Using Microsoft OneNote for Collaborative Vocabulary Notebooks in the Academic English Classroom

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New technologies offer new interfaces and visual designs and at times opportunities to explore new pedagogical approaches to familiar learning targets. This paper will examine one such technology, Microsoft OneNote, part of the Microsoft Office suite. It will explore how a technology available on most PCs can be used as a collaborative shared vocabulary notebook, offering an alternative approach to the existing paper-based notebooks. It is hoped this study will show that electronic vocabulary notebooks using a coherent framework can be easily implemented and in fact that with the right software the notebook experience can even be enhanced by its delivery in an electronic format.

Background to the Study

As part of the Office suite, OneNote is pre-installed in many computers and requires no additional downloads. With its familiar Office ‘feel’ it is more accessible than similar software programmes which have more unfamiliar interfaces. Microsoft’s Office website describes OneNote 2010 as “a digital notebook that provides a single place where you can gather all of your notes and information … plus easy-to-use shared notebooks so you can manage information overload and work together with others more effectively” (Microsoft, 2010).

The implications for being able to put all learners’ notes in one place are immediately apparent for producing collaborative vocabulary notebooks. Learners are able to keep a group record of vocabulary on their PCs, where any member of the group can edit or add to the notebook by simply accessing it on a shared drive. These changes are then visible to all members of the group. There are of course similar programmes available for producing this kind of collaboration, such as wikis or blogs, which could also be used for creating collaborative notebooks. However, for reasons of familiarity with the interface and ease of use, OneNote was chosen as being the most appropriate for this study.

Before describing the study in more detail, it is worth reminding ourselves of the benefits of collaborative versus individual study. Within the fields of language teaching, education and online learning we can see considerable evidence in favour of this collaborative approach. In language teaching we can see collaboration in many of the activities associated with the communicative language. It is also a key foundation of the co-operative language teaching movement which is “an approach to teaching that makes maximum use of cooperative activities involving pairs and small groups of learners in the classroom” (Richards, 2001, p. 192). In the field of general education there is again a plethora of evidence to support cooperative learning across a wide range of age, gender and social contexts (see, for example, Brown & Ciuffetelli Parker, 2009). Two of the most widely cited theories of learning, namely Vygotsky’s (1978) social constructivism and Wenger’s (2006) communities of practice advocate groupwork and social interaction as the basis for learning.

The Learning Situation

This study was carried out on an academic composition course delivered to adult female students on an intermediate level diploma course at one of the Higher Colleges of Technology, part of the state system of higher education in the United Arab Emirates. One of the learning outcomes of the course is to “understand and use the 120 non-general words most commonly found in academic writing” (Gleeson, 2009). These academic words were taken from a bank of corpus-informed, high-frequency lexical items, and are currently being taught as discrete items from a word list. Assessment of the words accounts for 10% of the overall grade for this course. In this way the list constitutes a bolt-on to the main focus of the course, which is an introduction to research skills in English.
Before developing the collaborative notebook approach, I conducted informal interviews with eight fellow teachers using the following questions:

1. Can you describe to what extent you think learners incorporate the vocabulary from the academic word list into their writings on the course?
2. Can you briefly describe how you teach the words from the academic word list, or otherwise?
3. Are you satisfied with the current approach to teaching the list?
4. Do you think you have achieved the learning outcome, that students can “understand and use” the items on the academic word list?

These questions were intended to understand better how teachers approached the teaching of the list as well as any perceived strengths or weaknesses of this approach, and indeed to the list itself. Findings varied, but two concerns were salient; that time constraints prevented extensive explicit teaching of the list, and the sense that there was a disconnect between the word list and the rest of the learning outcomes on the course. However, there seemed to be less agreement in terms of an approach, though there was a feeling that the academic word list was desirable with Teacher 1 (T1) stating that “these are the words they need for the IELTS exam, so I think they should be taught discretely.” Consistent with other teacher comments, T4 said she didn’t teach the list explicitly because, “I don’t feel I have time” and she felt that “they’re seeing it as too separate from the rest of the course.” Some teachers took an initial presentation followed by self-study approach: T3 said, “I try to teach them the first couple of lists then teach them how to learn – English/English dictionaries, parts of speech and simple definitions and then leave them to it.”

