

# How to Make the Student Satisfied without Associating Every New Word to a First Language One

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This paper is intended at L2 intermediate-level students. Such students usually tend to become too dependent on a bilingual dictionary, so that it becomes more of a hindrance than a help. This paper focuses on an analysis of the reasons why students should rely more on their own ability to guess than a dictionary, and how they may take advantage of this fact in extensive reading practice. It is necessary to realize that the acquisition of a word is not a rapid process but happens rather gradually. Some methods for word retention are also brought up in this study.

Key Words: Vocabulary, Incidental Learning, Extensive Reading

## **Introduction**

This paper is based on my experience as a language teacher. During this time I have often realized that particularly in students moving from basic to intermediate level, a bilingual dictionary becomes more of a burden than a help. Firstly, the reasons why students should overcome their dependence on their dictionaries are analyzed here. There is also a list of some advices and tips for acquiring new vocabulary without a bilingual dictionary and in fact with no dictionary at all, since I focus principally on word-guessing rather than the use of monolingual dictionaries. In addition, a short review of the methods to retain new words after acquisition is introduced. Finally, it should be

noted that this paper will be more helpful for the individual learning rather than formal lessons. Yet in the end it is often the teacher who needs to guide the students into discovering which the best methods to deal with a new language are for them.

## **Audience**

This paper is primarily intended for intermediate-level students who already have the basic vocabulary to conduct and follow a simple conversation, possibly learned through the pairing of L2 (Second Language) with L1 (First Language) words, but are still reluctant to face an L2 text without the help of a bilingual dictionary, as well as for their respective teachers.

## **Why not relate new L2 words to known L1 words?**

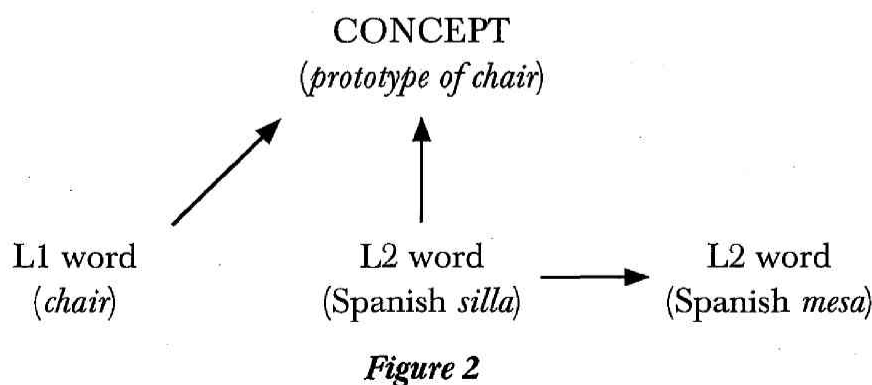
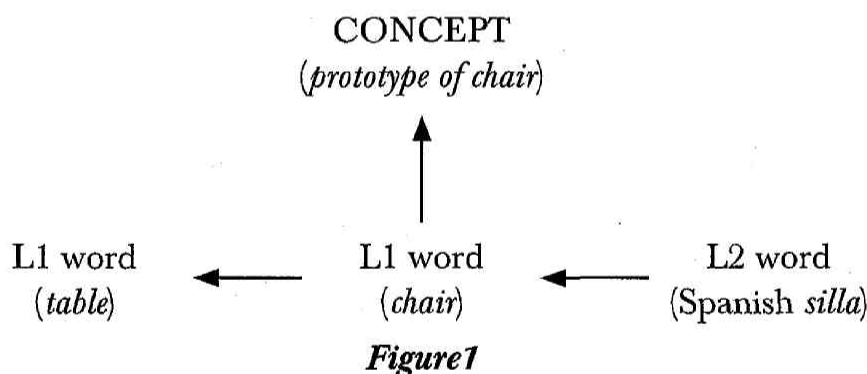
Several reasons to be considered are:

1. This enforces the idea many students have in believing that there is an exact lexical mapping between L1 and L2 (Ijaz, 1986). So, after having acquired an L2 word's translation in a particular context, students are often surprised when they discover new senses or collocations different from those corresponding to the L1 equivalent. Even worse, they do not accept these possibilities and are unable to understand that word in new contexts. Conversely, the student might translate plainly the whole range of meanings and collocations of the L1 word when using its L2 pair, a strategy which is not likely to succeed.

