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## **Memory? no way!**

**Abstract:** *Learning and using a language imply the memorization of great quantities of vocabulary. However~ nowadays that aspect of language has been neglected in language classrooms and students are left to manage the difficulties to learn vocabulary without their teachers' help. The purpose of this article is to make teachers aware of their role in guiding students towards the development of strategies to improve their use of long term memory, taking into account that Long term memory is the memory which learners need to improve and train in order to be successful as language learners and as language users.*

**Keywords:** *Short term memory, Long term memory, Mnemonic Strategies, Association.*

**Resumen:** *El aprendizaje de una lengua y el uso de la misma implican la memorización de gran cantidad de vocabulario. Sin embargo, este es un aspecto que se ha dejado de lado en el aula de clase, y los estudiantes deben enfrentarse solos a las dificultades que conlleva el aprendizaje del vocabulario, sin la orientación del profesor. El propósito de este artículo es hacer conscientes a los profesores de lenguas extranjeras del papel que deben cumplir como guías para que sus estudiantes desarrollen estrategias que les permitan mejorar su memoria a largo plazo, teniendo en cuenta que es este tipo de memoria el que se necesita entrenar y mejorar para lograr ser mejor aprendiz y usuario de la lengua.*

**Palabras clave.** *Memoria de corto plazo, memoria de largo plazo, estrategias mnésicas, asociación*

MEMORY? NO WAY! Have you ever heard that response from your language students when you tell them to memorize lexical items in the process to learn the foreign language? It is not new information to get negative attitudes towards the use of memory in modern times, when new language learning methods and in general, learning methods argue that a critical and an analytical mind is what is needed to learn anything and not memory as such.

Do you agree with these tendencies? Do you overlook the memorization of words? Do you take time to work on vocabulary as it arises in the lesson, explaining where necessary? Or do you take a systematic approach to help students cope with vocabulary? Do you have to use your memory to get competence in the second language?

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No matter the purpose of the language learning method, be it the promotion of all the skills, the reading of technical language (ESP), the accurate use of grammar, etc., their purpose gets to the same goal: lead the learners towards the use of the language to be able to communicate themselves. However, methods have focused on the study of the semantics and syntax of the language and many have neglected the use of vocabulary, probably, because it has to be given a special treatment in the language classroom, because it demands constant use of memory from the learners, and because the teacher might not know how to help the learners deal with it.

Vocabulary should be given the importance it deserves in the language learning process since the very beginning. As Wilkins (in Bowen & Marks, 1994:90) states, "there is not much value...in being able to produce grammatical sentences if one has not got the vocabulary that is needed to convey what one wishes to say". Even though the students have good command of the language structures and rules that govern it, they have to learn, to memorize the lexis to refer to the things they want to communicate about. Let us try reading the following paragraph:

*Everyone stuck in their craw when the noisome hag showed up sauntering, drawing and taking a gander at everyone.*

The students might have a good command of the structures of the English language but if they do not have a good range of vocabulary, they probably will not understand that *"everyone was disgusted when the stinky evil-looking old woman appeared, waiking síu ggishiy, speaking siowly, and staring at everyone"*.

Great quantities of words and expressions have to be memorized if one wants to have good command of the foreign language. Nevertheless, it might be a difficult and painful process, as well as boring. Everyone knows it is not motivating for students to know they are supposed to memorize long lists of verbs, adjectives or any other kind of words. Instead of telling students "to memorize," such long lists, why not help them stimulate the use of memory to improve their language command? Why not help them understand memory is not only a matter of repetition, testing, gap filling exercises or translating endless lists? Why not improve our role as teachers in order to guide our students toward the training of a better memory, and, by the same token, toward the improvement of their linguistic and communicative competence? In learning a new language, "the better the learner's memory, the faster he or she will learn new items, and the larger his or her vocabulary will be" (Spolsky, 1989:106), and of course, the better his or her communication in the target language.

