



# The Nightmare of New Lexis: How to Improve Retention and Retrieval

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## Abstract

A lot has been written on what vocabulary building entails and on how new lexis should be taught. There is little consensus on methodology and a big variety of suggestions about the teaching strategies that can be conducive to the better retention and easier retrieval of the newly-taught lexis. To facilitate vocabulary learning, many vocabulary learning factors such as recycling and exposure need to contribute to the learning process. Vocabulary activities need to include both intentional learning components (e.g. discrete item practice activities) as well as maximum exposure to recycling and revisiting the words. The main principle for improving vocabulary learning is to increase the amount of engagement learners have with lexical items. This article presents the challenges of teaching vocabulary and discusses the beneficial uses of constant revisiting it further claiming that there are goal-oriented strategy combinations that may make the difference in learners' vocabulary improvement. In the end, the article proposes classroom activities aimed at enhancing language learners' performance and at turning this into an additional channel for vocabulary acquisition.

**Keywords:** vocabulary, strategies, retention, lexis, retrieval, recycle, revisit, acquisition

## Apstrakt

Mnogo je pisano o tome šta građenje vokabulara obuhvata i kako treba podučavati leksiku. Mnogo je neslaganja i raznovrsnih predloga o strategijama za podučavanje koje mogu dovesti do boljeg zadržavanja i lakšeg prizivanja iz memorije novonaučene leksike. Kako bismo olakšali učenje vokabulara mnogi faktori važni za učenje vokabulara kao što su obnavljanje i izloženost treba da doprinesu procesu učenja. Aktivnosti za usvajanje vokabulara treba da uključuju ciljne komponente (npr. aktivnosti sa pojedinačnim elementima) kao i maksimalnu izloženost obnavljanju i ponovnoj upotrebi vokabulara. Glavni princip za poboljšanje učenja vokabulara podrazumeva povećanje angažovanosti učenika po pitanju leksičkih jedinica. Ovaj članak opisuje izazove u podučavanju vokabulara i razmatra korisne strane stalne upotrebe nove leksike, dalje tvrdeći da postoje kombinacije strategija orijentisane ka ovom cilju koje mogu da prave razliku u poboljšanju usvajanja vokabulara kod učenika. Na kraju u ovom članku predlažemo nastavne aktivnosti koje imaju za cilj da povise upotrebu novog vokabulara i da stvore dodatni kanal za usvajanje vokabulara.

**Ključne reči:** vokabular, strategije, pamćenje, leksika, pozivanje iz memorije, obnavljanje, vraćanje na staro, usvajanje

## 1. Introduction

Learning a foreign language is considered difficult and time consuming mainly due to the fact that new words and new meanings for old words constantly emerge, thus

making vocabulary a problem area for most ESL students. Learners are taught endless lists of words but they cannot retrieve them when they wish to so they struggle with translation problems and

memorisation that influence their ability to speak and write English correctly. The linguist David Wilkins said *“without grammar very little can be conveyed, without vocabulary nothing can be conveyed”* (Thornbury, 2002: 13).

Learners constantly complain that they are confronted with numerous unfamiliar or obscure words and they cannot recall them readily in order to produce language. My experience has led me to believe that the teacher can only motivate learners to take vocabulary seriously and give them ideas on how to learn. During my research I was happy and somehow relieved to read what Wilga Rivers, a leading authority on second language learning, wrote: *“Vocabulary cannot be taught. It can be presented, explained, included in all kinds of activities, and experienced in all manner of associations ... ultimately it is learned by the individual. As language teachers, we must arouse interest in words and a certain excitement in personal development in this area”* (Thornbury, 2002:144). Learners of all ages need to develop strategies that will enhance and reinforce their productive competence

## 2. Literature review

Experts from different fields such as psychologists, ESL authors and educators, as well as language teachers have been interested in vocabulary learning

strategies for a long time (Levenston, 1979). Some classic theories were developed by Wilkins (1972), Carter (1987), McCarthy (1990) and McCarthy and O'Dell (1994) whereas some recently developed theories by (Thornbury, 2002), Read (2000) and Schmitt (2000) contributed to clarifying diverse aspects of vocabulary acquisition.

Learners often learn items of lexis but are only able to complete discreet item practice activities. Turning receptive knowledge into productive knowledge can be a challenge for every teacher. Teachers should make students feel comfortable about working the words into a written or an oral task. They should systematically adopt materials and procedures which facilitate the nature of language learning.

Receptive knowledge precedes productive knowledge. We have to make words available and in that way enable learners to communicate. *“Available words are known in the sense that they come to mind rapidly when the situation calls for them”* (Richards, 1974: 35). If learners are able to retrieve and use many words, they will manage to communicate effectively. Developing an extensive vocabulary should be given priority over learning grammatical structures. *“The advent of the Communicative Approach in the 1970s set the stage for a major re-think of the role of vocabulary”* (Thornbury, 2002:14).

Moreover, some authors led by *Michael Lewis (1993) argue that vocabulary should be at the centre of language teaching. "A lexical approach requires a much more principled system of introducing and exploiting lexis"* (Lewis, 1993: 117) because only in that way will learners become able to overcome their vocabulary problems and reach communicative ease.

