

Words, words, words

Kat Robb shares some strategies for helping students learn and remember vocabulary.

It could be argued that vocabulary is the heart and soul of a language. If a student has weak grammar or poor pronunciation, as long as they know some words they are able to communicate what they want to say in a roundabout way. I am sure we have all been in a situation in a country where we do not speak the local language, but we have still managed to get by. When I first moved to Spain, I found myself mooing at a shop assistant and shivering, to indicate that I wanted cold fresh milk and not the carton of UHT milk he offered me from the shelf. So, vocabulary, words, lexical items that all come together to build up a linguistic lexicon: how can we help our learners get there?

In order for a word to become an active part of one's lexicon, it is said that it has to be used twelve times (Nation, 2001). This means learners need to read, write, listen to, or speak using each new word they want to store in and retrieve from their memory twelve times. That is a lot considering the vast array of vocabulary there is out there to learn. In addition, Miller (1956) claimed that our short term working memory only has the capacity to remember seven items (plus or minus two) at any one time. Furthermore, we are told that languages become increasingly difficult to learn the older one becomes due to loss of working memory capacity. While this may be

true for some and a different case for others, what appears to be a common trait in many language learners is that it is difficult to remember vocabulary and there are several challenges that appear to work against the remembering of words!

As educators it is part of our pedagogical responsibility to guide learners, to help them input, store and retrieve lexis so they are able to express themselves freely and communicate with others. We also know that there is more than one way to skin a cat and if a student is unable to recall vocabulary, especially in the moment that the specific word is required, or does not know the word they want to use, there is always an alternative. However, from a learner's perspective it can be extremely frustrating to be unable to remember a word. So, if we can teach learners strategies to help them learn, record, and remember vocabulary more effectively, there is a higher probability that they will find the word they are looking for and use it.

Here are some of the strategies I share with learners to help them learn and remember new lexical items.

Clines

Clines are a great way of organising vocabulary visually, so they work especially well with visual learners. I use them to teach high-frequency adjectives and to encourage students to widen their lexical range. I find a 'good-bad' cline the perfect example of how to demonstrate their use and creation. The beauty of using clines is that students can add to them as their lexicons grow, and they can also be used as classroom posters so they are visually on display and at hand for learners at all times.



Personalised glossaries

Encouraging students to record new lexical items they like, and want to know how to use in context, makes learning vocabulary more natural and real for them. This can be done by keeping a glossary in a notebook of new vocabulary, which can be used in both written and spoken discourse. When students use words from their personal glossary in writing, they can underline them to demonstrate that it is personal-glossary lexis they are using. This motivates students to keep a note of new vocabulary in a notebook or on a digital device, and refer back to it. So, by using and recalling the lexical items they are more likely to remember them for future use. I have found a realistic number of words to be 10–15 per week.

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Slips of paper

I was given this idea by a French teacher in 1990 who suggested that I record four to six new words on a small slip of paper and keep it in my pocket to look at throughout the day,

until I felt I was completely familiar with them and they became a part of my lexicon. I scribbled down my words on the back of bus tickets and receipts, and tried to look at them six to eight times daily. The strategy worked well and I can still see visual images of my scribbled words. Nowadays I prompt students to make notes on their smartphones to encourage them to engage with new lexis they have learned in class time or when reading. I prompt them to look at them while they are on the move instead of surfing the internet aimlessly, and consider how they could use them in context. Students can also refer back to the lists in class. I have found that random lists of words work better than lexis which is divided into topic areas, because the variety helps learners build up a broader, more global lexicon.

Out and about

Learning language in context undoubtedly makes learning more memorable. A fun activity for learners to carry out while they are walking to work or school, or commuting on a bus or train, is to look around and see how many of the things they see they are able to say in English. This encourages students to engage with English outside the classroom and consider their personal environment. Words they are unable to remember or are unsure of can be checked later in a dictionary or in class. A lead-on from this activity is to ask learners to recount in class a journey from home to work or an interaction they had during the day, to specifically practise the lexis they want to remember. These are powerful mental exercises that aid memory retrieval and help learners to create mental visual images of lexical items. I use this method in general English classes and Cambridge exam classes to widen general vocabulary knowledge.

Mind maps & graphic organisers

Mind maps are great for brainstorming ideas, but they are also beneficial for storing and learning vocabulary.

Students can keep them in their notebooks, or use one of the many free graphic organiser apps that are available on portable digital devices. Again, encouraging students to record vocabulary that they can carry around with them and look at during the day is an effective way of engaging with language throughout the day, because it is always at hand.

I think the key to teaching vocabulary is to ensure that all new lexis is boarded and explained in context. As well as suggesting lexis that I consider to be useful, I also encourage students to record the vocabulary that they think *they* will use, so they build up personalised glossaries and lexicons. This also prompts them to take ownership of their learning and makes the language learning experience more relevant for them. By using some of the strategies I have explained above, I provide students with the tools to input, store and retrieve vocabulary so that learning new lexis becomes a fluid part of their language learning and they are constantly endeavouring to integrate the new words they have learned into their written and spoken discourse.

References

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