

# Spanish Vocabulary Translation Tests and Memory Strategies

Francisco José BARRERA RODRÍGUEZ

## Abstract

Vocabulary is essential in the development of communicative competence, although its importance is not reflected in Spanish curricula in Japanese universities. Considered a fundamental part of Spanish pronunciation class at the School of International Liberal Studies (SILS) in Chukyo University, it was observed that just before vocabulary translation tests were held at the beginning of every class, a great number of students wrote the vocabulary words down dozens of times. However, although they seemed to try hard, the poor results did not change. This study was carried out with the objective of understanding how students study vocabulary, and testing how a task based in memory strategies can improve translation vocabulary tests' scores. The results of an exploratory and an experimental study revealed that: 1) there is a lack of variety in learning vocabulary strategies; 2) the vocabulary is learnt exclusively by repetition; and 3) explicit instruction based in memory strategies showed effectiveness in test's results. On the one hand, the memory strategies' task fostered not only good results, but it made studying vocabulary an enjoyable task, helped students' motivation, increased creativity, improved retention in memory, and stimulated active and collaborative learning. On the other hand, limitations of the task concerned the size of vocabulary, especially on the days when there were more than 50 items, and problems of context.

**Keywords:** Language Learning Strategy, Memory Strategy, Second Language Acquisition, Spanish, Vocabulary Acquisition, Vocabulary Learning Strategy, Vocabulary Translation Tests

### List of Abbreviations:

CEFR	Common European Framework of Reference for Languages
L1	First Language (used as synonym of “Mother Language”)
L2	Second Language (used as synonym of “Foreign Language”)
LLS	Language Learning Strategy
SILS	School of International Liberal Studies
VLS	Vocabulary Learning Strategy

## 1. Introduction

*While without grammar very little can be conveyed, without vocabulary **nothing** can be conveyed* (Wilkins, 1972: p. 111).

The sentence above may be obvious not only in a first language (L1) but, even more, in a second language (L2) context, as it is evident that we cannot communicate orally if we don't have the elements, the basics, even though we knew the rules (grammar and syntax).

A large number of studies have noted the importance of vocabulary in L2 learning. However, what do we understand by “vocabulary”? What is involved in “knowing vocabulary”? Is it also important in the academic curricula? And how is it treated in native teachers' Spanish classes at the School of International Liberal Studies (SILS)?

The first and common image that we have of vocabulary in L2 is a list of words, usually accompanied by L1 translations. However, vocabulary is not exclusively composed of single words, as Nation and Meara point out:

“There are some groups of words, like *good morning* and *at the end of the day*, which seem to be used like single words. Some of the groups may be items that have not been analyzed into parts but are just learned, stored and used as complete units” (2010, p. 35).

Therefore, vocabulary is more complex and is integrated by the **lexical elements**, including single word forms (with members of the open word classes, like noun, verb, adjective and adverb, or close lexical sets) and fixed expressions (sentential formulae, phrasal idioms, fixed frames, phrasal verbs, compound prepositions, and fixed collocations), and by the **grammatical elements** (articles, quantifiers, demonstratives, personal pronouns, question words and relatives, possessives,

prepositions, auxiliary verbs, conjunctions and particles)<sup>1</sup>.

Besides, knowing a word is not only knowing its meaning in L1. Folse (2004, p. 18) states that “knowing a word is actually a multipart task,” that includes not barely the semantics (meaning), but the form, with its sounds (phonology), its written appearance (orthography) and composition (morphology), and the use of that word. Thornbury (2002, p. 17) summarized the implicated parts as follows:

“Knowing a word, then, is the sum total of all these connections — semantic, syntactic, phonological, orthographic, morphological, cognitive, cultural and autobiographical. It is unlikely, therefore, that any two speakers will ‘know’ a word in exactly the same way.”

In **Table 1** we can divide the form, meaning, and use of a word into two dimensions: as receptive and as productive knowledge.

**Table 1.** What is involved in knowing a word

Aspect	Component	Receptive knowledge	Productive knowledge
Form	spoken	What does the word sound like?	How is the word pronounced?
	written	What does the word look like?	How is the word written and spelled?
	word parts	What parts are recognizable in this word?	What word parts are needed to express the meaning?
Meaning	form and meaning	What meaning does this word form signal?	What word form can be used to express this meaning?
	concepts and referents	What is included in this concept?	What items can the concept refer to?
	associations	What other words does this make people think of?	What other words could people use instead of this one?
Use	grammatical functions	In what patterns does the word occur?	In what patterns must people use this word?
	collocations	What words or types of words occur with this one?	What words or types of words must people use with this one?
	constraints on use (register, frequency ...)	Where, when, and how often would people expect to meet this word?	Where, when, and how often can people use this word?