2. One more hindrance that may occur is that students will tend to look for an exact correspondence between L1 and L2 words for any concept; this makes it considerably difficult for them to find an alternative expression, or circumlocution, when they lose access to the required lexical item in their memory (Baxter, 1980). Instead of this, the most appropriate strategy at this stage of learning is to develop the ability to express many concepts with a limited vocabulary.

3. It is normal and unavoidable that the L1 word closest to the L2 word comes to mind once the students happen to comprehend a new word. However, as they face more difficult texts, if they do not get used to inferring the meaning, they will become slaves to their dictionaries. Thus it will not be possible for them to read at a comfortable pace.

4. Following the subset hypothesis (De Bot, 1992) it may be suggested that the automaticity of the access to L1 words stored in memory is due to the numerous relationships among each other. Therefore, it seems prudent to pursue helping the students build links amongst their acquired L2 items, rather than between pairs of L1-L2 words. If we can change the Long Term Memory's structure (Figure 1) to that represented in Figure 2, we will reach two goals: First, the access to the L2 lexical item will be faster (the Spanish equivalent for 'chair' here), and second, the semantic relationships among L2 words will help their long-term retention (Henning, 1973, 108-109). In this example, the



Spanish words 'silla' and 'mesa' become related as they are both pieces of furniture.

5. When we encounter a new concept in L2 not coded or present as such in L1, students who are keen to find the correspondent L1 word will face many problems trying to retain that word, since it will not have a place in the student conceptual taxonomies. The experiment with colored trays by Barlett (1977) revealed that a new concept should be acquired and find a place among semantic categories before the corresponding lexical form is learnt.

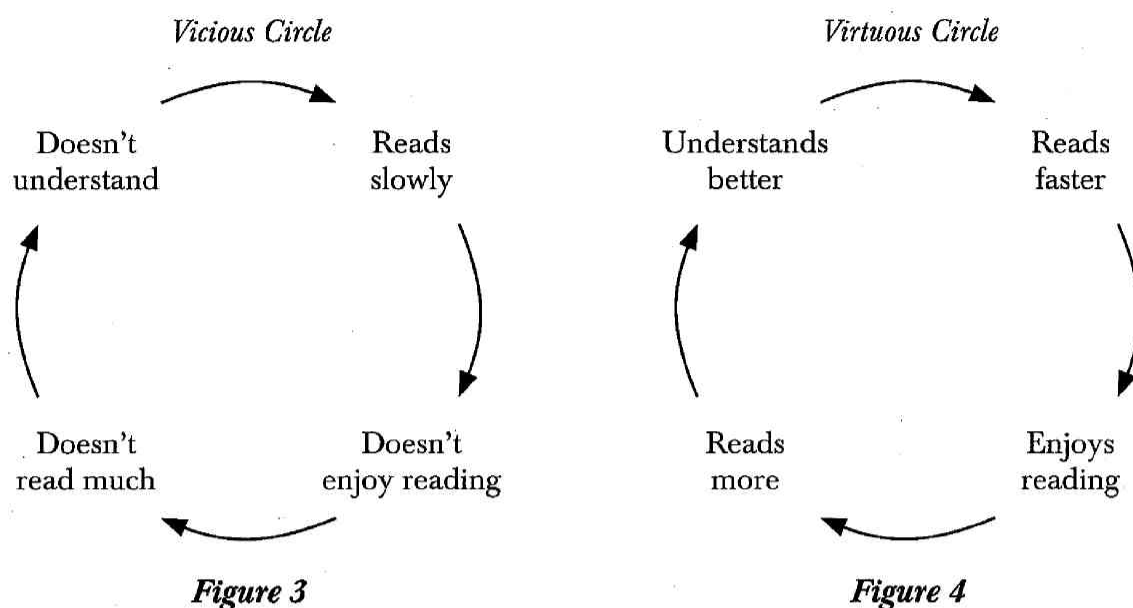
### **Extensive reading**

In this paper, I am in line with the "Incidental Vocabulary Learning Hypothesis" (Nagy & Herman, 1985), which claims that the vast majority of vocabulary words are learned gradually through repeated exposure (about ten to twelve exposures to a word over time in order to learn it well). Therefore, the best way to gain vocabulary is through extensive reading practice (Krashen, 1989). This is one thing that teachers can only promote but ultimately it is up to the students to do it on their own.

To achieve this goal there is just one golden rule: unless we have other high-motivating reasons, the student ought to enjoy reading. Accordingly, at the beginning the teacher should recommend texts attractive to the students, in relation to their age, background knowledge, etc. Eventually the objective would be for students themselves, who are best capable of choosing what interests them, to select texts on their own.

