

FIVE ESSENTIAL STEPS IN VOCABULARY LEARNING

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Teachers have always been naturally interested in how learners go about learning vocabulary. If we know more about learner strategies and what works and what does not work well, we can help learners acquire more profitable strategies. Intuitively, we have always given advice about how to learn vocabulary. Some teachers even make assignments for this purpose. For example, “Write down every new word you encounter in a notebook. Try to guess what it means in the context in which you heard it.” Or, “Try to use any new words you learn as soon as learn them. In fact, I want you to write me ten sentences tonight using new words you have learned.”

Brown and Payne [2, p.27] did an analysis that resulted in a very clear model where strategies fall into five essential steps:

1. encountering new words;
2. getting a clear image, either visual or auditory or both, for the forms of the new words;
3. learning the meaning of the words;
4. making a strong memory connection between the forms and meanings of the words;
5. using the new words.

Although the steps identified by Brown and Payne may possibly be divided into smaller components, it appears to us that each represents something learners must do, at least at some minimal level, to come to a full productive knowledge of words.

If learners or teachers can do anything to move more words through any of the steps, the overall result should be more vocabulary learned. We will describe the five steps in more detail below.

The first essential step for vocabulary learning is encountering new words, that is, having a source for words. “The student strategies here included ‘learning new words by reading books’, ‘listening to TV and radio,’ and ‘reading newspapers and magazines’.” [10, p.33]

As far as incidental learning vocabulary goes, this step is obviously the most vital. Because incidental learning of vocabulary must occur if foreign language learners are to approach a vocabulary that compares with of native speakers, this step is crucial.

How many words make it past this step may vary because of many learner factors. For example, natural learner interest or motivation may cause learners to pay more attention to some words than others.

In addition to interest, actual need may make a difference in whether encountered words are learned. We seem to learn words more quickly if we have felt a need for them in some way.

Another indication that encountering words may be more effective under some circumstances than others has been found in work with interactive video materials. When students have seen an object or an action, their desire to know the word for it may increase so that, when the word for it is encountered, it is learned very quickly. This appeared to be the case in Brown's study where learners were using an interactive version of *Raiders of the Lost Art*. "Learners had seen some objects or actions in the video, so, they had a visual image of them but did not hear or see the vocabulary items until later. Later in the video script or the instructional exercises, the words were supplied for what the learners had seen. These vocabulary items were learned significantly faster than other words in the script or exercises." [1, p. 263 – 286]

The number of times that a word is encountered may also affect whether it is learned. It appears logical that the need learners feel for a word would increase as they continued to encounter it. There is some evidence that learners are sensitive to the frequency with which they encounter both familiar and unfamiliar words. They say such things as 'I do not know what the word means, but I have seen it a lot,' or 'I have never seen that word before.'

Nagy and Herman have argued that "even a single encounter with a word in the context might help increase learner's knowledge about that word and its meaning. However, between six and twelve encounters with a word are necessary to ensure that the word would be learned".[8, p.19 – 36]

At the same time, Brown stated that, "I found no connection between the words that were acquired and the number of occurrences of those words in the source text. Instead, there was a small but important correlation between the words acquired and their general frequency. Learners may need various encounters with the same word in multiple sources rather than in just one source." [1, p. 281]

Reading is not the only way in which learners encounter words. The learners in Payne's study frequently mentioned "watching television and listening to the radio as good ways to learn vocabulary." [10, p.47]

Other strategies may not be as personally interactive and interesting, but they do serve learners. For example, textbook or teacher-assigned word lists are sources where the learners may encounter new words. Many researchers claim that the word list is probably the most widely used

approach to vocabulary development in formal settings, and most textbooks provide chapter word lists, end glossaries, or both.

Dictionaries are also sources where new words and new uses for old words can be encountered. It was stated that, the better learners use the dictionaries extensively to learn not just the words they originally started to look up but also related words or words nearby in the dictionary.

Other teachers have suggested that students be encouraged to generate their own word lists. Such lists are very easily compiled by students learning a language but may not be quite as easily generated in foreign language environments. As students notice where they encounter foreign words, they can begin to see some of the issues related to variation in lexical choice. English words are found in music and entertainment industry related products. Students would also learn that words encountered on t-shirts may differ from the words encountered on food product or technological instrument labels and instructions.

Continued work with sources may clarify what sources or characteristics of sources are most desirable, but for now it is quite clear that learners have to encounter words in textbooks or out before they can learn them.

The second step to vocabulary learning appears to be getting of a clear image – visual or auditory or both – of the form of the vocabulary item. This step was shown in comments such as ‘associating new words with words that sound similar in my native language’, ‘writing the sounds of words using sound symbols from my native language’, ‘associating words that are similar to words in other languages I have studied’, ‘associating a word with a similar sounding English word I know’ and ‘seeing a word that looks like another word I already know’ in this step.

