

## E.2 STRATEGIES FOR LEARNING VOCABULARY

### E: 2A Introduction

How do you feel about vocabulary learning? What words come to your mind when you see the word 'vocabulary'? Now say 'vocabulary'. What other words come to mind?

To the Anglo Saxons a vocabulary was a 'word-hoard' to be owned and treasured; to the Chinese, a sea of words to be fished. How do you see your own vocabulary? Which of these words best captures that image?

Stock	Tightrope	Nursery
Store	Perimeter	Pool
Repertoire	Raft	Armoury
Palette	File	Mine
Archive	Reservoir	Web
Treasury	Forest	Tunnel
Spectrum	Orchestra	Well
Mountain	Reserve	Theatre
Field	Larder	Tool-kit

Morgan and Rinvoluceri(\*1) describe *vocabulary learning as 'making friends with the words of the target language'*. They point out that we often have strong feelings towards words. Some we remember effortlessly, others slip through our minds however many times we try to consciously recall them. Vocabulary learning is not a neutral process.

### Active and passive vocabulary

**Passive vocabulary** can be defined as language items that can be recognised and understood in the context of reading or listening, whereas **active vocabulary** are items which the learner can use appropriately in speaking or writing. Many learners feel a need to improve in the area of active vocabulary. However, in the mother tongue as well as in a foreign language, it is usual to have a far larger passive vocabulary than an active one. An educated native speaker of English is said to have a passive vocabulary of between 50,000 and 250,000 words (estimates vary widely) but an active vocabulary of only about 10,000. Many words in the mother tongue are not learnt but guessed at. Native speakers learn to be content with approximate meaning.

## **`Knowing' a word**

To know a word may mean

1. To understand it when it is written and/or spoken. (In Japanese this would involve being able to read its Kanji too)
2. To recall it when you need it.
3. To use it with the correct meaning. This includes an awareness of where a particular word's range of meaning (semantic field) may differ from its translational equivalent in another language. e. g. 2 words `tsumetai' and `samui' in Japanese cover the single semantic field of `cold' in English.
4. To use it in a grammatically correct way.
5. To pronounce it correctly.
6. To know which other words you can use it with (e.g. to know that in English we can say `a white lie' but not `a red lie' which you can in Japanese.)
7. To write it.
8. To use it appropriately, in the right situation. e. g. to know that `kanai' meaning `wife', should only be used to refer to one's own wife and not the wife of another.
9. To be aware of a word's positive or negative connotations. e. g. `shitsukoi' in Japanese means `persistent' in a negative sense. It is therefore inappropriate to use it to express the idea of persisting in prayer as I once did in a sermon.

## **Be realistic**

The above list of what is involved in `knowing' a word may cause you to despair of ever mastering Japanese vocabulary, but not all of these points will be of equal importance to you. It will depend on whether you need to have a passive or an active knowledge of the word. Most of this `knowing' is unlikely to be necessary all at once. You will gradually become aware of the finer details in the trial and error of actual usage if you are prepared to ask continually `Can I use this word in this situation?' When trying to make new words part of your active vocabulary, be realistic about the amount you can retain.. Set goals for yourself relevant to your situation.

## **Stockpiling**

Most of us probably have a fairly traditional approach to vocabulary learning. We have probably at one time or another religiously kept a vocabulary notebook and compiled lists of words with their equivalents in our mother tongue. Even if the notebook is highly organized which it often isn't, memorizing what we have noted down is a tedious and often neglected task, especially if we have passed the stage of language school tests.

Stevick tells how one of the learners he researched, was totally put off her learning of Spanish (she was very successful at other languages) by being required to learn long lists of 'unattached' vocabulary (ie. they were not used in a meaningful context). 'It was as though Ann's Spanish professor had asked her to lay in a supply of food or water, one potato or one bucketful at a time, for a long trip that she might take at some unspecified time in the future.' Stevick uses the term 'stockpiling' to describe the memorizing of lists of words which have no meanings attached. He makes the following points about stockpiling.

1. People differ considerably in their ability to stockpile. Some can make significant use of it.
2. At best, though, the shelf life of unattached linguistic material is rather short.
3. People differ in their willingness to stockpile. If the potatoes are going to spoil or the water evaporate before we have a chance to take advantage of them, why go to the effort of accumulating them in the first place?
4. The only real way to be sure the supplies do not go bad or disappear is to eat them or drink them i e . **work them into real use of the language as soon as possible.**

### **Increasing personal involvement with vocabulary**

Research shows that **there is a close connection between 'cognitive depth' and memory i.e. the more actively we work out a solution to a problem(the more committed we are to the task of learning), the more likely we are to store this information permanently.** While this is perhaps obvious, the fact remains that strategies learners employ most frequently in language learning are not ones that require a high degree of active involvement. (\*3)

### **Meaning and organization**

The following example offers some interesting insights into how meaning and organization affect memory. 3 groups of individuals were each given the same list of 30 words but a different task.

1. Group 1 were told to memorize the words.
2. Group 2 were told to rate each word according to its pleasantness or unpleasantness.
3. Group 3 were asked to decide what items would be important or not important if stranded on a desert island.

Groups 2 and 3 were not told they would be tested on their ability to recall but group 1 was. Group 3 came out best in the test results. This experiment suggests

1. that the **intention** to learn by it self does not mean that effective learning will take place.
2. that people remember better when an activity **is meaningful** to them and requires them to **organize** the material in some way. (\*4)

The next section therefore will introduce some techniques for making vocabulary learning more meaningful and organized. They seek to harness all the senses -sound, sight, taste etc as well as the body and emotions to the task of learning vocabulary.

Notes for section E.2 Strategies for learning vocabulary-Introduction

1. Morgan, John and R i n v o l u c r i , Mario. Vocabulary OUP 1986 p.5
2. Stevick,E.W. Success with foreign languages Prentice Hall International 1989 p. 17.
3. O'Malley et al in 'Learner strategies used by beginner or intermediate students' (in Language Learning Vol 35.1 1985) found that the most frequently used strategies were repetition, notetaking, rote learning and questioning. Strategies which entailed a high level of involvement with the learning material such as use of imagery, inferencing, key words, deduction, grouping etc. were infrequently used.
4. Redman, S. and Gairns, R. Working with words - a guide to teaching and learning vocabulary CUP 1986 p.90-91