Others taught the words in class more explicitly, including T7 who worked at word level with learners and “how these words break down, parts of speech, examples, definitions and translation.” When asked if they thought they had achieved the stated learning outcome teachers reported doubts, with T4 stating that motivation was a factor: “Possibly a few of them who are highly motivated to self study may get some of these words.” These findings are at odds with other research that suggests learners prefer an assigned list. In one study by McCrostie (2007), “80% of all students wanted to be provided with word lists by their teacher” (p. 253). It would certainly be worth exploring more fully why teachers reported that in their current context, the word-list approach was not successful.

While I cannot draw definitive conclusions from these small scale interviews, the data indicate that teachers would welcome an approach to teaching the word list and that this should be “consistent and minimal” (T7).

In his summary of vocabulary acquisition research, Coady (1997) describes the concept of “Development plus Explicit Instruction,” which calls for “explicit teaching of certain types of vocabulary using a large number of techniques and even direct memorization of certain highly frequent items” (p. 275). This explicit instruction of high-frequency vocabulary items is seen as particularly relevant for the earlier stages of acquisition, especially for high-frequency words encountered by low-level learners (Coady, 1997). It is within this broad argument for explicit instruction that the use of vocabulary notebooks lies. However, research on vocabulary notebooks is often based on paper-based notebooks. For example Schmitt and Schmitt (1995) make the simple suggestion that “the notebook should be arranged in a loose-leaf binder, an index card binder, or on cards which are kept in a box” (p. 137). In the light of developments in technology and the ubiquity of devices such as the laptop, this paper-based approach seems increasingly redundant in the contemporary classroom, nor does it fit within the Higher Colleges of Technology’s profile as a technology-rich learning environment.
The Learning Design

Schmitt and Schmitt’s (1995) study of vocabulary notebooks proposes eleven principles for vocabulary learning, and Schmitt (2000) describes appropriate “vocabulary learning strategies” (pp. 132-141). These comprehensive frameworks were used to inform the design of the collaborative electronic vocabulary records.

Creating the Template

First, I created an example item as a loose template for subsequent learner-generated items. This template included a definition, an example sentence, a translation and a pictorial representation for the item. (See Appendix A).

Next, I created a ‘front page’ on the OneNote notebook which I used to introduce the approach and which could be used as a reference for learners. This included a study guide with metacognitive information on the purpose and uses of the notebook, and on how to find information. It also provided links to online resources that could help in the making of the entries. (See Appendix B).

Assigning the Words

The way that words were assigned for this particular case study was determined by the organisation of the vocabulary assessments for the course. There were four vocabulary quizzes over the whole course and each quiz covered thirty words. I therefore split the words in the notebook in the same way, that is to say I divided the total of 120 words into four blocks of thirty, which the class covered over the first 14 weeks of a 17-week semester.

The next step was to assign words to individual learners. Some learners received two words (out of thirty) and some received one word which meant that over the course of the four blocks learners made entries for a total of around six words each. This may seem very few and of course the number can be increased significantly, but in this particular group I had to limit the number of words per learner for two reasons. First, the total number of hours for the course was around 60 hours. During this time the course covered a number of areas related to academic research, of which the study of the academic word list was worth 10% of the final grade. Thus the amount of time the group could dedicate to the word list was around six hours in total (10% of the total time of the course); a somewhat limited timeframe to cover 120 words per learner. Second, although the number of individual entries per learner is limited, the later collaborative stages of editing provided much greater exposure to the target vocabulary.

