COGNITIVE AND LINGUISTIC MECHANISMS IN VOCABULARY LEARNING AND RETENTION

Bakhridinova Nargiza Sobirovna
Uzbek State World Languages University
Senior Teacher of the Department of Applied Sciences №1

Baxtiyorova Guli Shahzodovna
Student of the English First Faculty
Uzbek State World Languages University

ABSTRACT

This paper examines how people learn and remember new vocabulary. It focuses on three main strategies: organizing words by topic (like sorting items into rooms in a house), connecting new words to real-life situations and personal experiences, and learning all the different forms of a word at the same time. The paper draws on existing research in cognitive psychology and language learning to support these ideas. The findings suggest that vocabulary is remembered much better when it is organized, personally meaningful, and learned in complete form. These strategies are simple enough for any learner to apply in daily study.

Keywords: *vocabulary learning, memory organization, topic-based learning, real-life application, word forms, retention.*

ANNOTATSIYA

Ushbu maqolada insonlar yangi so‘z boyligini qanday o‘rganishi va xotirada saqlab qolishi tahlil qilinadi. Tadqiqotda uchta asosiy strategiyaga e’tibor qaratilgan: so‘zlarni mavzular bo‘yicha tizimlashtirish (xuddi buyumlarni uydagi xonalarga joylashtirgandek), yangi so‘zlarni real hayotiy vaziyatlar va shaxsiy tajribaga bog‘lash hamda so‘zning barcha turli shakllarini bir vaqtning o‘zida o‘rganish. Mazkur g‘oyalarni ilmiy jihatdan asoslash uchun kognitiv psixologiya va til o‘rganish sohasidagi mavjud tadqiqotlarga tayanilgan. Tadqiqot natijalari shuni ko‘rsatadiki, so‘z boyligi tizimli ravishda guruhlanganda, shaxsiy ahamiyatga ega bo‘lganda va yaxlit shaklda o‘rganilganda xotirada ancha yaxshi saqlanib qoladi. Ushbu strategiyalar shunchalik soddaki, ularni har qanday til o‘rganuvchi kundalik mustaqil ta’lim jarayonida osongina qo‘llashi mumkin.

Kalit so‘zlar: *so‘z boyligini o‘rganish, xotirani shakllantirish, mavzuga asoslangan ta’lim, real hayotda qo‘llash, so‘z shakllari, xotirada saqlab qolish.*

АННОТАЦИЯ

В данной статье рассматривается, как люди усваивают и запоминают новые лексические единицы. Основное внимание уделяется трем ключевым стратегиям: организации слов по темам (по аналогии с распределением вещей по комнатам в доме), связыванию новых слов с реальными жизненными ситуациями и личным опытом, а также одновременному изучению различных грамматических форм слова. Для обоснования этих идей в работе используются существующие исследования в области когнитивной психологии и освоения языка. Результаты показывают, что лексика запоминается значительно лучше, если она структурирована, имеет личную значимость и усваивается в комплексной форме. Данные стратегии достаточно просты, что позволяет любому учащемуся применять их в процессе ежедневного самостоятельного обучения.

Ключевые слова: *изучение лексики, организация памяти, тематическое обучение, практическое применение, формы слова, удержание в памяти.*

INTRODUCTION

Learning new vocabulary is one of the most important parts of learning any language. It does not matter how good your grammar is — if you do not know enough words, you cannot communicate properly. Yet most learners struggle with vocabulary. They study words, feel like they know them, and then forget them a few days later. This is a very common experience, and there is actually a good reason for it.

The problem is often not a lack of effort. The problem is that many learners are using methods that do not match how the brain actually works. Research in cognitive psychology and linguistics has shown that the brain does not remember random lists of words well. It remembers words that are connected to something — a structure, a personal experience, a feeling, or a pattern. When vocabulary learning uses these natural brain tendencies, the results are much better.

This paper focuses on three specific strategies. The first is topic-based vocabulary organization, which means grouping words into meaningful categories so the brain can retrieve them more easily. The second is applying language to real life, which means actively using new words in everyday situations that personally matter to the learner. The third is learning multiple word forms at the same time. The aim of this article is to explain why these strategies work and how they can be applied in practice.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Researchers have been studying vocabulary learning for many decades, and the field has produced clear and consistent findings. One of the most foundational is the idea that depth of processing determines how well something is remembered. Craik and Lockhart (1972) proposed that the more deeply a person processes a piece of information — thinking about its meaning, connecting it to other knowledge, using it in context — the stronger the memory trace becomes. Simply reading a word and its translation is shallow.

Nation (2001), one of the most cited researchers in vocabulary acquisition, showed that learners need to seea word many times before they really learn it, and seeing it in different situations helps them learn it better. He also demonstrated the importance of knowing a word in all its grammatical forms, not just the base form. This directly supports the strategy of learning word forms together, which is discussed later in this paper.

