• For Citation:
The effects of using high-frequency words, spaced retrieval, and task cycling on students’ perceptions of ability and levels of confidence.

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Potential Issues

• Level of materials.
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  ➢ Not too easy or too hard.
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• Relevance of materials.
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  ➢ Topics that are both interesting and of use to the students.
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  ➢ Helping students recall previously taught material.
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• Consequently, they can lose motivation and become disengaged (Murphy, 2007).

• This can be detrimental to the learning process (Fulcher, 1997) and negatively affect students’ perceptions of their own abilities and levels of confidence (Bury, 2014).
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• Consequently, teachers frequently employ authentic materials.

• These give students the chance to engage with the ‘real world’ in the classroom.

• However, authentic materials are often complex and this can highlight and intensify the challenges students face.
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• Huang and Liou (2007) state that targeted vocabulary instruction is essential in improving students’ retention of lexical items.
Consolidation of language

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- As a result, the increased exposure to the lexical items gained through reviewing vocabulary allows students to consolidate meaning (Schmitt & Carter, 2000).
Developing reading strategies

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• However, translation is just one way to approach reading and students should be encouraged to develop other reading strategies.

• Over-reliance on any one reading strategy should be avoided.
Developing communicative competency

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- A course that focuses on just receptive skills will not help create effective communicators.
Developing perceptions of ability and levels of confidence

- Students are constantly being challenged in relation to their comprehension of and beliefs about the target language and culture (Risager, 2006) as well as their perceptions of their own abilities and levels of confidence.
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• Self-perceptions are the impressions a person has relating to their own abilities in different domains or contexts (Harter, 1999).

• As such, they are a critical component of self-esteem (Bong & Skaalvik, 2003) and play an important role in the development of self-regulation, reading ability (Harter & Whitesell, 2003) and the way people approach communication (Nezlek et al., 2008), with self-esteem affecting willingness to engage in communication (Pearson et al., 2011).
Course development

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• It was decided that for this course the materials should include target lexis drawn from high-frequency word lists.

• It was hoped that this would give students the opportunity to consolidate their comprehension of common lexical items, in turn developing their confidence when communicating.
• Exigent grammatical structures and low-frequency lexical items were avoided so that a balance of recycled words and structures and newly introduced items that built on the previously covered material could be presented.
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These strategies also allowed the complexity of the materials to increase in a planned progression throughout the course.
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• The materials covered a wide range of popular tourist destinations from around the world, activities that can be done there and a profile of a worker in the industry at that destination.

• The destinations ranged from Finland and Peru to South Africa and Guam. The activities included bungee jumping, ostrich riding, surfing and capoeria. The job profiles ranged from hotel receptionist to dog-sled driver.
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• This involved implementing planned intervals between the use of target lexical items and grammatical structures. For example, a word that was introduced in Lesson 2 would be reviewed in Lessons 4, 7 and 12, with the distance between the presentations becoming gradually longer.
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- This involved implementing planned intervals between the use of target lexical items and grammatical structures. For example, a word that was introduced in Lesson 2 would be reviewed in Lessons 4, 7 and 12, with the distance between the presentations becoming gradually longer.

- Also, by focusing on lexical items that were chosen from high-frequency word lists, it was hoped students’ comprehension would be improved as the items commonly appear in different contexts, allowing multiple meanings to be conveyed.
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• By using task-cycling it was hoped that tasks could be introduced in a way that allowed a balanced development between a focus on form and a focus on meaning to occur.
• Learners were given the opportunity to identify the main themes of the texts by using pre-reading tasks, including predicting and key vocabulary matching.
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• As a result, it was hoped that learners would not be forced to use a dictionary as soon as they read the first sentence of a text as they had been given the necessary strategies and building blocks.

• This design aimed to assist learners immerse themselves in the materials and identify the main points and ideas without extensive translation.
Strategies employed

5. How can course materials be used to help develop communicative competence?
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• Unlike traditional university courses, which are often regarded as non-communicative (Zhang, 2009), the materials used in this course were developed to expose the students to lexical items that could be used communicatively in extension activities.

• This was a break from the more traditional teaching techniques that dominate university classes (Rustipa, 2010).
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• In asynchronous [prepared] communicative activities, students have more time to focus on accuracy and this can significantly affect the language produced (Skehan & Foster, 2001).

• In synchronous [unprepared] activities, students focus more on fluency and meaning, developing ‘real time’ communicative strategies (Skehan, 1998).
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- First generation tasks, such as targeted question and answer activities, aimed to develop communicative competence in a specific area.

- Second generation tasks, such as short presentations, allowed students to focus on content, procedure and language.

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- **This combination aimed to develop:**
  - communicative skills in conjunction with general cognitive strategies.
  - comprehension of the target language in a context specific to the students and their language learning goals.
  - awareness of the interpersonal skills essential in the tourism sector.
Research questions

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  ➢ speaking in English?
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  ➢ speaking in English?
  ➢ knowledge of vocabulary?
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  ➢ communicating in English?
Data collection

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• The items on the questionnaires were translated into Japanese and the students were able to write their comments in their first language to avoid dubious results being created due to misunderstandings and the language barrier. This allowed the student voice to be fairly and accurately represented.
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• As the cohort was fairly small, every student received a questionnaire to ensure that all opinions could be voiced, making the data more representative.