The notebooks were divided into four sections, each one corresponding to one assessment cycle, with each section covering thirty words. Because the allocation of the words was determined by the vocabulary assessment cycle, to the casual observer the words covered might seem somewhat random and unorganized. This also meant the notebooks were potentially less user-friendly for general reference by the learners. To counter this I introduced the search function of OneNote to learners. This search function is similar to other search functions in the Office suite, and involved learners simply typing in the desired word and the relevant entry is pulled up from anywhere in the notebook.

Figure 1 shows an example from one of the study groups of some of the words allocated to tabs. Each tab corresponds to a page where full entries could be made.
Individual Entries

Each learner filled in her tab and then made her initial entry following the pre-established template, completing her vocabulary item with an image, definition, translation and example sentence containing the item (Figure 2). This initial entry by individual students has implications for Schmitt and Schmitt’s (1995) first principle that, “the best way to remember new words is to incorporate them into language that is already known” (p. 133). Schmitt and Schmitt advocate incorporating items into existing schemata and this was attempted in the ‘examples section’ of the notebook. Although there was some evidence that students had simply copied from dictionaries or other sources, it was also found that learners did develop their own experience-based examples.

The entries in the notebook were accessible by all students and the teacher in one location using OneNote. The electronic format of OneNote also facilitated the organisation of entries, which could be cut and pasted onto Microsoft Word for example or printed in a different order, reduced, expanded or otherwise edited with a high degree of flexibility. The use of a template and powerful features of OneNote supported one of Schmitt and Schmitt’s (1995) principles for vocabulary notebooks which states that “organised material is easier to learn” (p. 134).

The often disparate semantic and morphological features of the words were also in keeping with another of Schmitt and Schmitt’s principles that, “words which are very similar should not be taught at the same time” (Schmitt & Schmitt, 1995, p. 134). The words were from the academic word list and selected for frequency and not any semantic or morphological similarity. This removed any element of choice from the selection process, and whether by design or happy coincidence similar words were not taught together.
This shared notebook, including the example entry and front page, was saved onto a shared drive accessible by all the learners at any time during the remainder of their studies at the college. The notebook continued to grow over the course of the semester and new entries were simply added under new tabs. Learners were encouraged to use the notebook as a reference both in class, and out of class.

**Small Group Editing**

To encourage what Schmitt (2000) calls a “social strategy” (p. 135), learners were then appointed as ‘editors’ and were required to check other students’ entries, changing anything they were not satisfied with. This task-based element increased direct exposure to the vocabulary through a variety of avenues. First, learners were asked to check the quality of each entry by checking its content for the accuracy and quality of definitions, examples, images and translation. This could mean editors had to check online resources for those entries they were unsure of, and at times consult with the writer of the original entry to check on any given aspect of the entry. Second, the editing process could also involve changing the ‘look’ of the entry including changing the font type or letter size or colour. This seemingly ‘surface’ difference was nevertheless important in that the time spent on a given entry (and thus the exposure to the target vocabulary) could be increased, even if editors felt that the actual content of the original entry was satisfactory.

In order to maximise the collaborative nature of this part of the cycle, learners formed their own groups of three or four members and were allocated entries by the teacher. This typically meant that groups were responsible for editing between six and eight words. Some groups divided their work up by simply editing one or two entries each, whilst others worked by sections, so one learner edited all the example sentences and another edited all the definitions from the allocated entries. Groups would then discuss the final edit. At this stage in the process it was interesting to note that some of the more mechanical ‘cut and paste’ type entries from the individual entry stage were changed, often extensively, both in terms of content and design.
We can also observe two more of Schmitt and Schmitt’s (1995) principles in the processes described up to this point, which are that “word pairs can be used to learn a great number of words in a short time” (p. 134) and that “knowing a word entails more than just knowing its meaning” (p. 135). The first of these is supported in the use of translations as part of the individual entries to provide a more complete treatment of the target item. Despite some resistance, this incorporation of L1 has become more widely accepted within the ELT community with the acceptance that “a learner’s L1 is one of the most important factors in learning L2 vocabulary” (Schmitt & McCarthy, 1997, p. 2). In terms of ‘going beyond the word,’ the multi-faceted approach to the OneNote entries extends itself to this principal. Knowing a word requires knowing numerous features including spelling, pronunciation, collocation, frequency and grammatical behaviour (Schmitt & Schmitt, 1995). Not all of these were pertinent to the collaborative notebooks. We can see clearly that pronunciation, register and frequency are not explicitly dealt with, though as the words on the list are for use in academic writing, the register and frequency were already implicitly indicated. The omission of focus on pronunciation may be seen as a weakness of the notebooks, and this is undoubtedly true from a perspective of covering all aspects of vocabulary items. However, it must be understood that the assessment-led nature of the learner focus meant that elements outside the scope of the written assessments were seen by learners to be unnecessary.

