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## **An Example of Classroom Practice Using Flashcards for Young Learners: Preliminary Indications for Promoting Autonomy**

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### **Abstract**

This article reports preliminary indications that flashcards are helpful for promoting a sense of control over learning. Participants were 25 fifth-year primary school students, who were required to create flashcards to use outside of their classroom after receiving instructions on relevant techniques. At the end of the semester, flashcards were collected in order to explore notes taken by the students. Ten of the students also participated in a follow-up interview. Results indicated that the open-ended nature of the flashcards, combined with scaffolding provided by the teacher, facilitate students' autonomous engagement, although some techniques were rarely used and some were not maintained consistently throughout the experiment. Pedagogical implications for promoting self-access language learning are discussed.

*Keywords:* learner autonomy, self-access, young learners

In the last ten years, there has been an extraordinary increase in the number of primary school students learning English as a Foreign Language (EFL) both in state systems and in private language schools. Thus teaching English to young learners is one of the growing areas in foreign language education. However, no matter how much students learn through lessons, there is much more they need to learn beyond the classroom, suggesting that it is essential to help students become more autonomous.

Autonomy is an undisputed educational goal for all learners. However, does this apply to young learners as well? What can teachers do to help young learners become more autonomous? How does the teacher's role change? This paper constitutes a progress report on how the authors have taught English and attempted to develop autonomous learning for young learners. Training young learners to think for themselves is an essential skill. Thus it is never too early to introduce autonomy.

In this paper, we demonstrate an effective approach of using flashcards to encourage young learners to be more autonomous and develop self-access language learning skills. In our intervention, students were required to create flashcards to use outside of their classroom. At the end of the semester, flashcards were collected in order to explore their notes taken. A follow-up interview was also conducted to further investigate how autonomy can be promoted from this approach. After describing the activities and the findings, we will comment on the signs of autonomous behavior shown in the learners according to our classroom practices.

### **Literature Review**

Learner Autonomy (LA) has become a central theme in foreign language education. The most widely cited definition conceives of LA as a learner's ability to take charge of one's own learning (Benson, 2006). This capacity is also important in learning a foreign language. As Benson stated, "Learners who achieved proficiency in foreign languages did so, at least partly, as a result of exerting control over their own learning process" (2001, p. 65). This highlights an important role for teachers in enhancing learners' autonomy. Indeed, promoting learner autonomy seems like a worthy goal in teaching English, both from a practical or a theoretical viewpoint. As Little (2007) claims, students should be responsible for various aspects and stages of their own learning processes. This entails setting goals, determining content, selecting techniques, and evaluating the progress.

Some scholars have suggested that Asian EFL learners do not readily take charge of decision-making in their own learning processes (Littlewood, 2000; Teng, 2015a). Smith (2008) proposed that the following learning processes are normally determined by the teacher, institution, or other factors:

- Objectives
- Contents (including materials)
- Stages ('syllabus')
- Methods and techniques
- Pace, time, and place
- Evaluation procedures.

In other words, although autonomy is important, decisions concerning the above points may affect EFL learners' development of autonomy. Several studies have looked at autonomous learning practices in young learners in various parts of the world. For example, in an attempt to stimulate autonomous practices among ten-year-old EFL learners in Sweden, Sundqvist and Sylvén (2014) observed three groups of research participants: Group one included students who did not play any computer games at all, group two were students who played a little, and group three were students who played video games a lot (four hours or more per week). The results showed that young frequent online role-playing gamers had developed their speaking skills and ability to self-assess in learning English more than the other students.

Goh and Taib (2006) explored the effects of metacognitive instruction on young second language learners' autonomy in Singapore. Ten primary school pupils participated in eight specially designed listening lessons that contained traditional exercises, individual post-listening reflections on their listening experience, and teacher-facilitated discussions that focused on specific aspects of metacognitive knowledge about listening. After the lessons, all the learners reported a higher level of autonomous learning in understanding of the nature and the demands of listening.

Butler and Lee (2010) examined the effectiveness of self-assessment on facilitating young learners' autonomy in South Korea. 254 EFL young learners who participated in the study were asked to perform self-assessments on a regular basis for a semester during their English classes. The findings showed that the young learners' self-efficacy improved significantly. This reveals that applying self-assessment on a formative basis in an EFL setting leads to increased self-efficacy.

