

Personal Vocabulary Notes

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Personal Vocabulary Notes (PVN) is a way of developing student vocabulary in a personalized way while encouraging them to become autonomous learners.

Overview

The basic activity is very straightforward. In and out of class encourage students to write words in their native language when they do not know how to say the English word.

- **Step 1.** Give students a daily journal or PVN note paper to record vocabulary items. In my monolingual Japanese classes I write the following instructions:
 - PVN: Personal Vocabulary Notes
 - If you don't know an English word, write the Japanese, show your partner, communicate, and then check the English later.
- **Step 2.** Tell students that the class will be "English only"
- **Step 3.** Engage students in some kind of fluency activity and encourage them to write words in L1 that they do not know how to say in English.
- **Step 4.** As homework have the students look up their PVN and find the English translations. They then should write sentences using their PVN. (To make a manageable workload teachers can ask students to choose just two or three PVN to make into sentences.)
- **Step 5.** The teacher collects the PVN, checks it, and hands it back the following class.
- **Step 6.** Students keep a section in their notebook for PVN and do follow up activities with it such as peer teaching and review activities.

In monolingual classes, students can simply show their PVN to communicate, but even in multilingual classes reading the word can be easier to understand than hearing it. PVN can preserve the "all English" atmosphere in the classroom by acting as a "safety valve" to lower student frustration when they have difficulty expressing themselves.

Creating the Need

To effectively set up PVN in a class, the students must first feel the need to learn vocabulary. A basic way to focus students and introduce PVN is to give them a fluency task which will require vocabulary that they do not have. This activity needs to be adjusted to the student level. For example, for a lower level class you might just have students describe their neighborhoods or what they did over the weekend. For upper level classes you might have them explain a movie or a current event. Many students have often developed the laudable habit of using only "easy English" to express their ideas, so it is important to encourage them to write PVN while they speak, assuring them that they both can use "easy English" and improve their vocabulary. I often tell students that each lesson they must get at least five PVN per class. If they do not manage to get five in class, I explain that they need to think of words they want to know outside of class.

Establishing a Routine

It is important to make PVN a habit in class which is easy and natural for students to do. I have found that a daily journal with a section for PVN (along with class notes, homework, etc.) to be effective. In this way, students are not searching for scraps of paper to write notes but will have an organized system for recording their PVN. Whenever they are speaking in class I ask them to keep

their journals out on the desks and can easily check if they are writing PVN.

It is also important to discourage dictionary use in class or at least during the communication activity as it disrupts the communicative task. Students will often pull out their dictionaries or ask me how to say something in English. In such situations, I just remind them that they can check later and that I do not want them to stop their conversations. It can also be worth mentioning how many people look up a word, say it, then promptly forget it.

In addition to having students look words up, you can devote class time in which students ask you and their classmates how to say things in English. Regardless of whether the teacher speaks the L1 or not, this activity can be tremendous in raising student awareness simply in showing how critical the context is in choosing the best vocabulary item.

It is important to clearly model how to look up words using bilingual and learner dictionaries. You can also encourage students to ask each other for translations. The important thing is to stress context, as students often just look up words and pick the first translation offered in their bilingual dictionaries. Teachers should also model how to write example sentences. Admonish students not to copy dictionary sentences and to make their sentences long enough to show the context. I usually do this by stressing that they will not receive credit unless they use their PVN to express their own ideas.

Finally, I would note how the PVN routine also engages students in a kind of learner training. Students learn how to be active and autonomous as they seek out language they want. The PVN system then asks students to experiment with language, notice their mistakes, and then use it again in conversation. As learner training it tends to be effective by creating pro-active habits instead of just "talking about" how to be an active learner.

Teacher Response/Feedback

The most important point to keep in mind when correcting PVN is to focus on what the students are trying to say. Often there is a temptation to "teach" them additional information related to the words they have written. Keep it simple. Just check that the sentences they have written are grammatically correct and naturally express the student ideas. For example a student might write the following sentence:

"I went to an alumni association last weekend."

