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The effects of using high-frequency words, spaced retrieval, and task cycling on students' perceptions of ability and levels of confidence.

James Bury

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• 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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- 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.

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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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• A course that focuses on just receptive skills will not help create effective communicators.

Developing perceptions of ability and levels of confidence

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• 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).

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• 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.

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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 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.

• 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.

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

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• 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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  - ➢ awareness of the interpersonal skills essential in the tourism sector.

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• 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.

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• Once the research was completed a short, translated report was made available to the all of the participants.

Results

Language area	Students' perceptions of ability			Students' levels of confidence		
	Pre-course	**Post-course**	**Diff.**	**Pre-course**	**Post-course**	**Diff.**
Reading	4.42	5.42	1.00	5.48	6.26	0.78
Speaking	4.24	5.05	0.81	4.86	5.11	0.25
Vocabulary	3.86	5.32	1.46	3.95	5.47	1.52
Communication	4.24	5.53	1.31	4.33	5.26	0.93
Average	4.19	5.33	1.14	4.65	5.53	0.88

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- For both perceptions of ability and levels of confidence, the language area with the biggest improvement was Vocabulary, followed by Communication, Reading and Speaking.

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Language area	Students' perceptions of ability			Students' levels of confidence		
	Pre-course	Post-course	Diff.	Pre-course	Post-course	Diff.
Reading	4.42	5.42	1.00	5.48	6.26	0.78
Speaking	4.24	5.05	0.81	4.86	5.11	0.25
Vocabulary	3.86	5.32	1.46	3.95	5.47	1.52
Communication	4.24	5.53	1.31	4.33	5.26	0.93
Average	4.19	5.33	1.14	4.65	5.53	0.88

• Table 1 shows that all of the language areas improved.

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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.

Students' perceptions of ability		Students' levels of confidence	
Pre-course	Post-course	Pre-course	Post-course
1. Reading (4.42)	1. Communication (5.53)	1. Reading (5.48)	1. Reading (6.26)
2. Speaking and communication (4.24)	2. Reading (5.42)	2. Speaking (4.86)	2. Vocabulary (5.47)
	3. Vocabulary (5.33)	3. Communication (4.33)	3. Communication (5.26)
4. Vocabulary (3.86)	4. Speaking (5.05)	4. Vocabulary (3.95)	4. Speaking (5.11)

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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.

Language area	Perceived effect on ability	Perceived effect on confidence	Overall perceived effect
Reading	6.05	6.53	6.29
Speaking	5.89	5.79	5.84
Vocabulary	7.00	6.74	6.89
Communication	6.11	6.16	6.13
Average	6.26	6.30	6.28

- 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.

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- 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.

Language area	Perceptions of ability			Levels of confidence		
	Post-course	Perceived effect of course	Diff.	Post-course	Perceived effect of course	Diff.
Reading	5.48	6.05	0.57	6.19	6.53	0.34
Speaking	5.10	5.89	0.79	5.14	5.79	0.65
Vocabulary	5.33	7.00	1.67	5.48	6.74	1.26
Communication	5.52	6.11	0.59	5.28	6.16	1.17
Average	5.36	6.26	0.90	5.52	6.30	0.78

- Table 4 shows that, in terms of both perceptions of ability and levels of confidence, the effect the students believed the course to have had was greater than the results gained from the post-course questionnaire.

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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.

- Responses to the item 'How much do you agree with the statement 'I would recommend joining the course to my friends' ?' produced an overall positive response of 6.79, with a mode of 7.

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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

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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.

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- This is supported by the improvement in students' perceptions of ability and levels of confidence in Speaking.

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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.

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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.

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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).

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- It is therefore suggested that, where possible, teachers employ some of these methods when designing their own courses.