EXPLORING LEARNERS' CHANGING LEXICAL LANDSCAPES AND LEARNER AUTONOMY

Andy Barfield

This paper presents the concepts of school knowledge and action knowledge (Barnes, 1992, 2008) and certain basic principles of learner autonomy as a necessary background for exploring learners' lexical development in different pedagogies for autonomy. Using a case study approach, the lexical landscapes of a single student in a content-based learning course are explored as the student develops her vocabulary practices over an academic year through experimentation, interaction and reflection with her peers. The student's emerging preference for using collocations, word associations and short paraphrases reveals an original combination of different vocabulary practices. It also suggests that learners, under appropriate conditions, will readily move beyond word-by-word translation and the simple listing of L2-L1 equivalents that entrance exam cramming requires them to do. Further research questions about the relationship between lexical development and learner autonomy are addressed in the final part of the paper.

本論は二つの「知識」に関するコンセプトschool knowledgeとaction knowledge (Barnes, 1992, 2008)及び学習者オートノミーの基本的理論が 自律性重視の教育において語彙発達の探求に不可欠であることを論じる。ケース・スタディ手法を使い、content-based learningの年間授業で、一人の学習者の語彙学習を追った。 クラスメイトたちとの交流の中での試行錯誤、自分の学びの振り返りを通しての語彙(lexical landscape)の発達を研究した。学習者がコロケーション、単語の関連性、短いパラフレーズなどを中心にする独自の学習スタイルを確立していく様子がはっきりと伺えた。これは適切な環境と指導があれば、学習者が単純な単語リストや英和対応などの入試対策として行ってきたもの以上の語彙学習を実践することができることを示唆するものである。語彙の発達と学習者オートノミーの研究に向けて、今後の方向性についても考察する。

Introduction

While we seem more than ready to discuss nonlinguistic dimensions to the realization of learner autonomy, we are curiously reluctant to get specific about processes of lexical

development that may be involved in that realization. One effect of this separation is that different positions around issues to do with learner autonomy and lexical development become lost or silenced. It is interesting, for example, that discussions of autonomous learning can sometimes go hand in hand with uncritical assertions that students should be assigned 20, even 50, words a week to record and learn, without further consideration of the contradiction between such demands and the realisation of learner autonomy. For these reasons, it seems useful to me to revisit certain fundamental pedagogic principles of learner autonomy in relation to fostering learners' lexical development. This may allow us to consider, in a detached way, possible relationships between learner autonomy and lexical development. In this paper, I first look at the distinction between school knowledge and action knowledge that Barnes (1976, 2008) makes and connect this to three basic, commonly held principles of developing learner autonomy in practice. I then consider how these principles might be applied to lexical development, before reviewing some classic examples of learner autonomy practices where vocabulary learning and use are highlighted. My aim is to question how lexical development is addressed and represented in certain pedagogies for autonomy. Following this, I present the case of a single student in a content-based learning course so that we can explore in some detail the lexical landscape that she moves through as she pays conscious attention to developing her vocabulary practices. In the final part, I identify a few important questions that it may be helpful to address further in exploring learners' changing lexical landscapes in relation to the development of learner autonomy.

Some Basic Principles of Learner Autonomy in Language Education

Within formal education, an important distinction has been made between two modes of learning. These modes are known as *school knowledge* and *action knowledge*. Barnes (1976) comments:

> School knowledge is the knowledge which someone else presents to us. We partly grasp it, enough to answer the teacher's questions, to do exercises, or to answer examination questions, but it remains someone else's knowledge, not ours. If we never use this knowledge, we probably forget it. In so far as we use knowledge for our own purposes, however, we begin to incorporate it into our view of the world, and to use parts of it to cope with the exigencies of living. Once the knowledge becomes incorporated into that view of the world on which our actions are based I would say that it has become "action knowledge." (p. 81)

