

MEMORY AS AN IMPORTANT FACTOR IN LEARNING VOCABULARY

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ABSTRACT:

Vocabulary is the first and foremost important step in language acquisition. If students have difficulties with vocabulary learning, it can be made interactive and interesting with the help of appropriate teaching strategies. And, this paper was an attempt to explore the various valuable strategies that can be incorporated in the teaching of vocabulary items in a language classroom for obtaining excellent results. Memory is an important factor in teaching and learning vocabulary as memorizing is an effective way of vocabulary acquisition (learning words).

Key words: vocabulary, memory, acquisition, short-term, long-term, remember, strategy.

INTRODUCTION:

It is vital to remember that there are many fundamental factors that determine success in language learning such as motivation, data (samples of the language), opportunities to experiment with the data and feedback – to confirm that you are heading in the right direction, or to re-direct you if you are not. Apart from that, there is one major factor that greatly influences learning vocabulary. It is memory. Learners need not only to learn a lot of words, but to remember them. In fact, learning is remembering. Unlike the learning of grammar, which is essentially a rule-based system, vocabulary knowledge is largely a question of accumulating individual items. There are few short cuts in the form of generative rules: it is essentially a question of

memory. How, then, does memory work? And what are implications for teaching vocabulary?

Researchers into the workings of memory customarily distinguish between the following systems: the short-term store, working memory, and long-term memory. The short-term store (STS) is the brain's capacity to hold a limited number of items of information for periods of time up to a few seconds. It is the kind of memory that is involved in holding in your head a telephone number for as long as it takes to be able to dial it. Or to repeat a word that you have just heard the teacher modeling. But successful vocabulary learning clearly involves more than simply holding words in your mind for a few seconds. For words to be integrated into long-term memory they need to be subjected to different kinds of operations.

Focusing on words long enough to perform operations on them is the function of working memory. Many cognitive tasks such as reasoning, learning and understanding depend on working memory. It can be thought of as a kind of work bench, where information is first placed, studied and moved about before being filed away for later retrieval. The information that is being manipulated can come from external sources through the senses, or it can be 'downloaded' from the long-term memory. Or both can be seen. For example, a learner can hear a word, download a similar word from long-term memory, and compare the two in working memory, before deciding if they are the same or different. Materials remain in working memory for about twenty seconds.

This capacity is made possible by the existence of the articulatory loop, a process of subvocal repetition, a bit like a loop of audio tape gong round and round. It enables the

short-term store to be kept refreshed. Having just heard a new word, for example, we can run it by as many times as we need in order to examine it (book...book...book...) – assuming that not too many other new words are competing for space on the loop. The holding capacity of the articulatory loop seems to be a determining factor in the ability to learn languages: the longer the loop, the better the learner. Or, to put it another way, the ability to hold a phonological representation of a word in working memory is a good predictor of language learning aptitude. Likewise, any interference in the process of subvocal repetition, e.g. distracting background talk, is likely to disrupt the functioning of the loop and impair learning. Also linked to working memory is a kind of mental sketch pad. Here images such as visual mnemonics (memory prompts) can be placed and scanned in order to elicit words from long-term memory into working memory.

Long-term memory can be thought of as a kind of filing system. Unlike working memory, which has a limited capacity and no permanent content, long-term memory has an enormous capacity, and its contents are durable over time. However, the fact that learners can retain new vocabulary items the length of a lesson (i.e. beyond the few seconds' duration of the short-term store) but have forgotten them by the next lesson suggests that long-term memory is not always as long-term as we would wish. Rather, it occupies a continuum from 'the quickly forgotten' to 'the never forgotten'. The great challenge for language learners is to transform material from the quickly forgotten to the never forgotten. Research into memory suggests that, in order to ensure that material moves into permanent long-term memory, a number of principles need to be observed [3; 24].

Here is a brief summary of some of the research findings that are relevant to the subject of word learning:

Repetition:

The time-honored way of 'memorizing' new material is through repeated rehearsal of the material while it is still in working memory – i.e. letting the articulatory loop just run and run. However, simply repeating an item (the basis of rote learning) seems to have little long-term effect unless some attempt is made to organize the material at the same time (see below). But one kind of repetition that is important is repetition of encounters with a word. It has been estimated that, when reading, words stand a good chance of being remembered if they have been met at least seven times over spaced intervals.

Retrieval:

Another kind of repetition that is crucial is what is called the retrieval practice effect. This means, simply, that the act of retrieving a word from memory makes it more likely that the learner will be able to recall it again later. Activities which require retrieval, such as using the new word in written sentences, 'oil the path' for future recall.