Although it is correct I would have a strong suspicion that what the student wanted to say was that:

*"I went to a class reunion last weekend." or
"I got together with some friends from high school last weekend."*

I will usually write these down and ask if this is what the student meant. In this way, the teacher engages the students in a dialogue about their intended message. I would avoid explaining exactly what an alumni association is, if the meaning the student is trying to express is simply getting together with friends. Teachers teach specifically to student needs. Of course, if a student later asks about the differences between an alumni association and a class reunion the teacher can address that interest.

There are also a great deal of oddities caused by direct translation. For example:

"My hourly wage is 800 an hour." or "I lacerated my finger."

My goal is to teach students the most natural English for their particular conversational situation (i.e. in class, chatting with friends). It is important in situations like the above to give students feedback on formality and register when offering the following suggestions:

"I make 800 yen an hour." and "I cut my finger."

In this way the teacher can bring in more complex aspects of knowing a word in a personal and contextualized way.

Follow up activities in class

Peer Teaching:

One of the first activities that I do and one which I do again and again is simply having students tell each other about the new words they learned. I usually put the following standard classroom questions on the board and have them talk to several different partners.

What new words did you learn?

How do you spell that?

What does that mean?

How do you pronounce that?

What part of speech is that?

In this way, the classroom questions are re-enforced and students review their own PVN as they teach them to others. I have found that students feel their need to "learn more vocabulary" greatly satisfied by this simple activity.

Peer Quizzing:

Another simple activity is to have students exchange PVN and quiz each other. This can be done by having the tester tell them PVN in Japanese or by reading their example sentence and blanking out the PVN. For example,

"I _____ with some friends from high school last weekend."

Circumlocution Lessons:

Teach student the circumlocution phrases like "This is a kind of..." and have them explain their PVN, to each other. The students who are guessing can guess in English or in L1 in a monolingual class (*Do you mean...?*). In the latter case, have students be insistent about the guesser getting the exact word. For example, they would need to guess "outgoing" and not "friendly" (That is close, but...). This forces students to work on conveying the nuances of different words.

Peer presentations on specific topics: Later, after student have gotten used to doing PVN you can actually assign topics for them to research and present to the class or small groups.

Other Vocabulary Games/Training:

Once students have a set of words to work with their are any number of games and exercises you can do with them. Many such activities are outlined in resource books like Vocabulary (Rinvoluceri, OUP), and A Way With Words (Gairns and Redman, CUP). To offer a couple of examples, I have had students organize their words in word stress patterns. I have also done speaking activities in which students must make short stories using two or more PVN. Another speaking activity is to have student slip a PVN item secretly in a conversation without the other person noticing.

Concluding Points about PVN

Motivation:

Students are usually much more motivated to remember their PVN than they are a set of vocabulary items they have received from a textbook or teacher.

Class Atmosphere:

PVN provides that safety valve which helps establish an "English only" atmosphere.

Student Need:

PVN addresses individual student needs by encouraging students to find the vocabulary they need to communicate and talk about

their experiences.

Contextualized Vocabulary Learning:

The teacher is able to address a great deal of complexity and richness without having to invent a context as the context is already created by the student.

Individualized Attention:

Especially, in large multilevel classes PVN provides the teacher with a time-efficient way of giving attention and feedback on language to individual students.

Vocabulary Awareness:

PVN gives students a much deeper sense of what it is to learn vocabulary and know a word as they get contextualized feedback on words they are using.

Dictionary Skills:

PVN provides a motivating context for teaching dictionary skills again because students are researching their own words.

Material for a Variety of Other Skills/Activities:

Once students have a set of PVN the teacher can use their vocabulary to teach many other points such as circumlocution skills, pronunciation (ex. word stress), grammar (ex. parts of speech)

Learner Training:

PVN engages students in the cycle of noticing their own needs, researching language, trying it out, and learning from their mistakes.

I have shared this technique with many colleagues over the years and it has been received well by both teachers and most importantly students. I particularly would like to thank Brian Long, Mary Scholl, and Robert Pfeil for their feedback and ideas over the years in developing PVN.

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