Barnes (1976) associates school knowledge with the knowledge of others (e.g., teachers, texts that learners read, books that learners study) and action knowledge with the constructivist capacity of the learner to reinterpret others' knowledge, reshape it to their own purposes, and make it part of their understanding of the world where "the pupil's ability to reinterpret knowledge for himself is crucial to learning" (p. 142). The concept of action knowledge leads

into questions of how new understandings of the world are managed by learners. Barnes (2008) explains:

> It is only the learner who can bring the new information, procedures or ways of understanding to bear upon existing ideas, expectations and ways of thinking and acting. That is, the learner actively *constructs* the new way of understanding. (p. 3)

Given the emphasis on the active role of learners in shaping their knowledge of the world, it is not surprising that the school knowledge/action knowledge nexus has been taken up by different learner autonomy theorists and practitioners as a way of understanding the capacity of learners to be authors of their own learning.

David Little, in particular, has theorized from Barnes's work and put forward three general pedagogic principles for the development of language learner autonomy: *learner involvement*, *learner reflection* and *appropriate target use* (e.g., Little 2005, 2006, 2007, 2009). What Little (2007) means by learner involvement is that learners "are brought to engage with their learning and take responsibility for key decisions" (p. 7). This principle highlights the importance of learners determining for themselves their learning purposes and goals, as such self-determination can directly influence their motivation and sense of control. From the principle of learner reflection follows the need for learners to be "taught to think critically about the process and content of their learning" (p. 7). Learners should therefore be guided to consider cognitive processes of learning and develop insights into their own ways of learning; they should also have freedom to choose (or at least the right to negotiate) the materials they use for their learning. The third principle, appropriate target language use, refers to learners "using the target language as the principal medium of language learning" (2006, p. 2). Learners should, in other words, use the target language not only for their own communicative purposes, but also for the metacognitive functions of reflecting on and evaluating their performance and development in the target language. These principles are seen by Little as operating in dynamic relationship to one another: the development of autonomous learning may take place, he argues, only under conditions where all three principles are followed in practice.

Addressing Questions of Learner Autonomy and Lexical Development

Relatively little has been written about the different pedagogic and learning practices that the above principles might entail with regard to vocabulary learning in the development of learner autonomy. Following Little, we may make the following assumptions, however: (a) learners should be guided to engage with their vocabulary learning and take responsibility for key decisions about the vocabulary that they decide they need to develop; (b) learners should be taught to think critically about the vocabulary that they want to learn and about different processes of lexical development, as well as have the right to choose (or at least negotiate) how they wish to learn vocabulary; and (c) learners should use the vocabulary that they learn (or make decisions about what vocabulary they need to use) and should be guided to reflect on their lexical development. With these theoretical principles as initial reference points, I look

next at three examples of learner autonomy practices where vocabulary learning and use have a prominent role.

The first example is from a class of English beginners under Leni Dam's tutelage in a secondary school in Denmark. In the description of her own practices for developing learner autonomy (Dam, 1995; Dam & Legenhausen, 1996), Dam shows how the very first English lessons with a class of Danish 11-year-old learners in a state school focus on what the learners want to say in English, and on how they are asked to bring into the classroom and use English words they find in the world outside. From the first lesson, the learners also use *The Oxford English Picture Dictionary* (Parnwell, 1989) to find funny, exciting or useful words that they need for their own purposes (Dam, 1995, pp. 13-19). Within a few lessons, the lexical choices that the learners make are written up by Dam on posters and displayed in the classroom, so that the whole class can use this shared vocabulary to write brief profiles of themselves in English. Other times, "making word cards" and "practising words" (p. 19) are among the activities that learners choose to do. Here, they are guided to write down words in their learning diaries that they would like to know/remember, to make drawings and write short texts, regularly sharing their work with each other (Dam & Legenhausen, 1996, p. 269). The learners also produce word cards[1] with "a drawing, photo or L1 equivalent on one side and the corresponding English expression on the other side" (p. 269) and make word games that can be used by others in the class. A couple of weeks after starting to learn English, learners are further encouraged to use new vocabulary in writing stories (Dam, 1995, pp. 19-20). Dam's account shows how learners can be asked from the very beginning to be self-directed in their lexical development. She also illustrates how learners can actively explore with each other different ways of learning and using vocabulary. They do not need to be restricted to one single way. Overall, a notably distinctive feature of Dam's practice is that learning vocabulary is closely (but not exclusively) connected with use, as well as with learners making decisions themselves about the vocabulary that they need and how they want to use it. A very important point to keep in mind here is that the vocabulary focus in these classes is part of an overall approach leading towards project work.