Spacing:

It is better to distribute memory work across a period of time than to mass it together in a single block. This is known as the principle of distributed practice. This applies in both the short term and the long term. When teaching students, a new set of words, for example, it is best to present the first two or three items, then go back and test these, then present some more, then backtrack again, and so on. As each word becomes better learned, the testing interval can gradually be extended. The aim is to test each item at the longest interval at which it can reliably be recalled. Similarly, over

a sequence of lessons, newly presented vocabulary should be reviewed in the next lesson, but the interval between successive tests should gradually be increased.

Pacing:

Learners have different learning styles, and process data at different rates, so ideally they should be given the opportunity to pace their own rehearsal activities. This may mean the teacher allowing time during vocabulary learning for learners to do 'memory work' - such as organising or reviewing their vocabulary - silently and individually.

Use:

Putting words to use, preferably in some interesting way, is the best way of ensuring they are added to long-term memory. It is the principle popularly known as Use it or lose it. Meanwhile, the following points all relate to ways of manipulating words in working memory.

Cognitive Depth:

The more decisions the learner makes about a word, and the more cognitively demanding these decisions, the better the word is remembered. For example, a relatively superficial judgement might be simply to match it with a word that rhymes with it: e.g. tango/mango. A deeper level decision might be to decide on its part of speech (noun, adjective, verb, etc). Deeper still might be to use it to complete a sentence.

Personal Organizing:

The judgements that learners make about a word are most effective if they are personalized. In one study, subjects who had read a sentence aloud containing new words showed better recall than subjects who had simply silently rehearsed the words. But subjects who had made up their own sentences

containing the words and read them aloud did better still.

Imaging:

Best of all were subjects who were given the task of silently visualizing a mental picture to go with a new word. Other tests have shown that easily visualized words are more memorable than words that don't immediately evoke a picture. This suggests that — even for abstract words - it might help if learners associate them with some mental image. Interestingly, it doesn't seem to matter if the image is highly imaginative or even very vivid, so long as it is self-generated, rather than acquired 'second-hand'.

Mnemonics:

These are 'tricks' to help retrieve items or rules that are stored in memory and that are not yet automatically retrievable. Even native speakers rely on mnemonics to help with some spelling rules: e.g. i before e except after c. As the previous point suggests, the best kinds of mnemonics are often visual. The most well-attested memory technique is the keyword technique, which is described further.

Motivation:

Simply wanting to learn new words is no guarantee that words will be remembered. The only difference a strong motivation makes is that the learner is likely to spend more time on rehearsal and practice, which in the end will pay off in terms of memory. But even unmotivated learners remember words if they have been set tasks that require them to make decisions about them.

Attention/Arousal:

Contrary to popular belief, you can't improve your vocabulary in your sleep, simply by listening to a tape. Some degree of conscious attention is required. A very high degree of

attention (called arousal) seems to correlate with improved recall. Words that trigger a strong emotional response, for example, are more easily recalled than ones that don't. This may account for the fact that many learners seem to have a knack of remembering swear words, even if they've heard them only a couple of times.

Affective Depth:

Related to the preceding point, affective (i.e. emotional) information is stored along with cognitive (i.e. intellectual) data, and may play an equally important role on how words are stored and recalled. Just as it is important for learners to make cognitive judgements about words, it may also be important to make affective judgements, such as Do I like the sound and look of the word? Do I like the thing that the word represents? Does the word evoke any pleasant or unpleasant associations?

While giving memory as an important factor in learning vocabulary we should also consider the factors which make words more difficult. Anyone who has learned a second language will know that some words seem easier to learn than others. One of the methodologists G.V. Rogova also points out some difficulties pupils experience in assimilating vocabulary. She says that learning the words of a foreign language is not an easy business since every word has its form, meaning, and usage and each of these aspects of the word may have its difficulties [2; 118]. Easiest of all are those that are more or less identical, both in meaning and form, to their L1 equivalents. When this is due to the fact that they derive from a common origin, they are called cognates. Thus French vocabulary, Italian vocabolario and English vocabulary are all cognates and hence relatively easily transferable from one language to the other. However, as we have seen, there are a number of traps for new players, in the form of false

cognates (e.g. English magazine does not mean 'shop or store' as Russian магазин, but means 'a type of press'). Apart from that, pronunciation (learners find the words with unfamiliar sounds more problematic), spelling (sound-spelling mismatches can contribute to a word's difficulty), length and complexity, meaning (words with multiple meanings like since and still can be troublesome for learners), and range and idiomaticity make words difficult to learn. These above-mentioned factors can produce challenging situations for learners where possible outcome may be errors made by learners in using the learnt words or it can even cause forgetting words.

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