### 3. Why vocabulary is a problem area

There are many reasons why learners are only able to complete discreet item practice activities even though they have been taught a wide range of vocabulary. Learners at all levels seem to share quite similar problems.

Some students constantly complain that they cannot remember vocabulary. They are only able to complete discreet item practice activities because vocabulary is not revisited and their item banks do not change. Learners understand more words than they utter, therefore teachers should help learners activate their working memory and build their long-term memory. Learners should reach a level where they will not forget even the more complex words.

Students should understand that they need to *know "what a word means in one context but not in another, and how this meaning relates to other words and other meanings"* (Thornbury, 2002: 49). The

multiple faces and the complexities of vocabulary have turned me into a 'searching' teacher who seeks ways of teaching vocabulary systematically in order to make learners become avid word-chasers.

There are words that share the same form (e.g. I *like* skiing ... He sings *like* a bird) but have unrelated meanings and are called homonyms. Other words sound the same but are spelt differently (e.g. *meat* and *meet*); they are called homophones. There are also words that are pronounced differently but spelt the same (e.g. *live* concert ... I *live* in Paris) and are called homographs. It is obvious that these words impede understanding and disorient learners, especially if they are young.

Undoubtedly, another potential source of confusion for learners is the fact that many words have different but overlapping meanings and are called *polysemes* like the word *fair*. Learners have difficulty learning all the shades of meaning and I have often seen discouraged students who reacted indignantly and wanted to drop out.

Two or more independent words can be combined to form new words such as *keyboard*, *teapot*; they are called *compounds* and their form is fixed. Groups of more than one word can function as a meaningful unit such as *put off* or *a lot of*; they are known as *multi-word units* or *lexical chunks*. Compounds are difficult to

learn but I can definitely say that phrasal verbs can bewilder even the most determined learner.

A looser kind of association is the *collocation*: two words co-occur but not necessarily next to each other—they may be separated by one or more other words (e.g. *record* collocates with *world*). “*Collocation is not a frozen co-occurrence of words*” (Lewis, 2000: 29). Students mis-collocate words quite often and are then intimidated.

*Synonyms* are words that share a similar meaning (e.g. beautiful, pretty, and handsome) but are not the same. *Synonyms*, *binary opposites*, and *antonyms* are also a big problem for learners. Binary opposites are mutually exclusive whereas antonyms are gradable and there is always something in between; consequently, their wrong use frustrates learners.

The use of the *add-ons*, which is called *affixation*, makes a verb past (e.g. called) or a noun plural (e.g. desks). *Inflections* and *derivatives* are formed by the process of affixation and they are treated as word-families with grammatical similarities. Students practise the add-ons through grammar exercises that do not help them become more productive or communicative.

Even when learners know vocabulary well, the cultural wall makes it difficult to choose between the various forms of English, the

appropriate style of language, and the correct register. “*Words with similar meanings can be used in different situations or for different effect*” (Thornbury, 2002:12). Teachers have to encourage autonomy in the classroom in order to communicate with comfortable intelligibility. I daresay adolescents are not very competent at distinguishing different styles and registers and in my opinion, the educational system of our country is partially to blame for that situation.

*Connotations*, *irony*, and *sarcasm* are linked to style. Students cannot easily see the different associations in meaning; they are not well-trained to read between the lines and identify the subtle variations of style.

Phonology is another serious obstacle since it is the main reason why the whole meaning of sentences can be misconstrued. Intonation, stress, pausing, and generally the movement of the voice give meaning to words and utterances and hinder ambiguity. If learners do not stress words correctly, they cannot make themselves understood and most probably they cannot understand what native speakers say. Spelling problems that are closely connected with pronunciation and phonology is another factor that does not facilitate the development of productive knowledge and competence.

Error correction often intimidates learners and makes them less confident. They

cannot be productively competent if they know that they will be corrected as soon as they utter their first word. In addition, some students are at a loss when they take back their essays or composition covered in red ink due to over-correction; this is quite embarrassing and counter-productive.

#### **4. Suggestions for teaching vocabulary**

Before presenting the activities which can develop students' productive competence, we will briefly refer to how to teach vocabulary and what strategies should be used in the approach to vocabulary use, storage and retention.

Teachers should involve the learners in the investigation of vocabulary problems in the class. They have to be active and contribute to the learning procedure by telling the teacher if they cannot take in the meaning. They have to be aware of the fact that as McCarthy (1990:120) said "*the vocabulary class is a place where meaning is negotiated between teacher and learner*". Teachers should teach words with a pattern because words that go in together go out together as well. They could teach it inductively to all learners- particularly young and intermediate ones, use elicitation, personalisation and inference with advanced learners, employ ESA and generally make a combination of

approaches in order to enhance acquisition.

My reading has led me to accept that "*error is intrinsic ... correction is time-consuming, and often inhibits students*" (Lewis, 1993: 173). Therefore teachers should give students plenty of opportunity to communicate fluently and express themselves; in that way the learners will feel secure and confident and the "*teachers' response strategies have to be: reformulation and feedback*" (Lewis, 1993: 174) which are constructive approaches.