In a different take on autonomous learning and vocabulary development, Little (2009) shares examples from a vocabulary list by a 30-year-old Ukrainian student at the A1 beginner proficiency level[2] in an intensive course organized on autonomous learning principles. The list includes vocabulary such as *operation*, *inflamed*, *tablets* and *temperature*. These relatively low-frequency words are directly related to the young man's need to consult a doctor about health problems (pp. 163-6). Thirty-three items are listed by the young man on the top half of a worksheet called My Personal Dictionary with the instructions, "Write 60 words. Find a partner. Test your spelling" (p. 166). Little makes the important point that "… learners acquire the vocabulary appropriate to their personal interests and priorities, which may entail the early learning of low-frequency words and technical terms" (p. 163). A similar claim is made in a rare quantitative study by Dam and Legenhausen (1996); they also report that "vocabulary acquisition in the autonomous approach is very successful and compares favourably with

results from more traditional textbook-based approaches" (p. 280). In Little's 2009 account, the specific vocabulary task of listing 60 words lacks the creative dimension that we saw in the example from Dam's practices; at the same time, it includes peer review and recycling to consolidate basic vocabulary knowledge. There is, however, no discussion, as far as vocabulary learning and use is specifically concerned, of what learners do beyond recording words in a list for their personal dictionaries. This makes it difficult to get a more detailed sense of how different pedagogic principles may apply in practice, unless we assume that learners are able to use the listed vocabulary for later action knowledge tasks that they do and assess themselves on.

Dam (1995) also reports on the vocabulary practices of a different intermediate class of 14- and 15-year-old learners at a Danish secondary school. In one example, some learners are described as noting down new English words after reading a poem they have chosen as part of their group project. However, how they do this is quite different from the creative vocabulary activities with the beginner class detailed in the first example. The intermediate learners simply write in their learning diaries the English words in a list next to the respective Danish translation equivalent each time. Dam does not mention any other ways in which the learners in this intermediate class record vocabulary. Clearly, in both of her classes, self-directed vocabulary development plays an essential part in the learners' engagement with content in doing project work. The children are regularly asked to evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of how they are learning and using English in the group-based projects that they do. Yet, while we may assume that Dam's learners develop a critical awareness of learning and using the vocabulary that they need for their projects, the evidence from the intermediate class suggests that some kind of shift has taken place in these learners' vocabulary practices towards "banking" vocabulary in L2-L1 lists. It is almost as if the learners have started collecting vocabulary for its own sake rather than for their own learning purposes.

This points to some gaps in the lessons that we can draw from these examples, particularly with regard to what learners do after recording vocabulary that they choose as important, and why learners tend to list vocabulary in L2-L1 columns as they gain in language proficiency. Is listing a function of increased lexical proficiency, in that intermediate learners may not need to organize vocabulary in any particular way in order to learn and use it? Is it perhaps an effect of further schooling and the greater institutionalization of learning as school knowledge so that vocabulary development starts to be separated from learner interest, purpose and use? What place does explicit attention to the development of learners' vocabulary practices have as learners become more lexically proficient and go on through the formal education system? University students have necessarily had to reconcile their own purposes with the institutionalized learning that the education system has required of them over several years. The pressure to cram vocabulary for university entrance exams in Japan is one example of how an overbearing emphasis on school knowledge forces learners into specific vocabulary practices that distance them from using the language meaningfully for their own purposes. How does this impact their later vocabulary practices and goals when they continue learning English

beyond high school? Some possible answers to such questions may be provided by looking at the single case of a second-year student, Reiko, in a content-based learning course where she does self-directed research projects over cycles of several weeks.

