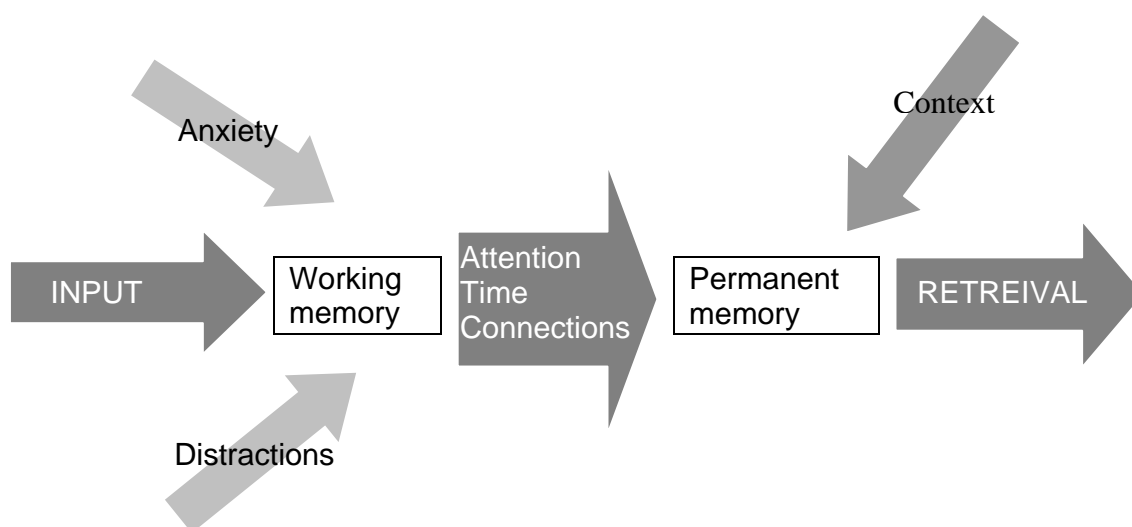


Why vocabulary is so important

Coursebooks and teachers alike tend to treat vocabulary only in passing while the grammatical syllabus takes centre stage. However, ***knowing the words in a piece of discourse facilitates understanding which in turn allows the grammatical patterning to become more transparent*** (Ellis 1997). In addition, it is possible to communicate very effectively with imperfect grammar if the correct vocabulary is known, indeed research suggests that lexical errors impede comprehension more than grammatical errors and that ***native-speaker judges rated lexical errors as more serious*** (Ellis 1994). On a very practical note, Nation (1995) suggests that ***the 2000 most frequent words are essential for any real language use***.

How Memory Works



Sensory input is first held in the working memory, which can hold a fairly fixed number of items (about 7 for most people) at a time, although this decreases with anxiety. Distractions may also fill up the “slots” and thus leave even less space to work with sensory input.

Information can be manipulated and analysed in the working memory, and it is this activity which allows it to be stored in the permanent memory. Relating new information to old means a link is created between the two and the new information can be incorporated into memory.

Learning a new lexical item means forming a relationship between form and meaning, this relationship may take the form of an L1 equivalent; L2 synonym or definition; visual image; feeling; sound; emotion; a certain situation or context; or a combination of these. The greater the number of connections we make the more likely we are to remember it.

Once stored in the permanent memory a word needs to be retrieved (or remembered) to be able to use it. This retrieval is usually triggered by linguistic or situational context.

To learn, learners need to attempt retrieval and then compare their efforts with a model, Stevick concludes that recall is more likely if the item was recalled previously or the learner has at least partially generated it using their own existing networks. He adds that, if learning means “changing what is in the memory so as to produce better performance in the future” then learning takes place *after* retrieval has generated a response and its suitability has been estimated by comparison with a model response or in some other way such as successfully completing a task.

Understanding new vocabulary

Guessing meaning

Studies suggest that 80% of unknown words can be guessed from context. In addition, Xiaolong's research (1988) suggests learners who are good at inferring meaning from context are more likely to retain meaning. This suggests that time teaching learners to guess meaning from context is well spent.