As it was said before, memory is something else than just a repetition of words; it needs to be trained; the students need to be oriented on how to use their long-term memory (LTM), since short-term memory (STM) is not very useful for learning a language. According to O'Malley and Chamot (1990:17), there are two possible ways to store information: STM, "the active working memory that holds modest amounts of information only for a brief period" and LTM, "the sustained storage of

information". However, according to Zimbardo (1992:154), there are three different systems to store information:

- a. Storage of Sensory Information, which lasts what is necessary for this information to be perceived, recalled and judged; it gets into the mind via all the senses, specially ear and sight.
- b. Short-term memory, which is a limited capacity to store small amounts of information, five to seven unrelated items such as words, letters, numbers. Nevertheless, the more related the data, the longer it can stay in memory.
- c. Long-term memory, in which the meaning of the information is stored, is more lasting. It involves large quantities of data, facts, skills, experiences, etc.

Although O'Malley and Chamot do not mention the storage of sensory information, they coincide with Zimbardo in that there are two fundamental ways to store information, STM and LTM, and in that LTM is the type of memory language students must improve if they want to be good users of the foreign language.

Zimbardo (ibid.: 161), however, complements his thought identifying two types of LTM:

Episodic Memory, used to store facts and experiences, and semantic memory, used to store data, rules, instructions, vocabulary, etc. It is this last type of memory that language learners need to exercise if they want to be successful in their learning process and in their role as language users. This means, that STM could be useful to some extent, when they need to store information for an immediate task, but it is a must to put information such as lexicon in their LTM. Of course, it is not easy to do so, and it is well known that when a person does not remember something, he or she feels bad because he or she does not have "a good memory." In fact, it is not a matter of "good" or "bad" memory; it is a matter of training memory to improve it; it is not a matter of overusing STM; it is a matter of processing the information to store it in the LTM.

The information stored in STM is easily recalled and it can be retrieved rapidly. Rote learning (loud repetition) is useful for STM, but of course, it is not for LTM: if you want your students to improve memory, LTM, it is essential that they build schemata to organize information, that they carry out a constructive process. To do so, the material to be stored in LTM must be meaningful, it must be useful, that is to say, the students must see that it serves a purpose — communication. It must not be isolated, as a simple list of words, but a part that belongs to a whole; the material should be practiced through all the language skills. Practice will make retrieval easier and faster. The material should be contextualized, that means, related to a situation, topic or function the students are working on. If these conditions are not fulfilled, it will be difficult to retrieve the information because it can only be stored in STM, in other words, it will be forgotten soon.

However, even if you have put information in your LTM, it can also be difficult to retrieve or it can be even forgotten. Storing material in your LTM does not mean it will be there forever. There are two theories that help explain forgetfulness, according to Zimbardo (ibid.:

162): The first says that the information memorized leaves a print in your brain, and if it is not used or practiced, that print will disappear. The second says that the material learned will not disappear unless new information interferes with it. Of course, it is difficult to avoid that interference, since the human being is always using his or her memory to store new facts, ideas, experiences, data, and so on. Anyhow, as users and teachers of a foreign language, we must try to stimulate and train our LTM so that what we learn lasts in memory as long as we need it to be able to communicate in the foreign language and, besides, help our students do the same.

### How to improve memory

The techniques given below will not probably be the panacea to the students' "lack" of memory, but surely they will help us, teachers, guide our students towards the training of their memory, so that they can store information in their BIM and retrieve it easily whenever it is necessary for speaking, reading, writing or listening to the foreign language.

1. The SQR3 method, which embodies a sequence of the processes of surveying, questioning, reading, reciting and reviewing, requires that the person analyze the information to get a global idea of it, that he or she question about the relevant aspects, the sequence of ideas, and the relationships; that he or she read the material carefully to get the details, and that he or she write notes about the main ideas or items and then, that he or she say them aloud. At this stage, it is also possible to respond questions he or she has posed. Finally, there must be a periodical review to address the attention to aspects not learned completely or to facilitate recaching. (ibid.: 167) This technique might be very useful to learn rules and vocabulary, but as it has been said, if information is given in context.

