5.1 Before carrying out F. C. exercise, teachers can teach the meanings of those selected lexical items by any of the following means: some useful means for making a direct association between a lexical item and its lexical meaning (e.g., drawings, pictures, real objects, actions, etc.), translation, definition and context (Palmer, 1920, quoted by Ito, 1979).

5.2 When lexical meanings are taught, the following points can be taken into consideration from the viewpoint of the exact recognition of lexical items: some advantages and defects of the above respective means (5.1 1—4), some problems of mono-lingual and bi-lingual dictionaries, both linguistic and situational contexts, collocations, idioms, register, the relationship and difference between lexical
items such as synonyms, antonyms, superordinate, hyponyms, connotation, denotation, etc., 6 the distinction between productive items and receptive ones, 7 prefixes, suffixes, etymology, 8 each form of present, past, past participle, present participle, simple and plural of each lexical item.

5.3 Learners can beforehand study their language materials by consulting their dictionaries about the semantic interpretation of the lexical items in discourses or exercises. And teachers can check the learners' preparatory studies and approve their results or correct their mistakes and explain those mistakes to them. Even if language materials for listening and speaking skills seem to be relatively easy for university students, the teaching of the lexical items in those materials should not be neglected nor made light of. To take an illustration, when a student listened to a sentence "Goodness! I'm afraid that's too expensive for me." (Cook, 1980, 1985), he interpreted 'Goodness!' as 'That was very good.' If he had studied the discourse including that sentence, he would not have made that error. Such misinterpretation should be corrected before starting some contextualized active practices.

6.1 As for the technique of making F.C. exercise, teachers or learners can turn an appropriate number of flashcards one after another in a short time repeatedly and the learners can try to understand or recall the lexical items by looking at the clues on the flashcards.

In preparation of flashcards, teachers or learners can beforehand write the spellings of some selected lexical items on one side of the cards and write on the other side of the cards one or a few clues
which stand for the lexical meanings: ① a line drawing, a picture, a cartoon, etc., ② a close native equivalent, ③ a useful part of a definition or an explanation.

6.2 As for the technique of using flashcards, there is a description by Finocchiaro and Brumfit (1983) from the viewpoint of the development of communicative ability. I want to summarize the description and introduce a part of the summary which can be applicable to F. C. exercise. ① Group words, single words or number can be included on flashcards. ② Pictures and cards may be matched. ③ The cards can be used as a cue in brisk substitution drills. ④ The cards can be given to group leaders to play games or engage in problem solving.

6.3 When teachers show learners the spellings of lexical items on flashcards, the teachers and/or the learners can pronounce those lexical items. In another way, the teachers can be silent and show only the spellings to the learners so that the teachers can turn flashcards more quickly and the learners can do F. C. exercises more speedily by concentrating on only the recognition of the lexical meanings.

6.4 In 6.3, the teachers can pronounce lexical items in various speeds according to the ability of the learners and the process of the F. C. exercise: ① The teachers can pronounce very slowly at first in the beginner's course so that the learners can easily and correctly comprehend or imitate to pronounce the lexical items. ② Or the teachers can pronounce in a normal speed so that the learners will be able to comprehend the pronunciation of native speakers of English. Appropriate speed in each F. C. exercise is very important for the
learners. It seems to me that in the past, many learners lacked lexical practices in natural speed with intelligible models of pronunciation. An American once stated that he had been surprised to see a Japanese student with high level of English in the U.S.A. who could not understand the normal English in an American movie. Perhaps one of the causes for the above fact is that he couldn’t catch quickly many English lexical items spoken in natural speed.

6.5.1 When learners try to recognize each individual lexical meaning in F.C. exercise, (1) they can utilize both a lexical spelling on a flashcard and its pronunciation produced by teachers or tapes as cues at the same time in order to comprehend lexical items correctly and easily, or (2) the learners can concentrate either on each lexical spelling or each lexical pronunciation in order to do the F.C. exercise more speedily and intently.

6.5.2 Each time learners utter each Japanese equivalent for each English lexical item in F.C. exercise as their response as soon as they comprehend each English item, or each time they utter each English item as soon as they recall each one in F.C. exercise, teachers can make sure whether the learners are correct or not by checking one learner or the whole class. As soon as the teachers find any mistake during the F.C. exercise, they can stop turning the flashcards and tell a correct answer for each exercise to the learners.

6.6 In F.C. exercise in a beginner’s course, learners can look at a lexical spelling on each flashcard and then recognize each lexical meaning and respond to each exercise in a native equivalent. They
can repeat the procedure of F. C. exercise three times very slowly at first in order to consolidate their lexical recognition ability better. Then they can practice recognizing each lexical meaning for each lexical spelling one time and then they can do the procedure again by changing the order of presenting the lexical items. Each time they repeat the F. C. exercise for the same several items, they will be able to respond more and more quickly. And then they can do the exercise again and again for only those items which they have not consolidated enough. Thus they will be able to develop gradually their responding ability to the exercise and memorize more lexical items steadily.