Huang (2011) suggested that content-based language instruction had an impact on EFL young learners' motivated behaviors, for example, eagerness to volunteer, and classroom verbal interaction. Law (2010) proposed that cooperative learning may have a long-term effect on improving Hong Kong fifth-grade students' autonomy.

Considering the above studies, one thing that we should bear in mind is that young EFL learners can indeed be encouraged to develop autonomy. This raises the

question of whether there are particular classroom practices and activities that can contribute to the gradual development of autonomy. The classroom practice reported in the present study investigated whether flashcards could be a useful means to promote autonomy.

Flashcards are a set of cards bearing information, such as words, pictures, or numbers, on either or both sides, used in classroom drills or in private study. Flashcards are a simple, handy, versatile, valuable, yet often an underexploited resource and seemed like a useful tool for promoting autonomous learning. Kohyama and Shimada (2005) designed three activities through using flashcards for improving fourth to sixth graders' autonomy. They concluded, "Although the levels of autonomy reached by each student differed, flashcards encouraged children to reflect on learning and be responsible for it. By personalizing the learning activities and goals, students became more motivated to learn, and made exerted efforts to the best of their abilities.... The levels of autonomy achieved by students depended on their experience dealing with it, not their age" (p. 120). In other words, when primary school students are provided with sufficient guidance through using flashcards, they will attempt to take responsibility for their own learning.

The present study reports an empirical example of classroom practice through using flashcards. Through using flashcards, teachers can help students improve autonomy in three ways: First, by instructing students how to select words. They can self-select words for study, which is crucial for learners because EFL students tend to encounter more words than they could possibly memorize at short notice.

Second, flashcards can give learners choices of what information to include for a new word. After being instructed as to the different kinds of information, e.g., synonyms, antonyms, collocations, example sentences, pictures, that are available, students may be able to choose for themselves which piece of information is appropriate for their learning.

Third, flashcards can be used to facilitate memorization by way of spaced repetition. The process of creating flashcards may exercise the mental processes of active recall. It may also present different ways for students to monitor and evaluate their learning processes.

In view of the above-mentioned reasons, creating flashcards seems to be an effective approach to promote a sense of control over learning for EFL students. Nunan (1997) divided levels of implementing autonomy into five categories: 1. awareness; 2. involvement; 3. intervention; 4. creation; to 5. transcendence. At level one, awareness, students are made aware of the goals and contents of the materials. They are encouraged to locate effective language learning strategies for their learning. At level two, involvement, students are encouraged to make choices of activities from a range of alternatives. At level three, intervention, students modify the tasks or goals of the course according to their needs and interests. At the same time, they are required to do more reflective thinking. Level four is creation. Students create their own objectives and tasks. Level five is transcendence. Students become teachers beyond classrooms. They do project work, and teach each other. Creating flashcards can have the potential to familiarize students with the concept of autonomy from the first to the fifth level (Kohyama & Shimada, 2005). In this regard, students may become more motivated to learn and manage their own learning, and make concerted efforts to the best of their abilities. This may build a foundation for the promotion and implementation of self-access language learning, which is learning a language through the use of a self-established learning environment with readily accessible materials (Chung, 2013).

## **Method**

### ***Participants***

The research focused on 25 fifth-year primary school students aged eleven and twelve years. They started learning English from the age of five, thus they had been learning English for at least six years prior to the study. They were of intermediate-level English proficiency according to an internal placement test. Additionally, according to their teacher's experience, they could be defined as non-autonomous learners because they were heavily dependent on their teacher's instruction in learning English. Students were not informed that autonomy would be the focus of this study

### ***Research setting***

The research was conducted during a semester-long course, with two 50-minute lessons per week. An EFL story book (Wang & Xu, 2014) was used in the students' regular class with an aim to improve their reading skills. This is a story book that is specifically designed for fifth-year primary school students and commonly used in primary schools in China. There is a vocabulary list following each story, which contains some new words. Each word was accompanied by its Chinese meaning.

Students were instructed to read the stories and the vocabulary list, guided in preparing the vocabulary test administered by the ELT Department, selecting important words and learning different techniques (see the instruction section). Students were required to create flashcards outside the classroom. At the end of the semester, the flashcards were collected and any notes that were added were analyzed.

The second author, who was familiar with the research procedures, was responsible for teaching the students.

### ***Instructions***

For the first 10 minutes, the teacher taught the difficult words and students read the story. After this, the teacher spent approximately 10 minutes of class time instructing the techniques of the keyword method, semantic mapping, finding collocations, finding antonyms and synonyms, and producing sentences.

