Effective Ways of Building Vocabulary Knowledge

by Paul Nation

In vocabulary learning, it is important to have a good balance of incidental and deliberate learning opportunities. In incidental learning, the learner focuses mainly on communicating or interpreting a message, and vocabulary is learned without being the focus of the activity. Most of a language program should involve such message-based activities. However, another kind of learning, deliberate learning, also has an important part to play in a well-balanced course. Deliberate vocabulary learning involves focusing on words and consciously trying to learn them. Deliberate teaching is one way of encouraging deliberate learning, but ideally most deliberate learning should be under the control of the learner. Learners should take responsibility for their own vocabulary learning, and the teacher’s responsibility is to show students effective ways of learning and to help them become proficient in the most useful strategies. Three useful strategies for the deliberate learning of vocabulary are using word cards, studying word parts and using dictionaries.

Using Word Cards

The most effective of these strategies is learning from word cards. Learning words from cards involves writing a word on one side of a small card (about 1” x 2”) and writing its first language translation on the other side. The cards are kept in packs held together by a rubber band, and when the learner has a few free moments, he goes through the cards recalling the meanings. This way of learning vocabulary is just one of the first steps in learning a word. There are several reasons for this. First, there is more to knowing a word than knowing its translation. Second, learning a word is usually a cumulative process rather than a one-time event. Finally, words not only have to be known, they have to be readily available for use. However, learning the translation of a new word is a very good step towards knowing that word.

Research on vocabulary learning provides useful indications of how learning from vocabulary cards can be done most effectively (Nation 2001). Students should be taught to follow these instructions when using word cards:

1. Write the word to be learned on one side of the card and its translation on the other side. Each time you use the card, look at the new word and try to recall its meaning. Since the word and its meaning are not written side by side, the meaning must be retrieved from memory. Each retrieval strengthens the connection between the form of the word and its meaning (Baddeley 1990). Seeing them both together does not do this.

2. Initially start with small packs of cards—about 15 or 20 words. Difficult items should be learned in small groups to allow more repetition and more thoughtful processing. As the learning gets easier increase the size of the pack. More than 50 seems to be unmanageable simply for keeping the cards together and getting through them at one time.

3. Space the repetitions. The best spacing is to go through the cards a few minutes after first looking at them, and then an hour or so later, and then the next day, and then a week later, and then a couple of weeks later. This spacing is much more effective than massing the repetitions together into an hour of study. The total time taken may be the same but the result is different. Spaced repetition results in longer lasting learning.

4. For words which are difficult to learn, use depth of processing techniques like the keyword technique (see sidebar “The Keyword Technique”). Other helpful techniques are thinking of the word in language contexts and situational contexts, breaking the word into word parts, or using a simple picture. The more associations you can make with an item, the better it will be remembered.

5. Make sure that words of similar spelling or of related meaning are not together in the same pack of cards. This means days of the week should not all be learned at the same time. The same applies to months of the year, numbers, opposites, words with similar meanings, and words with the same superordinate such as items of clothing, names of fruit, parts of the body, and things in the kitchen. These items interfere with each other and make learning much more difficult (Nation 2000).

6. Keep changing the order of the words in the pack. This will avoid serial learning where the meaning of one word reminds you of the meaning of the next word in the pack.

7. Say the word aloud to yourself. This helps the form to enter long term memory.

8. Also write collocates of the words on the card where this is helpful. This particularly applies to verbs. Some words are most usefuly learned in a phrase.

Studying Word Parts

Studying word parts is another way to build vocabulary and another way of linking the form of a word and its meaning. Let’s say that the learner wants to learn the word colloocate. First the learner needs to find out what the word means by looking it up in the dictionary or asking someone. Secondly, the learner needs to look at the word to see if it has any known parts. In colloocate the double “l” is a good clue to where word parts meet. Collocate has three parts: com—loc—ate. Com- means “together” or “with,” and loc means “place.” Thirdly, the learner needs to restate the meaning of the word so that it contains the meaning of the word parts: “to colloocate means to be placed together typically with another word.” This restatement of the meaning may sometimes be a bit clumsy, but its value is that it strongly connects the meaning of the word to its parts. When the word is seen again, its meaning will be more readily recalled. Note the following things about this technique:

1. It is a way of remembering the meaning of words, not of guessing their meaning. Using word parts to guess meaning has a low success rate.

