

**SPECIAL FEATURE 特集****Exploring Our Vocabulary Histories as Learners**

## 学習者としての語彙経験の探求

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*Key words:* 学習者ナラティブ、語彙発達、個人の目標設定、語彙経験

In a workshop at the 2011 Realising Autonomy conference on exploring learners' vocabulary development (see Barfield, 2012), participants were asked to recall and share their own experiences of learning and using vocabulary in a second or foreign language. At the end of the workshop, the people taking part agreed to stay in contact by email, and this led to some of us later writing our vocabulary histories and sharing them by email. A vocabulary history (VH) is similar to a language learning history (Benson & Nunan, 2005; Murphey, 1997; Murphey, Chen, & Chen, 2005; Pavlenko, 2001) in which a learner (or teacher) narrates their personal story of language learning and formulates their future learning plans and goals. What is different about a VH is that a learner (or teacher) gives much greater attention to how they have learned vocabulary at different stages in their L2 development and what positive and negative experiences they have had in doing so. The following VHs were written by Andy Barfield, John Spiri, Peter Cassidy, Lewis Malamed, Philip Shigeo Brown and Martha Robertson. As VHs offer a useful way for teachers to recall and reconstruct their own lexical learning practices and explore together different questions of lexical development, we would like to encourage members of the Learner Development SIG to write and share their vocabulary histories in future issues of *Learning Learning*.

語彙経験(VH)とは言語学習経験 (Benson & Nunan, 2005; Murphey, 1997; Murphey, Chen, & Chen, 2005; Pavlenko, 2001)と類似している。言語学習経験とは、学習者(または教師)が個人の言語学習経験を語ることにより自ら今後の学習計画を立て、目標設定を行うことを指す。語彙経験が言語学習経験と異なる点は、語彙経験において学習者(または教師)は第二言語習得の様々な過程における語彙習得に着目し、それぞれの語彙習得経験が自らの言語習得にどのように作用したのかを省察するという点である。本論の語彙経験はAndy Barfield, John Spiri, Peter Cassidy, Lewis Malamed, Philip Shigeo Brown, Martha Robertsonの記述である。語彙経験の記述は教師が自らの学習経験を振り返ることで、語彙指導の方法を再構成し、語彙発達に関する多様な課題について共に探求するための有効な方法である。この観点から、Learner Development SIGの会員にも今後語彙経験を記述し、*Learning Learning*の誌上で共有して頂きたい。

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## **Learning and Using German: Ein Wunderbarer Wort- und Erlebnisschatz [A Wonderful Treasure of Words and Experiences]**

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It's a long time since I started learning German—I was 12 years old and had been learning French and Latin for a year, so German was my fourth language (but not my last). I am not quite sure why I chose to do languages, and I really had no idea about German at all, except for caricatures in films and a few words in comics like “*Donner, Blitz und Himmel*.” But I started, and the first lesson I still remember today: our teacher didn't speak a word of English the whole class. The lesson was done in an interactive Direct Method way. It was a lot of fun, even if I wasn't completely sure what was going on at the beginning.

We did some kind of audio-lingual course at the start, which involved a thick, heavy textbook with lots of drills, and us recording our answers on tape and listening back to them again, and getting on with learning basic grammar through recorded speaking and listening drills. We also read and translated, and did sentence-level exercises all focused on the grammar.

I kept a first German vocabulary notebook, and then later another one—and another one. It was the usual pattern of German word on the left and English translation on the right, and it went on like that for pages and pages. I was good at this kind of learning and could memorise things easily. I don't think anybody ever talked to me at school about learning German vocabulary, inspirational as my main German teacher was, Paul Dicker. Mr Dicker “...*was noted for his quick sense of humour and ... had a deep love of German literature and music, knew his subject well and inspired many of his pupils. ... He always appeared at the right moment to give support. He cared deeply for those for whom he was responsible...*”<sup>1</sup> In class we were expected to read and understand a lot quite quickly, and soon we were getting a learner's magazine called *Die Fabrt* (yes, lots of laughter the first time we saw that), which had short articles and dialogues, and which was written in a controlled vocabulary and grammar for beginners of German.

