

Towards a Positive and Informed Approach to Vocabulary Learning

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One of my earliest childhood memories and language learning experiences was being on a hot sandy beach in Majorca, Spain, aged three, with my then six-year-old big sister. We were standing, chanting, “*Dos helados! Dos helados!*” while gesturing with two fingers to the person on the ice-cream stand. Contrary to what may first come to mind, we were not being rude! And, actually, until Googling it today, I never learned how to spell *ice-cream* in Spanish.

My mother, who is Japanese, used to speak a very little Japanese to me and my sister when we were growing up in England, and we used certain everyday words and phrases like *itadakimasu*, although the predominant language was English at home. Nonetheless, I recall hearing my mother tell us some Japanese traditional stories, such as *Momotaro*, both in Japanese and then English. She also sang some songs to us from which we learned some words and phrases. In addition, we chanted hiragana and had a picture book that my mum tried to use to teach us when I was about five-years old, but I was a very reluctant student with ants in my pants.

Eventually, my mum sent us to a friend of hers who taught Japanese, and whilst my older sister was very keen, I preferred to play on the floor and find other distractions. Somewhere along the way, though, I did learn to write most of my hiragana and some katakana, mostly by copying out the characters repeatedly and getting corrective feedback from my mum and teacher. Recognition and reading was aided by a picture book with some words like *sora* (sky) and some blocks with letters which I enjoyed playing with.

Visiting Japan on holiday when I was five, then again when I was eight and 12-years old, we discovered word cards and were encouraged to write down new words with Japanese on one side and English on the other. I recall that, although making the cards was not so enjoyable, I quite liked using word cards as it seemed to make learning words more like a game. However, it wasn't until I was 12 and got a Game Boy that I first really became motivated to learn Japanese to play some classic role-playing games. I bugged my mum constantly to help me translate various screen menus and storylines, which she did with the proviso that I wrote it down first. I carefully copied everything onto index cards matching the onscreen layout, then took the cards to my mum, often whilst she was busy cooking. Through these endeavours, I learnt a lot of very useful, high frequency vocabulary, e.g., *tatakau* (attack), *nigeru* (run away), *mahou* (magic). Well, important for the world of Wizardry in any case!

In school, aged 11, I began learning French, which I found difficult and therefore didn't like. But, as I didn't like not being good at it even more, I tried pretty hard to get better. In addition to the textbook, *Tricolore*, our school gave us an exercise book and vocabulary notebook which had a dividing line down the middle page of each page. We were instructed to write the letters A-Z at the top of each page and new words we learned were thus organised alphabetically. Our teacher told us to use red to mark feminine words and blue for masculine. Over the years, most of my teachers were English who spoke fluent French, but I also had a Belgian teacher for one year. In class, most of the activities were lockstep but we worked on all four skills and spent one class a week for one term a year in the language lab where we did listening and speaking exercises and could record and listen to our own voices,

too. We had weekly vocabulary tests and mid- and term exams covered all four skills, and included a one-to-one 5-10 minute oral interview. I think we were taught mostly through situation-based role-plays and audio-lingual methodology. From 13-16, I also learned German in much the same way.

Despite languages being my weakest subjects in school, I decided to read Law and Japanese at university, and make up for my lack of learning as a child. The Japanese course started from scratch and offered a year in Japan as an exchange student. Prior to starting university, I reviewed my limited Japanese, saved up and visited Japan for six weeks, armed with a bilingual dictionary, word cards, Japanese travel and phrase book. However, I seemed to get by using very little Japanese...

In the first year of university, we had a grammar class, kanji class (with a Monday morning weekly test!), language and conversation classes. Except for the latter, most were taught with English explanations, although after 2-4 weeks, there was no more romaji. Students were given about 1-2 weeks to learn hiragana then 1-2 weeks to learn katakana. I was blown away and impressed by my classmates who studied in just 1-2 months what I had slowly spent years learning! The only advantage I seemed to have after that was pronunciation to a small degree and some extra vocabulary from childhood.