The Lexical Development and Vocabulary Practices of One Student

In the 2011 academic year, I tracked the vocabulary practices and goals of several students doing a content-based learning course, a small but important part of which was devoted to encouraging students to explore and develop their vocabulary practices in different ways for themselves. The proficiency levels of the students ranged from high intermediate to advanced. Here I focus on one student in particular, Reiko, and her changing vocabulary history over the year (Barfield, 2011, 2012). A vocabulary history (VH) is similar to a language learning history (Benson & Nunan, 2005; Murphey, 1997; Murphey, Chen, & Chen, 2005; Pavlenko, 2001) in which a learner narrates their personal story of language learning and formulates their future learning plans and goals. What is different about a VH is that the learner gives much greater attention to how they have learned vocabulary at different stages in their L2 development and what positive and negative experiences they have had in doing so.

After discussing her own VH and reading some near-peer role models of vocabulary histories produced by other students, Reiko presented her own VH in the following way:

> *I started to learn the vocabularies from elementary school. I was very young, so there are many pictures in textbook of the cram school. At the cram school, we pronounced the words I learnt again and again, and after that we looked the sentences including the new words. I think this is the best way of remembering the words. Pronouncing is very useful to remember the words, and I could know how to use the word looking the sentences.*

> *At the junior high school and high school, I learnt the vocabularies in bad ways. I just make the vocabulary notes that there are the vocabularies I didn't know and remembered the words before the exam by writing again and again. This was very easy to forget the words. After the exam, I forgot all of words I learnt. I just learnt for getting score of exam. This was very bad motivation. Also I couldn't know the pronunciation of the vocabularies.*

> *At the university I could know a lot of words in the writing & speaking classes so far. I read so many articles and books written by English in the classes. And I have a lot of opportunities to explain the words I found out to other students. So I think that I have to understand definitely the words' meanings. So the classes give me a good motivation of learning and remembering the vocabularies.*

One of the interesting points about Reiko's vocabulary history is that her practices are quite specific to each stage and context of her formal education. Early on, her vocabulary learning is focused on remembering, pronouncing, and using lexical items; however, in junior high and high school, as her vocabulary development becomes exam-driven, memorization through repeated writing takes over completely from use. At university, her way of learning vocabulary

comes from a great deal of reading, as well as from using words to explain their meaning to other students. All in all, Reiko shows a greater concern with meaning as her English proficiency develops and as she becomes more concerned with using English. Another interesting point is that repetition of one kind or another (either to herself or to others— repeated pronouncing, repeated writing, and repeated explaining) figures as the most personally significant lexical development process for Reiko. Beyond that, however, she does not really articulate any other specific details about learning and using vocabulary for herself and her own purposes.

From the start of the second research cycle onwards, the students spend some (limited) time each week looking and experimenting with different ways of recording, learning and using vocabulary. The main focus is on their research into NGOs, working on issues to do with developing countries. Explaining and paraphrasing key ideas in their research notes to other students are a key part of the process by which they build their knowledge of NGOs. Reiko researches Save The Children, and, at the start of the cycle, she chooses a few key words from her research notes in English before listing different collocations in which they can be used (see Figure 1).

Children		Education	
help	(disadvantaged children	provides a	(broad education
	(special-needs children	deliver	(general
care for	(difficult children	received no formal education	
help the	(contribute to (child malnutrition		
	(child maltreatment	tradition of	(religious education
	(child trafficking		(legal

Figure 1.   Reiko's way of recording vocabulary in early June 2011.

