

Advice for Learning Vocabulary

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Introduction

How many times have you been asked for advice? Teachers are asked all the time. In Japan, I am asked how can students increase their vocabulary. I teach at universities and it is common for me to advise students how to improve their vocabulary. In this paper I will give seven types of advice on how students can improve their vocabulary building strategies. These methods are for university students taking specific English-medium courses, but can be used in learning any type of language. Some of these methods may be done alone while others need the aid of a computer or teacher. In each item of advice, the summary and detail have been written for the student so the language is simplified for better understanding. The justification and reference sections have been written for teachers.

I preface this with the advice I give all my students. Give the advice a try, but remember that you should always be aware of your own learning style. If this advice does not help, then consider how you learn things in relation to the advice. The advice given is based on groups of individuals. Statistics help us distinguish patterns for general advice and may not help particular individuals. Furthermore, since learning vocabulary takes into account various cognitive processes, it is possible to use more than one item of advice together.

Advice item #1:

Advice summary

Don't practice all at once.

Detail

Learn new vocabulary at spaced intervals rather than at one setting. Learn a few words at a time with more spaced-practice than trying to remember many words at one sitting.

Justification

Bahrck and Phelps (1987) compared the effects of learning vocabulary over spaced intervals of 30 days, 1 day or 0 day. After eight years, 30 day interval training was far more beneficial than 0 day interval training. Of course the 30 day interval training took longer to com-

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plete, but the results were far more beneficial for the students.

Reference

Bahrck, H.P., & Phelps, E. (1987). Retention of spanish vocabulary over 8 years. *Journal of Experimental Psychology: Learning, memory and Cognition*, 13, 344-349.

Advice item #2:

Advice summary

Remember new words and phrases through keywords.

Detail

It may be easier to remember nouns and verbs differently. Take a Japanese noun such as *ramen*, meaning noodles, and then get a similar sounding word in English such as *lawmen*. Then imagine the pair of words interacting such as lawmen eating noodles instead of donuts. In my case for verbs or phrases, I took the Japanese phrase, “doitashimashite” and then thought of an English phrase that sounded similar such as, “don’t touch my mustache.” For me this method is better for verbs or phrases because I associate sounds, not an image, to the phrase.

Justification

Keyword methods are very useful in acquiring vocabulary in the first stages of acquisition. Atkinson and Raugh (as cited in Ellis, 2003) compared learning of FL vocabulary by means of keyword mnemonics and concluded that subjects that used the keyword method learned more translations for a longer period than the control group. Ellis and Beaton(1993) demonstrated that keyword methods are effective in learning foreign to native translations. In addition, they showed that keyword method depends upon the part of speech and imaginability of the keyword.

This method should be limited to beginners because of the method’s difficulty in using abstract concepts.

Reference

Ellis, N. (2003). *Words in mind and brain: Implications for vocabulary acquisition and in struction*. p.57. Retrieved January 26, 2003, from Temple University, Department of Education web site: <http://tuj.ac.jp/newsite/main/tesol/ne0103.html/>

Ellis, N. & Beaton, A. (1993). Factors affecting the learning of foreign language vocabulary: Imaginary keyword mediators and phonological short-term memory. *The Quarterly Journal of Experimental Psychology*. 46A(3) pp. 553-558.

Advice item #3:

Advice summary

Take time to analyze for meaning rather than simply memorizing items.

Detail

Take your time and give some attention to what you are trying to acquire. Parrot-fashion learning is not optimal for long term memory. A more effective method is to place emphasis on learning the material in some meaningful way. The idea is not how many times you recall it, but rather on how you can recall it. Choose a word and then consider its meaning and recall it in a way other than just repeating it.

Justification

Hyde and Jenkins' (as cited in Ellis, 2003) study concluded that incidental and intentional distinction is not valuable. Subjects of the test were placed in three groups: one group was assigned specific methods to learn a list of words; one group was assigned specific methods to learn a list of words and were told they would be tested later; one group was presented a word list and were told they would be tested later. The conclusion of this study demonstrated the subjects that were assigned the specific method of rating words by pleasantness did much better than those not making semantic tasks even if the subjects knew they would be tested.