The keyword method is a visual-mnemonic technique beneficial for learning new words. Students think of a L1 word that sounds similar to the new L2 word. They then imagine and draw a picture that connects the two words. For example, Chinese students may find the pronunciation for the English word 'tea' similar to the word *ti*, which means 'carry.' Therefore, the students may draw a picture of someone who is carrying a cup of tea. This visual aid is beneficial for the learners because it can remind students of the meaning of the word 'tea' and its pronunciation.

Semantic mapping is a technique for vocabulary expansion and extension of vocabulary knowledge. Students relate already known words to a new word by drawing a semantic map showing the relationship between the words. The steps were:

choose and write a word on the card, then let students have a think of as many words as they can for the key word, and put the words into categories.

Collocations are partly or fully fixed expressions that become established in a context (Bejoint, 2010). Put simply, words often occur together with other words in chunks or phrases. Lessard-Clouston (2013) suggested that learning collocations, or lexical chunks, be incorporated into vocabulary teaching.

Finding antonyms and synonyms for target words is a useful technique for vocabulary learning (Teng, 2014). Thus, students were encouraged to use their previous knowledge or their books to locate any possible antonym and synonym for the target words. A synonym is a word or phrase that means exactly or nearly the same with the target word. An antonym of a particular word is one that has the opposite meaning.

Sufficient research findings also supported the effects of producing sentences in vocabulary learning (Teng, 2015b). This was due to the fact that producing sentences is related to a higher involvement load in learning.

Following the instructions for the techniques, students were required to spend 15 minutes in learning the words to prepare for vocabulary tests administered every month. These internal tests measure knowledge of written word form, and the form-meaning link. The tests use a stem plus a four choice multiple-choice format. The stem item mainly consists of previously learned words followed by a single non-defining context, and four options. One option has the closest meaning with the stem word, other options are distracters.

Following this, the teacher spent 15 minutes instructing the learners about how to select some important words for learning. This step was of paramount importance because key components of autonomy include learners' ability to make decisions for themselves, as well as the critical reflection involved in this process (Illés, 2012). In this case, Barker's (2007) cost/benefits questions were adapted. This was to facilitate a learner in deciding whether a word is worth particular attention. This method was also successfully applied in a previous study in Japan (Baierschmidt, 2011), which was to assist learners selecting words for a vocabulary journal. Adapted questions were as follows:



1. Does this word often appear in your books?
2. Would I use the translation of the word in my language?
3. Do I have a special reason for using this word?
4. Do I want to use this word in my learning?
5. Does your classmate often point out this word to you?

After this, participants were then told to choose important words from the book and create flashcards outside their class (See an example of flashcards in Appendix A). The word, and the Chinese definition were provided in the book. The students were encouraged to include more information for their flashcards through using the above-mentioned techniques. Throughout the semester, the teacher checked the flashcards which the students created. At the end of the semester, the flashcards were collected for analysis. After the study, ten students were invited for an interview (see the interview section).

Prior to the study, the teacher and her students discussed the best way to create flashcards. Students were shown several sample flashcards, such as flashcards both with a word and its definition on the front, flashcards with a word on the front, and its definition on the back, flashcards with a word, part of speech on the front, and its definition on the front. Following a discussion between the teacher and the students, it was decided that a preferred flashcard is to have a word and its part of speech on the front, and its Chinese definition on the back.

It may seem contradictory to require students to choose required words when one of the purposes of using flashcards was to enhance students' capacity in self-selecting words. This was done for the following reasons: First, because the tests for measuring students' learning performances consisted of the words from the book, learning these words was in line with the requirement of the teaching syllabus. Second, only eight students expressed they were confident in self-selecting words. Third, it seemed unrealistic and unfair to expect primary school students to have fully active roles in autonomous learning (Pinter, 2014). Thus an approach that provided words for them to choose seemed acceptable.

Students were encouraged to use the techniques in their flashcards if they felt

it was useful. Throughout the semester, the teacher collected and checked their flashcards. At the end of the semester, the flashcards were once again collected. This was for analyzing the notes taken, defined as any additional information that the students had added in the flashcards. After the analysis, a follow-up interview was also conducted in order to gain further insight into the results.