Context clues include (Clarke and Silberstein 1977, p145):

- ◆ **Synonym in apposition:** Our uncle was a *nomad*, an incurable wanderer who could never stay in one place.
- ◆ **Antonym:** While the aunt loved Marty deeply, she absolutely *despised* his twin brother Smarty.
- ◆ **Cause and effect:** By surrounding the protesters with armed policemen, and by arresting the leaders of the movement, the rebellion was effectively *quashed*.
- ◆ **Association between object and its purpose or use:** The scientist removed the *treatise* from the shelf and began to read.
- ◆ **Description:** Tom received a new *roadster* for his birthday. It is a sports model, red with white interior and bucket seats, capable of reaching speeds of more than 150mph.
- ◆ **Example:** Mary can be quite *gauche*; yesterday she blew her nose on the new linen tablecloth.

A rich context encourages cognitive processing and makes learning meaningful as well as giving clues about meaning, collocation and colligation. Checking guesses with a dictionary or the teacher ensures words are learned correctly and provides further processing.

This second step is important as a study by Fraser (1999) showed that either inferring meaning from context or using a dictionary brought retention to about 30%, but using both strategies together increased it to 50%.

The quality of the context is also important – if a learner sees or uses a word in a way different from how it was originally encountered better retention is achieved, the more original the use, the better (Nation 1995).

Other ways of guessing meaning include:

- ◆ **Knowledge of morphology and affixation** e.g. if a learner knows *cook* and understands the relevant affixes they should be able to deduce the meaning of *undercooked*.
- ◆ **Deducing meaning from word parts** e.g. *sunglasses* can be deduced from knowledge of its composite parts.
- ◆ **Identification of cognates** e.g. a speaker of a Spanish may be able to recognise *memory* as meaning *memoria*.

However, guessing from context is less likely to lead to incorrect guesses than by using other clues such as word parts.

Dictionary use and glossing

Studies suggest that glossing increases intake of vocabulary from 15% to 40% for children. This is probably due to increased saliency, help with meaning and repeated exposure as well as helping learners to form associations and thus store items more effectively. Glossing can take the form of mime, paraphrase, additional examples or translation.

Code-mixing

Code-mixing is a simple technique to introduce learners to new vocabulary. It involves inserting L1 words into an L2 text where the L2 equivalent also appears. This allows learners to encounter new lexis in context, exposing them to the patterning which appears with the target language while making meaning clear. For example:

Retrieval

If a learner gets a positive reaction to production the probability that it will reoccur in the future increases, but more importantly, it makes it *més probable*, more likely that it will reoccur as a *resposta*, a response to the same stimulus. So it is important to *indicar*, to signal to learners if their use of new vocabulary is appropriate, this need not be explicit and can take the form of a *resposta adient*, a suitable response to the *contingut comunicatiu*, the communicative content of the utterance.

Learners seem to recognise the pedagogical rationale of this technique and do not tend to use the L1 word in their subsequent production.

A similar idea can be used for beginner and low-level learners by encouraging them to write L1 sentences with the target L2 word imbedded in it. This helps the learner to connect the target item to context even though their language level may not be sufficient to produce the context in L2.

So a beginner learner of Spanish might use the sentence: My hermano is called Matt.

Importance of context

Meeting lexis in context helps learners with:

Meaning

Context helps learners to attach their own meaning to a new lexical item and thus store it more effectively in memory.

Patterns (collocation, colligation)

Repeated exposure to lexis in context gives learners valuable information about the grammatical patterns it co-occurs with (colligation) as well as other lexical items that it is likely to appear with (collocation).

Field, register, mode

In addition to semantic meaning learners need to know whether a lexical item is used in a certain context; whether it is formal or informal; and if it is commonly used in spoken or written language. All of this information can be gathered through repeated contextualised exposure.

Depth of processing

Craik and Lockhart (1972) showed there was a strong relationship between cognitive depth (the level of cognitive processing) and retention, suggesting we should encourage learners to make decisions about new language. Oller demonstrated that items are easier to learn if met in a meaningful context, as this requires cognitive processing as learners extract meaning from the text.

Interest/motivation

While we should always try to use texts that are interesting and relevant to the learner as this will greatly boost learner motivation, even a boring text is more motivating than a decontextualised list of words to learn. If learners are encouraged to choose which words from a text they would like to learn retention is further improved, as demonstrated by Atkinson (1972), who suggests learners who choose which vocabulary to learn perform 50% better in retention tests than when they had to study word lists set for them.