\*Adapted from Nation (2001, p. 27)

However, it has to be said that the importance of vocabulary learning is not reflected in academic

<sup>1</sup> See details for English language in Council of Europe (2001), pp. 110–111.

curricula, at least not in the terms of grammar, for example. In fact, the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching, Assessment* (Council of Europe, 2001) (from now on “CEFR”), that has become the basis of language learning curricular plans, is not very helpful as subordinates the vocabulary to linguistic competences:

“Communicative language competence can be considered as comprising several components: **linguistic**, **sociolinguistic** and **pragmatic**. Each of these components is postulated as comprising, in particular, knowledge and skills and know-how. **Linguistic competences** include lexical, phonological, syntactical knowledge and skills and other dimensions of language as system, independently of the sociolinguistic value of its variations and the pragmatic functions of its realisations” (Council of Europe, 2001, p. 13).

Evidently, as seen in **Table 1**, it does not have to do exclusively with lexical, but with sociolinguistic and pragmatic competence. The CEFR offers only two illustrative scales by levels of proficiency for vocabulary range and vocabulary control (p. 112). However, it is the CEFR user’s responsibility to decide which lexical elements the learner will need to recognize and/or use, and the way they are selected and ordered. Fortunately, The Instituto Cervantes’ *Curricular Plan* (2006) carried out specified Spanish vocabulary lists for each level of language reference (A1, A2, B1, B2, C1, C2).

If we take a look at the Spanish curricula of the main 20 universities in Japan that have a department or section of Spanish and/or offer classes as a part of a Major level<sup>2</sup>, we realize that is very common to entitle or subtitle Spanish subjects as “grammar”, “pronunciation”, “conversation”, “reading” or “writing”, but it is very infrequent to find classes strictly on vocabulary. We only could find one case, the Takushoku University that offers “initial vocabulary 1” and “initial vocabulary 2”<sup>3</sup>. Regrettably, despite the importance vocabulary deserves for researchers, it does not translate into the Japanese university Spanish’s curricula.

Finally, the case of Spanish classes at SILS is similar to others universities, as there is not a specific

---

<sup>2</sup> Data obtained from Spanish programs in 2019 at the following universities in Japan: Aichi Prefectural University, Chukyo University, Dokkyo University, Hosei University, Kanagawa University, Kanda University of International Studies, Kansai Gaidai University, Kobe City University of Foreign Studies, Kyoto Sangyo University, Kyoto University of Foreign Studies, Nanzan University, Osaka University, Seisein University, Setsunan University, Sophia University, Takushoku University, Tenri University, Tokoha University, Tokyo University of Foreign Studies and Waseda University.

<sup>3</sup> 初級語彙① I・II, 初級語彙② I・II.

subject for vocabulary learning. For example, in first grade there are two Spanish native teachers' classes: Spanish 1A ("Pronunciation") and Spanish 1B ("Conversation"), that in fall semester become Spanish 1E and Spanish 1F, respectively. In general terms, pronunciation class focuses not only on pronunciation, but vocabulary learning and listening, meanwhile conversation class is dedicated to speaking. The students are given a vocabulary list of every lesson's words in Spanish with Japanese translation at the beginning of the course (see **table 2**).

**Table 2.** Example of vocabulary list

"ELE ACTUAL A2" LESSON 2		
1	alergia	アレルギー
2	aspirina	アスピリン
3	brazo	腕
4	cabeza	頭
5	caliente	熱い
6	calmante	鎮痛剤
[...]		

**Table 3.** Example of vocabulary test

VOCABULARY TEST 2 (ELE ACTUAL A2)	
<b>Exam:</b> October the 8th	
<b>Name:</b> _____	<b>Points:</b> ____/10
• Put into Spanish:	
1. 疲れた	_____
2. 悲しい	_____
3. 心配している	_____
[...]	

The students must study the vocabulary in advance (they have a week between every exam) and they have to answer a vocabulary test of 10 terms with the Spanish translation (see **Table 3**). Needless to say that knowing the translation does not mean the student knows the vocabulary, but it is a previous step, as vocabulary is used in context during pronunciation and conversation classes.

## 2. Language learning strategies in vocabulary acquisition

The psycholinguistic studies focusing on the characteristics of the "good" L2 learner initiated in the mid-seventies by Rubin (1975) started to identify language learning strategies (hereinafter "LLS"), in order to apply them in the classroom to those students who didn't show that same level of success. Ellis (1994, p. 529) states that the concept of strategy itself remains "fuzzy" as there are two different approaches, one from the language acquisition and teaching (Rubin and Oxford) and the other from an information processing model (O'Malley and Chamot). Following Cohen (2011, p. 7) LLS would be:

"thoughts and actions, consciously chosen and operationalized by language learners, to assist them in carrying out a multiplicity of tasks from the very onset of learning to the most advanced levels of target-language performance."