#### **5. Suggestions for vocabulary development**

My reading and my experience have made me understand that teachers have to think of creative ways of developing activities to ensure memorability. Tasks that can develop the learners' productive competence are those in which the learners are required to incorporate the newly studied words into some kind of meaningful speaking or writing activity.

One of the reasons why production is limited is because words are taught in isolation and have little connectivity. We have to remember that what goes in together goes out together; the learners need exposure, they need a whole text so it is preferable to use authentic contexts as they are real texts designed not for language students. David Wilkins writes "

*the lexical items...begin slowly to have the same meaningfulness for them that they have for the native speaker"* (Wilkins,1972:132).

The teachers can help their learners increase productive ability by making the right choices of the right words to learn. The words taught should be relevant to special interests and to particular situations in which the learners find or might find themselves. Correct pronunciation and stress patterns aid communication, prevent lack of understanding and make students more confident.

Learners *"can be trained to take more responsibility for how and what they learn, and organizing vocabulary learning is a particularly productive area for the encouragement of learner autonomy"* (McCarthy, 1990: 129). They should improve their study skills and play with words and not only use the skills of logical elimination and inference because in that way they do not learn to produce. They need to get used to putting words on visual displays, grouping them in terms of hierarchical patterns, putting them on clines and showing degrees of difference. They should learn to use *hyponymy* and *metonymy* as well as grids, matrices and componential analysis (+/- connotations) of words which are challenging analytic activities that facilitate upper-intermediate and advanced learners' learning and

memorization. No word is an island, everything forms a web of meaning.

Having observed elementary students being taught many times, I appreciate the use of realia, drawings, photographs, flashcards, picture dictionaries, blackboard drawings, gestures and mime. The students are immediately involved, brainstorming and elicitation are key techniques and in that way *"a direct link between the word and the meaning is established"* (Wallace, 1982: 39). Learners can be assigned the project to make their own flashcards and picture dictionaries using drawings; *"learning by doing"* that Dewey suggested can create a *"cognitive depth"* that Piaget supported.

From the point of view of retrieval and memorization the use of vocabulary cards and word games (e.g. jumbled letters, What is it?, Target picture) is efficient. These techniques are highly motivating and create a positive atmosphere in which students respond to stimuli with their whole body and learn by repetition, mimicry and imitation.

*"More important than the manner of presentation is the kind of follow-up practice that is provided. The more decisions the learner has to make about a word, the more chance there is of the word being remembered"* (Thornbury, 2002: 38). Students should be given the opportunity to recycle and revisit vocabulary more than once because research suggests that

it takes six or more encounters with a word before learning is likely to take place. It helps to write the word – both the definition and an example of the use of the word – on a card that can later be revisited. Learners should not forget to have regular breaks between the vocabulary reviews so that words can be assimilated and thus effectively engraved in the mind.

New words need to be integrated into existing knowledge or what Thornbury calls the *mental lexicon* after Atkinson. The tasks that can be performed on a set of words i.e. lexical sets help students remember them more easily. Such tasks are: identifying, matching, sorting and ranking and sequencing.

Identifying words means finding ‘hidden’ words in a text or unscrambling anagrams. Learners from elementary to intermediate levels enjoy these tasks.

Matching involves first recognising words and then pairing them with a collocate, a synonym, an antonym, a definition or a visual representation. *Pelmanism* is a stimulating matching memory game which learners of intermediate levels appreciate. Sorting involves putting words into categories and ranking and sequencing activities require learners to put the words into some kind of order or on scale or cline.

Exposure to collocations and compounds in a variety of contexts, distinguishing

different types of weak, medium or strong collocations, teaching prefixes and suffixes explicitly are techniques that can develop students’ active vocabulary and store it effectively.

Activities that urge students to decide which word goes in which gap “*promote retention in long-memory*” (Thornbury, 2002: 101). Open and closed gap-fills as well as multiple choice tasks develop intermediate and advanced learners’ retrievability since they are completion tasks.

Students will also benefit from extensive reading even in the early stages of learning. Learners need to become avid readers of textbooks, novels and other literature and improve their reading habits so as to improve their vocabulary. They will get used to guessing words and inferring and they will read material rich in vocabulary.

Apart from meaningful tasks, there are other techniques that can be used to develop productive competence. Throughout my career I have always tried to help my students make a ‘meaning bridge’ between the target word and its L1 translation or “devise an image that typically connects the pronunciation of the second language word with the meaning of a first language word” (Thornbury, 2002: 145). Both are mnemonic techniques (memory tricks) and the latter is called the keyword technique.

## 6. Conclusion

Effective development of the productive competence is not the result of a single approach. Teachers should teach vocabulary systematically and learners have to take responsibility, organize vocabulary learning and aim to reach

autonomy. However, conceptions of learning differ from culture to culture. Even the same strategy may be executed in different ways in different educational tradition. Therefore, more research needs to be done along the learning context dimension.

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