So, vocabulary learning for me in German in these few two years was based on materials provided by the teacher—textbooks, tapes, a learner's magazine—and also a few real-world materials. I remember Mr Dicker coming into class with a news magazine and showing us various headlines. We would then discuss what they meant and make an attempt at

translating them into English. It was playful and a lot of fun, and it made German seem more real for us during the first few years of learning the language.

Later, for A-level studies in German, we had to read several works of literature within two years. This meant going through each page and translating it, page by page. Schiller's *Maria Stuart*, Fontane's *Irrungen, Wirrungen*, Goethe's *Die Leiden des jungen Werther*, Buchner's *Woyzeck*, Durrenmatt's *Der Besuch der Alten Dame*, Boll's *Und sagte kein einziges Wort*, and so on.

Looking back, I find it simply amazing that we read so much by sheer force of translation, but we learnt on our way a huge amount of vocabulary, and I could read German literature more or less freely by the time I left school. We also listened now and again to German radio recordings of current news, but speaking in German was mainly limited to doing reading aloud and translating (and never really using the language for my own purposes, whatever they were).

When I went on a school trip to Austria one summer, I could understand quite a lot of what I heard, but I don't think I really said much until one night I went to the pub, had a few beers and started talking with the people. *Nun ja, sehr gut! Zum Wohl!*

At university, for my BA, I did Combined Honours in French/German Language and Literature. This involved a massive amount of reading in both languages, but, looking back, it was a strangely literary and linguistic approach, without much focus on the history of Germany and social and political change and development in Germany, Austria and Switzerland, let alone other parts of Europe that had minority German populations. In hindsight, that was a great shame—the whole of 20th century history in Europe was waiting to be discovered from different points of view, but it also meant that living in Germany for a year as a student was a really extraordinary time for me.

Like many other exchange students (both then and now), I don't think I did anything in particular to learn German vocabulary—I was just using the language, making friends, studying, travelling, falling in and out of love, hitchhiking, doing a lot of beer drinking, also working in a glass factory as a holiday job and getting to learn about a whole different Germany from the world of literary classics. It was an amazingly enjoyable and carefree time.

When I look back now at how I learnt German vocabulary, it seems to have featured initially:

- a massive amount of non-comprehensible input made comprehensible through translation and teacher-learner L1 mediation
- a certain amount of graded reading and listening in the L2 (but not really extensive listening or reading)
- some interaction in German, but little expression of my own ideas or interest in German until the year abroad.

So, in many ways, my German vocabulary history was neither autonomous nor self-directed. Rather, it was continuously scaffolded. It was also heavily constrained by the style of education at the time, and the requirements of O- and A-level syllabuses and exams. I don't

think I minded this because I could do it and do it quite well, and I was good at learning a language in this way.

The big change for me was going to Germany as a student and becoming fluent over a period of several months. This involved:

- a lot of talking and interaction
- a lot of reading
- using everyday German every day, and also having long serious discussions over a game of chess or a pint, or both, on whatever the issue was that came up.

As for specific vocabulary strategies, it's very difficult to say if I had any. Because I knew Latin, and because learning and using (German) vocabulary invite a certain creativity (you can literally join words together to try and express that particular meaning or idea that you are after), I was good at decoding and guessing German word formation from different prefixes and suffixes (and using my knowledge of Latin to help me, too). Most important of all, I feel now, is that I always enjoyed learning and later using German. Overall, I would characterize my lexical history in German as input- and translation-based, expanded by exposure, interaction, and meaningful use, as well as inspired by an exceptional teacher, Paul Dicker, and enriched by an ever-growing sense of confidence and purpose in using German.

### Note

1. These extracts come from Paul Dicker's obituary, which is included in *EFA Tributes to Former Players and Officials. (A-E)*. Retrieved from <http://www.fivesonline.net/oldefasite/information/obituaries.a-e.html>

### Keeping Vocabulary Notebooks

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Although I am a native English speaker, the first time I tried intentional learning of vocabulary was in high school. We would have weekly vocabulary quizzes in English class, and to prepare I would happily drill the list outside of class, usually resulting in a perfect score. Years later, my friend and classmate would prompt me with a word from a list for fun, and I would run off at least several from the list: *ecclesiastic* (of the church), *predatory* (preying), etc. In a college English course the memorization paid dividends as I defined a word exactly as I recalled it from the high school list, and the teacher marked it wrong on the midterm exam. Confident that she had mismarked it, I visited her office showing her the entry in a dictionary, and she reluctantly reversed it, which pushed my score up to 90. In the end I got an "A" for the course by the narrowest of margins.