The pioneer path that Rubin (1975) opened was followed by research that, as a result of their empirical studies, realized operational classifications of LLS (Stern 1975; Naiman *et al.*, 1978; Reiss, 1983, 1985; Lennon, 1989; Oxford 1990; Rubin and Thompson, 1994; Chamot and El-Dinary 1999; Chamot and Keatley 2003; Oxford *et al.* 2004). Of all the classifications, Oxford (1990) made one of the most complete taxonomies, classifying LLS into two big groups:

- 1) Direct strategies, those that directly involve the target language: memory, cognitive and compensatory strategies.
- 2) Indirect strategies, that is to say, the strategies that support and manage language learning without involving the target language: metacognitive, affective and social strategies.

Forming part of LLS, Gu (1994) distinguished those strategies that were specifically used in vocabulary learning/acquisition: the vocabulary learning strategies (from now on “VLS”). Schmitt (1997) adapted Oxford’s (1990) classification in order to develop a set of fifty-eight different strategies in two groups and five subcategories:

- 1) Strategies for the discovery of a new word’s meaning: determination strategies (individual) and social strategies (interaction).
- 2) Strategies for consolidating a word once it has been encountered: memory strategies (mnemonics), cognitive strategies (mechanical), metacognitive strategies (monitoring) and, also here, social strategies (interaction).

In fact, Schmitt (1997) tested his taxonomy carrying out research on VLS by Japanese learners. The aim of his study was to find the strategies perceived as useful, even though they were not used by the students. Following the review of studies on VLS that consider Japanese learners, Kudo (1999) conducted two studies, one involving 325 Japanese senior high school English learners across 3 Japanese high schools, and the other with 504 from 6 different high schools. He found a lack of knowledge about VLS itself, and a limited use of strategies, where keyword method and semantic mapping were not used at all. Students rarely used social strategies, and the use of memory strategies were limited to rote learning, i.e., memorization technique based on repetition. In Japan rote learning is a commonly employed method that everyone experiences at school when learning *kanji* (originally Chinese characters used in the Japanese writing system). In another study, Mizumoto and Takeuchi (2009) examined the effectiveness of explicit instruction of VLS over a ten-week semester with

a group of 146 female English learners from two Japanese universities. Using vocabulary test and questionnaires on VLS and motivation to an experimental (with explicit instruction) and a control group at the beginning and at the end of the course, they showed that the experimental group outperformed the control group in the vocabulary test.

Finally, for the purpose of this study, we will focus now on memory strategies, using the taxonomy (see **Table 4**) developed by Oxford (1990), who classifies them into direct strategies. They have a specific function, that is: “helping students store and retrieve new information” (Oxford, 1990, p. 37).

**Table 4.** Memory Strategies

Creating mental linkages	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li><b>1. Grouping:</b> classifying language material into meaningful units.</li> <li><b>2. Associating/Elaborating:</b> relating new information to concepts already in memory.</li> <li><b>3. Placing new words into a context:</b> placing a word or phrase in a meaningful sentence, conversation, or story in order to remember it.</li> </ol>
Applying images and sounds	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li><b>1. Using imagery:</b> relating new language information to concepts in memory by means of meaningful visual imagery.</li> <li><b>2. Semantic mapping:</b> making an arrangement of words into a picture, which has a key concept at the center or at the top, and related words and concepts linked with the key concept by means of lines or arrows.</li> <li><b>3. Using keywords:</b> remembering a new word by using auditory and visual links.</li> <li><b>4. Representing sounds in memory:</b> remembering new information according to its sound.</li> </ol>
Reviewing well	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li><b>1. Structured reviewing:</b> reviewing in carefully spaced intervals.</li> </ol>
Employing action	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li><b>1. Using physical response or sensation:</b> physically acting out a new expression or meaningfully relating a new expression to a physical feeling or sensation.</li> <li><b>2. Using mechanical techniques:</b> using creative but tangible techniques, especially involving moving or changing something which is concrete (e.g., flashcards).</li> </ol>

\*Adapted from Oxford (1990, p. 18)

### 3. Objectives

Through direct observation, we realized most students of Chukyo University’s SILS of Spanish language write down Spanish words dozens of times just before the vocabulary tests at the beginning of practically every pronunciation class. Besides, as for the Fall Semester, students are divided into 4 classes for Spanish 1E (Pronunciation) and Spanish 1F (Conversation) attending the qualifications of both subjects in the Spring Semester (i.e., Spanish A and Spanish B). It was observed that the students with the lowest scores had poor results in vocabulary tests, independently of theme or difficulty. In other words, those students seemed to be bad at memorizing. In this scenario, two main questions that motivated this study arose:

- 1) How do the students prepare the Spanish vocabulary test without having explicit instructions?
- 2) How can memory strategies improve vocabulary test's scores?

