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Tina Marie Collings

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# Vocabulary-Building Strategies: A Guide for Students of a Foreign Language

Tina Marie Collings

## Introduction

Students of a foreign language soon discover that there are at least three basic parts to learning a new language. They are vocabulary, grammar, and culture. Even though cultural knowledge is not completely necessary in order for a person to produce coherent sentences in a given language, it is a vital part of communicating with native speakers of that language. But teachers usually pay little attention to how much cultural knowledge the students are assimilating. Teachers concentrate mostly on vocabulary and grammar. If we were to compare a language to a brick wall, then vocabulary would be the bricks and grammar would be the mortar.

Bricks are absolutely indispensable in building a brick wall. You can build a wall without mortar. Even though the wall will be unstable, it will serve for some basic purposes. Similarly, you can communicate to a small degree using only vocabulary, but communication is impossible using only grammar principles. Vocabulary skills are essential in learning a language. Consequently, students are always asking their teachers how they can learn vocabulary more effectively. Since each student learns differently, there is no best answer. There are methods that can assist both the teacher and the students to find the best answer for the individual, however.

One method uses the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI) to determine a person's psychological type, (based on Carl Jung's *Psychological Types*). The MBTI is a questionnaire that places a person in one of sixteen types. Each type is a combination of four categories. Within each category there are two opposite subtypes. Madeline Ehrman of the United States Foreign Service Institute suggests that a person's type also affects one's learning style. Once a student knows his psychological type, he

also knows his learning style (1991). Once he knows his learning style he can find vocabulary learning techniques best suited to that style.

One of these categories, sensing—intuition, seems to relate more to vocabulary learning. Of these two subtypes, the intuitor seems to have more trouble with vocabulary learning. If the nature of the intuition subtype makes it more difficult to learn vocabulary then there need to be strategies developed to aid people of this subtype in learning vocabulary. Do intuitors have more difficulty learning vocabulary than other types? If so, what strategies will best help them to acquire vocabulary.

## Personality Type and Vocabulary

### Categories

The four categories of the MBTI are: Extraversion—Introversion, Sensing—Intuition, Thinking—Feeling, and Judging—Perceiving. Isabel Briggs Myers, creator of the MBTI, explains that each of these categories exists to answer a different question. Each question is answered by one of the two opposite words in the name of that category. For example, the question, "Where do you prefer to focus your attention?" determines whether a person is in the subtype of extroversion or introversion. An extrovert focuses her attention on the outside world. An introvert focuses on the inside world. Table 1 illustrates the questions, traits, and relating categories (1980, p.5).

### Sensing—Intuition Subtype

The sensing—intuition category should be the main focal point when identifying which students would typically have trouble learning vocabulary since learning vocabulary is acquiring information. Sensing people are "good at remembering and working with a great number of facts." Intuitive people

prefer to use “meanings, relationships and possibilities that go beyond the information from [their] senses” (1990, p. 5). Vocabulary is generally presented as a “fact” of language, a list that needs to be memorized. It follows that a sensing person—one who is good with facts—would more easily remember vocabulary items than a person who deals with meanings and relationships. In other words, intuitors have more trouble than sensing people with vocabulary in traditional situations.

Because intuitors have more trouble in this area, they are more likely to need more help. Barbara Ferrell, in *Profiling and Utilizing Learning Style*, says that “since the term ‘learning style’ was first coined by Herb Theba in 1954, two things have become apparent about learning style from research in the field: individual differences in learning style do exist and when efforts are made to match an individual’s learning style with an instructional environment, the outcomes of learning are positively affected” (Keefe, 1988, p. 35). In the same book John M. Jenkins adds that the attitude of students also improves because they feel a measure of control (p. 42).

However successful teaching to a student’s learning style may be generally, teachers cannot adapt to each student’s style. It becomes necessary for the student to adapt his or her private study time instead. This is also very important since students usually do not have many opportunities to learn vocabulary in the classroom. Most teachers do not even teach vocabulary. They usually give them vocabulary lists and tell them to study. This puts the burden of deciding a study style on the student.

The study style decision is something within the student’s ability. M. E. Payne, a masters candidate at Brigham Young University, states in her thesis that generally students can identify their learning style (1988, p.18). With a little help, the students can use this knowledge to create their personal style of study that suits them best. There are many vocabulary building strategies available that use intuition to find relationships that aid vocabulary learning. These styles include the root \affix

method, mnemonics, logical arrangement and reading in the language being learned (the target language).

