

E. LEARNER STRATEGIES

Research shows that successful language learners use more strategies (quantity) and use them more effectively (quality) than less successful learners.

Strategies are defined by Michel Rost as follows*:

1. **Specific, conscious, sustained ways of attempting to learn more effectively.**
e.g. how you record new vocabulary you hear or deciding to pick out a certain number of new words each time you attend a church service.
2. **Conscious actions to overcome difficulties or compensate for lack of knowledge.**
(e.g. what you do if you don't know a word you need). Ways to deal with negative emotions which we discussed in Section B are also examples of this kind of strategy.
3. **Attempts to monitor and develop one's access to L2, communication in L2. ability to notice new features in L2, feedback on L2 performance, and assessment of progress.**
These are what are known as mega-cognitive learning strategies and relate to your planning of your language study, goal setting, self-evaluation etc.

An Example of Using Strategies in Goal setting

S M A R T

The capital letters above stand for adjectives. These words refer to the type of goals you should set. Can you guess what words the letters stand for?

A strategy is simply any technique learners use to help themselves learn. Some are general techniques applying equally well to any language skill. Others are specific to listening or reading or memorization.

Ways to Assess your Use of Strategies.

- a. 'Assessment of Strategy Use' Chapter 10 of 'How to be a more successful language learner' 2nd edition 1994 by Joan Rubin and Irene Thompson, Heinle and Heinle.
- b. 'Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL)' by Rebecca Oxford, 1989

6 – ‘A’ Formula for language learning by Dr Rebecca Oxford

1. ABILITY (to take responsibility)
- +
2. ATTITUDE
(willingness to take responsibility)
- +
3. AWARENESS (of need for strategies)
- +
4. ACTION (use of strategies)
- ↓
5. AUTONOMY
&
6. ACHIEVEMENT

E. 1 STRATEGIES FOR IMPROVING MEMORY

In March 2000 several newspapers carried reports on the discovery that taxi-drivers in London have bigger brains than other men. Researchers reported that the brain scans of 16 taxi-drivers showed that the hippocampus (not a university for African mammals but the place where the brain stores spatial and conscious memory) was a few millimeters larger than in 50 non-taxi drivers. The longer the taxi drivers had been on the job the larger that part of the brain became. All drivers of black taxis have to pass tests on what is called ‘the knowledge’ to secure a license. After been given a blue book with more than 450 routes around London, they spend the next 2-3 years committing to memory every street, alley, hospital, hotel, institution, nook and cranny of the city. Then they spend 6 months to a year undergoing periodic tests about what they know. In the process their brains grow and adapt to help them store a detailed mental map of the vast capital city.

The significance of this report is that it lends backing to the idea that our minds and memories can be trained to work more efficiently. In the armed forces of an increasing number of countries, mental martial arts are as important as physical combat skills. National Olympic squads devote as much as 30% of their training time to the development of mental set, mental stamina and visualization. In golf the best players regularly say that the game is 20% physical and 80% mental self-programming. The belief that mental ability declines with age is also shown by research to be false. If the brain is stimulated, no matter at what age, it will physically grow more protuberances on each brain cell’s tentacles, and these protuberances will increase the total number of connections within the human brain.

Buzan(*1) argues that much of the potential of our brains lies dormant through our failure to train our minds in two areas - firstly, use of both sides of the brain, and secondly, in how we organize our study.

Left and right cortex

Buzan urges extensive use of imagination and networks of association. He argues that by neglecting to use these means we are using the potential of only half of the brain. The activities of the 2 sides of the brain are traditionally divided as follows.

Right cortex

Rhythm
Spatial awareness
Gestalt (the whole picture)
Imagination
Day dreaming
Colour
Dimension

Left cortex

words
logic
numbers
sequence
linearity
analysis
lists

Most traditional study methods such as note taking in linear form or memorizing of word lists, are activities belonging to the domain of the left cortex. Buzan, however, argues that in order to develop our real potential, **both sides of the brain** need to be activated. In learning new vocabulary, for example, we can harness all our senses to imagine the sight, taste, smell, shape, colour, touch etc of the item we want to remember. Our recall of this item later will be much more effective than if we simply memorized the word in linear form in a word list.

Think of at least 3 right brain and 3 left brain language learning activities:

Right brain activities

Left brain activities



12 Memory Principles

Buzan outlines 12 basic principles of memory whose first letters form the 2 words SMASHIN' SCOPE. In forming mental images for purposes of memorization, he suggests using

1. **S**enses - sight, hearing, smell etc
2. **M**ovement - making your mental images move and have rhythm.
3. **A**ssociation - link the item you want to remember to something stable in your mental environment.
4. **S**exuality
5. **H**umour - the more ridiculous your images are the more memorable they will be.
6. **I**magination

7. **N**umber
8. **S**ymbolism
9. **C**olour
10. **O**rder - e.g.. colour grouping, sorting by category.
11. **P**ositive Images
12. **E**xaggeration

Training ourselves in the use of the above in our mental images is said to enhance our memory recall.

