

E2. STRATEGIES FOR LEARNING VOCABULARY

E2. C Miscellaneous techniques for vocabulary learning

Walking around

Some people find walking around, or going for a walk with vocabulary cards to memorize helpful. It is one way of relieving tension.

Reading aloud and writing

Both reading or repeating aloud and writing out words can be purely mechanical techniques, but there is no doubt that using the auditory and motor channels as well as the visual one does reinforce learning and some learners will benefit from either or both techniques.

Labelling

Labelling items in one's environment such as furniture, kitchen utensils etc with word cards at beginner level can be a valuable technique. Others may find it helpful to put up lists of words to be learnt by the kitchen sink or over a desk to jog their memory visually when engaged in other activities

Recording

Record the vocabulary you want to memorize on tape. You can choose to record Japanese words only or the words plus their definitions too. If the former, you will need a written record in addition to which you can refer when you forget a meaning. Taping the Japanese words only is a good way of revising vocabulary already learnt and of testing yourself. More preferable than recording the words alone is recording them in context; in a sentence which shows their appropriate use. It takes a little time and effort to record but once you have your vocabulary on tape you can listen to it over and over again. Use the tapes as an aid both to conscious and unconscious learning. You may simply want the sounds to wash over you while you are driving, for example, or doing the washing up. You don't have to be concentrating on listening the whole time. I have found it helpful to repeat words 2 or 3 times when recording. Otherwise I find when playing back that the tape has run on to the next word before my brain has had time to absorb the last one and register its meaning. For those who find that they need the prop of the written word and are uneasy in conversation with native Japanese speakers for fear they will not understand, listening to a tape alone is excellent training in weaning oneself from dependence on the written word.

Creating your own sentences and drills

Put new vocabulary items into different structures and drill yourself. Create as many sentences as you can using the word you yourself are seeking to learn. This will increase the range of associations the word has for you and so its memorability, as well as giving you facility in its use.

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E2. D Organizing your vocabulary learning

There are many ways of storing vocabulary. The important thing is to develop a system that works for you.

Vocabulary notebooks or files

This is probably the most common method of keeping a record of new words learnt. Shearin(*1) lists some ways of organizing them.

- Alphabetically-a page or two is set aside for each letter of the alphabet and new words and expressions beginning with that letter are added to the pages. This will only work if you are writing your words in Roman letters which should be avoided if possible. If you write in hiragana, you can use the `a, i, u, e, o, ' order, though it will take some getting used to at first.
- The new Japanese word is recorded in Japanese with a definition also in Japanese
- The Japanese word is recorded with its mother tongue equivalent preferably in two clearly separate columns so that one or other column can be covered up for self testing.
- The new word is listed with a picture wherever possible.
- Words are listed by topic.
- Topic networks - each page can be given a whole page.
- Grammatical categories - verb, noun, adjective etc.

Before you decide on how to organize your vocabulary think whether you want also to include a column for Kanji.

The importance of context.

*Whatever method you use, avoid noting words down in isolation. Learning vocabulary in context is **vital** to successful language learning, thus your notebook should contain examples of your newly acquired vocabulary in **sample sentences**. This becomes more and more important the further you advance in your knowledge of the language.*

In Japanese, for example, particles like 'wa' and 'ga' or 'ni' and 'o' are crucial to meaning. Make sure you note down with new vocabulary the accompanying particles. When learning the words 'noru' (to get on') and 'oriru' ('to get off') ensure you learn them together with their particles ('basu **ni** noru' and 'basu **o** oriru'.) The equivalent in English is learning vocabulary items together with prepositions.

Vocabulary cards

The great advantage of these is that they are easily transportable and lend themselves to various ways of organization. They are useful for revising in odd moments on public transport or when waiting for someone. Cards can be neater than notebooks and plenty of information can be stored on them, including examples of the words in context. The most common use of cards is probably to write the new item on one side and the other tongue equivalent on the other.

Here are a few additional suggestions for use.

- a. Write the Japanese word on one side and a whole sentence using the word on the other. When you look at the word, try and remember the sentence it was used in
- b. A variation on this is to replace the word by a blank on the sentence side of the card. Look at either side of the card and test yourself by trying to give the other.
- c. Take a pack of 25 vocabulary cards. When reviewing them, put cards you can do easily at the bottom of the pack. If you have to hesitate with it but then get it right, stick it into the middle of the pack. If you can't do it at all, put it back into the pack just a few cards from the top.
- d. In Japan it is easy to buy sets of small cards on rings. These are easily slipped into a pocket and make for easy cyclical revision of vocabulary although it is not possible to increase the frequency of revision of items less easy to remember as suggested in c.
- e. If you are out and about walking or travelling with your cards, try keeping one pocket for cards which need reviewing and another for ones you feel fairly sure of. You can transfer cards from one pocket to another as you review them.

Word box a.

When you meet a new word or phrase, write it on a piece of paper. On the other side write the meaning of the word and/or use it in a sentence which shows its meaning. Fold the paper in half so that the meaning of the word is on the inside and put it into a box. From time to time take out the words and check whether you know the meaning without unfolding the paper. If you get the word right 3 times, take it out of the box and throw it away. You can probably now consider the word as learnt!