#### 4. Methodology

In order to answer the first research question, an exploratory study was carried out, while for the second question, it was necessary to implement an experimental study. This section provides details on the subjects who participated (→ **4.1 Informants**), as well as the material created for both exploratory and experimental studies (→ **4.2 Material**). The instrument of validation is explained in point **4.3**; and, finally, we conclude with the procedures that were employed (→ **4.4 Procedures**).

##### 4.1 Informants

The subjects that participated in both exploratory and experimental studies were part of one of the four groups in which Spanish E (Pronunciation) is divided, consisting of 14 Japanese students. For the experimental study, they were divided into two groups attending their tests' scores: 7 students with the lowest scores formed the experimental group (E1~E7), and the remaining 7, the control group (C1~C7). Age and academic grade were the same for both groups, although the percentage of males/females differed (see **Table 5**).

**Table 5.** Informants

	Control Group	Experimental Group
Number of participants	n = 7	n = 7
Average age	19 years old	19 years old
Male/Female	m = 3 (38.1%) / f = 4 (61.9%)	m = 0 (0%) / f = 7 (100%)
Grade	first year (fall semester)	first year (fall semester)

##### 4.2 Material

In order to carry out the exploratory study, an anonymous questionnaire was prepared, with a biodata (age, grade, mother language, experience learning languages) and open questions about the way they memorize vocabulary and the time they employ in doing it.

The experimental study required an activity including as much as possible the memory strategies



explained in **Table 4**. We adapted from Kimura<sup>4</sup> a task that comprehends contextualization, use of key words, presentation of sounds in memory, structured review, and use of mechanical techniques through flashcards. A vocabulary flashcard or word card is a card bearing information on either or both sides, usually reserving the front for L2 words and the reverse side for translations in L1. Nation and Webb (2011, p. 29) explain the strategy of using paired-associate learning by employing flashcards, as mapping L2 word forms to L1 meanings. However, Oxford (1990, p. 43) relates the utilization of flashcards to using mechanical techniques, as one moves a card from one stack to another when the word is learned<sup>5</sup>. (See **Appendix 1** for the instructions given to the students, and **Appendix 2** for samples from students' cards).

The task was called "Let's talk with your favorite artist" and consisted of putting the vocabulary they have to prepare for the next class into a funny conversation with his/her favorite artist, writing down what he/she/they would say in a determinate situation. The key is that if the student can relate the meaning and the sound of a word or expression with an image or an original connection it would be easier to remember, and therefore, acquire.

The students of the experimental group had to create their own flashcards following a specific structure. They had to place in the **front** of the card the Spanish vocabulary and next to it, separated by a colon, its meaning in Japanese. Meanings on word cards may be represented by L2 definitions, L2 synonyms, L1 translations, pictures, L2 contextual definitions, etc. but the most effective way is L1 translations, as Laufer & Shmueli (1997, p. 103) claimed, "glosses in L1 proved more beneficial for retention".

On the **back** of the card, students were requested to think of a sentence in Japanese including his/her favorite artist with the Spanish word to study. Besides, they had to put its pronunciation inside a box, the Spanish vocabulary in brackets, and its meaning underlined.

The instructions also indicate that it is necessary for the student to study for the following week's vocabulary test reviewing the cards he/she made. At the end of the instructions, students are informed that in the next class the funniest cards will be chosen, and they will have to complete a short comment sheet about this activity, in order to provide feedback and also monitor their learning. In the comment sheet, they are asked to comment briefly on the advantages and disadvantages of using this kind of task and their opinion.

---

<sup>4</sup> In JACET (2006), pp. 142–147.

<sup>5</sup> For the effectiveness and criticisms of this strategy see Nation (2000), pp. 296–316.

### 4.3 Instrument

The instrument used in the experimental study consisted of 12 direct translation vocabulary tests (see **Table 3**) in which students had to write the Spanish equivalents to 10 questions in Japanese. The vocabulary list (see **Table 2**) contained the vocabulary necessary for the textbook employed in Pronunciation and Conversation classes: “ELE Actual A1” and “ELE Actual A2”. **Table 6** provides figures for the contents of every exam, with number of items, the textbook and unit, themes and vocabulary, and the dates it was held.