Organizing study

The second area in which Buzan feels we fail to harness the full potential of our brains, relates to how we organize our study. Mental processes, he claims, do not decline with age, but improve with accumulative experience. If you wish to remember better, you need to **plan** your studying and **train** your memory. There are 5 main factors which help your memory to recall:

1. *Primacy – the first event or first items in a list*
2. *Recency – the most recent items*
3. *Linking, connecting, associating.*
4. *Outstandingness*
5. *Review*

The implications for learning are that you will remember

- **more at the beginning and end of a study period**
- **more if items are associated in some way such as rhyming or repetition**
- **more if items are unusual**
- **and less from the middle of a learning period.**

These factors also have implications for **the length** of a learning period. For example, if you study for 4 hours without a break, you will be giving yourself only one primacy and one recency period, allowing your recall to sag in the middle.

Optimum learning period

Buzan suggests a learning period of **20-50 minutes** as the optimum length. (c f. fig 1) Anything shorter does not give the learner enough time to organize the material and a longer period means a growing decline in the amount of material recalled. In a learning period of, say 2 hours, it therefore makes sense to have several breaks, so that recall is kept as high as possible.

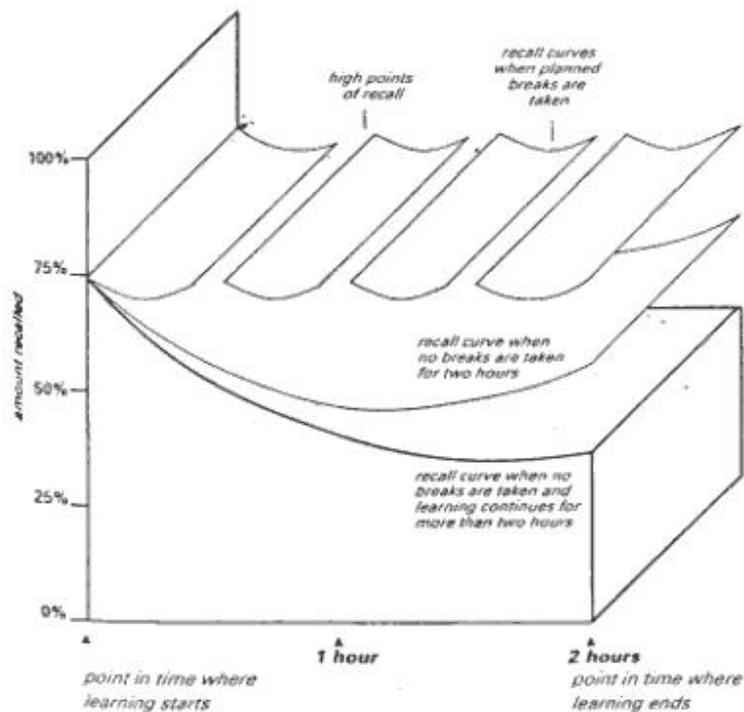


Fig 1 Recall during learning - with and without breaks. A learning period of between 20-50 minutes produces the best relationship between understanding and recall.

Importance of planning review

After any learning period there is a very sharp decline in what is remembered an alarming 80% is lost within 24 hours! To overcome this, Buzan suggests a programme of revision as follows:

1. **A 10 minute review** of material about **10 minutes after a one hour learning period.** This will help retain the material in the memory for one day.
2. **A 2-4 minute review the next day** which should help retain the material for about a week.
3. **A 2 minute review the following week** helps retain the material for **1 month.** A **4th review** a month later and a **5th 4 months later** should ensure that the material is stored permanently in your long term memory.

