Making words stick

Darius Langhoff presents an overview of vocabulary learning strategies.

The multilayered issue of L2 vocabulary acquisition can be represented through a model comprising four parts: learner, task, context and strategy. These constituents have been subjected to empirical research with the focus on task-dependent guessing strategies, dictionary strategies, note-taking strategies, rote rehearsal strategies and encoding strategies. Researchers have either looked impassively for the strategies that achieve the best results, or argued that the choice of a successful strategy hinges on the task, the learner and the learning context. This article endeavours to demonstrate that learning new words involves complex processes and requires further research to better our understanding of how new words are learnt and retained.

A model for learning

Language learning in general and vocabulary acquisition in particular are problem-solving tasks at different levels of complexity. When learners come across challenging tasks, they adopt certain strategies to overcome the problem. Linguists, teachers and psychologists have long been interested in the effectiveness of the various strategies they use. Researchers have come up with several vocabulary-learning models, which have been fused into a more general person–task–context–strategy model.

Person

Learners introduce into the learning situation a broad spectrum of individual differences that influence the pace of learning and the ultimate degree of success. The factors which determine how learners handle tasks are: age, gender, intelligence, prior knowledge, motivation, personality and cognitive style.

Task

A learning task can be as broad as mastering another language, or as narrow as remembering the meaning of one word. In general terms, the concept of a learning task includes the materials which provide the language input and the goal the learner is trying to achieve by using these materials. Different sorts of materials and differing task aims and levels of difficulty call for different learning strategies.

Context

The learning context refers to the learning environment: the socio-cultural-political space where learning takes place. The learning context may encompass teachers, classmates, the classroom ethos, family support and the curriculum. Learning contexts influence the ways in which learners approach learning tasks. A learning strategy of value in one learning context may prove useless in another.

Strategy

A learning strategy is the course of action a learner tries in order to complete a language task. A strategy commences when learners analyse the task, the situation and their own L2 proficiency. Then, they proceed to select, deploy, monitor and evaluate their actions, and decide whether their plans and actions need be modified. Language learning strategies should be differentiated from language-use strategies: the former include, for example, memorising; the latter involve such things as writing and speaking.

Person, task, context and strategy are interconnected and co-function in the process of learning. An analysis of learning strategies requires knowledge of the person-task-context configuration of the particular learning situation. There are strategies which are more task-dependent and others which are more person-dependent or context-dependent. The first type tends to predominate in second language teaching and learning and will be dealt with in detail below.

Task-dependent learning strategies

It seems sound to claim that the principal aim of vocabulary learning is to bridge the gap between knowing a word and using it. In other words, the purpose is not only to remember new words but also to know how to use them in a variety of contexts. Evidence, such as that collected by Rod Ellis, suggests that the *knowledge* aspect (its breath and depth) requires conscious and explicit learning mechanisms, whilst the *skill* aspect draws mostly on implicit learning and memory. In short, vocabulary learning strategies ought to include strategies for 'using' as well as 'knowing' a word.

Since the majority of L1 vocabulary is learnt through incidental exposure

rather than through direct instruction, it seems plausible that lexical acquisition in L2 might follow the same route. This theory brings with itself a number of questions:

Does guessing meaning lead to vocabulary learning?

Clear evidence shows that children learn a large proportion of their L1 vocabulary incidentally, even accidentally, from hearing and seeing. A similar mechanism operates in L2 contexts, but, as Margot Haynes points out, learners are sometimes conspicuously incapable of guessing the meaning of an unknown word appearing in a text or discourse. Two conclusions may be drawn from this. Firstly, that L2 learners, owing to their inadequate knowledge of the target language, are generally poorer guessers and less effective incidental learners. Secondly, that L2 beginners, who lack basic skills in the target language, are often condemned to ineffectual attempts at incidental vocabulary learning.

How many exposures are needed to learn a word?

There some discrepancies in the research that attempts to answer this question. Some researchers, such as Paul Nation, postulate that between five and 16 exposures are necessary to learn a word from context. Others, such as Paul Meara, put forward a 0.01 hypothesis (1 uptake for every 100 exposures), arguing that L2 learners are not usually exposed to large quantities of spoken or written discourse. Despite these considerable differences, researchers agree that the necessary number of exposures depends on factors such as the conspicuousness of the word in a text and the number of contextual clues.

Is incidental learning more effective than intentional learning?

Although incidental learning is more clearly the primary means of vocabulary learning in L1 contexts, it does still have a role to play in L2 vocabulary learning. Nevertheless, a prerequisite for successful incidental vocabulary learning through reading is actual reading ability, an ability L2 beginners may possess to a limited extent. This problem is exacerbated if the second language has an entirely different orthography. Moreover, when the amount of target language input is small and reading materials are scarce, exclusive reliance on incidental learning is doomed to failure. It is no surprise, then, that a combined approach proves superior to incidental vocabulary learning alone: explicit lexical instruction in conjunction with self-selected reading brings better results. This is particularly true at beginner or elementary level, where incidental learning must be coupled with the support and reinforcement of explicit learning and teaching. A combination of techniques is, however, also effective with advanced L2 learners.

How useful are dictionaries?

Teachers and lexicographers have for a long time debated whether dictionaries should be used in the language classroom and, if so, *what* dictionaries should be used.

It is common knowledge that a dictionary is one of the first things that students purchase. It is their dictionaries that they carry around, not grammar books. However, empirical research into the usefulness of dictionaries is only beginning to emerge. So, is it better to use a dictionary when looking for meaning, or to try guessing from context?