**Table 6.** Contents of vocabulary tests

Test	Items	Lesson	Themes and vocabulary	Date (M/D)
1	32	A1, 14	Sports. Free time activities.	9/22
2	56	A2, 1	Studying Spanish. Wishes. Needs. Plans. Intentions. Possibility.	9/28
3	44	A2, 2	Physical state. Mood. Body. Illness. Remedies.	10/5
4	81	A2, 3	Shopping. Foods. In a restaurant.	10/12
5	59	A2, 4	Recent facts. Apologies. Excuses.	10/19
6	37	A2, 5	Personal experiences. Learning a foreign language.	10/26
7	49	A2, 6	Clothes. Shopping.	11/9
8	30	A2, 7	Birthday's party. Greetings. Presents. Foods and drinks.	11/16
9	28	A1, OPT.*	Usual actions. Sports. Free time activities	11/30
10	78	A2, 8	Travels.	12/7
11	43	A2, 9	Biography. Important moments in someone's life.	12/14
12	37	A2, 10	Social situations. Classroom's rules.	12/21

\*OPT. = optional (This unit is studied after units 6 and 7, as these 3 lessons deal with simple past tense).

### 4.4 Procedures

At the beginning of the Fall Semester, the students of the lowest level Spanish class were given, as usual, a list of the vocabulary that would be used in Spanish 1E (Pronunciation) and Spanish 1E (Conversation) with the Japanese translation and the dates the vocabulary test would be carried out. Additionally, they were handed a questionnaire to fill in with a brief biodata and answering freely about the way and the time needed to prepare for the tests. The fact that it was anonymous was emphasized. This exploratory study was complemented with direct observation, at least during five minutes before every test was held. After the 6th vocabulary test, the class was divided into two groups, and the experimental group was given the instructions to prepare for the six remaining exams (→ **Appendix 2**). Once each test was finished, the experimental group had 10 minutes for

discussion and feedback, and they had to complete a comment sheet about the task, explaining advantages and disadvantages of using the flashcards.

## 5. Results

### 5.1 The exploratory study

The results of the questionnaire given to the 14 students at the beginning of Fall Semester offer no doubt about the way they prepare for the vocabulary test: a hundred percent confirm that they memorize by writing the word, although they differ in the time they employ doing it.

Bellow is a summary of the most significant answers given by the students:

C1: *[I study] Two days before the exam, I write down the vocabulary in Japanese and in Spanish. I memorize it writing more than ten times. The day before the exam, I check writing if I remember the vocabulary. I practice writing lots of times the vocabulary I couldn't write correctly.*

C3: *Mainly on Friday and Wednesday nights I write every word five times while I pronounce it every time. The word I couldn't remember, I try to memorize it just playing on words.*

C5: *First, Wednesday night, I memorize the word reading (without paying attention to the details). Thursday, I memorize writing the word (I pay attention to the spelling and the accent mark). As I study just before the test I do not remember well, and I forget the word immediately the test finishes. I should study having planned in advance, but I always forget to do it.*

C7: *I listen to the correct sound and write while pronouncing. I don't memorize one by one, and I check it once after I study it. Those I couldn't remember, I repeat them writing several times.*

E1: *I study checking the Spanish words and trying to guess the meaning. I check either on Saturdays and Sundays. I memorize on the train on Mondays and Tuesdays, and Wednesdays' night.*

E2: *I read the vocabulary two days before the exam. The day before, I read it and write it. The same day I check it on the train and write it just before the exam.*

E3: *I study seeing Japanese and learning Spanish. I write and learn Spanish while seeing the meaning of Japanese, I always study on the train, while coming to Chukyo.*

E6: *I study writing the vocabulary in a paper, on Saturday and Sunday and the day of the exam, on the train.*

E7: *I read aloud the vocabulary and write it down. I study on the train and during the free time between classes.*

The direct observation carried out during the first six tests confirm the questionnaire results as almost one hundred percent of students was repeatedly writing the vocabulary in the moments before starting the class, and therefore, the test. Only 2 students of 14 were reading the vocabulary list instead of writing, one three times (test 1, 3 and 6) and the other twice (test 1 and 6). A correlation between how these two students prepared the tests reading and the number of items can be established, as tests 1, 3 and 6 included lower vocabulary than the others (32, 44 and 37, respectively).

## 5.2 The experimental study

In **Table 7** the individual scores of the 12 vocabulary tests made during the Fall Semester are recorded. The first 7 lines correspond to the experimental group (E1~E7), and the lines above represent control groups' scores (C1~C7). Besides, in bolds figures are the scores of both groups during the treatment period.