Looking at the Vicious/Virtuous Circle of L2 Reading (Nuttall, 1982) in Figures 3 and 4, we can see that the main factors to extensive reading and enjoying the process are comprehension and speed of reading.

**1. Comprehension:** As we mentioned earlier, this paper is aimed at students with a basic L2 vocabulary. Researchers have found a thresh-



old of about 3,000 word families (5,000 lexical items) from which good readers can be expected to transfer their higher level processing strategies to L2 (Laufer, 1991). This would provide coverage of 90–95% of any text (Deville, 1985; Laufer, 1989). But in order to be able to guess unknown words from context we need to cover 98% of the text (Hirsh & Nation, 1992), and for this we would need to know about 5,000 word families (8,000 lexical items), according to Nation (1990). As a result, there will possibly be a gap between students' knowledge and the desirable threshold. This is called the "beginner's paradox" (Coady, 1997) and there are a variety of ways to solve it: a) Texts adapted for students, including texts "prepared" in order to cut all infrequent vocabulary, and "real" texts whose topic is well-known by the students, which motivates them and allows the use of their background knowledge; b) formal instruction combined with independent learning; and c) tolerance for ambiguity (see below).

2. **Speed:** Two factors that slow down reading speed are the use of dictionaries and bottom-up strategies (vs. top-down strategies).

The use of a dictionary is not only a hurdle for L2 learning but also for children learning new words in their native tongue (Miller & Gildea, 1987). In spite of the new fast electronic dictionaries, looking up a

word still entails breaking the pace of reading and, since the short term memory of the student is not yet so developed for L2, hinders considerably the cognitive process of comprehension of the text. A good strategy to combat this is to read the whole text at once, while highlighting unknown words and to work them out afterwards. Sometimes the information provided later can help us to understand the meaning, so it is better to keep on track rather than halt at every new word.

Bottom-up strategies involve the analysis of words one-by-one in order to comprehend the sense of a targeted text. This is opposite to top-down (holistic) strategies whereby readers first try to figure out what is written about in the text, and later assign to the unfamiliar words the meaning that best suits that interpretation. The best performance is obtained by combining both methods; the use of only holistic strategies may drive a student to misunderstanding if she or he is satisfied just with interpretation at the level of a sentence or a phrase. This is enough for texts that are simple in content and composed of frequently-used vocabulary, but not for texts with specialized terms, where misinterpretation prevents proper understanding. However, focusing too much on every new word is highly time-consuming and as a result, students will not read much and they might not be able to encounter as many times the frequent words as desirable (Parry, 1997).

### **How to approach the meaning of a word**

Now that the student is convinced about the benefit of extensive reading and knows how to enjoy it, I move on to list a number of strategies for deciphering new words. I use the expression “approaching meaning” to convey the fact that the acquisition of vocabulary is made gradually. Actually, it is very difficult to speak of perfect acquisition of a word, since we cannot find complete information on all of the aspects surrounding a lexical item even in a dictionary. Let us consider the different stages of vocabulary learning (the sequence does not nec-

essarily imply order in time):

Referent of the word in that context → General meaning of the word according to that context → Other meanings → Syntactical behavior → Pragmatical behavior (stylistics, formality) → Collocations

That is, it is not possible to say that we have acquired a word just by recalling one of its L1 translations. Moreover, according to the incidental hypothesis, a word is acquired after about ten to twelve exposures. We should expect that the automaticity in recognizing and producing that word improves when we are exposed to more and more inputs.

Instead of talking of word acquisition, I am introducing here the concept of “comfortability” with a word. The L2 learner feels comfortable with a word when, while listening or reading, its occurrence does not prevent the comprehension of the message, i.e. the input occurs in an attention free manner. What distinguishes this idea from that of automaticity is that it can be affected by one factor: tolerance for ambiguity. Students who have a strong dependence on bilingual dictionaries do not usually rely on this kind of tolerance. The learner should take into account that, although she or he may have just a vague idea of the meaning of a word after a few inputs, this representation will become more accurate as she or he encounters more examples of that word in different contexts.

### **What to do with an unknown word?**

There are three strategies: a) looking it up in a dictionary; b) skipping it; and c) making a guess.

a) Looking up the word in a dictionary is regarded as the best way to grasp the meaning of a word, in spite of its problems, e.g., the number of entries tends to confuse the reader (Lupescu & Day, 1995). I would like to point out here two issues regarding dictionaries: First, as

mentioned before, looking up the word is highly time-consuming so it seems advisable to try to use this strategy as little as possible.

