

The Status Quo of Latin Vocabulary Learning

Vocabulary acquisition and retention is an important part of learning a second language. Students are asked to incorporate new vocabulary words into their long-term memory on a regular basis. Over time many students struggle with ever increasing numbers of words they must know (Nation, 2005).

To improve retention, it is necessary for teachers to understand how students learn vocabulary. Constructionist theory going all the way back to Piaget suggests that the brain organizes knowledge in a framework called schemata. Without these connections between words and ideas in the brain it would very difficult to retrieve information from our memory. Learning of L2 vocabulary involves processing the new words into existing schemata (Alessi & Dwyer, 2008).

A better understanding of how the brain naturally classifies and organizes information will allow second language instructors to facilitate learning by helping students make the associations and see patterns between the L1 and L2 languages (Horst & Collins, 2006). Barcroft's study (2009) found that allowing learners more time to process new words had a positive effect on vocabulary acquisition and retention.

Other studies suggest that the higher the student's involvement in the learning activity the greater the vocabulary acquisition and retention. Students must practice using new words, if they are going to incorporate them into long term memory. Laufer (2006) found that students who read a text with target words, discussed words in small groups, and answered comprehension questions scored significantly higher than students who were simply given a list of vocabulary to memorize for a quiz.

Fan (2003) conducted a study in Hong Kong with college students studying English to identify the strategies that promote vocabulary learning. There is evidence in this study that the students' positive perception of the usefulness of a learning strategy can increase their use of the strategy. This "thinking" about their learning is called metacognition (Flavell, 1979) and can be an excellent means of improving learning.

Mnemonics, word association, flashcards and meaningful repetition are all cognitive tools that can be used to assist students with vocabulary acquisition and retention. Making students aware of learning strategies and helping them determine which ones facilitate learning is an example metacognition in the classroom. One study (Anderson, 1998) explored the use of multiple intelligences to improving vocabulary retention in 7th & 8th grade Latin students. Students were encouraged to use more than one intelligence to study vocabulary, thus incorporating dual encoding theory. Post-intervention data showed an increase in vocabulary quiz grades and an increased awareness of personal learning style.

A study by McKeown & Gentilucci (2007) suggests that opened ended questions can encourage second language students to think about how they develop their understanding of a reading passage. Other cognitive research suggests that visual stimuli create strong memories (Cohen & Johnson, 2011) that can help students learn foreign language vocabulary.

Although the teacher can promote active learning through engaging classroom activities, individual learning differences are not always address through whole group instruction. Giving learners the opportunity to work at their own pace is important. One way to differentiate vocabulary learning is through flashcards. In an action research study of flashcard use and time spent studying for Latin 2 vocabulary quizzes (Stehle, 2010) the results showed that use of flashcards was more important than time spent studying on long term vocabulary retention.

The connections between metacognition and increased vocabulary acquisition and retention is currently one of the most promising lines of research in educational psychology.

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