**Table 7.** Individual vocabulary tests' results

N	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
E1	6	7	7	7	8	7	<b>9</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>8</b>
E2	7	7	8	6	7	9	<b>8</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>10</b>
E3	6	8	6	7	6	9	<b>9</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>8</b>
E4	8	7	6	7	7	6	<b>9</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>10</b>
E5	6	7	5	6	8	8	<b>8</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>9</b>
E6	7	7	4	5	6	8	<b>9</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>10</b>
E7	5	8	7	5	7	8	<b>8</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>10</b>
C1	7	10	9	8	8	8	<b>9</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>9</b>
C2	8	10	8	9	9	10	<b>9</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>10</b>
C3	10	9	10	8	8	9	<b>8</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>10</b>
C4	9	6	9	8	7	9	<b>8</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>9</b>
C5	8	7	8	8	7	8	<b>9</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>8</b>
C6	10	8	6	7	10	6	<b>10</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>6</b>
C7	9	8	10	8	9	10	<b>9</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>7</b>

If we pay attention to the means (see **Table 8**) it is observed that there is practically no difference in the control group's means between the first sixth weeks (8.4) and the last sixth weeks (8.38). However, the means of the experimental group differ between both periods of time (see **Table 9**).

**Table 8.** Vocabulary tests' means by groups

Means	First sixth weeks	Last sixth weeks (treatment)
Experimental group's means	6.81	<b>9.12</b>
Control group's means	8.4	8.38

**Table 9.** Experimental group's descriptive statistics

		Mean	N	Std. deviation	Std. error mean
Par 1	Experimental Pretest	6.81	7	0.36327	0.13730
	Experimental Posttest	9.12	7	0.22825	0.08627

In order to test if it was a substantial difference, a Paired T-test was carried out using IBM SPSS statistics 25. The results are given in **Table 10**:

**Table 10.** Experimental group's T-Test result

		Mean	Std. deviation	Std. error mean	95% CI of the dif.		t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
					Lower	Upper			
Par 1	Exp_Pre-Exp_Pos	-2.31000	0.50948	0.19256	-2.78119	-1.83881	-11.996	6	0.000

Assuming the significance at  $p < 0.01$ , we can say there was a statically significant difference in the scores for pre-test ( $M = 6.81$ ,  $SD = 0.36327$ ) and post-test ( $M = 9.12$ ,  $SD = 0.22825$ ):  $t(6) = -11.996$ ,  $p = 0.000$ ).

Apart from the quantitative study, the qualitative data obtained by the comment sheets must be considered. During the six weeks it took to collect the experimental group's data, some points in common can be extracted about learning vocabulary through this kind of task:

1) Becomes enjoyable

E2 (11/9): *It's been very funny to imagine strange situations.*

E4 (11/16): *I do not turn the cards in the same order, but randomly, so I do not get bored of repeating mechanically the same thing.*

2) Helps motivation

E3 (11/16): *It is a challenge for me to think funnier situation than the last week.*

## 3) Increases creativity

E1 (11/23): *I choose every time a different comedian and try to arrange the sentence to his/her personality. I can hear his/her particular voice pronouncing the sentence I created.*

## 4) Improves retention in memory

E6 (11/30): *If I tell you the truth, I used to study vocabulary for passing the exam, and I forgot it immediately. But using the vocabulary with its sound and its meaning at the same time helped me to remember it more efficiently. The absurd situation that I thought made me not forget it so easily.*

## 5) Stimulates active and collaborative learning

E7 (11/30): *At the beginning it was a little bit embarrassing to share the situations that I thought in front of everyone. But at the same time, I could learn a lot just hearing the other's sentences.*

However, on the other hand we found that:

## 6) Not all the words can easily be contextualized

E6 (12/7): *I found very difficult to think examples for “trasladarse a” or “religioso”.*

## 7) The number of words may be an impediment

E5 (12/7): *Today's list was too large, impossible to memorize and took me a lot of time the task.*

## 6. Discussion

The exploratory study confirmed the impressions that motivated this study, as it was found that there is a lack of variety when learning vocabulary. The prevalence of using writing as the preferred way to learn a word seems to be influenced by the way Japanese students memorize kanji, as seen in Kudo (1999). Although more evidence would be necessary in order to establish the reasons of using rote learning, the participants' positive comments on discovering different ways of studying vocabulary point in the direction of the necessity of explicit instruction of vocabulary, coinciding with Mizumoto and Takeuchi (2009). Without previous instruction, studying for a vocabulary test may become an “every man for himself” task.

