Strategies for Receptive Vocabulary Learning

Paul Nation
Victoria University of Wellington
New Zealand

If a teacher wishes to prepare his learners for the vocabulary they will meet, he may teach them the vocabulary itself or he may teach them strategies for dealing with the vocabulary items. This article describes two quite different strategies which allow learners to deal with new vocabulary with a minimum of assistance from the teacher. The first is a strategy for learning words in lists and the second is a strategy for interpreting words using context clues.

Strategy 1: Learning words in lists

Learning lists of words has been unfashionable among many language teachers for quite a long time. However learners working on their own frequently use this technique. In addition for over a hundred years psychologists and researchers on language learning have investigated how such learning can be most efficiently carried out.

One of the great attractions of learning lists of words is that large numbers of words can be learnt in a very short time. Without too much effort learners can master well over thirty foreign-word mother-tongue word associations per hour. Experiments have shown that some learners are capable of rates of over one hundred associations per hour. Moreover most of this learning is still retained several weeks afterwards.

The research shows (Nation, in preparation) that some ways of learning from lists are more efficient than others, so there are many useful learning tips that teachers can pass on to their learners and give them practice in applying them.

(1) Learning is more efficient if the foreign word form is associated with a word in the mother tongue rather than a foreign synonym or definition.

(2) Each word form and its translation should be put on a small card with the foreign word form on one side and the translation on the other. This is much more efficient than setting the words out in lists in a book or on a sheet of paper. Firstly, the learner can look at the foreign word and make an effort to recall its translation without seeing the translation. Secondly, the learner can re-arrange the cards so that he is not using the sequence of the words in the list to help recall.

Thirdly, he can put the words which give him most difficulty at the beginning of his pile of cards so that he can give them extra attention.

Piles of these cards are easily carried around and they can be studied whenever the learner has a free moment.

(3) Much more important than the number of repetitions or the amount of effort put into the learning are the particular types of association made between the foreign word and its translation. One of the strangest and yet most effective techniques for associating a foreign word with its translation is the "keyword" technique. Let us look at how this technique could be used by a learner of Malay to associate the Malay word *pintu* with its English translation *door*. First the learner thinks of an English word that sounds like *pintu* or like a part of it, for example the word *pin*. This is the keyword. Second the learner imagines a pin stuck into a door, or a picture of a pin with a door in it! The more striking or unusual the image, the more effective it is. This image then is the linking association between *pintu* and *door* because it contains a clue or key to the sound of the foreign word *(pin-pintu)* and it contains the key to the translation of the foreign word *(a door)*. The numerous experiments on this technique have shown that when the repetitions are the same, twice as many successful associations are made when using this technique than when using a simple rote learning technique (for example, Ott and others 1973). So teachers should show their learners how to make strong mental associations between a foreign word form and its translation. The keyword technique is one way. The use of word analysis by breaking the foreign word into prefix, root, and suffix is another. In such analysis it is often only necessary to know the meaning of the prefix in order to make a useful association between a foreign word and its mother-tongue translation. Also, instead of just trying to list the foreign word form with a mother-tongue word, the learner should try to imagine what the mother-tongue word represents. The more striking and unusual the image, the better the learning. Finally the learner should look carefully at a foreign word he wants to learn to see if the shape or sound of the word will provide a way of making a strong association with its translation. For example, a *pintu* is used when you go into a house. It needs to be stressed that learning words in lists is only the first step in mastering new vocabulary. Eventually the learner needs to know much more about a word than can be learned from

memorizing its mother-tongue translation, but learning the mother-tongue translation provides a useful basis for this future learning.

Strategy 2: Guessing words from context

Once learners know around two to three thousand words they can use the reading skills they have developed to infer the meanings of unknown words that they meet. Some readers can do this without any particular training, but those who cannot do it can easily be taught a strategy which will quickly enable them to guess most of the unknown words they meet. This strategy is basically very simple. It begins by getting the learner to look closely at the unknown word, next to look at its immediate context, and then to take a much broader view of how the clause containing the word relates to other clauses, sentences or paragraphs. After guessing, there is a simple system of checks to make sure that the guess is the best possible. Once learners have mastered the steps of the strategy and have practised guessing words by systematically going through the steps, it is no longer necessary to apply all the steps. That is, the strategy is just a means of acquiring the unconscious skill that an efficient reader already has.

Let us look at the steps involved in the strategy and then apply them.

Step 1.   Look at the unknown word and decide its part of speech. Is it a noun, a verb, an adjective, or an adverb?