The importance of having a clear image of the ‘form’ of a word becomes apparent when we think about what happens when we try to retrieve words. The classic study in this area was done by Brown and McNeill. “Definitions of words with very low frequency were read by the participants and they were asked to write down what they thought the word might be. When they could not think of the word, they were asked to write down what they could remember.” [3, p. 325 – 327]

Brown and McNeill concluded that initial sound, final sound, and number of syllables were all aspects used to retrieve words from the memory. Learners also seemed to give a higher than average number of guess with the correct initial sound, final sound, and number of syllables for words that were on the tip-of-the-tongue. There were also indications that the form of native language words affected the search for the target language words.

The importance of getting the form of the word also appears when students are asked to give definitions for words. Beginning students are particularly likely to make mistakes that are obviously related to confusions of the form of one word with the form of other words. “In one experiment

students were given an English sentence with one word underlined and were asked to write their native language translation of the word. Their translations were then back-translated to English. Some of the words for which the students were attempting to give translations and what the back-translations of their words were. The students who did the back-translation had not seen the original sentences nor test words.

Many of the errors seem to be caused by, or related to the confusing of words similar in form either to a native language word or to another English word. The use of word form can also be seen in a study by Huckin and Bloch. They found that “the learners are able to use context to define and translate correctly twenty-five of the possible forty-four words they did not know. They were unsuccessful in their guessing nineteen out of the forty-four times, and nine of those times they apparently mistook the word for another that resembles it. All of these errors indicate that learners are often led astray in their attempts to understand words because they confuse the form of the word with an another form.” [6, p.160]

Problems for learners arising from words similar in form have been identified as a major problem for language learners and given the name synophones by Laufer. “In lexical error analysis we found form confusion to account for about one fourth of all errors. In this study, the language background of the students was an important factor.” [7, p.275]

He felt that this aspect of vocabulary learning was harder for the learners whose languages used the Roman alphabet because of confusions with words and spellings in their native language. Whatever the reason for the learners, it is obvious that learning the form is important. Almost all learners seem to have strategies, such as those listed above, that they are automatically use to help them remember the form of foreign language words.

The third essential step in the learners’ reported strategies is the one which is most often associated with the idea of vocabulary learning: getting the word meaning. “This step includes such strategies as ‘asking the teacher what words mean’, ‘asking people who speak my native language the meaning of new words’, ‘making pictures of word meanings in my mind’, and ‘explaining what I mean and asking someone to tell me the English word’.” [4, p.382]

The specificity of the meaning that learners need may vary. The level of distinctions that must be made in word definitions seems to vary both with the requirements of the task or situation and also with the level of the learner. Although beginning learners seem satisfied with quite general meanings, more advanced learners often need more specific definitions in order to differentiate between their synonyms. Language learners may also need different kinds of definitions and distinctions depending on the words being learned and the reasons for needing them. Advanced

learners may find thesauruses more appropriate than dictionaries in supplying the finer distinctions in meaning that they need.

Learners often get close to the meaning of the English words, choosing meanings that have some of the features of the test word, but not all. “For example, *windshield* is a window, but it is a particular kind of window. *Upon* as used in the test sentence relates to time, but it does not mean *since*, *after*, *once*. *Strong* and *hard* share some features with *heavy*, but are also distinct in several ways.” [4, p.383]

The learners know some things about the vocabulary, but they also seem to indicate the need to refine meanings for words, to make finer distinctions, which thesauruses generally do better than regular dictionaries. Doing feature analysis might help learners in their attempts to get the meaning of the words they are learning.

Most teachers know, however, that learners assume that dictionaries are one of the main sources of word definitions. After all, language learners carry around dictionaries, not grammar books. If learners carry dictionaries, however, it would seem wise for them to have the best possible dictionaries. Students who received bilingual glosses, oral and written, scored consistently higher on vocabulary tests than students who received monolingual glossaries. There seems to be natural progression in the type of dictionaries or glosses that learners prefer. They seem to go from picture dictionaries to bilingual dictionaries, and then to monolingual dictionaries and thesauruses.

Another way of getting definitions is simply by having a teacher explanation.

Finally, one very popular way and practically the only way in incidental learning for learners to get the meaning of the words is through context. Learners guess the meaning of words from the situation, discourse, and context in which they are used, and from the structure of the words themselves. Haynes found that “guessing is one of only two principles urged in all of the reading textbooks we examined. In order to see the effectiveness of such guessing, we had students read passages and guess at the meaning of unfamiliar words. Each passage contained two nonsense words which replaced all occurrences of two real words. The nonsense words were included in order to ensure that students would encounter words they could not have known from any other source. The only way they could tell what the words meant would be through context and word structure. The meaning of one of the nonsense words in each passage could be guessed from the clues just within the sentence in which it occurred. Guessing the meaning of the other nonsense word required synthesizing information through the passage.