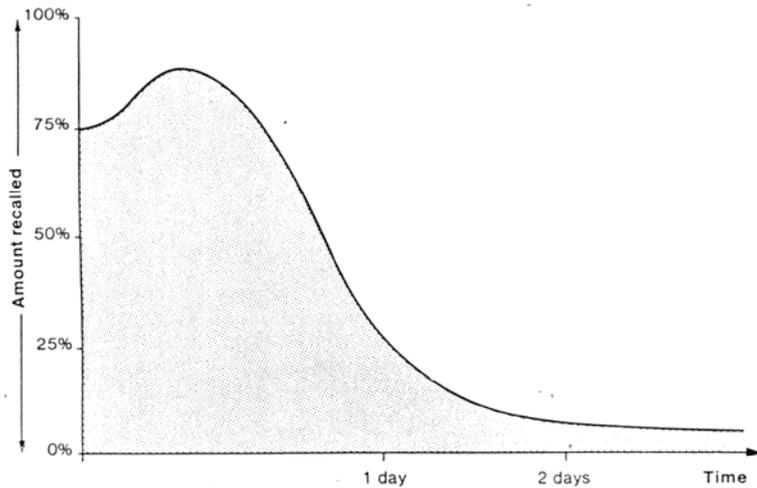


Figure 2

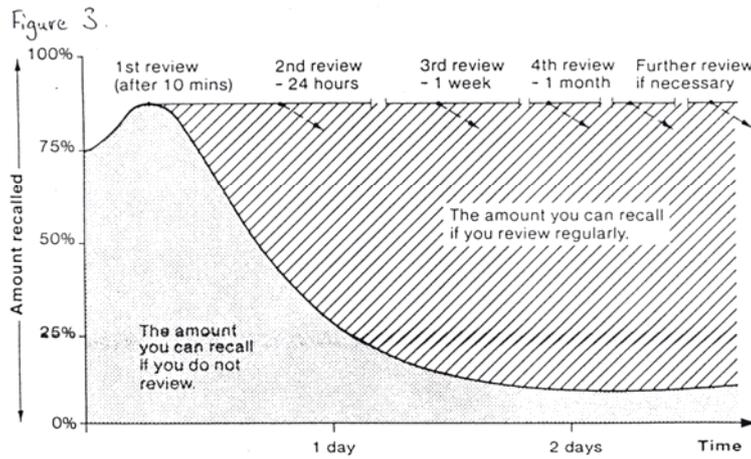


Figure 3.

Cumulative effect

Buzan points out the cumulative effect of proper review on all aspects of learning, thinking and remembering. Hence the person who does not review is continually wasting the effort he puts into any learning task and putting himself at a serious disadvantage.

Each time he approaches a new learning situation his recall of previous knowledge gained will be at a very low ebb, and the connections which should be made automatically will be dismissed. This will mean that his understanding of the new material will not be as complete as it could be, and that his efficiency and speed through the new material will also be less. This continuing negative process results in a downward spiral that ends in a general despair of ever being able to learn anything - each time new material is learned it is forgotten, and each time new material is approached it seems to become more oppressive. The result is that many people, after having finished their formal exams, seldom, if *ever*, *approach* text books again.

Failure to *review* is equally as bad for general memory. If each new piece of information is neglected, it will not remain at a conscious level, and will not be available to form new memory connections. As memory is a process which is based on linking and association, the fewer items there are in the 'recall store', the less will be the possibility for new items to be registered and connected.

*On the opposite side of this coin, the advantages of reviewing are enormous. The more you maintain your current body of knowledge, the more you will be able to absorb and handle. When you study, the expanding amount of knowledge at your command will enable you to digest new knowledge far more easily, each new piece of information being absorbed in the context of your existing store of relevant information. The process is much more like that of the traditional snowball rolling, where the snowball gets rapidly bigger the more it rolls and eventually continues rolling under its own momentum. (*4)*

Buzan's comment would seem to be particularly relevant to language learning where what we are seeking to master is a linguistic system into which we have to fit each newly learnt item. We cannot keep on adding new building blocks in terms of new grammatical items or vocabulary and expect them to stay firmly in place if the foundations of previously learnt knowledge is shaky. Perhaps this calls for a slower but surer rate of learning with more planned-for review as opposed to aiming to cover as much material as possible in as short a time as possible. 'The man in a hurry misses the way.' Proverbs 19:2 (NEB)

Building on what you already know is vital, for example, for the effective learning of Kanji. Kaiser(*5) points out that coming to terms with kanji as a system requires the experience of first having learned:

1. a fairly high number of Kanji
2. Kanji of a sufficient level of complexity.

The first requirement, the need to learn several hundreds of kanji for starters, arises because only by way of the accumulated experience gained through those kanji that have been learnt, can the learner relate or cross reference the hundreds of different phonetic elements for memorizing and/or guessing readings of **unknown kanji** .

Personal application

1. What do you think of the validity of Buzan's 12 Memory Principles? How could you make use of them to maximize the effectiveness of your memorizing?
2. In the light of what you have read above about
 - a. the **optimum length** of a learning period
 - b. the need for breaks **within** a learning period
 - c. the need for **continual review**

consider how you might improve the organization of your study.

2. In preparation for the next section on **specific** strategies or techniques we can use in language learning, think about the strategies you use or have used in learning Japanese. e.g.. you might note down words you hear in a church sermon which are unfamiliar to you and look them up afterwards in a dictionary. Ask yourself both the following questions.

What do I do when learning Japanese?

*What do I do to **improve** my Japanese?*

Make a list of all the things you can think of under three headings (where relevant to your particular situation).

- a. *in class*
- b. *in private study*
- c. *in interaction with Japanese speakers*

You may find it useful to refer back to the list of characteristics of 'the good language learner' (section C) and think what you do in respect of each characteristic in turn.

Recommended Reading

Buzan, Tony Make the Most of your Mind Pan Books 1988 ISBN 0 330 30262 0

Notes (for section E. 1)

1. Buzan, Tony Use your head BBC Publications 1974
2. Buzan 1974 p.61
3. Ellis and Sinclair Learning to learn English CUP 1989 p17
4. Buzan 1974 p.66
5. Kaiser, Stephen. 'The potential of Castle/J or all the features you ever wanted from a computer assisted package.' A paper given at the Japanese Language Association conference in London February 1991.