### *Interview*

After the end of the course, ten students were randomly chosen and invited to participate in a one-on-one interview. Taking participants' English proficiency level into account, the interview was conducted in Chinese. The interview was to encourage participants to reflect on their experiences of creating flashcards, and to express opinions on how the experiences affected their autonomous learning. The second author was responsible for the entire process and took notes. Interview time for each participant was about two minutes. The total time was about 20 minutes.

Questions for interview were as follows:

1. What did you think of creating flashcards? Why?
2. Among the nine categories of information (Self-example written sentences, copied example sentences, pronunciation, collocations, synonyms, antonyms, semantic mappings, translation of example sentences, drawings), which one did you tend to provide for the flashcards you created? Why?
3. Did you maintain your interest in flashcards till the end of semester? Why?

### *Data analysis*

As noted above, the students were expected to add more information in the flashcards through using the techniques. As part of speech, and definition were already provided in the book, the flashcards were collected to check other additional information. Analysis showed that students provided nine kinds of notes which can be said to provide evidence of autonomous learning behavior. These were:  
Self-example written sentences

- Copied example sentences

- Pronunciation
- Collocations
- Synonyms
- Antonyms
- Semantic mappings
- Translation of Example Sentences
- Drawings

“*Self-example written sentences*” are the sentences produced by the students through using the new words. “*Copied example sentences*” are the sentences that the students copied directly from their textbooks. “*Pronunciation*” referred to the attempts at applying phonetic symbols to memorize the pronunciation of a word. “*Collocations*” meant the students provided words or phrases that often co-occur with the target words. For example, for the new word ‘naughty,’ a student included a word like ‘monkey.’ “*Synonyms*” meant the students provided a word with a similar meaning of the target words. For example, a student provided ‘bad’ for the new word ‘naughty.’ “*Antonyms*” meant the student recorded words that are opposite in meaning with the new word. For example, ‘good, well-mannered’ for ‘naughty.’ “*Semantic mappings*” referred to the attempt that the students drew a web of connections demonstrating the relationships between the target words and their already known words. “*Translation of example sentences*” meant the students translated the English example sentences into Chinese. “*Drawings*” referred to the pictures that the students self-drew to help them remember the meaning of the new word.

## Results

Figure 1 shows the types of notes taken and the number of students who took the notes.

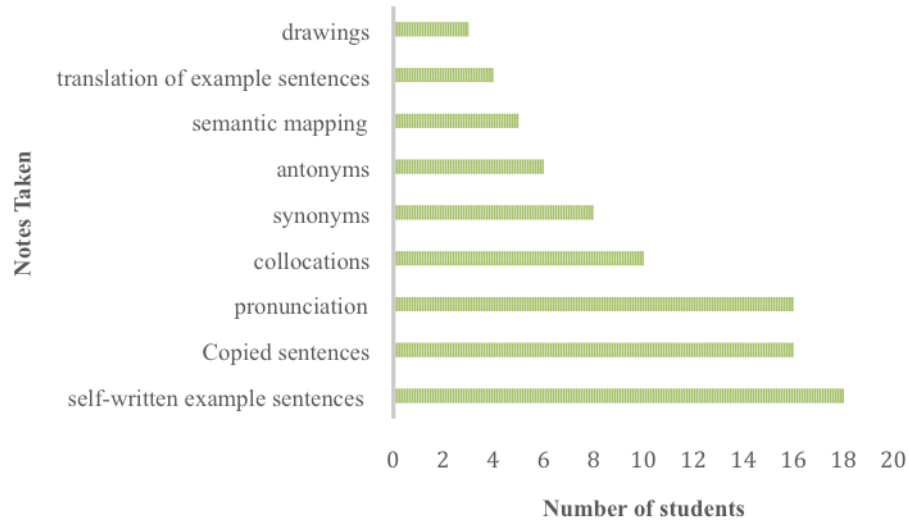


Figure 1. Summary of the Notes Made on Flashcards

Figure 1 shows that among the categories, “*self-written example sentences*” were used the most (18 students), followed closely by “*copied sentences*” (16 students) and “*pronunciation*” (16 students), “*collocations*” (10 students), “*synonym*” (8 students), “*antonym*” (6 students), “*semantic mapping*” (5 students), “*translation of example sentences*” (4 students), and “*drawings*,” which was used least (3 students).

#### *Analysis of interview*

The above findings were investigated further in the interviews. Data from the interviews revealed that eight learners out of the ten interviewed expressed satisfaction with creating flashcards. The following comments were encouraging as they indicated that boring rote-learning of words could be transformed into an enjoyable experience through flashcards (comments were translated into English by the second author).