Even though my efforts were grossly rote, I feel that it was a positive learning experience, and I did learn many new words. Similarly, during my "I want to be a writer" phase during my early 20s, I made a push to learn vocabulary on my own, keeping a notebook of words I gleaned from books I was reading. That too, I enjoyed.

Unfortunately, I had no interest in the Spanish class I took in high school, and can recall no effort to learn a single word. When I finally did feel desire to learn a foreign language, after earning my bachelor's degree, I tried to learn French on my own, but failed miserably using a

cassette tape course I found ridiculously difficult due to the natural speed of the dialogs. So I made no progress, with no intentional learning of vocabulary. I did a little better with Mandarin Chinese during my year in Taiwan (1989-1990), eventually becoming capable of having basic conversations, but again, I cannot recall any special focus on vocabulary. That changed when I began studying Japanese in 1995.

One of the key aspects of my self-study (which is about all I've ever done) was utilizing a vocabulary notebook. Over the 15 or so years since I started I have kept a dozen or more vocabulary notebooks. While they have evolved to a degree, all contain a basic translation definition.

One reason I have been relying on a vocabulary notebook is my infamously bad memory. It is very difficult for me to remember a word that I haven't written down. It's almost as if I never really hear it completely, never get a firm hold on the pronunciation, until the word is written on paper. Indeed, I have over the years learned very few new words without writing them down at one time or another.

Since starting to self-study Japanese around 1997 I have been carefully recording words, and taking time to review them. Admittedly, I never really review them as thoroughly as I have always intended, but all pages get looked over at least a couple times, some pages and notebooks more than that. For another admission, I go through periods when I don't review or study Japanese at all, then other periods when I study more intensively. To review, when I recall either the English or Japanese (depending on whichever I chose to cover to quiz myself), I highlight the word. As I tell my students to this day, keeping a pocket sized vocabulary is very advantageous because then it is easy to carry it onto a train or plane, and do some reviewing during otherwise boring times.

One method that I wanted to try was to have a recording made of my words so I could listen to pronunciation while drilling. I paid a student at a previous university to do the recording, and by the time the MD was made, I got busy with other things, or lost interest. Sadly, I never used it to study at all. One of the false starts of my life that fall under the heading of "the best laid plans...."

At one point, frustrated at the number of new words that was flooding me, I wrote down every new word I encountered. Of course, I have always been aware of the importance of choosing words carefully, and focusing on useful (higher frequency word), but my effort was an act of defiance, as if shaking my fist at a language which would find so many varied ways to express things. So I opened my mind wide and grasped for every new word that crossed my path. I don't think I really learned too many of them, but for a while at least enjoyed the all-out effort.

My vocabulary notebook has been tweaked in various ways over the years. Some I have crammed with words on every available line. Those literally hold hundreds of new words. More recently I have begun skipping spaces, and putting the definition on the opposite page rather than squeezing it on the same page. In addition, I have written sample sentences from my electronic dictionary. Another technique, that I've grown to dislike, is rearranging the definitions and sample sentences so they are not directly across from the targeted word. The idea is to then, while reviewing, find the right definition and sample sentence.

Over the years I've become more forgiving and less ambitious perhaps. I feel it's fair enough to only feel like I'm learning 50% of the targeted words, and do not put pressure on myself to scramble to rewrite, and focus more on, words that just don't stick. And some clearly don't want to stick, for whatever reason.

I still do enjoy writing the words down and defining them. One of the keys is writing the words neatly. In the few cases where I have written the words and/or definitions sloppily, I can't bear to go back and review them. I've tried various colors (having read about how it stimulates the brain or some such research), but prefer just using my favorite pen at the time, usually black or blue.

