Keeping words on the tip of your . . .

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

Thursday July 24, 2003
The Guardian

"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?

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