We found that all the learners were much more successful at guessing the meaning of locally constrained words and guessing success depended a great deal on the number of other unfamiliar words in the passage.” [5, p.47]

Although the depth of definition needed may vary and the sources from which meaning can be extracted may be quite different, all learners must get the meaning of words in some manner, or the words can never be considered truly learned.

The fourth necessary step revealed by Brown and Payne's analysis requires the consolidation of form and meaning in memory. Many kinds of vocabulary learning drills, such as flashcards, matching exercises, crossword puzzles, etc., strengthen the form-meaning connection. Almost all of the ten memory strategies that Oxford mentions consolidate the connection between word form and meaning in memory. "We divided these strategies into four general categories: (1) creating mental linkages; (2) applying images and sounds; (3) reviewing well, and (4) employing actions. We can mention nine specific strategies along with the general categories in which they fall:

1. Grouping language material into meaningful units (categ.1);
2. Associating new language information to concepts already in memory (categ.1);
3. Placing new words into a context, such as a meaningful sentence, conversation, or story (categ.1);
4. Using semantic mapping (categ.2);
5. Using keywords with auditory and/or visual links (categ.2);
6. Representing sounds in memory in such way that they can be linked with a target language word in order to remember it better (categ.2);
7. Reviewing the target language material in carefully spaced intervals (categ.3);
8. Acting out a new target language expression (categ.4);
9. Using mechanical techniques, such as writing words on cards and moving cards from one stack to another when a new word is learned (categ.4).

Many of these strategies specifically mention vocabulary, expressions, or words. Those that do not mention vocabulary explicitly still can be applied to vocabulary study, for example, reviewing at carefully spaced intervals." [9, p. 241]

Mnemonic devices and their uses have been studied extensively by many researchers. One method, in particular, the keyword method, has received great attention. This method calls for the word to be learned in a sentence that gives contextual cues to the meaning of the word while relating the form to forms the learner already knows. The method is described as having two stages. In the first, students are taught to link an unfamiliar word with an acoustically or visually similar word. Next the students are shown a picture which contains both concepts in an interactive display. The story or sentence with or without the picture will make the meaning of the word clear. The pronunciation of the word is remembered because of its association with the known words. If all of the learners in a language class have the same native language, the keywords can be done in the

native language. If the class has a heterogeneous language background, the keywords and sentences must be in the foreign language. In addition to deciding which language to do keywords in, learners or teachers may need to decide whether verbal or visual (imagery) mnemonics are more effective and whether learner-generated mnemonics are more helpful. With regard to verbal or visual mnemonics, Cohen cited mixed results depending on whether the words to be learned represented concrete or abstract items. “Verbal mnemonics are better for abstract items. Younger learners could not seem to generate visual images as easily than adult learners; and more fluent learners benefit more from verbal mnemonics.” [10, p. 43 – 62]

Regarding whether mnemonics should be generated by the learner or the teacher, Cohen cited studies which generally showed that either method worked equally well. Cohen did point out, however, that almost all experiments had used words for which keywords were easy to generate. The difficulty of generating keywords may discourage learners, or they may simply opt for more traditional ways of consolidating word forms with word meanings. Probably the most traditional way of doing this is to memorize words and their meanings from lists. There are variations on this method – using flashcards, covering one side of the paired lists (words and their meanings) and trying to guess the other, drawing lines between words in one list and their meanings in another list with a different order – but many cultures or educational systems simply call for students to memorize a list with the word and its meaning paired. Although this method may not be as entertaining as others, there are sufficient persons who have learned languages in this way so that the method should not be discounted. Which method learners use for this step does not seem to be as crucial as that they do it. The more words learners can get through this step, the more words they will know overall.

The final step in learning words is using the words. Some would argue that this step is not necessary if all that is desired is a receptive knowledge of a word. Such an argument can apply to many of the other processes as well, since a great amount can be comprehended in context even if a reader or listener knows nothing about many of the words being used. However, if the goal is to help learners move as far along the continuum of word knowledge as they can, word use is essential. Furthermore, use seems to provide a mild guarantee that words and meanings will not fade from memory once they are learned. Possibly because the use of a word tests the learner’s understanding of the word, learners feel more confident about their word knowledge once they have used a word without undesired consequences. Use of the word may simply be a form of hypothesis testing, allowing learners to see if the knowledge gained in the other steps is correct. In addition to increasing confidence and receptive knowledge, use of words seems to be necessary for students to test their knowledge of collocations, syntactic restrictions, and register appropriateness.

Thus, we gave the five essential steps which learners take in vocabulary learning. Although, there is a broad range of activities, strategies, or techniques that learners use at each step, the necessity of the steps seems more constant. Learners need all five in order to have a full knowledge of the words they want to learn.

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