

## Unit 2: How to learn words

Unit 2  
Text 1

**Look at this list and try to memorize it**

Abendessen = dinner party  
Spiel-anfangen = match- kick off  
Ausgaben = expenditure  
ausleihen = check out  
bezahlen = pay (off)  
Examen-durchfallen = exam-fail  
Ecke = corner  
warmes Frühstück = cooked breakfast  
Kurs= class  
nachschiagen = look up  
Schulden = debts  
Steak = steak  
Tor = goal  
vom Platz stellen = send off

Unit 2  
Text 2

### **Keeping words on the tip of your . . .**

Building vocabulary starts by understanding how memory works, explains Scott Thornbury

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"I'm not 100% convinced that memorising the dictionary is the best way of improving your vocabulary," says the character played by Hugh Grant in Woody Allen's film *Small Time Crooks*. Yet why not? If you could memorise the dictionary - or even the 5,000 most common words in that dictionary - wouldn't that give you a huge advantage? Researchers estimate that a core vocabulary of between 2,000 and 3,000 high-frequency words is probably enough to push learners over the intermediate plateau. So why don't we insist on them memorising these words, from day one, and as quickly as possible?

As an example, a New Zealand friend of mine who studied Maori asked me recently what I, as a language teacher, would make of his teacher's method: "We just do masses of words around a theme, for example, family or food. We have to learn these words before the next lesson, then we come back and have a conversation about family or food etc, using these words. The teacher feeds in the grammar that we need to stick the words together." He added that he thought the method worked a treat.

Nevertheless, for most teachers and learners the sheer spadework involved in memorising lists of words doesn't make for very exciting teaching. More importantly, knowing a word involves much more than simply having memorised it. Is it readily accessible? Is it there when you need to say it? As Hotspur says (in response to

Glendower's boast that he "can call spirits from the vasty deep"), "Why, so can I, or so can any man; but will they come when you do call for them?"

Memorisation of words without frequent opportunities to access them is probably time misspent.

Yet memory is important - perhaps the most important task facing the learner. And therefore knowing how memory works, and how to make it work to the learner's advantage, is a major responsibility for teachers. So how does memory work, and what implications might these workings have on the teaching of vocabulary?

### **Repetition**

The time-honoured way of "memorising" new material is through repeated rehearsal of the material while it is still in working memory. However, simply repeating an item seems to have little long-term effect unless some attempt is made to organise the material at the same time.

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 that 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 over a period of time than to mass it together in a single block. This is known as the "principle of distributed practice". This means that new vocabulary introduced in one lesson, should be reviewed in the next, with successive tests spaced at gradually longer intervals over the sequence of lessons.

### **Use**

Putting words to use, preferably in some interesting way, is the best method of ensuring they are added to long-term memory. It is the principle popularly known as "use it or lose it".

The following points all relate to ways of manipulating words in working memory.

### **Cognitive depth**

This means that if the learner is making successively more demanding judgments about a word, the better the word will be remembered. A relatively superficial judgment might be simply to match the word with one that rhymes with it. A deeper-level decision might be to decide on its part of speech. Deeper still might be to use it to complete a sentence.

### **Personal organisation**

The judgments that learners make about a word are most effective if they are personalised. In one study, subjects who had read aloud a sentence containing new words showed better recall than subjects who had rehearsed the words silently. Subjects who made up their own sentences with the words - and read them aloud - did better still.

Best of all were subjects who were given the task of silently visualising a mental picture to go with a new word. Other tests have shown that immediately evoke a picture are more memorable than words that don't. This suggests that - even for abstract words - it might help if learners associate them with a mental image. This

principle is the basis of the "keyword" technique which involves devising an image that connects the pronunciation of the second language word with the meaning of a first language word.

### **Attention/arousal**

Contrary to popular belief, you can't improve your vocabulary simply by listening to a tape in your sleep. 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.