Having considered the advantage of word cards, which gives the learner the chance to shuffle the deck, I have tried them, but don't like them. I think the reason is I enjoy flipping through the notebook's pages, almost admiring this record of my learning. The word cards, on a ring, are clumsy.

Since I have made many Hot Potatoes vocabulary quizzes for my students, I have wanted to try that, and would if someone else would create the quizzes! I can't bring myself to take the time to create quizzes just for myself.

This essay has almost exclusively focused on vocabulary notebooks for one main reason: it's about the only method I've really tried. It is certainly one I've enjoyed and found helpful.

### **Grammar Translation and the Audio-Lingual Method in French and Japanese**

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As a native English speaker and graduate of a late, half-and-half, French Immersion program in Canada, I brought to the table a few strategies for learning Japanese vocabulary. Most of my Japanese study has been self-directed using the internet and free Japanese learning sites with some of my exposure coming listening to recordings of Japanese while riding the train. I did take one very low-level beginner class for a few months in my second year as a resident of Japan, and I believe that it was effective for my getting a better understanding of Japanese grammar as well as learning Japanese vocabulary and some of the rules associated with the lexical differences to my L1 and my L2. My Japanese vocabulary acquisition is the result of both grammar translation through self-study and audio-lingual using language tapes and, of course, listening to the language being spoken all around me in Japan.

I have used the approaches that my French teachers employed—Grammar Translation and Audio-Lingual—and will explain why these were useful and necessary for my learning French and how they gave me focus in my Japanese language learning. It might be important to mention that after 11 years in Japan, I periodically search for vocabulary that was once very automatic or habitual when engaged in a French conversation. I believe that my L2 (French) is located in the same part of my brain as my L3 (Japanese) and evidence of this is found in my regular code-switching between French and Japanese vocabulary words when struggling to use a specific word in either language. English doesn't seem to be a part of this phenomenon.

The Grammar Translation method, in unison with audio-lingual practice, was very useful to me for learning French. I do not have a Latin background, so conjugations of French verbs seemed daunting as a student. In French, irregular verbs, as well as regular verbs, have many more inflectional affixations than English. Also, many of the most common verbs are irregular, as the following list illustrates:

*Être* (to be) / *Avoir* (to have) / *Faire* (to do) / *Dire* (to say) / *Aller* (to go) / *Voir* (to see) / *Savoir* (to know) / *Pouvoir* (to be able to) / *Vouloir* (to want) / *Falloir* (to be necessary)

Moreover, French has more inflectional affixations as is shown below with the irregular verb *to be* in the present tense:

*Être: to be*

Je suis \_\_\_\_\_. I am \_\_\_\_\_.  
 Tu es \_\_\_\_\_. You are \_\_\_\_\_. (sing)  
 Il est \_\_\_\_\_. He is \_\_\_\_\_.  
 Elle est \_\_\_\_\_. She is \_\_\_\_\_.  
 Nous sommes \_\_\_\_\_. We are \_\_\_\_\_.  
 Vous êtes \_\_\_\_\_. You are \_\_\_\_\_. (plur)  
 Ils sont \_\_\_\_\_. They are \_\_\_\_\_. (masculine)  
 Elles sont \_\_\_\_\_. They are \_\_\_\_\_. (feminine)

Regular verb also are governed by inflectional affixations, but these inflections could be memorized easily using the Grammar Translation method:

*Parler: to speak*

Je parle. I speak. (-e)  
 Tu parles. You speak. (-es)  
 Il parle. He speaks.  
 Elle parle. She speaks.  
 Nous parlons. We speak. (-ons)  
 Vous parlez. You speak. (-ez)  
 Ils parlent. They speak. (-ent)  
 Elles parlent. They speak. (-ent)

My teachers at school also favoured the audio-lingual method, which was employed through language labs or labo. In labo sessions, we would listen and speak using target vocabulary in a supporting text. Often, instructions were supplied in English just as the English tests in Japan are often supported by Japanese instructions.