The results of the experimental study reveal the effectiveness of using memory strategies to prepare vocabulary translation tests, but at the same time some questions arose. In which way are the good scores of the experimental group in the last six vocabulary tests the product of the intervention (i.e., the task), and not of the time they employed on it? From the comments sheets, the importance

of time is not explicated, but the control of the time variable would be necessary in future studies. Besides, from the comments of the students, there is evidence that they feel the task improved the retention of vocabulary in memory, but it is not clear how much “better” is memorized, i.e., if the vocabulary is stored in short-term or long-term memory. This study focused on vocabulary test performance, rather than vocabulary acquisition, so it will be necessary for longitudinal research to get more empirical evidence of the “quality” of memorization.

Finally, disadvantages were found using the flashcard’s task, such as the difficulty handling vocabulary that exceeded 50 items (e.g., test 10), and the equivalency between Spanish and Japanese, as some Spanish consonant groups (“cla”, “trans”, “fra” ... ) or phonemes ([r]) do not exist in Japanese.

## 7. Conclusions

The results regarding the way our students learn vocabulary allow us to affirm that:

- 1) There is a lack of variety in vocabulary learning strategies.
- 2) The vocabulary is learnt exclusively by repetition, despite the bad vocabulary tests’ scores.
- 3) Explicit instruction task based on memory strategies, in particular, the task employing flashcards, showed effectiveness in test’s results, especially considering the participants’ scores in the pretest. In addition, such instruction:
  - a) Makes studying vocabulary an enjoyable task.
  - b) Helps student motivation.
  - c) Increases creativity.
  - d) Improves retention in memory.
  - e) Stimulates active and collaborative learning.

On the other hand, the limitations of the task as to the size of vocabulary and the problems of context, indicate the preference of offering students a variety of strategies and/or tasks (e.g., use of images).

## 8. References

- 大学英語教育学会 (JACET) 学習ストラテジー研究会 (編著) (2006) 「英語教師のための『学習ストラテジー』ハンドブック」, 東京: 大修館書店.
- [Daigaku eigo kyoiiku gakkai (JACET) Gakushuu sutoratejii kenkyukai (Henchou) (2006) “Eigo kyoushi no tame no ‘gakushuu sutoratejii’ handobukku”, Tokyo: Taishuukanshoten.]

- Translation: University English Education Association (JACET) Learning Strategy Study group (Compilation) (2006) *“Learning Strategy” Handbook for English Teachers*, Tokyo: Taishukanshoten.
- Chamot, A. U. & El-Dinary, P. B. (1999) Children’s learning strategies in immersion classrooms. *Modern Language Journal*, 83 (3): 319–341.
- Chamot, A. U. & Keatley, C. W. (2003) Learning strategies of adolescent low-literacy Hispanic ESL students. Paper presented at *the 2003 Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association*, Chicago, IL.
- Cohen, A. D. (2011) *Strategies in learning and using a second language* (2nd ed.). London: Longman.
- Council of Europe. (2001) *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching, Assessment*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Ellis, R. (1994) *The study of second language acquisition*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Folse, K. (2004) *Vocabulary myths: applying second language research to classroom teaching*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.
- Gu, P. Y. (1994) Vocabulary Learning Strategies of good and poor Chinese EFL learners. *The Twenty-Eighth Annual Convention and Exposition*. Baltimore.
- Instituto Cervantes. (2006) *Plan curricular del Instituto Cervantes: Niveles de referencia para el español*. Madrid: Biblioteca Nueva.
- Kudo, Y. (1999) *L2 vocabulary Learning Strategies*. Unpublished MA thesis. Second Language Teaching & Curriculum Center, University of Hawai‘i, Honolulu, USA. Available at: <http://www.nflrc.hawaii.edu/NetWorks/NW14/> [Accessed June 25, 2019]
- Laufer, B. & Shmueli, K. (1997) Memorizing new words: Does teaching have anything to do with it? *RELC Journal* 28, 1: 89–108.
- Lennon, P. (1989) Introspection and Intentionality in Second Language Acquisition. *Language Learning*, 39: 375–395.
- Mizumoto, A. & Takeuchi, O. (2009) Examining the effectiveness of explicit instruction of vocabulary learning strategies with Japanese EFL university students. *Language Teaching Research*, 13 (4): 425–449.
- Naiman, N., Fröhlich, M., Stern, H. & Todesco, A. (1978) The Good Language Learner. *Research in Education* Series No 7. The Ontario Institute for Studies in Education. Ontario.
- Nation, I. S. P. (2001) *Learning vocabulary in another language*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Nation, I. S. P. & Meara, P. (2010) Vocabulary. In N. Schmitt (Ed.), *An Introduction to Applied Linguistics* (pp. 34–52). Abingdon: Hodder Education.
- Nation, I. S. P. & Webb, S. A. (2011) *Researching and Analyzing Vocabulary*. Boston: Heinle, Cengage Learning.
- Oxford, R. L. (1990) *Language learning strategies: What every teacher should know*. Boston: Heinle & Heinle.
- Oxford, R. L., Cho, Y., Leung, S. & Kim, H. (2004) Effects of the presence and difficulty of task on strategy use: An exploratory study. *International Review of Applied Linguistics in Language Teaching*, 42 (1): 1–47.
- Schmitt, N. (1997) Vocabulary Learning Strategies. In N. Schmitt and M. McCarthy (Eds.): *Vocabulary: Description, Acquisition and Pedagogy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Schmitt, N. (2000) *Vocabulary in Language Teaching* (pp. 199–227). Cambridge U.K: Cambridge University Press.
- Stern, H. H. (1975) What can we learn from the good language learner? *Canadian Modern Language Review*, 31: 304–318.
- Reiss, M. (1983) Helping the Unsuccessful Language Learner. *Canadian Modern Language Review*, 39: 257–266.
- Reiss, M. (1985) The Good Language Learner: Another Look. *Canadian Modern Language Review*, 41: 511–523.
- Rubin, J. (1975) What the “Good Language Learner” can teach us. *TESOL Quarterly*, 9 (1): 41–51.
- Rubin, J. & Thompson I. (1994) *How to be a more successful language learner* (2nd Ed.). Boston: Heinle & Heinle.
- Thornbury, S. (2002) *How to teach vocabulary*. Harlow: Pearson Education Limited.
- Wilkins, D. A. (1972) *Linguistics in Language Teaching*. London: Arnold.