Secondly, arises the question whether it is better to use a monolingual or a bilingual dictionary<sup>1</sup>. Researchers maintain diverse views regarding this matter. Taking into account what I have outlined so far, I recommend the use of a monolingual dictionary. As Baxter (1980, p. 330) claims, it “not only demonstrates that definition is an alternative to the use of lexical items, but it also provides the means to actually employ definition.” However, a bilingual dictionary at hand is useful when reading technical terminology, for in these cases often the L2 and L1 terms do match exactly and it is easier to acquire meaning through the L1 equivalent rather than through an academic definition.

b) For most L2 learners the goal probably won't be to acquire the 100,000 words they may encounter through L2 texts, as it is enough to have 3,000–5,000 word families (see above) and the ability to infer or look up the meaning of low frequency words included in each text. Hence, if the student feels confident in catching the overall meaning of a text, there is no problem in skipping an unfamiliar word. If the student happens to encounter the same word again on another occasion, she or he can judge it more important than expected and work it out. This will enforce the retention of the word in their long term memory, for it will be cognitively labeled as ‘especially important’ thanks to the change of assessment (Hulstijn, 1992).

Of course, throughout the L2 learning process the tolerance for ambiguity in relation to the full comprehension of a text will gradually give way to a stricter need for accuracy. At the former phase, the student should be satisfied by learning a few words per text and omitting all the ones regarded as unnecessary to have an impression of the gist, if only fuzzy.

c) If students decide to try a guess they count with the two kinds of strategies already discussed: bottom-up and top-down. As noted above, language learners should get used to dealing with both of them in or-



der to be able to use the most appropriate strategy for each case.

Bottom-up strategies include mainly the analysis of the parts of the word (either lexemes or morphemes) as well as the recognition of cognates between the target language and any other language students may know. It is also important that the student be aware of the fact that every compound is not transparent (Laufer, 1997). Nevertheless, the comprehension of the parts of the word together with the context may help them to approach the meaning in one way or the other; that is a good strategy, for example, when facing new Japanese compounds in context. "False friends" or fake cognates also lead students to misunderstanding; but once again, amendment (maybe with a dictionary after realizing the meaning inferred does not fit in other contexts) helps the retention because more cognitive process is involved (Hulstijn, 1992). In any case, it is crucial that this correction be made with the full attention of the student.

Top-down strategies imply relying on the information provided by the text (for that, we should already know most of the surrounding vocabulary, see above) together with the reader's background knowledge, in order to decipher the referent the unfamiliar word is pointing to. Note that in this case students should not focus on the categorical meaning but rather the specific referent<sup>2</sup> of the word in that context. This consciousness prevents them from later mistakes on the supposition that the word will apply exactly to the same referent in any other context.

The next section deals with how we can infer the categorical meaning from the reference.

### **Ways to reach the meaning from the reference**

So far I have supported an incidental and close-to natural learning hypothesis. Therefore, it seems reasonable to try to follow the same path that children do while learning L1. As stated before, even native children acquire word meanings gradually, and in the process they make usual mistakes connected with the location of a new word to

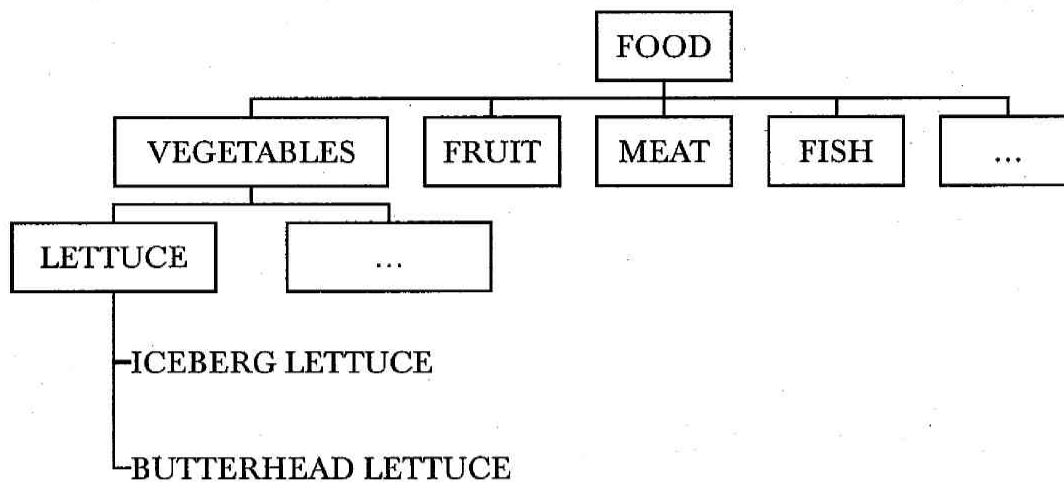


Figure 5

conceptual taxonomies. Let us look at Figure 5.

