

Facilitating Vocabulary Learning by “3R”-- Recycling, Repetition and Retrieve

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Abstract: Vocabulary learning is serving as an essential role in language acquisition. Although traditionally there are debates over vocabulary learning, studies of vocabulary has recently gained much more attention at an academic level. This article shed lights on how to further vocabulary learning by the mechanism consisted of recycling, repetition and retrieve. By elaborating the conception of this mechanism, this article reached a conclusion that, for one thing, it can help teachers and administrators set appropriate targets for learning in order to encourage learners to obtain vocabulary learning skills that are expected. For another, vocabulary items must not only be known but also be known well so that students can use the vocabulary automatically and accurately.

KeyWords: Vocabulary learning; Recycling; Repetition; Retrieve

1. Introduction

It is said that learning a language is one of the most complex accomplishments that humans have achieved. James Milton (2009) once cited in his book that “(w)ords are the building blocks of language and without them there is no language.” The importance of learning vocabulary is as equal as that of vocabulary itself. Although traditionally there are lively debates over vocabulary learning, the study of vocabulary has recently become much more fashionable at an academic level. And this interest has transferred itself to the foreign language teaching mainstream. Therefore, theories about second language vocabulary acquisition is developing constantly. Recent years researchers put forward the notion of vocabulary repetition, retrieve and recycling from psychological perspective. The former deals with the question how the vocabulary is learned while the latter two touches upon the issues how it is forgotten.^[1]

2. Vocabulary recycling, recycling, repetition and retrieve

An individual needs to practice and revise what he/she has learned previously otherwise the input will gradually fade and finally disappear. If a person does not use the memory representation they have formed, the memory will fade or decay over time. In other words, information stored in our memory falls into discard unless it is activated regularly. Similarly, if one does not revise or recycle what he/she has learned before, he/she may fail to recall that knowledge. Learning second language vocabulary is not an exemption. In this vein, it is noteworthy to recycle, repeat and retrieve the vocabulary which is learned.^[2]

New material that is recycled and repeated is to be satisfactorily learned. Milton (2009) stated that this also apply for vocabulary teaching. In his article, Milton reviewed the issues about vocabulary recycling in textbooks, and drew upon Nation's suggestion that few textbooks actually contain recycling parts, even though many researchers implied that recycling can be an important element of success in learning. As the author mentioned, the recycling of words are not always systematic in textbooks may explain why several hundred words never to be acquired. Generally speaking, the results shown that the more an word is repeated in the textbook, and presumably it means the learners are exposed to it, the more likely it is to be learned.

However, this was not the whole story. The results also suggested that even very high repetition does not guarantee learning. Similarly, low repetition does not stands for failure in learning. There were several factors here. One factor may be the impact from oral presentation and recycling of the pronunciation. Another one included the elements of words difficulty. For instance, words that are highly imageable or more accessible are learned easily despite of low course book repetition.^[3]

Milton confirmed that systematical recycling really can play a role in vocabulary acquisition, even it does not tell the whole story. One thing of certain is that a well-designed textbook with a good choice of vocabulary includes recycling, can enhance learning and aid to recall.

Back to 1896, Gairns and Redman postulated that vocabulary recycling is a direct consequence of the theories of forgetting. On the one hand, the memory traces gradually fade in the memory without regular practice, so it is of significance that the teachers create opportunities in the classroom for the students to practise what they have learned. On the other hand, students learn different courses at the same time, and other learning activities may interfere with the retention of new lexical input.

3. Pedagogical Implication

With regard to the implication that the rate of forgetting has an impact on the recycling of vocabulary input, Gairns and Redman

draw upon Peter Russell's (1979) revision schedule which encompassed four reviews that happen in gradually longer intervals, ensuring that new material is permanently recorded. Although they suggest that such a detail plan will not be realistic until the course designers integrated systematic lexical recycling into the prescribed syllabus, they still believe that this type of recycling should be possible if the teacher incorporates some organized recycling activities such as warmer activities and quick reviews of important lexis one to two days after initial input. As for further recycling, weekly or monthly progress tests are a practical way to compensate for the memory decline. [4]

Finally, recycling is not only a matter of quantity, but also of quality. Teachers may provide many examples of sentences to illustrate words' meaning. Nevertheless, varied examples of sentences can be overwhelming, ending up with more confusion than understanding. From the perspective of contextualization of new lexical input, the function of recycling is to expand the context range of an item so as to promote words retention or recall.

As mentioned above, vocabulary recycling serves as an engine in vocabulary learning. However, it is unwise to recycle all their vocabulary systematically as is widely thought essential for learning, and successful EFL course books and teachers appear to strike a balance between frequent and non-frequent vocabulary.

In addition to words recycling, there are other methods that facilitate vocabulary teaching and learning. The second major way that may lead to a word being remembered is retrieval. Nation pointed out that "(i)f that word is subsequently retrieved during the task then the memory of that word will be strengthened" (2001, p.103). When the learners hear or see the form of the word, they need to retrieve what they know of its meaning, which means learners may retrieve the ideas stored from previous meetings and the content and information from the present meeting.

Retrieval can be receptive or productive. Receptive retrieval is perceiving the form and having to retrieve its meaning in listening and reading tasks. And as Nation suggested, an effective way to get repeated retrieval is to read the same story several times. Productive retrieval means to retrieve a word's spoken or written form as in speaking or writing. Teachers can design retrieval into speaking activities by making the task involve retelling. And it will be more convenient if the teacher is able to supplement the story re-telling with pictures and blackboard drawings.

Furthermore, learners need an opportunity to meet a recently met word again before the memory of the previous meeting fades. Too much time that has passed between the previous meeting and the present encounter with the word will turn the present encounter into a first encounter with the word, so repetition is another essential factor of vocabulary learning.

It is not simply repetition which is important but the spacing of repetitions. In regard of this, two types of repetition ought to be commented. "Massed repetition involves spending a continuous period of time, say fifteen minutes, giving repeated attention to a word. Spaced repetition involves spreading the repetitions across a long period of time, but not spending more time in total on the study of the words" (Nation, 2001, p114). Ample researches on memory and second language vocabulary learning stated that spaced repetition achieves more secure learning than massed repetition. So, the words repetition should be spaced at increasingly larger intervals. For example, word cards will usually involve repetition in that learners can change the way they process the cards by thinking of different sentences containing the word and the different contexts of use. (Zhang and Lu, 2015) [5]

4. Conclusion

Vocabulary learning is vital for language acquisition. Students are expected and encouraged to master more vocabulary. The best way to enhance one's memory in vocabulary learning may be the natural osmosis from the language which surrounds them inside or outside class. As for what has mentioned above, it should be of interest to everyone involved in vocabulary acquisition that vocabulary items must not only be known but also be known well so that they can be used automatically and accurately. It can help teachers and administrators set appropriate targets for learning so that learners can have the vocabulary learning skills that are expected.

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