

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

Martha Robertson, Aichi University, Toyohashi Campus
 Email: marrober@alumni.iu.edu

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.

Genki expresses, most naturally, a state of being and a spirit to which I aspired long before I knew it had a name. I had to have it for my own.

Ownership of a word, however, means that the word flies easily to the lips, connecting a deeper feeling and desire with a current situation. So what to do about functional words and phrases such as counters, markers, and “When does the bus come”? I went about learning these items in the most dreary, rote way and found the whole exercise frustrating and dispiriting. Next, I tried those survival phrase books that feature brisk, intrepid cosmopolitan couples discussing where the jam came from and where the automobiles at the trade fair were made with their Japanese hosts. My God! They had just arrived in Japan! Weren’t there more interesting things to talk about? The books with all the colorful pictures, at first, seemed more engaging until the 10-year-old American girl woke up in the hotel room she shared with her mother and asked for the day’s weather report instead of asking when they were going to Disneyland. What was she doing sharing a room with her mother anyhow? Dad had asked for two rooms. In the US, we would consign the kids to the room next door and enjoy a bit of adult time. Not these folks. And why was a 10-year-old American girl speaking flawless Japanese to her English-speaking mother anyway? Weird! Needless to say, all these bizarre situational aspects distracted me from the task of learning language. Besides, all these folks seemed to acquire Japanese at a phenomenal rate and I always ran out of steam by the middle of the book.

Although the books did provide me with some useful phrases for special situations, the only way to own these phrases seemed to be by rote memorization. I don’t rent hotel rooms or go camping on a regular basis, so I still find myself looking up these phrases when the need arises. Not so with medical terms. I went through an extended period of inexplicable illness with a veritable *byouki teishoku* of symptoms. (*Byouki teishoku* became mine the first time I heard it because, not only did it describe my situation exactly, but it evoked marvelous images of a formal banquet table set with all kinds of disgusting physical symptoms—just the perverse sort of images that intrigue a warped personality.) As with other functional missions, I looked up the basic medical vocabulary and the grammatical structures for my complaints and wrote them in romaji. (I should say here that I am very much a visual learner and have almost no capacity for aural memorization.) After writing the phrases several times, I practiced saying the words, visualizing the conditions and procedures as I recited. My Japanese friends gave me words to describe the types of pain and symptoms not included in phrase books for travelers. Often, these words were onomatopoeic and slipped easily into the brain and off the tongue. After several visits to the hospital, I was able to discuss symptoms and treatments as easily as old men and women discuss their need for prune juice. Pain and need brought about opportunity, but ownership transpired only because of a fascination with all things deviant and medical and the pleasure of gossiping about them with friends and strangers.

(All this vocabulary transferred nicely when my friend asked me to take her cat to the vet. I did run into a bit of a snafu when discussing the main purpose of the visit, as *neuter* was not in any of my phrase books nor a part of my previous, personal medical procedures. However, I got the job done by resorting to graphic gestures and a few words used by little boys that, I am told, a lady should never say. Doubtless, the vet and his staff are still talking about the two crazy gaijin and their cat, but the operation went well and the experience shows, once again, that if both parties want to get the job done (at least in a high-context situation), raw courage, collaboration, good will and persistence can overcome paucity of vocabulary.)

Passion, too, facilitates the substitution of new sounds for familiar objects. (I am not speaking here of romance, though romance has expanded the lexicon of more than one lonely traveler, I hear.) My interests in gardening, cooking, and figurative ceramics may not be so thrilling to others, but, before I could shop or travel, I learned the names of plants, colors, blooming times, and whether a plant prefers shade or sun. Because I love to cook, Japanese recipes and cooking shows quickly taught me names for utensils and techniques and transformed carrots into *ninjin* and vinegar into *su*. As for pottery, my interest has become an obsession. I came to Japan with almost no knowledge of techniques or styles, but after having many opportunities to visit Seto craftsmen, words like *tsuchi-aji*, *hi-iro*, and *ki-seto* are my most natural modes of expression. These words I truly own, and, because of desire (and, perhaps, because of the immediate, concrete nature of such terms), I assimilated them almost effortlessly.

Resistance to learning vocabulary, or perhaps disbelief, comes when I go to the Post Office or to the bank to perform a complicated transaction. Despite consulting phrase books, despite rehearsing the unfamiliar structures under my breath, I am never sure that the transaction has been completed successfully until I repeat the request or instructions in English. Never mind that the person with whom I am communicating does not speak English! My students often do the same thing, asking a question in halting English and then repeating it in Japanese to be sure they have communicated their need correctly. Clearly, study and repetition may help us remember alternate names for objects and actions, but without a conceptual sea change in which an intrinsic link is forged between the new sound and the object, action, or idea, the words lose their power. The parroting of phrases has perhaps trained the mouth, but nothing has reached the brain!

My experience studying foreign languages in the United States bears little resemblance to my pseudo-study of Japanese. Those languages involved class meetings 3-5 days a week, memorizing long lists of vocabulary words, reading prolifically, and writing compositions, which caused me to examine phrasing and nuance as well as discrete vocabulary items. As my reading proficiency improved, I acquired vocabulary much as I acquired English vocabulary as a child. Cognates and Latin derivatives also accelerated my learning, aids that, like reading, are not available to me in learning Japanese. Need and desire, pain and pleasure, however, motivated foreign language study then, just as they do in Japan. I had a need to pass my courses and a need not to appear to be a fool before my polyglot professors. I also love to read and found fresh world-views opening to me as I improved my ability to read texts in a foreign language. Although the methods imposed in my university classes are considered outmoded today, desire and systematic study linked these words inextricably to objects and actions and I even used them in my dreams.

Looking back, I see that language not only connects me to others, it is fundamental to my existence in the world. Language shapes and defines my inner self and because of language I find my place. Words, in whatever language, expand our vision and alter our identity. If our students can somehow be led to experience the transformative power of the word, it will be the greatest gift we can give them.