• A total of 64 students enrolled on three courses that taught the same materials. Two students were absent from the final lesson and two students had dropped out, giving a return of 60 post-course questionnaires.
• All the data collected was anonymous, the purpose of the research was explained to the students and it was clearly stated that their participation was voluntary.
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• Once the research was completed a short, translated report was made available to the all of the participants.
## Results

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Language area</th>
<th>Students’ perceptions of ability</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th>Students’ levels of confidence</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
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</thead>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Pre-course</td>
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<td>Pre-course</td>
<td>Post-course</td>
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- Overall, students’ perceptions of ability improved more than their levels of confidence and this is true in all of the language areas except Vocabulary.
Table 2 shows that while the ranking of language areas in the pre-course questionnaires were very similar, the post-course rankings differed, especially for students’ perceptions of ability.

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Even though Vocabulary showed the greatest improvement in terms of students’ perceptions of ability, it still ranked third, behind Communication and Reading post-course.

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In terms of students’ levels of confidence, the rankings of Speaking and Vocabulary changed over the course. This change reflects the differences in improvement highlighted in Table 1.
Table 3 shows that the students believed the course had a positive effect on all of the language areas, both in terms of their perceived levels of ability and levels of confidence.

<table>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Reading</td>
<td>6.05</td>
<td>6.53</td>
<td>6.29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Speaking</td>
<td>5.89</td>
<td>5.79</td>
<td>5.84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vocabulary</td>
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- In regards to perceived effect on ability, the data shows that the language area with the greatest perceived improvement was Vocabulary, followed by Communication, Reading and Speaking.
- In relation to perceived effect on confidence, the greatest perceived effect was on Vocabulary, then Reading, Communication and Speaking.
- In all of the language areas the perceived effect on confidence was greater than the effect on ability, with the exception of Vocabulary.

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In regards to ability, the average difference was 0.90 and in terms of levels of confidence the average difference was 0.78.

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• Two students commented that it was beneficial to study about tourism, and that the topics were good.

• One student stated that the course was interesting, but one comment indicated that the course was too difficult.
Findings

- An improvement both in terms of students’ perceptions of ability and levels of confidence in all language areas was indicated.
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• The results also indicate that the course introduced in this article had a direct impact on the positive effect, both in terms of perceptions of ability and levels of confidence.

• This suggests that the course was successful and positively contributed to developing students’ perceptions of ability and levels of confidence.
• The language area that was most improved was Vocabulary.
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• This implies that the implementation of spaced retrieval, task-cycling and the modifying of texts to include target lexis drawn from high-frequency word lists was successful in helping improve students’ perceptions of ability and levels of confidence in using lexis in this context.
• The language area that showed the second highest improvement was Communication.
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• This suggests that the decision to depart from a traditional, less-communicative course to one that used different extension activities to develop communicative competence had positive results.
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• This is supported by the improvement in students’ perceptions of ability and levels of confidence in Speaking.
The improvement identified in students’ perceptions of ability and levels of confidence in Reading implies that the methods employed in the design of this course were successful.
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• The improvement also suggests that the planned development in the complexity of the texts helped to improve students’ self-perceptions, which had a positive effect on the way they felt about and approached studying English.
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The decision to avoid complicated grammatical structures and low-frequency lexical items when designing the course may also have contributed to these results.
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The decision to avoid complicated grammatical structures and low-frequency lexical items when designing the course may also have contributed to these results.

It also further corroborates the finding that exposing students to high-frequency lexical items and reviewing them in a communicative way in extension activities had positive results.
• In terms of students’ perceptions of the course, the positive finding that students would recommend the course to their friends indicates that it was well received and popular with the students.
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• Furthermore, the findings that students believed the course to have had a positive impact on their abilities and levels of confidence, and that the perceived impact was consistently higher than their perceived improvements, illustrates that the course, and the combination of theories implemented, was successful.
However, the course was not studied in isolation and other external factors that the students were exposed to, including both formal and informal learning, may have affected the findings outlined (Erstad et al., 2009; Furlong & Davies, 2012).
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• Consequently, while the materials studied throughout this course impacted on students’ perceptions of ability and confidence, the level of its bearing on the outcomes presented is difficult to calculate.
Conclusion

• The course presented in this article was structured and designed differently from traditional university courses in order to help students process new structures and lexical items without becoming overwhelmed.
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• Additionally, the types of activities employed were rotated to help balance students’ learning, applying the theory of task-cycling (Skehan, 1998; Levy & Kennedy, 2004).
• As a result of the methods used in the design of the course, a positive contribution to the improvement of students’ perceptions of ability and levels of confidence in four language areas was identified.
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• It is therefore suggested that, where possible, teachers employ some of these methods when designing their own courses.