6.7 After finishing F. C. exercise, teachers and learners can confirm whether the learners consolidated the lexical items by one of the following ways: ① The learners can confirm quickly by themselves by glancing at the questions on flashcards shown to the learners by the teachers one after another. Or ② the teachers can confirm quickly by asking the learners some questions.

7. As for the proper number of lexical items (e.g., three to five items, seven to ten items or fifteen to twenty items, etc.) and the proper practice time (e.g., a few minutes, three to five minutes or seven to eight minutes, etc.) for F. C. exercise, teachers can decide by taking into consideration the following elements: ① the purpose and level of a course and a lesson, ② the appropriate balance between the learning of pronunciation, vocabulary, grammar, culture and other aspects in a complete lesson, ③ a stage in class (e.g., the review of a previous lesson, the beginning of a new lesson, the middle or the end of a class), ④ the characteristics of learners (age, ability, aptitude,
motivation and purpose, etc.).

8. After carrying out F. C. exercise for a certain amount of time, teachers can change to any other teaching activity, even though some learners may not have acquired some lexical items, because the learners can have another opportunity to learn those items in the subsequent contextualized practices and other F. C. exercises.

9. F. C. exercise can be given in (1) pre-teaching, (2) mid-teaching and (3) post-teaching in class. As these have respectively some unique merits, teachers can give F. C. exercise to learners at any time whenever the teachers feel it necessary or desirable.

10. F. C. exercise can be carried out effectively and efficiently in both intermediate and advanced courses as well as in beginner’s courses. If the exercise is consistently carried out in every lesson for a long period (e.g., three years, six years or eight years), the effect of the exercise will be greater than teachers expect it to be.

11. As learners progress from the beginner’s level to the advanced level, teachers can increase the number of lexical items for F. C. exercise and expand the size of a lexical combination presented at one time in F. C. exercise. I want to quote some examples of various lexical combinations from a spoken material (Stout et al., 1983). (1) indefinite article+noun (e.g., an application), (2) definite article+noun (e.g., the sea), (3) verb+adjective (e.g., feel good=feel well), (4) verb+noun (e.g., cut classes), (5) verb+indefinite article+noun (e.g., make a speech=deliver), (6) indefinite article+adjective+noun (e.g., a pleasant
12. Before making F. C. exercise, teachers can flexibly choose any suitable items from the above procedure ((2) 1.-11.) according to various teaching and learning circumstances, i.e., time, place and occasion.

[3] **Some consideration of F. C. exercise**

I would like to consider some merits of F. C. exercise, complementing the previous section.

1. Learners can do both a quick lexical comprehension exercise and a quick lexical recall exercise by using some flashcards. The lexical comprehension exercise may be effective for mainly developing the basic ability of the receptive aspect of communicative ability. In the past teaching of vocabulary, teachers were mainly engaged in teaching learners to understand and use lexical items correctly. Hereafter, when the teachers introduce and explain some new lexical items or give the learners any lexical exercises in each class, it would be desirable for them to emphasize the aspect of comprehending lexical items quickly as well as correctly. And F. C. exercise would be helpful as one of the means of accomplishing this aim.

2. A lexical recall exercise can be made by means of the same technique of the lexical comprehension exercise by flashcards. The lexical recall exercise may be effective for mainly developing the basic ability of the productive aspect of communicative ability. In other
words, the exercise may be effective as the pre-teaching of a contextualized practice for accomplishing the excellent productive ability of four skills. And the exercise may supplement and reinforce the effect of the lexical comprehension exercise. I suppose that in the past vocabulary learning, many learners may not have had enough time of doing lexical recall exercises. Consequently they may have felt various contextualized practices for four skills difficult and reluctant to do and they could not do those practices and other exercises quickly and smoothly. Therefore, it would be desirable to emphasize greatly lexical recall exercises from a beginner’s course.

3. Since the technique of F. C. exercise is very simple, any learner can easily do the exercise at any time at his or her own pace. Therefore, every learner will always be able to get good learning results in the exercise.

On the other hand, all learners may not necessarily succeed in doing contextualized exercises on lexical items because there may be some learners of relatively lower ability of English in almost all classes. Those lower learners may feel it too difficult to solve most problems of those contextualized exercises. Or they may feel it very difficult to understand other elements besides the lexical items in question in the exercises. As a result, they may lose their confidence or desire for learning English or give up doing the exercises. Or they may spend too much time in trying to solve only a few questions and they may not fully consolidate enough useful lexical items.

However, even those lower learners can do each F. C. exercise very efficiently in a short time. In this sense, the technique of F. C. exercise may be to some extent similar to a simple but very useful lexical
exercise by means of a computer (Fox, 1984).

But in F. C. exercise human teachers can very flexibly teach lexical meanings and give lexical exercises to learners and correct some mistakes and explain why some learners make those mistakes and how they can correct those mistakes.

4. Since lexical items for F. C. exercise are mainly picked up from language materials of the coursebooks used in the present class, learners will feel more urgent need of and more interest in learning those selected lexical items and therefore they will be able to learn the items more willingly and acquire them more easily and accurately.

On the other hand, there may be some serious defects in memorizing disconnected lexical items selected at random without relation to coursebooks or memorizing isolated lexical items selected from a vocabulary list in the alphabetical order.