Reference

Ellis, N. (2003). *Words in mind and brain: Implications for vocabulary acquisition and instruction*. pp.42-45. Retrieved January 26, 2003, from Temple University, Department of Education web site: <http://tuj.ac.jp/newsite/main/tesol/ne0103.html/>

Advice item #4:

Advice summary

Verbalize new words from word lists.

Detail

It is necessary to say the new vocabulary aloud for it to be acquired for long term. Of course you need some source whereby you can check the authenticity of speech such as a native teacher. The process of saying the word aloud activates previously learned material. Ideally, usage and feedback from real conversations work best.

Justification

The ability to repeat novel phonological patterns plays a role in long term memory acquisition. Seibert (as cited in Ellis & Beaton, 1993) showed that saying words aloud led to better retention than silent rote memorization. Pronouncing words takes into account the learner's cognitive awareness of the language's patterns in addition to the articulatory process. The more a learner understands how to pronounce words, the quicker the learner can adapt new vocabulary and keep it long term (Ellis, 1993).

Reference

Ellis, N. & Beaton, A. (1993). Psycholinguistic determinants of foreign language vocabulary

learning. *Language Learning* 43:4, 559-617.

Advice item #5:

Advice summary

Use computer assisted language learning (CALL) material such as Cabsoftware.

Detail

Go to the university computer or download the material onto your personal computer. Use the programs or sites as instructed. Programs such as Vocab Scheduler can help you retain vocabulary for life! Here are a few URL sites to view and download.

<http://www.cabsoft.com/>

<http://www.nottingham.ac.uk/~alzsh3/acvocab/>

<http://132.208.224.131>

Justification

According to Paul Nation's (2001) principles of vocabulary teaching, students should be provided with the opportunity of spaced, repeated practice and generative retrieval methods to ensure cumulative growth. By using CALL in conjunction with classroom materials, the students are afforded the implicit processing practice to transform the explicitly learned concepts into real situational language usage.

We know that learning vocabulary can be done implicitly and explicitly. To facilitate implicit learning, CALL can help both by providing exposure and frequency. On-line dictionaries, contextual usage, and other thesaurus-like information can be tools for explicit learning. CALL provides the students opportunities to increase their vocabulary, which in turn, should help the L2 learners' acquisition of language competence (Ellis, 1995).

Reference

Nation, ISP. (2001). *Learning Vocabulary in Another Language*. Cambridge University Press. p 385, table 11.3.

Ellis, Nick. (1995). The Psychology of Foreign Language Vocabulary Acquisition: Implications for CALL. *Computer Assisted Language Learning*. 8(2-3), 103-128.

Advice item #6:

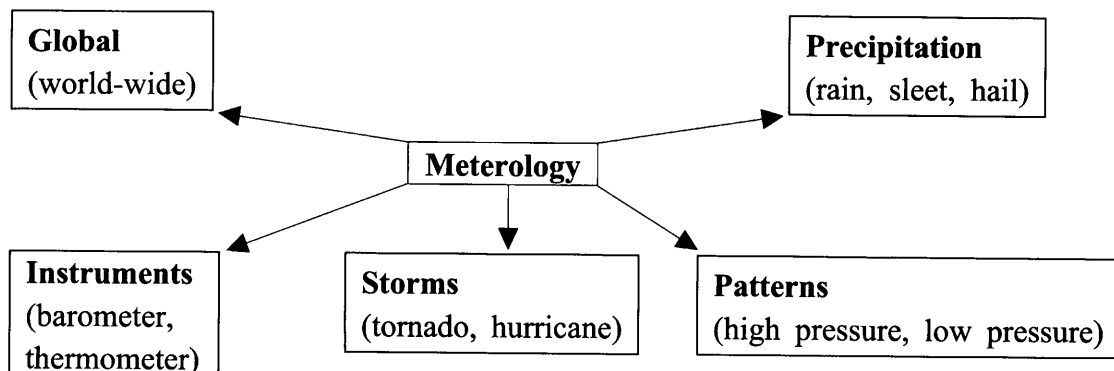
Advice summary

Make a map of concepts and vocabulary for the class readings.