Studies of the efficacy of dictionaries in lexical acquisition have usually been carried out in L1 settings, and have compared the contribution of dictionary definitions to contextual guessing. In general, the results appear to favour contextual guessing. However, as Susan Knight observes, these results are questionable, as the students under investigation who engaged in contextual guessing read not only unadapted texts, but also texts accompanied by definitions and examples, being thus exposed to dictionary-like situations. Again, a combination of strategies may be more productive than either exclusive dictionary use or contextual guessing.

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If dictionaries are to be used, a further question concerns what kind of dictionary is preferable: bilingual or monolingual? The stance of most linguists and teachers is that monolingual dictionaries should be used. However, monolingual dictionaries tend to be circuitous in their definitions. For example, the words *encourage*, *favour*, *foster*, *foment*, *provoke*, *instigate*, *urge*, etc are all used in each other's definitions. Monolingual dictionaries for learners tend to use a restricted defining vocabulary, usually about 2,000 words, but this pre-selected lexical set is frequently of little use to students below advanced level. I feel that what is needed is a new generation of bilingual reference books, which present students with fuller semantic, grammatical and stylistic information, and with more examples and usage notes, things typically absent in traditional bilingual dictionaries.

Vocabulary learning strategies

Note-taking and memorisation

When dealing with the meaning of unknown words, learners make notes in notebooks, write on cards, in the margins of texts or between the lines. Of course, the exact form of those notes is unique to each learner, and so is their usability. Differences in how new vocabulary is recorded may distinguish the good learner from the poor one.

One of the first problems learners have to solve is how to memorise large numbers of new lexical items. The commonest strategy here is to repeat the new expressions over and over until they are remembered. Thus a substantial amount of research has focused on vocabulary rehearsal and identified four influential factors: the number of repetitions required to memorise a word list; the optimal number of words to be learnt at one time; the timing of the repetition; and loud versus silent repetition.

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▶▶▶ An unexpectedly large amount of new lexis seems to be learnable within a relatively short time span. When the words on a list are 'easy', that is to say of high frequency, lists containing 100 or even more lexical items can be studied at one time. Empirical studies show that repeating aloud helps retention far better than repeating silently. The ear assists the eye in the long-lasting retention of vocabulary. This has been attributed to the fact that the ear can split sound into constituent simple sound waves, whereas the eye cannot split light into constituent electromagnetic waves.

Encoding and vocabulary learning

Repeating word lists is just one vocabulary learning strategy; there are others which centre on deeper processes involving memory, form, meaning and use.

The use of mnemonics is one technique which has recently attracted a lot of attention, though mnemonics have been used as a memory aid since antiquity. Probably the best-known mnemonic technique is the *keyword method*, where a foreign word is remembered through linkage to a keyword, a sound-alike native word (acoustic link), or a look-alike native word (visual link).

However, mnemonic strategies for learning L2 vocabulary are not without flaws:

- Mnemonic techniques rely on the retention of paired associates, while an L2 lexicon hardly resembles an ordered collection of L1–L2 lexical couplets.
- The mnemonic approach stresses a rigid one-to-one relationship between form and meaning, while in reality one lexical item stands for multiple dimensions of meaning.
- Mnemonic techniques tend to overrate the referential meaning of a word, often at the expense of its grammatical properties.
- Abstract words, because of their lack of tangible referents, are unsuitable for mnemonic strategies.
- The success claimed for mnemonic techniques in facilitating long-term retention is defined as being correct recall after two weeks under experimental conditions; in real life, retention needs to go infinitely beyond a two-week period.

Word-formation: focusing on form

Lexicographers are particularly interested in form: their work is based on the thesis that the etymological background is important to learners. It is certainly true that knowledge of Greco-Latin roots can often help students predict what a given English word means and why it is spelt the way it is. This knowledge may also help them remember it through a realisation of how its present meaning evolved from that of its original root. Learners may benefit also from affixation: splitting a word into its component parts lays bare its roots; learners may also recognise the meanings and functions of suffixes and prefixes and how they contribute to the meaning of the whole word.

Semantic networks: focusing on meaning

Our knowledge of vocabulary learning has expanded recently due to developments in lexical semantics. The paradigmatic versus syntagmatic treatment of the mental lexicon has instigated new perceptions of the semantic field. Applied linguists design semantic networks, maps and grids in which words are connected by intertwined meanings. Such strategies, although potentially too prescriptive, may be of benefit to learners.

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Today, vocabulary learning is better understood thanks to the pioneers in the fields of incidental vocabulary learning, memorisation and mnemonic techniques. But there are still unanswered questions, and the following three points are what I consider to be the most important issues for future research:

1 Research efforts have mostly been directed towards discovering the 'best' strategy for vocabulary retention, ignoring the diversity of strategies students actually employ.

2 Quite a lot of emphasis has been put on incidental vocabulary learning, overlooking the potential of intentional learning.

3 Research into vocabulary learning conducted in the linguistic tradition has concentrated on the product (what is learnt or is to be learnt) rather than on the process of acquisition (how things are learnt).

The choice and effectiveness of vocabulary learning strategies depend on the task, the learners and the context. In future, researchers may want to identify strategies which help learners acquire multi-word expressions or which are specifically applicable to students at different levels of proficiency. In addition, the contextual perspective must not be underestimated in our search for the perfect strategy.

Successful vocabulary learning comprises far more than the presenting and retaining words. A steady L2 vocabulary growth nurtures itself when learners apply strategies aimed more at the use than at the retention of words. What is now needed is a developmental model which will recognise the intricate complexity and diversity of lexical acquisition. **ETp**

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