In the early days of my exposure to French, respect for the L1 was evident in that learners were not redirected away from using English. French vocabulary was introduced with their English equivalents, and this allowed for better results in learning the vocabulary. One example that comes to mind involved irregular verbs. An English acrostic helped helped us to remember some irregular verbs in French for one of the conjugation tests. I still remember RED MAP as shown below:

**R**ester / Retourner / Tomber  
**E**ntrer / Sortir  
**D**escendre / Monter

**M**ourir / Naître  
**A**ller / Retourner / Reveiller / Dormir  
**P**rendre / Mettre

The L1 was one of the tools at our disposal when learning French conjugations and this was something that I am thankful for with regard to my L2 learning background. I actually tried to study the Japanese verbs in the same order we learned French verbs. If I hadn't studied French and was coming to Japanese as a first foreign language, would I have had this strategy? I studied, in this order, *to be, to have, to want, to see...* just as I remembered doing in French with those lists shown above. I think this helped my learning curve, since I had a plan going in to my self-directed study. This supports the idea that the connection between languages is dynamic. Noticing similarities and differences between the L1 and the target language is vital.

Another tricky part of French vocabulary acquisition is the indefinite article system. It has only a few loose rules that one can apply, and learners must rely on memorization. The Grammar Translation method provides the platform for this, but I made, and still make, many mistakes when applying articles to countable nouns in French. This is very different in Japanese as there are no indefinite articles per se, rather one must learn a variety of different ways to apply number to objects based on shape or form. Perhaps I applied myself to this task with more confidence with the knowledge that this was a lexical rule that I could sink my teeth in to unlike the French article system. This is speculative hindsight of course, but as I write this now, it seems to be a logical reason why I enjoyed learning *ni mai, ni biki, ni satsu, ni pon* and so forth. It was a vocabulary challenge that I enjoyed although I'm sure others don't feel so excited about this lexical phenomenon. Some people may never learn this aspect of the language since one can be understood by using *futastu* for all shapes and forms.

To conclude, I will admit that I have a reliance on *romaji* for all of my Japanese self-study. Reading and writing Japanese is a problem for me, and I confess that I am practically illiterate. I rely on *romaji* for learning pronunciation of new vocabulary that I have heard but cannot always catch all of the *kana* involved. Furthermore, I should try to study *kanji* to allow for better literacy since most sentences consist of a combination of hiragana, katakana, and kanji. I believe that becoming literate is crucial to learning a language and that these skills should be combined with the listening and speaking that comes with the audio-lingual practice discussed above. I think that it will take a lot of effort to change but I feel that this brief narrative has highlighted where improvements could be applied in my case. Also, I see now that I have omitted music as one of the tools that has helped me learn vocabulary, and yet that has been one of the most important. This reflection exercise has proved to be more fruitful than first anticipated. Thanks for the opportunity to contribute this brief vocabulary learning history. I hope that it will motivate me to make further improvements even in my now comfortable existence in 日本。

## Motivation, Time, and Opportunity to Practice

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I grew up in Florida, about 30 miles south of Miami. When I was five- or six years-old, Cuban immigrants, displaced by the Cuban revolution, began to arrive. The schools tried to prepare us for the influx of Spanish speakers by gathering us, grades one through six, into the auditorium to watch a Conversational Spanish program on TV. We watched the same set of programs, which were broadcast about once a week, for the next six years. There was no other instruction, as this was a quiet Southern suburb, far from the big city, with no Spanish teachers—at least not yet.

For an hour or so after I came home from school—maybe I was then in the fourth or fifth grade—I did my Spanish vocabulary work as a kind of ritual. It hadn't been assigned...I just thought it was fun. The house was empty, as my parents hadn't come home from work yet, and I assumed a relaxed position, hanging upside down on the couch, with my feet on the back of the couch and my head hanging down, imagining I was walking on the ceiling. Well, perhaps this had nothing to do with my vocabulary learning, but I would look around the room, and think about what I could and couldn't say about it in Spanish. "The carpet is dirty," perhaps, or maybe, "The windows are open," or even, "My Favorite Martian is on TV." I had an English-Spanish dictionary next to me, and I would look up any needed words, and then practice saying the phrases I created to myself. I didn't have any confirmation of the phrases I created, and never knew if they were correct. Still, by the time I started studying in real Spanish classes in high school, I could read and understand Spanish, write it a bit, and speak it with a fairly good accent. Near the end of my high school days, I took a trip to Bogota, Colombia with the University of Miami Youth Symphony as part of a cultural exchange program. We played music and talked to people. I was happy to find that communication in a foreign country was not as difficult as I had imagined. It renewed my interest in continuing my study of languages at the university level.

