

In 1991, a group of 216 teachers from Brazil, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Israel, Mexico, Nigeria, Russia, Sweden, Yugoslavia and Zimbabwe were all asked the same question: *What did you find most difficult as a learner?* For all of them the most problematic aspect of learning a foreign language was the acquisition of vocabulary.

learners' own language. Spanish and English both have many words of Latin origin, which makes the learning burden lighter. However, false cognates can sometimes cause problems. For example, *relative* is *pariente* in Spanish, *parents* is *padres*. Language learners first try to identify the meaning of a new word by referring to similar-sounding words in their mother tongue.

A way with words

Flavia Priotto
offers some sensible
strategies and activities
to help learn vocabulary.

And it isn't only teachers who think this way. When I asked a group of learners from different levels to rank their own difficulties in order, they agreed that vocabulary was one of the most complex areas of language learning because of the numerous aspects involved in learning a new word.

According to Nation (1990), knowing a word means knowing the:

- pronunciation
- spelling
- part of the sentence it occupies
- grammatical pattern
- collocations
- frequency
- appropriateness
- meaning
- associations with other words.

So, it seems hardly surprising that vocabulary is considered to be one of the most difficult areas of learning a foreign language.

Why is it such a problem?

Nation believes that learning a word (receptively or productively) depends on three things: the learners' previous experience in English and in their mother tongue; the way in which the word is learnt or taught; and the intrinsic difficulty of the word.

1 Previous experience

The meaning of many English words can be predicted because of the similarity they have with words in the

Teachers need to bring false cognates to the learners' attention, to avoid fossilised learning.

It has been demonstrated that early learners store vocabulary items according to sounds and form. That is, they tend to connect similar-sounding words like *horse* and *house*. Because of this, words with a similar sound or spelling should not be introduced in the early stages. Learners at higher levels, on the other hand, store vocabulary according to meaning. That is, they tend to connect words like *cow* and *horse*. As a result, if they have poor knowledge of a certain topic, it will be more difficult for them to associate a new item with previous knowledge.

The more predictable and regular the features of a word (either because of mother tongue similarity or target language previous knowledge), the lighter the learning burden.

Some of the features which have an important effect on the learning burden are:

Spoken form

The relationship between sounds and spelling, or the unfamiliar combination of sounds (sound clusters) poses great difficulty in learning a word.

Grammatical patterns

If a word occurs in a grammatical pattern which is similar to the mother tongue, the problem is reduced. However, many words occur in totally unpredictable structures, which have no similarity with the mother tongue.

Collocation

We can't always predict collocations from the form, the meaning or the mother tongue translation of the word.

Frequency

Short words occur most frequently in English. This is not so in all languages. Students tend to use long, infrequent words because of the similarity they have with the mother tongue.

Appropriacy

It is very difficult to sound totally appropriate when the speaker does not live in the target language community. Appropriacy has to do with the degree of politeness, formality, variety, connotation, etc of a certain word or expression.

Meaning

Meaning can't always be predicted from the form, the parts or the sound of a word. Moreover, onomatopoeic sounds may vary between cultures.

Association

To store words in the brain, learners need to make associations with other words in the target language.

2 Learning and teaching styles

The learning of a word can be affected by the way it is presented. For example, bad organisation, lack of repetition or practice, use of ungraded material, etc can result in unsuccessful learning because these factors increase the difficulty of learning a word.

Similarities between words can help the learning process, but they can also sometimes result in greater difficulty. For example, when learning opposites, similar features will strengthen the association and differences will interfere. For instance, *short* and *long* both describe length; they are often taught at the same time and the teacher uses similar actions or pictures. These factors can cause cross-association and make these words much more difficult to learn than if they were presented separately.

Exceptions, too, make learning more difficult. So, only after the rule has been mastered should the exception be introduced.

3 Intrinsic difficulty

It has been found that the part of speech of a word affects the learning of it. Nouns are the easiest to learn, followed by adjectives. Verbs and adverbs are the most difficult to learn.

In addition, the learning difficulty is affected by whether a word is learnt simply to be recognised (receptively) or actually to be produced (productively). It is easier just to recognise a word than it is to recall its meaning and produce it in the right situation.

Vocabulary-learning strategies

As we can see, vocabulary learning is not an easy task. We need, therefore, to develop strategies to help learners to cope with new vocabulary items. Some of the most common and useful strategies are:

- Writing sentences using a key word
- Making notes about the use of a new word
- Writing the pronunciation/stress
- Organising the vocabulary according to topics (in word webs)
- Writing synonyms/opposites
- Drawing pictures/diagrams
- Making lists of words and expressions with their translations
- Writing the definition in English
- Associating the different speech parts (verb, noun, adjective, etc)
- Writing the collocations
- Guessing words from context
- Using a dictionary
- Using mnemonic techniques
- Learning prefixes, suffixes, roots, etc.

Vocabulary-learning activities

Learners need to be given motivating and cognitively-demanding activities when they are presented with new vocabulary to learn. Here are some examples of good vocabulary learning activities:

- Matching (opposites, words and definitions, words with pictures, etc)
- Discriminating or organising vocabulary according to subject matter
- Playing games (puzzles, crosswords, etc)
- Completing charts
- Describing pictures or events
- Grids

- Clines
- Clusters
- Roleplaying
- Exchanging information through information gap activities
- Surveys and questionnaires
- Gap-fill (cloze) texts
- Multiple-choice activities
- Decoding codes
- Solving letter soups
- Miming
- Completing sentences by looking at pictures or prompts
- Finding collocations from cards
- Finding words from their definitions
- Using vocabulary cards
- Organising charts and word webs
- Paraphrasing
- Writing opposites and synonyms
- Finding a hidden word.

Recycling and adapting activities

One of the key aspects of vocabulary learning is recycling. Students need to be presented with the same vocabulary items several times in different contexts and activities. Furthermore, each task should be more cognitively demanding than the last.

In order to use the activities suggested here with different learners, some modification may be needed. >>>

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