Studying vocabulary in context

- ◆ **Jigsaw readings**
- ◆ **Guessing meaning from context**
- ◆ **Narrow reading** - Reading many texts on the same topic allows learners to become repeatedly exposed to the relevant vocabulary. As well as helping learners remember these items it also decreases the difficulty of the task due to the lexical repetition.
- ◆ **Conversation** - Meaning is supplied by the learner and lexis by the teacher or a classmate. These items are very memorable due to their relevance.
- ◆ **Concordance lines**

Patterns

Learners can be encouraged to investigate the patterns words appear in, either using concordance lines or by noticing which patterns the word appears with in texts.

For example, learners may be guided to discover that *recommend(s)* commonly appears in the following patterns (NB only the forms *recommend* and *recommends* are given here, other forms e.g. *recommended* have their own patterns):

1. N *recommend(s)* N
2. N *recommend(s) that* N V
3. N *recommend(s)* N *for* N (problem or situation, generalised group of people)
4. N *recommend(s)* N *to* N (person)
5. N *recommend(s) -ing*
6. N *recommend(s)* N (person) *to* V
7. N *recommend(s)* N V (infinitive)

It is generally the case that one meaning may be expressed by means of a variety of patterns, however one pattern tends to express a limited number of meanings. Making learners aware of patterns will both help them use words correctly and also help them guess the meaning of unknown words from the context they appear in. For example the pattern V n *into -ing* expresses the meaning of persuading or manipulating someone to do something and even a neutral word like *talk* assumes this meaning when it appears in this pattern.

Fashion, diet and beauty industries *brainwash women into thinking* that there is only one approvable way of living.

Shady phone-line firms have *tricked unemployed people into ringing* for details of non-existent jobs.

If Miguel could *talk Cristalena into living* with him, he could keep the car.

(Examples from <http://www.collins.co.uk/Corpus/CorpusSearch.aspx>)

Repetition

Most forgetting occurs soon after initial exposure, so repetition is most effective if it starts soon after the first encounter. However, effort is more important than repetition, more important still is association. i.e. Quality is better than quantity (Nation 1995).

Activities with class vocabulary cards:

- ◆ Carry on the story
- ◆ Definition game
- ◆ Taboo
- ◆ Charades
- ◆ Pictionary
- ◆ Hangman
- ◆ Back to the board

Other activities

- ◆ Gap fills (for example, using the text where the items were originally met.)
- ◆ Questions (have students choose, say, 5 words and write a question with each for homework. They ask and answer in groups at the beginning of the next lesson.)
- ◆ Writing example sentences
- ◆ Receptive gap fills
e.g. *I get on well with...*
- ◆ Puzzles - Use a webpage like <http://puzzlemaker.discoveryeducation.com/> to make your own crosswords and word searches. Or get your students to do it for homework.
- ◆ Making vocabulary quizzes (have students write them for each other)
- ◆ Connect 4
- ◆ Writing/telling stories

The Keyword Technique

The keyword technique works by associating a word with its meaning using a mental image. For example, an English speaker wanting to learn the Spanish word for duck (pato) could form a mental image of someone **patting** a duck on the head.

Using associations can help learners to remember concepts that are hard to visualise e.g. storing “hard” with the image of a rock. The procedure is simple and tends to get easier with practice.

- ◆ Think of a word in L1 that *sounds* similar to the new word in L2.
- ◆ Create a mental image that relates the two meanings.
- ◆ Spend a few moments becoming aware of the details of your mental image.

Conclusion

Learners should, as far as possible, choose the lexis they would like to study. We can choose items which are relevant to their lives and experiences and use a variety of presentations to appeal to different learning styles and provide interest. Meaning should always be of prime concern as it contributes to memorability and encourages cognitive processing as well as contributing to motivation. Learners should be encouraged to make associations and decisions about new items to promote cognitive processing and thus improve storage in memory. Finally learners should be given the opportunity to retrieve new lexis and use it in a meaningful context. In addition to learning new items we must equip learners with skills to understand unknown lexis in context.

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