I think my early work helped prepared me for my later study, and I have retained quite a bit of Spanish to this day, considering that my last class was almost 40 years ago. At the latest JALT conference, I attended a class intended for Spanish teachers. The presenter was kind enough not to kick me out or laugh at me when I told her I just wanted to hear Spanish, and I was happy to find that just seeing words come up on the screen or in the handouts was enough to trigger a memory and to bring back the meaning of the words. I've lost a lot, but I think it's retrievable.

My early Spanish training differed a great deal from the way I learned vocabulary in French in college, which was mostly through reading. After the two Basic French courses following an audio-lingual method framework that included listening to tapes and practicing dialogues, I took reading and history courses. These classes expanded my vocabulary beyond basic phrases, though the expansion followed no known natural progression. I learned *ecstatic* before I learned *excited*, and *inexplicable* before learning *difficult*. The texts were somewhat turgid, though occasionally interesting, with vocabulary in the margins of the page, with occasional examples, or explanations of grammar, at the bottom of the page or at the end of the chapter. The methods used in these reading classes would seem familiar to some Japanese learners of English, perhaps.

French History was another story, as it was a fourth-year class attended mostly by graduate students and it was above my level. Lectures and discussion were in French, as were the final papers. My dictionary was worn out by the end of the course, but the class was well-taught. I would need a lot of study to bring my French up to a usable level at this point in my life, but I've retained some memory of the subject matter, if not the language.

Japanese was a completely different language-learning experience than learning French and Spanish. My wife and I arrived in Saitama years ago with zero Japanese, hired as private-contract AETs, rather than JETs. One of the first days we were there, I went to a local grocery. I still remember hearing a shopkeeper yell, "*Irrashaimase!*" at me, and I put my hands up to show that I wasn't stealing anything. I had no clue why he was yelling at me until later.

Thankfully, the Board of Education in our city did a good job of providing us with opportunities for learning. We were taught to do basic introductions, greetings and leave-takings, like, "I'm sorry to be leaving before you" and such things that one needs to know in an office or workplace in Japan. We were also encouraged and supported in taking language classes, but most of the vocabulary learning, for me at least, was situational. I learned phrases, not words. I needed to send money, I needed to send a package, I needed to get a haircut—I remember a friendly vice-principal writing down, in romaji, what I was supposed to say to the barber, the equivalent of "Please cut my hair short." I was worried about coming back from the experience with no hair, but dutifully memorized and recited the message and got a nice haircut.

I repeated this process of learning and memorizing phrases in lots of other situations, and the year that we were in Saitama was probably the best and fastest time in my Japanese-learning history. Not everything I tried worked, however. I was mostly unsuccessful at reading a children's book, "*Sanbiki no Kobuta*," even though the story of Three Little Pigs was known to me. This showed me one of the difficulties in learning a language where the characters were not accessible. If I didn't know the word or have an informant, the process of looking it up was just too time-consuming. I could look up a word I heard, but not a word I read, unless I was reading something specifically for foreigners.

Thanks to advances in computers, we now have programs like "*Rikaichan*" or "*Furigana Inserter*," additions to Firefox which allow access to Japanese kanji and vocabulary, at least in online text and, through these tools, my Japanese vocabulary learning has recently begun again. While I'm still on my own when trying to read signboards, these programs allow me to understand, or at least attempt to understand, the memos, reminders, etc. I receive from my office or through my email, and with luck, and a little effort, some of what I learn will be retained.

What do I need to learn vocabulary? For me, it is motivation, a quality I had more of when I was young; time, a quantity I had more of when I was young; and the opportunity to practice, something I have more of now, if I can persuade myself to take advantage of it. I think some play with the language (not necessarily while lying upside down) is essential, some drill with dialogues and grammar is useful, and some foreign travel can put things into context. The heart of my language learning so far has reflected a desire to interact with speakers of other languages, and that is where my path to successful learning still lies.

## 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.

*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.