Word box b.

Keep a card index box divided into 2 sections labelled 'known' and 'unknown' or 2 separate boxes likewise labelled. Every now and then, go through the 'known' box or section and check that you still know all the words. Those you are unsure of should be transferred to the 'unknown' box. Likewise, items learnt out of the 'unknown' section can be transferred to the 'known' one.

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E2.E Strategies for coping when you don't know a word.

These are some things you can do when talking to someone and finding that you are lost for a word or words.

- **Avoid** where possible **using your mother tongue**. Be adventurous.
- **Describe what something is used for**. (e. g. ask 'what do you call the machine you use to clean the carpet?'-to elicit the answer 'a vacuum cleaner').
- **Paraphrase - describe** what something looks like or what it is made of etc.
- **Use a word close in meaning**. e. g. If you don't know the word for stool, say 'it's a kind of chair.'
- **Invent a new word or expression**. e. g. for gallery in English, you could invent the word 'picture place'.
- **Use substitute words** like the English examples 'thingummy' or 'whatsaname'.
- **Miming**.
- **Sound effects**.
- **Drawing or showing the object** if that is possible.

If you are reading or listening to a conversation, make use of **context clues** in guessing the meaning of unknown words. Nattinger(*2) lists 3 types.

1. Clues from the topic which in conversation is obvious from the type of social interaction involved, and which in reading may be signalled by an outline or title for the reading passage.
2. Clues from other words in the discourse which is full of redundancy and parallelism. The following examples show the types of contexts which can provide the meaning of an unfamiliar word.
 - synonym in apposition: Our uncle was a **nomad**, an incurable wanderer who never could stay in one place.
 - antonym: While the aunt loved Marty deeply, she absolutely **despised** his twin brother Smarty.
 - cause and effect: By surrounding the protesters with armed policemen, and by arresting the leaders of the movement, the rebellion was effectively **quashed**..
 - association between an object and its purpose or use: The scientist removed the **treatise** from the shelf and began to read.

- description: Tom received a new **roadster** for his birthday. It is a sports model, red with white interior and bucket seats, capable of reaching speeds of more than 150 mph.
- example: Mary can be quite gauche; yesterday she blew her nose on the new linen tablecloth.

3. Clues from grammatical structure and intonation in speech.

Notes for E2. D and E

1. Sheerin, S Self Access OUP 1989 p172ff
2. Nattinger in Carter, R. and McCarthy, M. Vocabulary and Language Teaching Longman 1988

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E2. F Ways of acquiring new vocabulary

1. Always carry a dictionary and notebook with you.

It's surprising how few people do. Note down new words especially when listening to others talk. Even at a beginner level try and pick out words in a church service, for example, that you can write down and look up in a dictionary afterwards. In any one sermon some words are bound to be repeated a number of times and you will begin to wonder what they mean. It pays to note them down straightaway. The chances are that you won't remember what the word was later. Where possible in conversation be active in asking what words mean and questioning people if you don't understand the meaning. You will need to weigh up the disadvantages of disrupting the process of communication to do so against the advantages of making the most of a learning opportunity. It's all too easy to let unfamiliar words and phrases in conversation slip by and be content with a vague understanding.

2. When preaching or giving a talk, check with a native speaker beforehand.

Check whether words that you may have had to look up in a dictionary are appropriate for your context. Dictionaries are not always the best source of new vocabulary and many of us have difficulties with the kanji in English/ Japanese dictionaries.

3. Learn what you want and need to learn.

If you are not a very book-oriented person, learn from situations around you rather than from lists in a book. Vocabulary learning lends itself to this kind of learning more than grammar, for example which needs a more structured approach. If you have a cooperative Japanese speaker, use him or her as a resource person. Note down things you want to know how to say when you think of them or find yourself in situations

where you are lost for words and then have a session where you get your friend to tell you how to express yourself in those situations.

4. **Reading is the main key to building vocabulary .**

However reading in Japanese is not such an easy task for many of us. **One important thing to remember is not to tackle reading material which contains more than 10% of vocabulary unknown to you.** A higher percentage will mean you are not able to cope without recourse to a dictionary and will make for very tedious work. Secondly, don't try to look up all the words you don't know as you go along. **Read for gist** and look up words later particularly those that are recurring or are keys to your overall comprehension. Use context cues. Be aware that there are different kinds of reading and that these different kinds lend themselves to different kinds of language practice. I will be going in to this in more detail in the section on strategies for reading.

5. **Make use of the radio and television** to increase your vocabulary.

Resist the temptation to have bilingual TV if you can. You can learn so much without it. Morgan and Rinvoluceri give one example of how TV can be used... (*1) A Turkish engineer learning English told them how each day he viewed and audio-recorded the 6 p.m.news in England. He would listen to the recording, pick out the unfamiliar words and transcribe them, then look them up in an English-English dictionary and from the definitions provide his own Turkish translations. At 9 p. m. he would listen to the news again, and hear many of the words in the same or a slightly modified context. Finally he tested himself next morning, using his bilingual list, covering up first one side and then the other.

Notes

1. Morgan, J. and Rinvoluceri, M. Vocabulary OUP 1986 p.5.