### **Affective depth**

Affective (ie emotional) information is stored along with cognitive (ie intellectual) data, and may play an equally important role in how words are stored and recalled. Just as it is important for learners to make cognitive judgments about words, it may also be important to make affective judgments, 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?

· Scott Thornbury is the author of *How To Teach Vocabulary* (Longman, 2002).

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sthornbury@wanadoo.es

Unit 2

Text 3

## **Words in the mind and words in books**

From: J. Aitchison, *Words in the Mind*. 2<sup>nd</sup> edition. Oxford 1995

The human word-store is often referred to as the 'mental dictionary' or, perhaps more commonly, as the mental lexicon, to use the Greek word for 'dictionary'. There is, however, relatively little similarity between the words in our minds and words in book dictionaries, even though the information will sometimes overlap. Let us therefore look at some of the differences between a human's mental dictionary and a book dictionary. The dissimilarities involve both organization and content.

With regard to organization, book dictionaries standardly list words in alphabetical order. As a first guess, one might suggest that the mental lexicon of someone who can read and write could also be organized in this way. After all, many of us spend a considerable amount of time looking things up alphabetically in telephone directories and indexes. So, one might assume that educated English speakers had set up their mental lexicons to fit in with their alphabetical expectations.

This is an easy hypothesis to test. People occasionally make mistakes when they speak, selecting one word in error for another. If the mental lexicon was organized in alphabetical order, one might expect speakers to accidentally pick an adjacent entry when making errors of this type. So, in place of the musical instrument 'zither' one would predict, perhaps, the wrong selection of zit 'pimple', zizz 'a whizzing or buzzing sound', which precede and follow zither in the the *Concise Oxford Dictionary* (COD). Similarly, in error for the word 'guitar' one might expect someone to accidentally pick 'guinea' or 'guise', or perhaps 'guiver', 'Gujerati', 'gulch', 'gulden', 'gules', 'gulf', all words which immediately surround it in COD.

Welcome to Dictionopolis!

But mistakes of this type are quite unlikely, as becomes clear when we look at a few 'slips of the tongue', such as 'He told a funny antidote', with 'antidote' instead of

'anecdote', or 'The doctor listened to her chest with his periscope', with 'periscope' replacing 'stethoscope'. These errors suggest that even if the mental lexicon turns out to be partially organized in terms of initial sounds, the order will certainly not be straightforwardly alphabetical. Other aspects of the word's sound structure, such as its ending, its stress pattern and the stressed vowel, are all likely to play a role in the arrangement of words in the mind.

Furthermore, consider a speech error such as 'The inhabitants of the car were unhurt', where the speaker presumably meant say 'occupants' rather than 'inhabitants'. Such mistakes show that, unlike book dictionaries, human mental dictionaries cannot be organized solely on the basis of sounds or spelling. Meaning must be taken into consideration as well, since humans fairly often confuse words with similar meanings, as in 'Please hand me the tin-opener' when the speaker wanted to crack a nut, so must have meant 'nut-crackers'.

Arrangement in terms of meaning is found in some collections of synonyms, such as *Roget's Thesaurus*, but not generally in book dictionaries, where a desire to be neat and tidy in an alphabetical fashion may outweigh other considerations. For example, the word 'horse hair' occurs soon after 'horse' in *Collins English Dictionary* (CED), but there is no mention of it near the entry 'hair'. Similarly, 'workhorse' occurs soon after the entry for 'work', but does not appear with 'horse'. In brief, the organization of the mental lexicon is likely to be considerably more complex than that of book dictionaries, for whom orderliness is a prime requirement.