“I enjoyed it because it was like an interesting assignment to finish.”

“I enjoyed it because it was very helpful. It encourages me to find more related words, or phrases, example sentences to complete this assignment by myself.”

“I enjoyed it because it is interesting to finish this assignment at home.”

Close analysis of the interview data also revealed a number of interesting observations. First, eight of students interviewed included example sentences when creating flashcards because they believed that including example sentences would be helpful for their learning. Secondly, learners' responses seemed to warn us against total dependence on flashcards. Nine of the students mentioned that they would not provide a semantic mapping, or drawing. The following comments explained the reasons for this.

"It is very difficult for me to provide a semantic mapping for the new word that I included in the flashcards. Although I tried to, I gave up at last."

"I write sentences, or copy sentences directly from the book. However, I do not want to provide a semantic mapping for the words in the flashcards. It takes too much time."

"I want to draw a picture in the flashcards. However, it is too difficult."

Thirdly, four learners said that they did not maintain interest for using flashcards consistently throughout the semester. For example, three students commented,

"I am quite interested in flashcards at the first beginning, but I lost interest towards the end of the semester."

"Some of the techniques are difficult to follow to the end. For example, finding a synonym or antonym."

"Establishing a semantic map needs time, and teacher does not ask us to do this. Although I did it at the start, I decided not to continue."

### **Discussion and Conclusion**

The interview data and notes on the flashcards could be presented as preliminary indications that flashcards are helpful for promoting a sense of control over learning. Even though the students were not required to and did not receive any external rewards for using any techniques, about two-thirds of the students provided example sentences, copied sentences, as well as phonetic symbols to memorize the

pronunciation. Additionally, about one-third of the students provided collocations, and synonyms for the words recorded in the flashcards. A few students provided drawings, semantic mapping, and translations.

However, there are a few caveats to be made of the findings. For example, some of the techniques were rarely used. Only five students presented semantic mapping, a technique for graphically representing concepts. Results seemed to suggest that semantic mapping is not a technique that can be autonomously used by students. In addition, an autonomous student could choose not to use the technique because it is not effective for him/her. Although a previous study has shown that semantic mapping helps students, especially struggling students, to identify, understand, and recall the word meaning (Zorfass & Gray, 2014), to make this technique beneficial for the students, a step-by-step set of direct instructions and repeated practice might be needed.

Second, only three students autonomously applied drawings for the included words in the flashcards. They may think drawing is time-consuming. As a previous study has shown that the drawing strategy was an effective word problem solving strategy for students (Dennis, Knight, & Jerman, 2015), direct instruction and repeated practice for this one also seems to be necessary.

Third, some techniques were not maintained consistently throughout the whole semester. Follow-up interviews showed that some students did not continue use some of the techniques, e.g., semantic mapping, and finding a synonym or antonym. Possible explanations for this were students' lack of time, interest, and the difficulties of the technique itself. Baierschmidt (2011) used a vocabulary journal for his students to promote autonomous learning. However, some techniques were also not maintained long term. This seemed to raise questions as to whether we can have only one tool to maintain learners' interest and, or how we can go about doing it?

Fourth, the usefulness of applying flashcards might have been affected by variables, e.g., classroom setting, context, learner background, etc. Future studies with in-depth analyses are warranted.

This example of classroom practice also sheds lights on promoting self-access language learning. By creating flashcards, students began to set their own learning

goals. Students are offered a learning environment in which they are active participants rather than passive recipients of information. First, they clarify their objectives. Then they select words relevant to those objectives, choosing not only the information best suited to the flashcards, but also the level appropriate to their ability. Second, they exercise their responsibility for their own learning by developing their own flashcards. Students learn how to set priorities, decide when and where to study, and determine how to pace their learning. Finally, they evaluate their learning and, if necessary, change their plan of action through sharing flashcards in the class.

Unfortunately, some learners may not have the knowledge and skills that allow them to take part in this kind of classroom practice. Teachers must therefore need to help their learners develop this knowledge and skills. A teacher's role is to move learners along a continuum from dependence on the teacher to autonomy. This can be done by a collaborative effort between teachers and learners. In other words, this calls for a pedagogical partnership between teachers and learners.

### **Notes on the Contributors**

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Fang He is a lecturer at the department of English, Nanning University, China. She also works as an English instructor in a self-access center for primary school students. Her research mainly includes young learners, and bilingual education.