Although Figure 1 shows that Reiko records several different collocations, she tends to limit the number of possible combinations that she records with either key word. It appears that Reiko is becoming concerned with the quality of her vocabulary knowledge, rather than just with increasing the size of her vocabulary. This change from quantity to quality is one of the crucial changes that most students go through as they attend more consciously to their lexical development in a self-directed way (cf. Benson & Lor, 1998, who note a similar shift in learners' general conceptualisations of language learning as they become more autonomous).

A couple of weeks later, Reiko starts experimenting with using word associations. Here she mentions in her notebook the importance of trying to create a concrete image and of connecting words actively with other words. The new words that she chooses are shown on the left in Figure 2, with the word associations that she makes shown on the right.

Reiko's word associations are made with highly frequent vocabulary, revealing how she is trying to connect new words to vocabulary that she already knows very well. When, later in the same research cycle, Reiko chooses to record *advocacy*, *advocate*, *address* and *lobby*, we begin to see how her way of recording key vocabulary now includes short paraphrases, associations and collocations as she continues to experiment and try to find ways that work best for her (as in Figure 3).

measles	infection, fever, children （はしか、麻疹）
notably	important, outstanding, remarkable
strap	belts, fasten
bureaucratic	(官僚的な) rules, official, complicated, arguments
squabbling (squabble)	argue, girls, quarrel
livelihood	money, important, protect
burden	heavy, load

Figure 2. Reiko's way of recording vocabulary in early July 2011

(v) address	to speak to someone directly
話しかける、	to make a formal speech to a large group of people
言う	*talk, complain, speak*
	(ex a meeting/conference etc
similar	governments about
	an audience
(v) lobby 働きかけ	- to try to persuade the government or someone with
	political power that a law or situation should be changes *government, campaign, address*
	ex.: lobby (<u>for</u> a reduction
	(our leader <u>to</u> support ---
	(<u>against</u> a bill

Figure 3. Reiko's way of recording vocabulary in late June 2011.

In this example, *to speak to someone directly* and *to make a formal speech to a large group of people* are Reiko's short paraphrases for *address*, whereas *talk, complain, speak* are her personal associations, and *a meeting/conference governments about* and *an audience* are collocations that she feels are important for her to learn and use. Figure 3 also illustrates how, within a short period of experimentation, Reiko has started to combine different subprocesses together in the way that she records vocabulary for herself.

By being asked to consider what she is doing to develop her vocabulary knowledge and to think about the strengths and weaknesses of what she does decide to do, Reiko begins to become critically aware of the effectiveness of her choices and actions. In a short reflection written in her notebook about her changing vocabulary practices, Reiko notes at this point:

> *Today I researched similar words, but I found the way that of using is different each other. So I think my way is good for understanding, and also this way shows me the meaning of the words in both of languages, so I can understand the meaning absolutely. By doing the association, I can have the image of the words.*

Then, a few weeks later at the end of July, as she looks back on the development of her ways of learning and using vocabulary in the previous two months, Reiko interprets the changes in this way:

> *At first of learning and using vocabulary I just wrote down the word and the meanings of the words in English. But I realized that this way was not useful because I couldn't remember the word through this way. I found that association was very helpful and it was very fun! And using collocation was also very useful! So finally I wrote down the word that I want to research and the meaning of that in English and Japanese, association and collocation. I think this way was the most useful for me. My goal in the third cycle is to increase my vocabularies which is in the field that I'm interested in.*

In the autumn, Reiko continues using short paraphrases, associations and collocations as the main way of organising her vocabulary notes. She believes that taking time to create several connections helps her "know a lot of words" and "know how to use the word clearly"; her way, she observes, also helps her to "use difficult words in conversation". An example is shown in Figure 4.

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competition              1. when a company or person is trying to be more
                            successful or better than other
adj + N – intense                V + N
      keen   competition          face, be up against    competition
      global                      beat off

                                 N + V  competition →  heat up
                         2.  an event when people try to win prizes
destroy  stop            organize
give up  take out        compete in      → competition
                         be banned from
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Figure 4. Reiko's way of recording vocabulary in October 2011.