### Learning Strategies

#### Root Affix Method

According to Gordon E. Clark, there is evidence that a root/affix method is useful to people learning vocabulary in both their native language and in foreign languages (1991, p.53). The root/affix method uses the roots and affixes of language to form new words. In English we have many Latin and Greek roots and affixes. For example, the affix ‘pre-’ means ‘before’ and the root ‘fix’ means to ‘attach’. Together they form the word ‘prefix’ meaning ‘attached before.’ ‘Pre-’ combines with other words, not necessarily Latin, to form many English words such as predate, prepay, and prenatal. A student who understands this concept can remember at least part of many English words. The intuitive student may recognize the role of ‘pre-’ even when he does not understand the meaning of the root. In words such as ‘preliminary’ or ‘preamble’ the root has no meaning to the average English speaker. However, the ‘pre-’ still suggests that it comes ‘before’ something.

Howard Keller suggests that in some languages the root/affix method is a very powerful tool. Both Russian and Chinese combine fragments of words, which represent concepts, to form a very extensive vocabulary. In Russian “the task of learning some 2,000 words, then, can be reduced to acquiring a familiarity with 200 roots and 20 prefixes.” Of course not all roots and prefixes combine to make words (1978, pp. 2-4). If a teacher were to give a group of students a choice between 2,000 words and 220 word fragments, very few would choose the larger number.

In other words, it is easier to do what Hughey and Wormuth call learning about words. They stress the need to learn how to manipulate the words and practice how to organize terms and discover mean-

**Table 1: Questions, Personality Type and Traits**

Question	Traits	Category
“Where do you prefer to focus your attention?”	Outer world Inner world	Extroversion Introversion
“How do you acquire information?”	Using your five senses Examining relationships Using logic	Sensing Intuition Thinking
“How do you make your decisions?”	Considering the way people feel In an organized, planned fashion	Feeling Judgement
“How do you orient toward the outer world?”	Spontaneous	Perception

Questions and information are taken from Myers, 1980, pp. 5-6.

ing (1983, pp. 9-10). Learning about words begins to give the student an understanding of the language that a native speaker might have.

This power is more likely to be acquired by the intuitive learner than the sensing learner because sensing learners memorize and intuitive learners feel relationships. According to Myers, sensing children learn arithmetic by rote. "For many of these children, two-plus-three is entirely different from three-plus-two, and has to be learned separately" (1980, p.61). When sensing children begin to learn algebra they don't always understand what they should be doing (Myers 1980, pp.60-61). If sensing children do not see the relationship between two-plus-three and three-plus-two then it would be difficult to see relationships that exist between roots and affixes. This task is much easier for the intuitor. The intuitor seeks for relationships that exist in compounds, such as those found in Chinese characters.

Many Chinese characters are a composite of other more simple characters. The simple characters have fixed pronunciations. These fixed pronunciations combine to form new words. The same is true for many Japanese words. Japanese borrowed many of the Chinese words and their characters. Table 2 (below) illustrates this concept in Japanese.

The relationships between the individual character meaning and the compound is sometimes very abstract. The intuitor works to understand the relationship between "outside hear" and "reputation." The sensor memorizes the combination. The most difficult part of the process for the intuitor is memorizing the pronunciations for each character. In order to memorize these pronunciations the student may employ techniques such as mnemonics.

#### Mnemonics.

Mnemonics is widely used in learning vocabulary. Keller defines it as the association of new information with information already in one's

memory "on one of the following basis: logical connection, similarity, contrast, or simultaneous occurrence." They include associating a letter with a number or a visual and a symbol (1978, p.7).

There are several ways that a student can use this method with vocabulary. One is the keyword method. Hall et al.(1982) explain that the keyword method has three stages: "(a) A common English word, the keyword, is derived from the foreign word based on acoustic and/or orthographic similarity; (b) a stable association is built between the foreign word and the keyword; and (c) a visual image containing the referents of the keyword and the English translation is produced by the learner"(1981, p.345). Dr. Blair, professor at Brigham Young University, gives an amusing example of this. To remember the Chinese word for nose, pronounced beedza. "Don't put beads up your bizi (1992)." This definitely calls up a visual picture. But not all keywords work so well.