Whole Class

In this final stage of each cycle the whole class looked at a selection of entries from each group to give it a final ‘editorial approval.’ Students could access the entries from their individual laptops as well as by seeing them projected onto the whiteboard. At this stage the entries were ‘approved’ or ‘rejected’ and in the latter case were sent back to the editing group for further work. It should be noted here that the volume of words in each cycle (30), meant that there was not enough class time to look at every entry, but with a smaller number of words this would be possible.

Both this whole class approval and the previous small group editing resonate with another of Schmitt and Schmitt’s (1995) principles that “the deeper the mental processing used when learning a word, the more likely that a student will remember it” (p. 135). This is one of the major challenges in having learners with little intrinsic motivation to engage with the words at deep action level. OneNote’s social and collaborative features seem to promote close reading and so deeper negotiation of meaning amongst members of the group. The effectiveness of this collaboration requires further investigation, and is outside the scope of this study.

Consolidation

At the end of the course the notebooks were regarded as ‘finished’ and so I printed out multiple colour copies for distribution to the learners for the completion of the next stage in the process. This involved what I will call combined gap-fill exercises where the target items were met in context in an artificially produced reading activity followed by a gap-fill activity. This provided useful practice for learners as well as reflecting another of Schmitt and Schmitt’s (1995) principles that “the act of recalling a word makes it more likely that a learner will be able to recall it again later” (p. 135). The use of gap fills mirrored the college testing format, but also seemed to be the most practical way of dealing with a frequency-based, de-contextualised word list, in that it was difficult to contrive alternative activities that would require more authentic production for such a wide variety and number of items.

It is hoped that in addition to the principles already mentioned, the remaining four principles
of Schmitt and Schmitt’s (1995) original eleven will at least to some extent be met by the learning design described here, and before going on to comment on the results of the study I will mention these. Firstly, the combination of tasks satisfies the principle that “learners must pay close attention in order to learn most effectively” (p. 135). In the same way it is hoped that the multiplicity of tasks will help achieve the principle that “words need to be recycled to be learnt” (p. 136). Drawing on the work of Nation is the principle that “learners need from five to sixteen or more repetitions to learn a word” (Nation, 1990 as cited in Schmitt & Schmitt, 1995, p. 136). In the creation of the collaborative notebook described above there is a level of repetition spread over the three stages of the notebook, that is to say the initial creation of the entries, the subsequent editing of other entries and the final combined gap fill exercises and formalised course assessment.

Schmitt and Schmitt (1995) also describe an efficient recycling method which consists of ‘expanding rehearsal’ where learners are encouraged to review materials “soon after the initial meeting and then at gradually increasing intervals” (p. 136). It is difficult to quantify the extent to which the re-cycling activities of the collaborative notebooks followed a pattern of expanding rehearsal, although clearly students were required to revisit items at various points during the course. Schmitt and Schmitt also go on to recommend what they call ‘enrichment’ activities, which approximate to the re-cycling incorporated into the learning design. They also reassuringly report that “it would be too time-consuming to do all these enrichment activities with every word in the notebook” (p. 139), which was very much the case in this study.

