

Learning One Hundred Words A Day through Association and Note-taking

by Yuehai (Mike) Xiao

According to Sweller (2005), some guiding principles of the cognitive load theory include: a. humans' working memory has limited capacity; b. schemata, the organized background knowledge stored in long-term memory, can serve as a central executive for working memory; and c. automated schemata, meaning the schemata that are activated autonomously, can reduce the constraints on the limited capacity of working memory and facilitate the comprehension of learning materials. The general pedagogical implication is that instruction in general should reduce the cognitive load of students' working memory and facilitate schemata construction and automation (Sweller, 1994; Xiao, 2008).

One way to construct schemata is through connecting new knowledge to prior knowledge. Analogous to this function, the association method for building vocabulary might be useful for ESL teachers and learners. This paper presents two methods--association and note-taking, and some techniques within each method, of building vocabulary that have been successful for the author and his students. The new words that were used as examples to illustrate the techniques in the paper were meant for grade school ESL learners. These techniques can be used to learn the new words in the TOEFL, SAT, and GRE tests too--with up to 100 words a day!

Building Vocabulary through Association

It's true: one good word leads to another. That's the basis of the association method—building on what is known to learn something related, but new. In this way, the ESL learner can develop vocabulary from everyday language—antonyms, categories, prefixes, roots, sentence construction, similar spelling, suffixes, synonyms. Examples of each follow.

Antonyms

arbitrary: objective
relaxed: busy
hostile: friendly

Categories

fruit: apple orange watermelon strawberry litchi banana
job: lawyer painter teacher nurse carpenter accountant manager

Prefixes

mis: misunderstand mistake misfortune
un: unlikely (not likely) unimportant (not important) unfair (not fair)

Roots

commit: committee commitment commission
spect: respect inspector spectacles spectator prospects

Sentence construction

disturbing: It is disturbing when a cell phone rings in the classroom.

Similar spelling

brush: bush rush brush

petty: pretty jetty

wander: wonder sander

Suffixes

ly: kindly friendly daily

ship: friendship hardship dictatorship

Synonyms

employment: occupation job career calling profession work

petty: small unimportant trivial minor

Note that, as in the case of “petty,” new words and the words that they are associated with can serve in more than one category—another way to link.

Building Vocabulary through Note-Taking

Note-taking is a way of learning vocabulary by paying attention to the frequency and contextual meaning of a word. This is done by noting new words, through fast scanning, underlining, or jotting them down, when speed reading a text. Fast scanning can increase the appearance of a new word; this helps remember and construct vocabulary (the schemata). Extensive online resources are available for ESL learners and for lower level learners of EFL/ESL who want to speed read. One useful site is <http://www.aitechac.jp/~iteslj/ESL.html>, which provides a thematically organized list of suggested links with a searchable database of further links.

The note-taking procedure has several steps, each of which helps the ESL learner remember and use new words effectively. Here are the steps:

- Highlight or write down each new word or phrase in the passage you read.
- On a page in a notebook, write down the date, title of the text, and page number.
- In two columns, on the left write each new word; on the right, give the definition, L1 translation, or other annotation, such as antonyms and synonyms.
- Use the association method to memorize each new word. Mark the word in your own dictionary.
- Each day, review the two columns to become familiar with the new word.

The association method is an umbrella term for such memory tools as antonyms, categories, prefixes, roots, sentence construction, similar spelling, suffixes, synonyms.

Example of a notebook page

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Word	Definition
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flicker	quick back-and-forth movement of light
dull	boring, tedious
anticipate	expect
notorious	famous for having a bad or unsavory reputation
prim	controlled, restrained, formal

I can attest to the value of using these two methods of increasing vocabulary. When I prepared for the GRE, I memorized 10,000 new words in about three months. Those 10,000 new words earned me a \$50,000 scholarship to a master's program—each word was worth \$5! Academic training in graduate school led to my publishing academic papers and extensive presentations, and an invitation to serve as a reviewer for several scholarly journals. I also became an author of a book.

Most important, these methods benefited my students a great deal as well. Using them, they were able to improve their TOEFL and SAT scores, and have enhanced their discipline in studying and learning. I strongly recommend that you incorporate these vocabulary-building methods in your classroom.

References

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