In my experience in the English language classroom, this strategy has proved to be very useful during the reading comprehension sessions, because the new vocabulary is not in isolation but within a context. Besides, when reading a text, the students are able to follow the SQR3 method completely analyzing the material carefully, taking notes, getting the details, interacting with others about relevant aspects, etc., processes that help in the memorization of vocabulary.

2. Mnemonic strategies are aids designed to assist memory based on *associations*. Let us take a look at some associations that might help the learner learn vocabulary.

a. Association with a mental image or picture:

The learner whose learning style is visual will benefit from realia, labeled diagrams, pictures, colored — mind maps, etc. The more lively and specific the image, the easier it will be to remember vocabulary. This strategy, as it has been said, is highly useful for those learners who are visually oriented, that is to say, learners who learn more easily when they see the image or the picture of the concept he is learning.

b. Association with sounds: While some learners memorize more easily using visual imagery, others, who have aural learning style preferences memorize better, and, of course learn more when making mental linkages with sounds. The point is to identify the new word with a familiar word in the native language because of their similarity in pronunciation, or to identify the sound of the new word with the sounds of words already known. For this, the teacher can use phonetic spelling, rhymes, riddles, songs, etc.

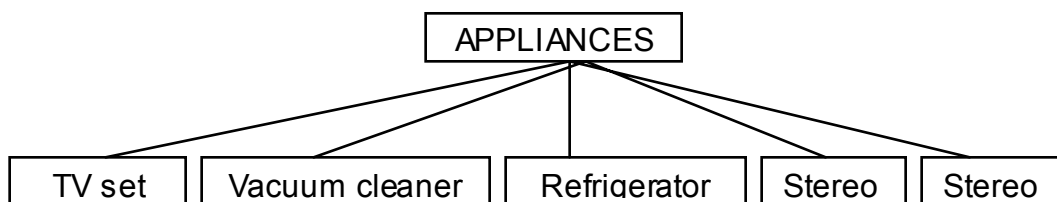
c. Association with motion: The learners who are motion oriented, in other words, those individuals who have kinesthetic learning style preferences, benefit from learning activities in which they must comply with physical movement. The teacher must prepare activities in which the learner physically acts out new expressions, or relates them to physical feelings or sensations, such as “hot, cold, nervous, afraid, etc.”

d. Association with touch: Linking verbal material with the contact of real things, helps tactile oriented learners improve their memory and their learning. To apply this technique, the teacher should use realia and things that are more concrete and that the learner can manipulate. Pictures, cards to play games, objects to organize or to classify are recommended to apply association with touch.

e. Association with a story or situation or topic: The presentation of vocabulary by means of stories or topic oriented context can help the learners memorize it more easily than just giving them just a list of words. The teacher must be creative so as to design activities in which the students write down the words they associate with a topic, story or situation, or make up stories to relate words, etc.

f. Association with other words: There are several ways to associate words within the same language or across languages:

Superordinates and hyponyms: The teacher can have the students make a diagram showing the relationship between a headword or general word, called superordinate, and words that mean a different type of that general word or hyponyms. Let us see an example:



You can do the exercise in two different ways, giving them the superordinate word for the students to find the hyponyms or give them the hyponyms for them to find the superordinate.

Word collocations: Not all the words of a language are easy to remember according to the words they go together with. However, there are many that have restricted meanings and are only useful when they together with another word or other words. Let us see the example taken from Bowen and Marks (1994: 97): the word *large* can not be learned through word collocation since it has many possibilities of combination with other words. On the contrary, the word *petty*, which means small in a negative sense, only collocates with nouns such as *cash*, *details*, *crime* and *thief*. It can not be used with other words. This technique is particularly useful to learn adjectives that go with certain nouns, phrasal verbs, and combinations of nouns or adjectives and prepositions.