As for content, a book dictionary contains a fixed number of words which can be counted. Book dictionaries are therefore inescapably outdated, because language is constantly changing, and vocabulary fastest of all. As the eighteenth-century lexicographer Samuel Johnson pointed out in the preface to his famous *Dictionary of the English Language* (1755): 'No dictionary of a living tongue can ever be perfect, since while it is hastening to publication, some words are building, and some are fading away.' Everyone must at times have been frustrated to find occasions when a book dictionary concentrates on an archaic meaning of a word or omits a moderately common item. COD (7th edn, 1982), for example, defined 'buzz' only in terms of sound. It did not mention its more recent and perhaps equally frequent meaning of the 1980s of 'a thrill, a euphoric sensation' until almost a decade later (8th edn, 1990). Or take the word 'wimp', meaning 'a weak ineffectual person'. This was a vogue word in the early 1980s, as in the 'lonely hearts' ad 'Wimp needs bossy lady' (*Time Out*, July 1984), or the comment by a singing group that 'the trying-hard wimps' were an easy target for humor. (*Guardian*, July 1984), or the magazine column which noted that 'your cad, pale-faced wimp, Byron with malnutrition, Little Boy Lost...have a great appeal for women since they are vulnerable' (*Cosmopolitan*, July 1984). Its adjectives were also widespread: A Sunday newspaper referred to 'the wimpish young schoolmaster' (*Mail on Sunday*, May 1982), and a women's magazine called attention to a calendar featuring 'six most decidedly wimpy males in varying states of undress' (*Over 21*, August 1984). Yet wimp-words have been slow to find their way into British book dictionaries. *The Oxford English Dictionary Supplement* (1987) finally included them, and showed that they had been around for decades: wimp (first occurrence 1920), wimpish (1925), wimpy (1967), and wimpishness (1978). And 'wimp' is now found in most good dictionaries (*New Shorter Oxford Dictionary*, 1993, for example).

Turning to the mental lexicon, its content is by no means fixed. People add new words all the time, as well as altering the pronunciation and meaning of existing ones. Humans, however, do not just add on words from time to time, in between utterances. They often create new words and new meanings for words from moment to moment, while speech is in progress. A caller asking an American telephone operator about long-distance charges was told: 'You'll have to ask a zero.' The caller

had no difficulty in interpreting this as 'a person you can reach on the telephone by dialing a zero'. Similarly, it was not difficult for native speakers to guess that 'The newsboy porched the newspaper yesterday' meant 'The newsboy left the paper in the porch', or that the instruction 'Please do a Napoleon for the camera' meant posing with one hand tucked inside the jacket, as in most pictures of Napoleon, even though they had probably never come across these usages before.

In the examples above, the speakers and hearers were already familiar with other uses of the word 'zero' and 'porch' and with the characteristics of a famous character such as Napoleon. They simply reapplied this knowledge in a new way. But human creativity goes beyond this. Quite often, totally new lexical items can be created and interpreted on the spur of the moment. This skill has been tested experimentally. The researchers gave a short description of a somewhat eccentric imaginary character to a number of students: 'Imagine that a friend of yours has told you about his neighbour, Elvis Edmunds. Elvis loves to entertain his children in the evenings with several magic tricks that he knows. He often surprises them by pulling dollar bills out of his ear. During the day, Elvis is employed as a professional skywriter. He likes to work best on days when there is not a cloud in the sky. To supplement his income, Elvis carves fruit into exotic shapes for the delicatessen down the road.' The students were then quizzed about the meaning of the phrase 'doing an Elvis' in various contexts, a task they found easy. They were confident, for example, that a sentence they could not possibly have heard before, such as 'I have often thought about doing an Elvis Edmunds to some apples I bought', meant 'carving apples into exotic shapes'. The fluidity and flexibility of the mental lexicon, then, contrasts strongly with the fixed vocabulary of any book dictionary. But the biggest difference between a book dictionary and the mental lexicon is that the latter contains far, far more information about each entry. All book dictionaries are inevitably limited in the amount they contain, just because it would be quite impracticable to include all possible data about each word. In any case it is unlikely that anyone has ever assembled the total range of knowledge which could be brought together about any one dictionary entry. As one linguist notes: 'There is no known limit to the amount of detailed information ... which may be associated with a lexical item. Existing dictionaries, even large ones, specify lexical items only incompletely.'