However, the combination of F. C. exercises for lexical items in discourses and the subsequent discourse learning has some merits of both uncontextualized and contextualized practices.

5.0 F. C. exercises in pre-teaching and mid-teaching may have some good effect of lexical acquisition as well as some effect of preparation for the subsequent contextualized practices. F. C. exercise as pre-teaching will make the later discourse learning a little easier. And F. C. exercise as mid-teaching for the same discourse material will make the same discourse learning more comprehensible and efficient. And if learners do F. C. exercise as post-teaching of the same discourse material, they will consolidate the recognition of the lexical items more accurately and quickly. Thus they will be able to comprehend
or recall the items more easily and quickly and accelerate the memorization of the items, that is, to quicken and strengthen the learners' long-term memory more effectively. It seems to me that F. C. exercises as mid-teaching and post-teaching have seldom been given to learners before. If vocabulary expansion should really be aimed at, F. C. exercises as mid-teching or post-teaching should be given to them steadily hereafter.

5.1 I gave F. C. exercise to 48 freshmen students at a university in Japan on 8th September, 1986. The exercise was carried out as the pre-teaching of a communicative material in the beginner's course (Cook, 1980, 1985). The lexical items chosen for the exercise were the following 12 items:

all the time, believe, football, good at, good-looking, nowadays, once, pretty, silly, squash, strange, ugly.

The procedure of the F. C. exercise for those 12 items was as follows:

1. Check, confirmation and brief explanation about each lexical meaning and usage.
2. A slow lexical comprehension exercise (once).
3. A slow lexical recall exercise (twice; the learners pronounce each lexical item following the teacher's pronunciation).
4. A quick lexical recall exercise (twice).
5. A very quick lexical recall exercise (twice).

Every time the above-mentioned lexical exercises (2—5) were carried
out in the Language Laboratory, the order of presenting the lexical items was changed and one student was asked to put his/her headset on and to produce orally each item while the other students produced orally each item at the same time without putting their headsets on.

As for their attitude, most students (94%) wrote in Japanese their favorable impression about the above F.C. exercise. The following statements are the extracts of their impression.

1. “I recognized in today’s class that I had forgotten surprisingly the words and idioms which I had remembered for the entrance examination of a university.”

2. “I think I will not be able to speak English unless I acquire the ability to use words.”

3. “This word practice was good because I repeated it several times. As the words remained rather deeply in my mind, it was effective. I think the exercise was gradually quickened and I familiarized myself with the words, therefore that was good for me.”

4. “I think that as I uttered each word one after another rather speedily, I could concentrate on the exercise with tension.”

5. “This word practice was interesting for me. And it was good for me because I could remember the words fairly well.”

6. “I enjoyed this word exercise since I could do it well. And when I practiced uttering the sentences in the coursebook with the
teacher, I was able to understand the sentences more quickly than before."

7. "After this word practice I read the discourses with the teacher for the purpose of understanding and speaking and I felt I understood the discourses more easily."

8. "I think this word practice is very good. I enjoyed speaking English more quickly."

9. "As it is important to increase the number of words in our vocabulary, we had better continue this word practice."

10. "I think this word practice is very effective and very useful. I want you to continue it by all means hereafter."

Conclusion

In the present article I described almost comprehensively the procedure of doing a lexical exercise out of context by using flashcards. (F. C. exercise) and explained the ways of carrying out F. C. exercise. Learners can flexibly do the lexical exercise by following the procedure of F. C. exercise described in this article. In another article I will describe some other characteristics of F. C. exercise further from the viewpoint of vocabulary teaching and learning.

Here I would like to emphasize again the importance of F. C. exercise as follows: F. C. exercise is a basic practice for acquiring lexical items and for pre-teaching and mid-teaching of language materials for developing the four active skills of listening, speaking, reading and
writing. Therefore, if learners would steadily do F. C. exercise from a beginner's course to an advanced course, they could accomplish the development of four skills and vocabulary expansion more effectively.

Generally speaking, the learning of each individual lexical item out of context tends to be neglected by teachers because of the thought that (1) though the lexical learning in context is effective, the learning of each isolated lexical item is defective and (2) the activity of learning sentences or paragraphs should be emphasized more than the activity of learning each individual lexical item separately.

But in the past actual teaching and learning situations most Japanese learners of English as a foreign language might have felt contextualized practices for four skills more difficult than teachers expected them to be and many learners might have failed to do those contextualized practices well or smoothly. However, F. C. exercise has some advantages as described in the present article. One of the best advantages seems to me that F.C. exercise can be repeated speedily, easily and efficiently several times. Consequently, F. C. exercises as pre-teaching and mid-teaching will be useful for the subsequent contextualized practices. And F. C. exercise as post-teaching will be effective for vocabulary acquisition especially in both beginner's and intermediate courses.

Therefore, I am convinced that it would be very desirable for learners to continue to do F. C. exercise in order to comprehend or recall each lexical item more correctly and quickly and memorize more lexical items steadily in each lesson in class or at home than before.

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References