• Synonyms or opposites: The students can organize taking into account if they have similar or opposite meanings. They can also draw scales to illustrate different shades of meaning. For example:

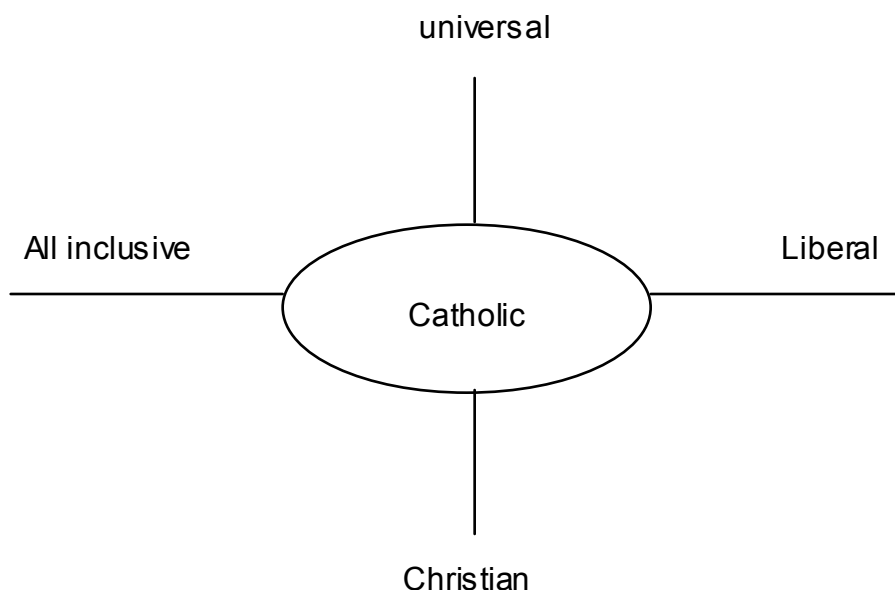
	Tough
	Difficult
	Hard
	Exacting
	Demanding

• Association with words within the same lexical group and word — building: knowing the meaning of affixes is really useful to generalize about the meaning of unknown words. For instance, if the learner knows that the particle *re* means “again;” he or she will deduce the meaning of words such as *recollect*, *reconvey*, *reform*. and so on.

• False and true cognates: The students can analyze words of the second language that they consider are similar in their native language and study the differences

between them in pronunciation, writing and meaning. They can make lists of true cognates such as *sock4*, whose meaning in Spanish is the same, and false cognates such as *actual*, that means “real” in English.

Homonyms: teachers can encourage learners to write diagrams or tables or grids in order to store words that have several meanings, as in the example:



- Homophones: teachers can encourage learners to organize words that have the same pronunciation but different meaning, such as *brake* — *break*, *pail* — *pale*, *meat* — *meet*.

g. Other ways to facilitate the memorization of vocabulary are associating words with their negative or positive feelings they promote, associating them with their etymology, that is to say, their origin and linguistic development. (Ibid.: 104)

All these associations of words, as it has been said before, should be aids the teacher can give the learners for them to store information in their BIM. Nevertheless, the students must develop their autonomy, since learning vocabulary is a never ending task of a language learner. The teacher must hold activities periodically to see if they are applying the techniques, and, of course, to see if they have learned the vocabulary proposed in the language program.

According to what I have seen in my language classroom, and according to other teachers' experiences, all these strategies work out once you have identified your students' learning styles. In that way, each student, depending on his or her learning style, will make the best out of each strategy.

Finally, for all the techniques given here, the learners might use labeled pictures, mind maps, word cards, charts, diagrams, grids, etc. according to their own learning styles.

## Conclusions

Learning a language deals not only with the knowledge of grammar structures, pronunciation, pragmatics, but also, and very importantly, with the knowledge of words and their meaning. However, the learning of vocabulary has been neglected in the language classroom and students are left to their own devices to cope with it. To help students improve their long term memory to be able to memorize vocabulary more easily and, by the same token, improve their language command teachers should:

- change their position towards the teaching of vocabulary and help students apply techniques that might help them stimulate their BIM and their recalling capacity.
- not see his or her students as passive elements of the learning process. but as active members of the process. that need to be guided in the difficult task of learning vocabulary.
- do action research in their classrooms, related to learning styles, learning strategies in order to help students identify their own learning styles and the activities and strategies they can benefit more from.

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