For example, one popular dictionary (COD) suggests that the verb paint mean 'cover surface of (object) with paint'. but 'If you knock over a paint bucket, thereby covering the surface of the floor with paint, you have not thereby painted the floor'. Nor can one patch up the COD definition by suggesting that one must intentionally cover something with paint: 'For consider that when Michelangelo dipped his brush into Cerulian Blue, he thereby covered the surface of his brush with paint and did so with the primary intention that his brush should be covered with paint in consequence of his having so dipped. But MICHELANGELO WAS NOT, FOR ALL THAT, PAINTING HIS PAINTBRUSH.' All this suggests that people have much more detailed knowledge of the meaning of words than any book dictionary would have the space to specify.

Furthermore, why don't people wear rancid socks? Or eat rank eggs? There is nothing to suggest that this is abnormal in the *Longman Dictionary of the English Language* (LDEL). It defines the word *rancid* as 'having a rank smell or taste', with *rank* in turn defined as 'offensive in smell or flavour, esp. rancid'. This suggests that one ought to be able to attach both words to dirty socks or cow dung or bad eggs. Yet it would sound very odd to say 'Alphonse was ashamed of his rancid socks' or 'Mary's egg was rank'. Written dictionaries list only a small section of the range of words with which a lexical item can occur. As one lexicographer comments: 'The

world's largest data bank of examples in context is dwarfed by the collection that we all carry around subconsciously in our heads'.

Moreover, in book dictionaries, words are mostly dealt with in isolation. A child is defined by COD as a 'young human being'. But this fails to inform us how the word *child* relates to all the other words for young human beings, such as *baby*, *infant*, *toddler*, *youngster*. Similarly, LCED tells us that *warm* means 'having or giving out heat to a moderate or adequate degree'. Yet in order to fully understand *warm*, one needs to know how it slots into the range of temperature words such as *cold*, *tepid*, *hot*. This type of information seems to be an intrinsic part of one's mental lexicon. To continue this list of differences between words in the mind and words in books, a book dictionary tends to give information that is spuriously cut and dried. It is likely to tell you that pelicans, sparrows, parrots and flamingos are all birds, but will not rank them in any way. Humans seem able to judge that a sparrow is a more 'birdy' bird than a pelican or a flamingo. Or more likely, a human would say that a pelican is a 'funny' kind of bird. In addition, book dictionaries do not often spare the space to comment on frequency of usage. There is no indication in COD that *abode* is less usual than *house*, or that *coney* is uncommon beside *rabbit*. People, on the other hand, seem well aware of which words are rare and which not.

Or, to take another facet of words, book dictionaries contain only a very small amount of data about the syntactic patterns into which each word can slot. *Wide* and *main* are both classified as adjectives in COD. But it does not tell us that you can say 'The road is wide' but not 'The road is main'. Both *eat* and *resemble* are both classified as transitive verbs (verbs which can take an object), but it does not tell us that whereas 'A cow was eaten by my aunt' is possible, 'A cow was resembled by my aunt' is not.

If we move on to consider how book dictionaries cope with sounds, we note that they normally specify only one pronunciation for each word. Yet native speakers of a language are likely to be able to understand quite different pronunciations by different speakers. In addition, they are likely to have more than one pronunciation in their own repertoire, depending on formality of the occasion and how fast they are speaking. Sometimes, for example, one might pronounce a word such as *handbag* with all the sounds found in the conventional spelling, and at other times it might sound like 'hambag'.

The examples listed above could be multiplied. They show that the mental lexicon is indeed a mammoth structure. The relationship between a book dictionary and the human mental lexicon may be somewhat like the link between a tourist pamphlet advertising a seaside resort and the resort itself. A tourist pamphlet gives us a small, partial glimpse of a place as it was at some point in the past, with no real idea of how the different parts of the resort fit together to form a whole, living town. Similarly a book dictionary gives us a spuriously neat, static and incomplete view of the mental lexicon.