Step 2.   Look at the clause or sentence containing the unknown word. If the unknown word is a noun, what adjectives describe it? What verb is it near? That is, what does this noun do, or what is done to it?
If the unknown word is a verb, what nouns does it go with?
Is it modified by an adverb?
If it is an adjective, what noun does it go with?
If it is an adverb, what verb is it modifying?

Step 3.   Look at the relationship between the clause or sentence containing the unknown word and other sentences or paragraphs. Sometimes this relationship will be signalled by a conjunction like *but, because, if, when,* or by an adverb like *however, as a result.* Often there will be no signal. The possible types of relationship include cause and effect, contrast, inclusion, time, exemplification, and summary. (See Nation 1979, for a fuller list.)

Step 4.   Use the knowledge you have gained from steps 1 to 3 to guess the meaning of the word.

Step 5.   Check that your guess is correct.
(1)   See that the part of speech of your guess is the same as the part of speech of the unknown word. If it is not the same, then something is wrong with your guess.
(2)   Replace the unknown word with your guess. If the sentence makes sense, your guess is probably correct.
(3)   Break the unknown word into its prefix, root and suffix, if possible. If the meanings of the prefix and root correspond to your guess, good. If not, look at your guess again, but do not change anything if you feel reasonably certain about your guess using the context.

Experience has shown that using affixes and roots alone as a means of guessing meanings is not very reliable. Also, once a word has been analyzed according to its parts, this guess at its meaning is more likely to result in twisting the interpretation of the context than allowing interpretation of the context to modify the guess of the meaning. So, by leaving the use of affixes and root until the last step in the strategy, the learner is more likely to approach interpretation of the context with an open mind.

Let us now apply the strategy to guess the meanings of two infrequent words. The following paragraph is taken from *A Higher Course of English Study* by Ronald Mackin and David Carver (London: Oxford University Press 1968: 45-50).

[Chinese spectacles] were regarded as objects of *reverence* because the rims of tortoise-shell came from a sacred and symbolic animal, and the lenses were made from sacred stones. People wore them at first not so much to aid eyesight, or for curing eye-ailments, as for good luck, or for the dignity which they *bestowed* on the wearer. Sometimes even empty frames were worn as a mark of distinction.

reverence (line 1)

Step 1. *reverence* is a noun.

Step 2. spectacles are objects of reverence. If, because of the *-ence* suffix, we guess that *revere* might be a verb, we could say

people revere spectacles.

Step 3. *because* indicates a cause-effect relationship. The causes are *The rims of tortoise-shell came from a sacred and symbolic animal* and *the lenses were made from sacred stones.* The effect is *Chinese spectacles were regarded as objects of reverence.*

Step 4. *reverence* seems related to *sacred* and *symbolic* so it probably means something like *religion* or *holiness.*

Step 5. (1) Like *reverence, religion* and *holiness* are nouns.

(2) Spectacles were regarded as objects of holiness. Spectacles were regarded as objects of religion. The first substitution seems the best.

(3) *re- -ver- -ence, -ence* indicates the word is a noun. The prefix and root do not help at all.

The dictionary says that *reverence* means *feelings of deep respect. Holiness* is close enough to this: 95% correct.

bestowed (line 6)

Step 1. *bestowed* is a verb.

Step 2. Spectacles bestow dignity on the wearer.

Step 3. *or* indicates that there are alternatives. The other alternatives are *good luck,* and *curing eye-ailments* which are desirable things, so we can conclude that *bestowing dignity* is also a desirable thing.

Step 4. *bestowed* probably means *gave* or *put.*

Step 5. (1) *gave* and *put* are verbs.

(2) Spectacles put dignity on the wearer. Spectacles gave dignity on the wearer. Except for the awkwardness of *on* both words seem suitable.

(3) *be- -stow- -ed.* No help here.

The dictionary gives, *put, place:* 100% correct.

There are several ways of practising the strategy for guessing words in context. The one I favour is to get pairs of learners to choose a word that they do not know from the passage. They work on the steps together and then describe the steps to the rest of the class. The teacher gives them a percentage grade for correctness as in the examples above.

Guessing words in context obviously leads on to dictionary work. Unless the learner already has a reasonable idea of what a word means he will be unable to choose the most suitable meaning from those given in the dictionary. Using the dictionary could be the fourth way of checking in Step 5.

A Final Word

The two strategies described above complement each other. Learning words in lists is useful where a large amount of vocabulary needs to be learned quickly, for example in the early stages of language learning and where learners are going to begin reading in a new field. The strategy of guessing words from context assumes a knowledge of most of the words that make up the context and although successful use of the strategy can occur even at fairly high densities of unknown words to known words, it is better if the unknown vocabulary load is not too heavy.

References

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