The vocabulary notes shown in Figure 4 come from a research cycle where Reiko has chosen to look at how green businesses are developing their Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) policies to address different social and environmental issues. At the end of the third cycle, roughly six months after she started reflecting on her vocabulary history and diversifying her vocabulary practices, Reiko sees her lexical development like this:

> *This time I found lots of specific words which is related to CSR. These are difficult, but I could remember and know how to use it by changing my vocabulary notes and using the words a lot. Also I could learn more words through learning one word. I tried to find the related word with the words which I researched so I could learn the meaning of the words in other words.*

It is important to note that, within this content-based learning course, no other student made the same choices as Reiko as to how to develop their vocabulary practices. Each student found their own new pathways through their lexical development. One of Reiko's main concerns was making connections between what she was trying to learn and what she already knew; here she used word associations in conjunction with short paraphrases and simple collocations to create multiple connections between new vocabulary and known vocabulary. She also used Japanese equivalents at times to consolidate those connections. Over time, Reiko gradually became more astute in selecting useful and important vocabulary for development rather than focusing exclusively on unknown lexis as she did early on (as shown in Figure 2, for example, with her first set of word associations). From the outside looking in, it seems that Reiko was able to find a growing sense of creativity in using word associations effectively. She also achieved, it seems, a strong sense of communicative accomplishment in developing short practical paraphrases and small sets of useful collocations around key words and ideas in her research.

Concluding Questions

It needs to be emphasized that the focus on self-directed lexical development was only a small part of the content-based learning course. The main focus in the course was on the research projects that the students did, as well as on their co-constructing knowledge of the different issues that they researched. For the lexical development part of the course, however, students were guided to engage with different ways of developing their vocabulary practice and take responsibility for the vocabulary that they wanted to learn and use. Starting from reconstructing her own vocabulary history and becoming aware of the strengths and weaknesses of different practices she had tried in the past, Reiko started to find a critical stance towards her own lexical development. She then continued to experiment with, and further develop, vocabulary practices that worked well for her, by building her awareness through discussion, short written reflections, and using key vocabulary to explain her research to her peers. Reiko's story shows that there is no necessary reason why young adult learners cannot develop their own effective ways of learning and using vocabulary for themselves as part of the overall process of their becoming more autonomous in how they learn and use English.

Are the processes of lexical development and restructuring (Henriksen, 1999) that Reiko embodies in her vocabulary practices available to learners at other levels of overall language proficiency? These processes include (a) connecting up new with known vocabulary, (b) moving between associative lexical knowledge and conventionalized collocation knowledge, (c) focusing on both individual words and multiword phrases, and (d) learning to create short paraphrases in English of key ideas. If they are available, in what ways might they be differently realized by others? If not, in what ways might those processes of lexical development and restructuring be restricted? Is the development of these processes (either individually or in combination with each other) possible in formal education contexts only under conditions that support autonomous learning? What further connections can be made between lexical development and the development of learner autonomy? These are, I believe, some of the interesting questions that the journey through Reiko's lexical landscape invites us to explore in the future.

Notes

1. Kramsch (1979) reports the use of index cards where vocabulary items are chosen by students and recorded "together with a synonym, antonym, or translation, and an example sentence" (p. 154).

2. The A1 level is part of the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) scheme of proficiency levels (A1 and A2: basic user; B1 and B2: independent user; C1 and C2: proficient user). For more details, see the Council of Europe European Language Portfolio website (n.d.).

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Andy Barfield teaches in the Faculty of Law at Chuo University in Tokyo. His pedagogic and research interests include learner/teacher autonomy, content-based learning, students' vocabulary practices and development, and collaborative curriculum development. Andy is currently co-editing a multivocalic anthology of teachers' stories to do with their engagement with learner autonomy, due to be published this autumn by the IATEFL Learner Autonomy SIG.

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