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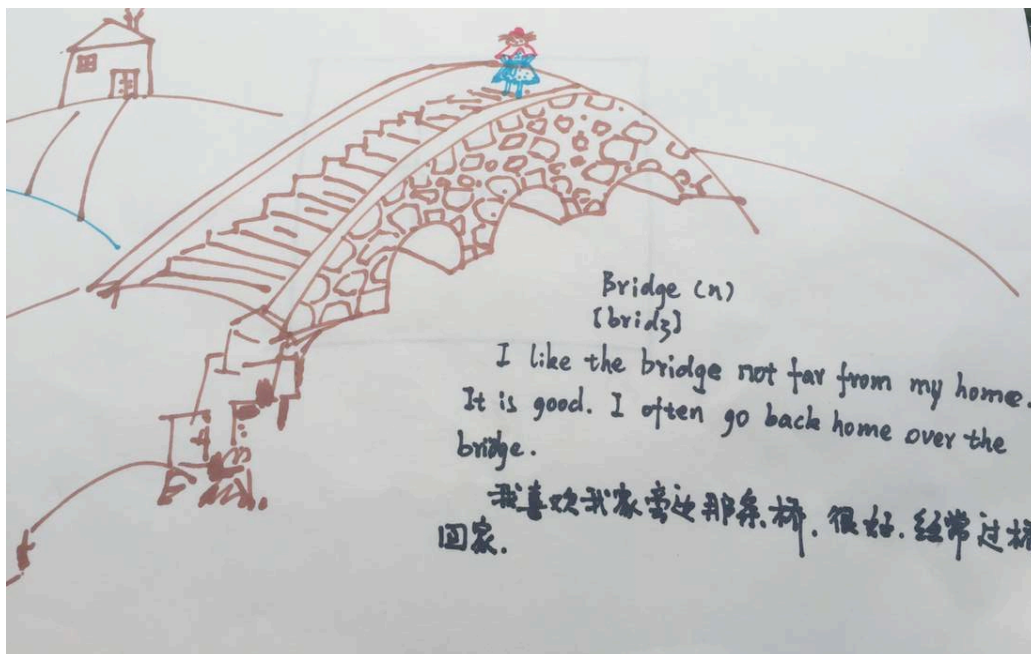
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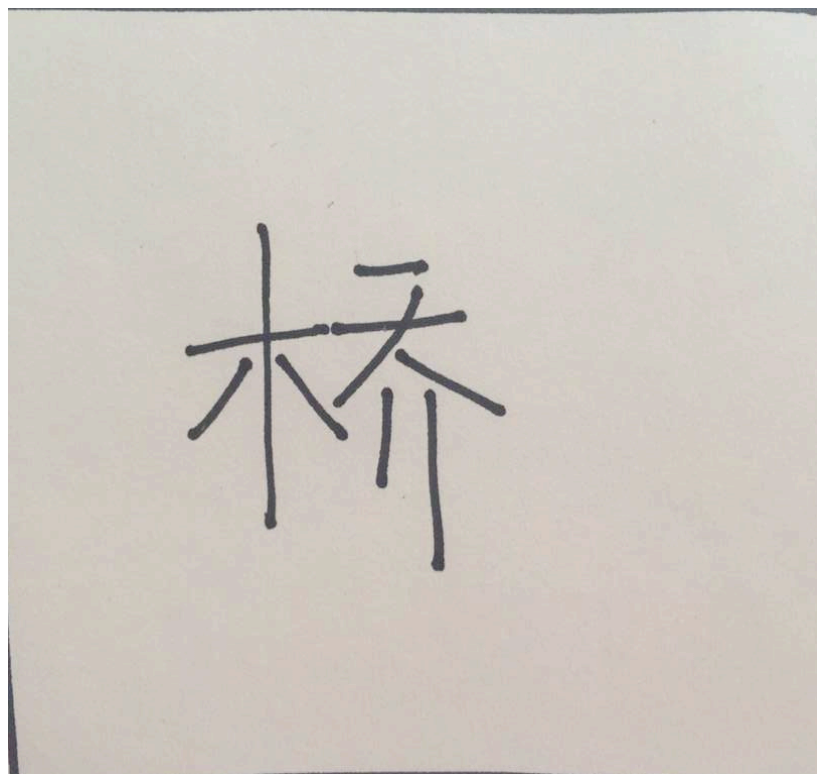
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Appendix A An example of a student participant's flashcard



(Front)



(Back)