Hall's study reveals that the keyword method is not always useful. Three of seventeen students who were supposed to generate keywords for the study didn't, but they recalled more words. The other fourteen students only generated keywords for 80 percent of the items. One reason for not doing this was that they couldn't find a useful word. Another reason was they found a way that they liked better. The keyword method does work better if the teacher is controlling the study, but if the student is allowed to study freely it doesn't. Students with a choice used more than one method of memorizing vocabulary lists. They repeated the words, noted similarities between the words in the target language and words in other languages they knew and various modifications of the keyword method. Sometimes the students would choose a word for its meaning rather than its sound or spelling. For example, one student used 'excited' (about success) to remember the Spanish word for success, *exito*, instead of the word 'exit', which was the word given to students.

Table 2: How Chinese Characters Combine to Form Words

Chinese Character	Japanese Pronunciation	English Equivalent
聞	kiku, kikoeru, bun, mon	to hear, listen; can be heard/hear-say
新聞 new hear	shinbun	newspaper
見聞 see hear	kenbun	experience
外聞 outside hear	gaibun	reputation

But, in long term retention the methods used didn't seem to make much of a difference (1981, pp. 349-357).

One reason that the keyword method may not be effective long term is that the students forget the keyword. It is not hard to find a student complaining that he has forgotten his memory device. Since the intuiitor naturally sees relationships the mnemonic devices that he uses should be based on some sort of relationship when possible.

Keller suggests an interesting mnemonic device. Many times the etymology of a word can aid the student. This works especially well when the target and native languages are somewhat related. For example, in Russian, *gazeta* means newspaper. Other word similarities may be less obvious such as in *žena* (wife). Often the 'ž' in Russian comes from 'g'. *Zena* has the same root as the Greek GYN that English speakers use in words like gynecologist (1978, pp. 7-8). With this type of strategy a student may need the help of a teacher. Nevertheless it can serve the student well once she has learned some patterns. Another way that the student can establish patterns is by arranging words into logical vocabulary lists.

#### *Logical Arrangement.*

Most of the time it seems that vocabulary lists are arranged in an alphabetized or very arbitrary way. Halverson and Keller agree that this can frustrate students who would like to learn how to communicate (1985, p. 328; 1978, p. 12). When we converse we don't randomly spit out words. We arrange our thoughts in topics. We should do so with our vocabulary lists also. Unfortunately, often lists are not made to order.

The student can combat this by arranging flash cards according to topics. This will increase his ability to converse well on specific topics. This will boost the student's confidence with the language because she will feel more secure conversing when she has an idea of the words that will be involved.

A similar thing is suggested by *The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*. In its *Infield* book for foreign-speaking missionaries it suggests that they note topics that they would like to be able to discuss but can't. They are to learn everything they can about that topic by asking people about it and conversing with others about it in the target language (1986, p. xii). The text for the missionaries also has vocabulary lists arranged according to topic.

Topical arrangement is not the only way that a student may arrange her vocabulary lists or flash cards. McDonough suggests that a student can organize her lists into semantic categories, such as containers (1981, p. 71). Despite drawbacks there are advantages to this method. At the Annual Convention of Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages, Vicki Smith said that children acquire native vocabulary in such a way. She continued by stating they will substitute known words

in these categories for words they do not know. For example, if they were shown water, milk, or coffee, they might all call it milk because they did not know the correct word. They would make the substitution based on the objects' similarities (1978, pp. 6-8). This gives the student a way to communicate without knowing everything. As she uses the language, she is reinforcing what she already knows. However, McDonough warns that this may cause a problem because the target language does not always have the same categories as in the student's native language (1981, p. 71). This strategy is also helpful because it allows the student to compare items within the category once she can distinguish between the two items.

A similar method would be to arrange words in similar pairs. For example a student learning Japanese may have difficulty distinguishing between *ashi* 'foot' and *ishi* 'rock'. The problem is complicated by a vague similarity in the characters that represent them. If the student were to study them side by side the differences would be discovered and the words could be easily distinguished in the future. If the student has chosen to use flash cards then it would be easy for him to rearrange the cards as he feels fit. When his needs change so can the arrangement of his cards.