2. To use the technique the learners must know the most useful prefixes (see sidebar “Common Prefixes”). There are only about 20 very common ones that are needed to begin with. Learners must have some practice in recognizing them in words and must be able to look up the meaning of a word in a dictionary and restate it using the meaning of the prefix. Teachers can help learners gain this knowledge.

Because about 60% of the words of English come from French, Latin or Greek, many words have prefixes and suffixes. This technique of using word parts can thus be used very often. Unfortunately learners’ dictionaries do not give the etymology of words and thus high intermediate and advanced learners may find it useful to have a dictionary that does this.

Using a Dictionary

There are three kinds of dictionaries that a
second or foreign language learner could use. Monolingual dictionaries are all in the second language, that is, the meanings are given in the second language. The famous learner dictionaries like the Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary, the Cambridge Advanced Learner’s Dictionary, the Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English and the Collins COBUILD English Dictionary for Advanced Learners are all monolingual dictionaries. The problem with monolingual dictionaries is that learners need a vocabulary of at least 2,000 words to be able to understand the definitions. However, they contain a large amount of very useful information about the meaning and use of words.

Bilingual dictionaries use the learners’ first language to give the meanings of the words. This makes them easy to understand and thus bilingual dictionaries are very popular among learners in the early stages of language learning. Bilingual dictionaries differ greatly in quality, but they are a very important learning tool.

A less common but very useful dictionary is the bilingualized dictionary. Usually this is a monolingual dictionary that has the first language meanings of the words added to it. Thus it can combine the best features of bilingual and monolingual dictionaries.

Research on dictionary use indicates that learners tend to use dictionaries in limited ways, not making the best use of the wide range of information that the good ones contain. Here are some ways to help learners make good use of dictionaries.

1. Before looking up a word which has been met in reading or listening, try to guess what the word might mean from the context clues. This will help when having to choose a particular sense listed in the dictionary.

2. When looking up the meaning of a word, look at all the senses that are given and see if there is a common underlying meaning running through the different senses. For example, interpret can mean (1) to explain the meaning of a difficult text, (2) to understand the purpose of something such as a gesture, (3) to translate from one language to another, (4) to convey the spirit of a work of art as in interpreting a dance. All of these share the meaning of “carry the meaning of something from one form to another.” Seeing this underlying meaning then makes the range of uses of the word accessible to the learner.

3. When the meaning has been found, look at the example sentences containing the word in the dictionary and try to visualize the meaning of these sentences. Also think of a situation in which you might use these sentences.

4. When using your own dictionary, put a small mark next to the word to show that you have looked it up. If you find that you look up the same word again, it is clearly a good idea to put this word on a word card and deliberately learn it.

5. Some dictionaries have frequency markers next to the most useful words. The Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English uses letters and numbers (S1 means the word is in the first 1,000 words of spoken English, W3 means in the third 1,000 words of written English). The COBUILD dictionary uses diamonds—more black diamonds mean a more frequent and useful word. These markers provide a very useful guide to the value of spending time deliberately learning a particular word. Learners should be helped to become skilful at interpreting these markers and acting on the information.

The three strategies we have looked at—word cards, word parts, and dictionary use—are all ways of giving deliberate attention to vocabulary. Deliberate attention speeds up learning. These strategies require some investment of time by both the teacher and learners. It is not enough to know about them. They need to be practiced until they become easy to use.

The Keyword Technique

The keyword technique is a very useful way of helping words to stay in memory because it provides links between form (the written or spoken form of the word) and meaning. Numerous experiments on the keyword technique for learning foreign vocabulary have shown that the technique increases the efficiency of vocabulary learning by around twenty-five percent. Except in a few predictable cases, the technique has no negative effects on pronunciation or spelling of words learned by this technique.

There are four parts to the technique. Parts one and two constitute the “form link,” three and four, the “meaning link”:

1. The foreign word
2. First language keyword which sounds like the foreign word
3. Mental image of the meaning of the keyword and foreign word
4. Meaning of the foreign word

In the following example, the four parts are numbered to match the four parts of the technique. When learning the word cite (1) meaning “to quote or refer to” (4), a Javanese learner of English might use the keyword sae (2) which means “good.” The image (3) could be someone being told they are good because they cited someone’s work well.

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REFERENCES


Common Prefixes

These are the most common English prefixes. Though not always regular, they are a good first list to learn for the word part strategy.

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