## 9. Appendix

**Appendix 1:** The instructions given to the students**ACTIVITY: Let's talk with your favorite artist**

Put the vocabulary for the next class into a funny conversation with your favorite artist, writing what he/she would say in a determinate situation.

The key is that if you can relate the meaning and the sound of a word or expression with an image or an original connection it would be easier to remember.

- **Necessary material:** Flashcards.
- **Instructions:** Create your own cards following the structure and the examples given below. Study for the next vocabulary test reviewing the cards you made.

## EXAMPLE

FRONT	<b>Saludar</b> (SPANISH) : 挨拶する (JAPANESE)
BACK	さんまがサルに「サルだ！」(saludar) と可愛く挨拶した。[Sanma-ga saru-ni “saruda!” (saludar) to kawaiku <u>aisatsushita</u> ]*

\*Translation: [The Japanese comedian] Sanma greeted pretty to a monkey (=“saru”) “monkey!”

## STRUCTURE

FRONT	SPANISH VOCABULARY: ITS MEANING IN JAPANESE
BACK	A SENTENCE IN JAPANESE INCLUDING YOUR FAVORITE ARTIST WITH THE SPANISH WORD TO STUDY: ITS JAPANESE PRONUNCIATION INSIDE A BOX □, THE VOCABULARY IN BRACKETS ( ), AND ITS MEANING UNDERLINED __.

- **Strategies:** Contextualization, use of key words, presentation of sounds in memory, structured review and use of mechanical techniques.

- **Others:** Next class we will choose the funniest cards. You will have to complete a short comment sheet about this activity.

## Appendix 2: 5 samples from students' cards

## Sample 1:

FRONT	<b>Contestar : 答える</b>
BACK	ベッキは <u>コンテスト</u> (contestar) でインタビューを <u>答えた</u> 。 [Bekki-wa <u>kontesuto</u> -de intabyuu-wo <u>kotaeta</u> ]

## Sample 2:

FRONT	<b>Vida : 人生</b>
BACK	ヒロシは「 <u>ビーだ</u> ま (vida) のように小さな <u>人生</u> だった」と叫んだ。 [Hiroshi-wa " <u>biidama</u> -noyouni chiisana <u>jinnsei</u> datta" to sakennda]

## Sample 3:

FRONT	<b>Catedral : 大聖堂</b>
BACK	中島裕翔が <u>大聖堂</u> で <u>勝手に</u> <u>ドラム</u> (catedral)を使わないでと言った。 [Nakajima Yuuto-ga <u>daiseidou</u> -de <u>katteni</u> <u>doramu</u> -wo tsukawanaide to itta]

## Sample 4:

FRONT	<b>Reservar : 予約する</b>
BACK	亀梨が <u>レセル・バル</u> (reservar)に <u>予約する</u> 。 [Kamenashi-ga " <u>Reser Bar</u> "-ni <u>yoyaku suru</u> ]

## Sample 5:

FRONT	<b>Alojarse : 泊まる</b>
BACK	小錦は <u>アロハ</u> シャツ(alojarse)で <u>泊まる</u> 。 [Konishiki-wa <u>Aloha</u> shatsu-de <u>tomaru</u> ]