Detail

This method is most effective when done with several classmates. Write a concept on a piece of paper and then brainstorm free-associates. Then write out the collection of concepts and vocabulary in a map-like format, like the example shown below. After the map is complete, compare it with other classmates' maps and discuss. Discussion of the map format is a key element

in this method.



Justification

The mapping of concepts and vocabulary can be done prior to class readings so students can gain more from the reading. Stahl and Fairbanks (1986) determined that the best methods which produced the highest effects on comprehension and vocabulary measures were ones involving definitional as well as contextual information about each word. Furthermore, methods which provided breadth of knowledge had a good effect on understanding text, including the new vocabulary.

Reference

Stahl, S and Fairbanks, M . (1986). The effects of vocabulary instruction: A model-based meta-analysis. *Review of Educational Research*, 56(1), 72-110.

Advice item #7:

Advice summary

Examine word prefixes, suffixes and roots and play a version of the Name Game.

Detail

Learn the roots from the class word list and then add prefixes or suffixes in the Name Game. For example, take the root *crat*, meaning supporter, and then add the prefix *demo*, meaning common people to make the word “democrat,” a supporter of the common people. Next add *un* and *ic* to democrat making it “undemocratic.” The next step is to play the Name game with the new vocabulary words. For example, he is a democrat. she is a Democrat and he is a democrat. Iraq is undemocratic and she is... and he is.... Japan is a democracy and Iraq is... and she is... and he is....

Justification

Stahl (as cited in Ellis, 2003) claims that 20 prefixes account for 97 percent of prefixed

words in English. In addition, retrieval of the base words in many different contexts is important for greater vocabulary acquisition. It is hoped that a concentration of content specific vocabulary will help students understand the vocabulary usage in the field of study. By making sentences, students will be able to use the vocabulary and make judgments on the authenticity of the statements. Once the game is finished, the students could ask if the statements were true or not, is Iraq undemocratic? Students making and questioning the statements will mean they have processed the specific information studied.

Reference

Ellis, N. (2003). *Words in mind and brain: Implications for vocabulary acquisition and instruction*. pp.124 & 105-110. Retrieved January 26, 2003, from Temple University, Department of Education web site: <http://tuj.ac.jp/newsite/main/tesol/ne0103.html/>

Morris, P. & Fritz, C. (2000). The name game: Retrieval practice to improve the learning of names. *The Journal of Experimental Psychology: Applied*. 6, 124-129.

One final comment to the students. If you have any problems with the items of advice, come and talk to me. The advice is meant to help not hinder your progress. For example, if you cannot find or the use the web sites, let me know and we can go to the computer room together and check it out.

In conclusion, these six items of advice can help build students vocabulary. Keyword mnemonics, attaching significant meaning to new vocabulary, verbalizing new vocabulary aloud, CALL, mapping concepts and vocabulary, and word games are methods that have been explained to students to acquire vocabulary. The appropriate research and documentation of these methods have been stated for the teachers. The main themes extracted from the advice is that frequently practiced words in many different contexts will help learners not only with the definition of the word, but how to use it in real life situations. Acquisition of new vocabulary will help students to communicate more fluently. Students will be able to express their ideas more concisely and understand interlocutors better as well.

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概 要

語彙習得のための助言

日本の大学で英語教育に携わる母国語話者に対して頻繁に尋ねられる質問の1つに「どうやったら語彙を増やすことができるか」がある。

本稿では、語彙習得法について7通りの助言を提示したい。

以下に述べる語彙攻略法は英語の中級学習者を学習とするものであるが、英語に限らず他の言語習得にも適用可能である。

また、7つの助言は学習者が単独で実践できるものもあるが、場合によってはコンピューターの支援や教員の指導を必要とするものもある。

7項目中の「要旨」と「細目」は学習者向けに、「正当性」と「参照」は担当者に向けて書かれたものである。