Schmidt (1990) introduced the concept of "noticing" — the idea that learners only acquire language features they consciously pay attention to. This supports real-life vocabulary use. When a learner deliberately looks for a word in the target language for something they see or experience, they are engaging in exactly the process of noticing Schmidt described, which greatly improves retention.

Baddeley (1986) studied working memory and described a "phonological loop" — a mental system that briefly holds the sound of a word in mind. This helps explain why saying a word aloud or repeating it internally helps with learning. It also supports the benefit of encountering words in spoken contexts, not just written ones. Together, these theories form a strong foundation for the strategies discussed in this paper.

METHODOLOGY

This article is a review-based study. It does not collect new data from participants. Instead, it examines existing theories and findings in cognitive psychology and applied linguistics and uses them to evaluate three vocabulary learning strategies. The strategies were selected based on common difficulties that language learners report, and each one is analyzed using established theoretical frameworks. The focus is on understanding why certain strategies work, using theoretical explanation and practical examples rather than statistics.

The three main frameworks used in the analysis are the levels of processing theory (Craik & Lockhart, 1972), Nation's (2001) vocabulary knowledge framework, and Schmidt's (1990) noticing hypothesis. These were chosen because they are

directly relevant to the strategies being discussed and are well-established in the literature.

RESULTS

First, organizing vocabulary by topic significantly improves recall. The brain uses associative memory — it finds words by following connections to related words, not by searching at random. When words are grouped into meaningful clusters, such as "travel," "family," or "health," the brain builds a richer network around each word, making it much easier to retrieve under pressure. Words that are stored in isolation have no such network to support them.

Second, connecting new words to real-life situations leads to much stronger retention than passive study. When learners use words in contexts that are personally meaningful — describing their own experiences, naming what they see around them, talking about plans and hopes — they engage emotionally and cognitively at the same time. This engagement creates a deeper memory trace that is more durable over time.

Third, learning word forms simultaneously is more efficient than learning them separately. When a learner studies "decide," "decision," "decisive," and "decisively" together, they are storing four connected pieces of knowledge in one session. This increases vocabulary size without requiring much extra study time and helps learners recognize language patterns, making it easier to learn new words in the future.

DISCUSSION

The three strategies discussed in this paper all share a common principle: they work with the brain's natural tendencies. Vocabulary that meets all of these strategies is far more likely to be remembered.

The brain-as-a-house analogy helps illustrate this clearly. Imagine your memory as a house. If everything inside is mixed up — clothes in the kitchen, food in the bedroom — finding anything is slow and frustrating. But if the house is properly organized, with each room serving a clear purpose, you know exactly where to look for what you need. Our brains work the same way. When words are stored in organized "rooms" — grouped by topic, theme, or context — the brain knows where to search when it needs to retrieve a word quickly. Randomly memorized words, by contrast, are like objects thrown into a pile. They might technically be there, but finding them in the middle of a real conversation is extremely hard. This is exactly why learners sometimes go blank on a word they clearly studied — it was never stored in any meaningful structure.

The principle of real-life language application goes beyond simply "using the language more". It is about creating personal connections between new words and lived experience. When a learner walks down the street and actively names everything they see in the language they are learning — the buildings, the weather, the people, the feelings they have — something important happens. Each word becomes attached to a real sensory moment. If they do not know a word, they look it up immediately, use it in that moment, and it becomes part of a real memory. This is a completely different experience from writing it on a flashcard. The word is no longer just a definition. It belongs to a real place and a real time in that person's life.

The same strategy can be used with time as well. A learner who talks about what happened to them yesterday, what they are doing today, and what they are planning and hoping for next month is covering a vast range of vocabulary naturally. More importantly, that vocabulary is vocabulary they actually need and care about. Personal relevance, as the research consistently shows, is one of the strongest predictors of retention.

Learning word forms together is perhaps the simplest of the three strategies to implement, but it is one of the most consistently overlooked. Many learners study the verb form of a word, consider it learned, and move on. But a word is not truly known until it can be used in all its grammatical roles. Knowing that "decide" becomes "decision" as a noun and "decisive" as an adjective does not take much extra time to learn, but it results in vocabulary that is far more flexible and usable.

CONCLUSION

This paper has argued that vocabulary learning is most effective when it is organized, personally meaningful, and complete. The brain is not a passive storage box. It is an active, associative system that learns best when new information connects naturally to what it already knows and cares about. Memorizing unrelated words from a list does not match how the brain works. Building vocabulary that is sorted by topic, tied to real experiences, and rich in word forms does.

The three strategies discussed — topic-based organization, real-life application, and simultaneous learning of word forms — are not complicated, time-consuming or expensive. They do not require special technology or courses. They simply require a shift in how learners think about vocabulary learning. A word is not truly learned when it is copied into a notebook. It is learned when you can find it when you need it, use it correctly in a real context, and recognize it in all its forms.

Future research could explore how these three strategies work in combination and whether certain types of learners benefit more from one approach than another.

For any language learner — beginner or advanced — these principles are a practical and accessible place to start.

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