Finally, Schmitt and Schmitt (1995) recommend that teachers “should not be too prescriptive” and note that “learners are individuals and have different learning styles” (p. 136). The notebook design did allow flexibility as learners could focus to a greater or lesser extent on any of the elements of the notebook; the graphic representation of the lexical item, the definition, the example or the translation. It also catered for more individualistic learners during the production of the notebook entries, as well as the more group-oriented learners during the editing stage. More visually inclined learners were able to focus on the notebook design, while linguistically inclined learners could restrict themselves to the content if they wished.

**Evaluation**

At the end of the course a simple questionnaire was completed by the twenty learners. This featured four statements asking for learners’ preferences in terms of modes of learning vocabulary and their level of satisfaction with OneNote as a way of organising vocabulary notebooks. The questionnaire first covered learner preferences for using OneNote over a more traditional vocabulary notebook. Then it explored the preference for studying in groups compared to individual study, before going on to gauge overall satisfaction levels with the collaborative vocabulary notebooks. I also included a comments section at the end of the questionnaire for any further comments. Some of the responses supported the approach described in this study by observing that “OneNote made it easier for me to view the vocabulary words” and “working in groups made studying the words easier.” One student commented “I prefer studying using OneNote because I won’t lose it, which is unlike using worksheets.” Others suggested that “OneNote made it easier for me to view the vocabulary words,” that “making changes was easy,” and that “it’s a good way to be able to access the vocabulary words.” These comments dovetailed with my own observations that the notebook entries seemed dynamic and subject to frequent changes and at times provoked lively discussion amongst learners. Learners were able to access the notebooks at any time and the learners revisited the notebooks at different stages of the course. The overarching conclusion that can be drawn from this positive feedback is that learners seemed to value the notebooks for three reasons: ease and flexibility of use, storage and access of information, and peer collaboration.
It is worth noting however that comments were not universally positive, with some learners expressing a resistance to using OneNote: “For me, I prefer using the list and study it with pen and paper” or “It didn’t help because it’s difficult to use the laptop in studying.” This resistance is worthy of further study. Perhaps different learning styles meant that the electronic notebooks were more appropriate to some than others or perhaps wider issues related to the use of technology as a whole were responsible for the resistance.

Without a doubt the judicious use of vocabulary notebooks is an effective strategy for vocabulary acquisition, and Microsoft’s OneNote has shown itself to be fit for purpose for use in the collaborative classroom. The scope of the software is broad, in fact encompassing just about any learning and teaching situation where learners have access to computers. Despite its limitations, this study demonstrates that OneNote can be an effective tool in the creation of collaborative vocabulary notebooks.

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References


Appendix A

Example Notebook Entry

**Analyze**

**Definition:**
- examine (something) methodically and in detail

**Example:**
- need to **analyse** our results more clearly

**Translation:**
1. حال
Welcome to LSEC100 Vocabulary Notebook

What is the Notebook for?
- Keeping an electronic record of the vocabulary you study for whenever you need it
- Helping to prepare you for the vocabulary quizzes
- Getting used to working in groups on projects
- Improving your understanding of the way that words work
- Improving your research skills on the Internet

What do I have to do?
- Go to your section and find your group
- Look at the example entry for "analyze" and try to produce similar entries for the other words from the list
- You can divide the group how you want, but I recommend you divide up by words, so each person takes 2 or 3 words
- You will then be able to edit anybody's entry or add to it if you think you can improve it
- The following week, as revision for your vocabulary quizzes you will present the words you have been working on to your group
- I will give you 30 minutes class time a week to work on this
- In addition I will ask one or two students to share their findings with the group each week, but of course I won't tell you which ones!

Tips
- You can use shared notebooks at any time,
- Create more sections in this notebook if needed. To do this, on the File menu, click New and then in the submenu select Section. When you create a new section, use the first page to explain briefly how people should use it.
- Microsoft Office OneNote 2007 tracks who wrote what. Right-click on any paragraph to see the writer's name and the date they wrote it.
- If you make comments, identify yourself explicitly--start your comments with your name or color-code your comments.
- Try http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/ for definitions
- Try http://www.lextutor.ca/ for examples