To learn Japanese kanji, I'd bought Japanese notebooks and wrote them repeatedly whilst making up stories based on the radicals. I reviewed them on several times during the week and this helped me to do well. I returned to writing in pencil as this felt nicer than writing in pen, and I thought I could write more attractive characters that way. I also made bilingual lists of new words and organised them by topic/theme. My friends and I also went through a phase of labeling items around the house and testing each other, like a game. We did karaoke and belonged to the university Japanese Society where we met students from Japan and spoke some Japanese to them.

My third year was spent in Japan. Finally, I started to use more Japanese and develop my speaking, although it was really tough at first and I literally found myself still reading out of phrase books and not understanding the answers that I got! However, I continued to learn vocabulary by making word lists, using both a big kanji paper dictionary and bilingual electronic dictionary. I continued making word cards but knew nothing beyond using them in the most rudimentary way. When out with friends, we used to test each other reading signs randomly, which was quite fun, and going to karaoke with Japanese friends helped a bit with listening, reading, and speaking. Like many of my students now, I tried to write down every new word at first, but soon got overwhelmed so readjusted my strategy to targeting words that I thought might be useful to me then or in the future. However, this still left me in an ocean of vocabulary and I felt I was only just about keeping my head above water at best, and struggling not to drown most of the time!

Continuing into my fourth year, my vocabulary learning did not really change very much as I focused on dictionary use, word lists, testing myself, and sometimes studying with friends. However, I ran out of word cards and, not being able to buy them in England, abandoned this strategy.

On reflection, up to this point, I would say that my language learning and vocabulary study had been semi-structured, rather labour intensive and somewhat inefficient.

More recently, I started learning Malay and began with a basic word list of some 800 words. I use a depth of knowledge test to self-evaluate not only how many but also how well I know those words, and others that I add to it. I retest myself periodically to check my progress and, although I find this a bit time-consuming as I learn more, it is nonetheless motivating and a learning process in itself. In addition to using a small pocket dictionary, in which I highlight new and reviewed words, I frequently ask (in Malay), “What’s X in English/Malay?” or simply, “What’s this/that?” I’ve also used word cards with much greater success than before, having learned to use them more effectively and efficiently with expanding review: I learned nearly 200 words receptively in the first two months, and could use about 120 productively—a record for me! I still make some bilingual wordlists in a vocabulary notebook and really try to use what I learn. Reading Facebook posts and occasionally posting/texting in Malay has also been a good development along with listening to my wife speak Malay to our six-month son.

There are two major differences in my vocabulary learning since doing an MA TEFL/SL and my dissertation of vocabulary learning strategies: first my approach is now much more informed, and secondly, I no longer believe myself to be poor at languages but capable of becoming a better lifelong language learner.

“Ugga-Bugga Footoo”: The Transformative Power of the Word

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When I was a child, I believed that words and objects were inflexibly and inextricably connected. Consequently, when, around the age of three or four, I became aware that people in other countries spoke different languages, I marveled that they would go to such great lengths to devise other words for objects and actions rather than call things by their real names.

Still, it seemed an entertaining activity, and, if folks in other parts of the world could communicate by incomprehensible grunts and lip-smacks, I felt that I, too, could make up my own language. The problem was that I could never remember for very long whether *ugga-bugga footoo* meant a black cat or my yellow raincoat. That no one else knew or remembered brought communication to a screeching halt. From these early experiments with language, I learned three things: 1) the link between an object and its name is a communal, contextual transaction, 2) one must have some way of remembering this shared contextual meaning, and 3) people are very resistant to assigning new sounds to familiar objects until there is a pressing need to do so.

Moving forward to my lackadaisical efforts to learn Japanese, I see these early insights validated in my first Japanese communicative transactions. Certain words like *genki*, *douzo*, and *hashi* quickly became a natural part of my vocabulary. The frequency of these words was a factor, but, also, they were always situational and transactional, and, in the case of *douzo* and *hashi*, usually accompanied by gestures and objects that triggered a visual memory. *Genki*, however, is one of those words like *umwelt* or *schadenfreude* or *natsukashii* that are comprised of nuances and connotations requiring a host of words to express in English.