Arranging words in logical groups does not fully explore the diverse ways in which words can be used. Words do not appear in lists when we speak. Our speech is usually arranged according to topics but this does not allow the student to feel how the words are used in the target language. If the student is allowed to read text in the target language then she will get a feel for how the words are used and the context that generally surrounds them.

#### *Reading.*

Reading in the language has proven effective because it allows the student to see the context in which the word is used. A study done in Sweden showed that while students may learn the vocabulary more slowly, they learn it better (Krantz, 1991, p. 138). Krantz does not believe that this reading will help one type of student more than the next (1991, p. 138). There is no evidence to support that this strategy is more effective for the intuiitor than the sensor. But it does yield significant benefits.

All students can benefit from learning words in context. Leontiev stresses the importance of learning how words fit into the system because "words are not just isolated units" (1981, pp. 55-56). Words best communicate when they occur in context. Sometimes the context is nonverbal, but it is necessary to ensure complete understanding.

Often the problem of context is solved by having the students memorize phrases. Reading can do more than memorizing phrases. Memorization can be very restricting and very monotonous. Also, there is the question as to which phrases should be memorized. When it comes to real life situations

these phrases can both help and hinder. They help because they are words in context. They hinder because this context may not fit the situation.

One student of Japanese needed to call a friend in Japan. The friend spoke English but her family did not. She studied all the phone conversations available to her in the text book. She felt prepared. When the connection was made she communicated that she would like to speak to her friend. The response she got was nothing like had been given in her text. She was lost. Panicking she could only say that she couldn't speak Japanese. Had she been exposed to more natural conversation she might have felt secure enough to think of a way to circumvent the problem at hand. Also, reading may have given her the passive vocabulary necessary to understand the situation.

Passive vocabulary consists of the words that a person can recognize and understand but does not feel comfortable enough with to use on his own. Crow states that a person can get along with an active vocabulary of about 2000 words, but an average college student has a passive vocabulary of over 150,000 words (1985, p. 499). The passive words in the student's vocabulary will help him to recognize situations and respond appropriately. Another advantage to passive vocabulary is the familiarity that the student has with the words. Because the student can recognize the words he can more easily begin to use them in his own speech. Because he has read the words in real situations, he can quickly recognize appropriate situations in which he can use these words. Using the language has long been the most accepted way of learning it.

Probably the most important reason to read is to retain what has been learned. Constant exposure to a language is constant review. Reading is a way that the student can actively participate in the communicating process without needing to rely on the sometimes rare availability of another target language speaker. Reading is a strategy that should be used no matter what a student's learning style is. It helps because not only does the student continue to learn more about the words she knows but she also reinforces what she already knew. No matter what a student's learning style may be, few would dare dispute the need for consistent use of the target language.

### Conclusion

The way a student is exposed to vocabulary can affect the student's ability to learn. There are two ways in which people acquire information. One way uses the five senses. A sensing learner does well with traditional methods because he can memorize well. Another uses intuition to examine the relationships that may exist. An intuitive learner needs help to discover relationships between words because she prefers to learn using relationships. The methods that an intuitive learner can use to find relationships in language are: the root/affix method, mnemonics, and logical arrangement. Reading in

the target language is a strategy that both the sensing and intuitive learning types can use to review what has been learned and prepare for what may be learned in the future.

The root/affix method teaches the students to recognize word fragments and how they may be combined to form different words. A sensing learner might find it easier to just memorize the words if the task were small. An intuitive learner would prefer to "cheat" by learning the roots and affixes that form the building blocks for the words.

Mnemonics is a strategy that seeks to find relationships between things that the student already knows and what she needs to learn. These relationships are not concrete. The student can be creative and employ any idea that she thinks will link new words to old.

The last strategy that utilizes relationships is logical arrangement of vocabulary lists. Because the traditional vocabulary list can be somewhat arbitrary, it is difficult for the intuitive student to find relationships. There are many different ways to arrange words. Topical arrangement puts words together that might be used while conversing on a specific topic. Category arrangement groups words that have similar functions. Finally, a student can arrange words according to similarities that can make them hard to distinguish one from another.

Once the student has gained enough knowledge in the language to read, she should read to retain what has been learned. This strategy helps students of all learning styles. It is important to remember that one learning style is not better than another. But it is important that the student recognize her style so that she can capitalize on the advantages of her style and minimize the disadvantages.

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