Imagine a child, who does not know yet the word “lettuce”, looks at an iceberg lettuce salad and listen to her or his parents saying: “Eat up all the lettuce!” Maybe the child infers that the word is applied to every green vegetable, and later she or he may reject eating the “lettuce” when presented a dish of cabbage. This is called *overextension*: in the child’s mind the meaning of “lettuce” is extended to include all green vegetables. She or he has erroneously located the word one step above in the taxonomy<sup>3</sup>.

But if, on the contrary, the child thought that only iceberg-type lettuces can be labeled “lettuce,” she or he would not have any name to refer to a butterhead lettuce, for example. Such cases are known as *underextension*.

Although these features are considered mistakes, we can take advantage of them since they are part of the natural process of vocabulary acquisition. In fact, the explicit correction of this kind of inaccuracy does not seem to have any effect on children (Miller & Gildea, 1987). In the case of students too, when they try a guess for a word, it is most likely that the meaning deduced is over- or underextended. This will be revealed clearly at the time of production. But the student should not feel embarrassed because of such a mistake; instead both student and teacher need to accept this is a signal of the student’s prog-

ress.

### **Ways to infer new meanings of a known word**

Now that we have already apprehended the core meaning (i.e., the most frequent sense) of a word, we ought to be prepared to meet the word conveying a meaning different than expected. Two usual ways whereby words extend their meaning throughout language history are: a) metaphor, which implies meaning extension by means of similarity (e.g., “mouse” referring to the computer device) and is often used to give a more abstract meaning to a concrete noun; while b) metonymy is a somewhat more complicated possibility based on a quite different conceptual relation, not similarity but a strong association between the instances. Most of the cases consist in terming a whole by the name of one of its parts (e.g., saying “crown” to refer to the Queen or King).

Metaphor and metonymy provide us with tools to decipher unfamiliar meanings of a familiar word without the help of a dictionary. After that, we are able to build semantic relationships with the core meaning rather than establish new resource-consuming associations with other L1 words.

### **How to retain a word**

Two methods are considered here: rote repetition and keyword techniques.

Keyword techniques, though used by students since long ago, have not until recently been considered a topic in academic papers because of its inherent informality. Now many researchers discuss and perform empirical experiments of this method (Hulstijn, 1997). As keyword mnemonics imply an association between an L2 word and its L1 equivalent through a keyword that resembles phonologically the target word, it seems to be opposed to our purpose here. However, this link should be understood as a temporary tool to improve the access

until there are enough semantic links with other L2 words.

Of course, this technique is constrained by the imageability of concept (Ellis & Beaton, 1995): abstract words are very difficult to depict. In these cases, the best solution is to make an image from a symbol that clearly represents the concept.

Rote learning is nowadays disregarded in many manuals as an old-fashioned method. In spite of this, some studies prove its value in helping students to remember a word for a long time, much better if combined with keyword techniques (Ellis & Beaton, 1995). That is particularly true in the case of students whose L1 orthographic system does not have any relation with the phonological information, like Japanese or Chinese. The brains of this group of students do not apparently activate the phonological recognition when reading (Koda, 1997). Rote repetition can provide "self" verbal inputs, mending the absence of phonological information.

## **Conclusions**

These pages would be of use to motivated students. Motivation is important since the methods analyzed here require at first more active brain-work than the dictionary. All through the paper the emphasis was on a natural idea of L2 learning, focused on personal work by means of extensive reading. The final conclusion is that it is very difficult to retain words learnt in isolation. Words are stored in the long term memory only when they convey a message of interest for us, and this happens with words in context.

This paper lacks profound discussion on each of the topics mentioned. Nevertheless, it is intended to serve as a general guide to useful ways of L2 vocabulary acquisition. In the end, the strong and weak points of a student are only known by herself or himself. They are invited to test on their own how these techniques fit their needs, and to deepen their abilities by way of personal experiences and bibliography research.

### Notes

- 1 There is also a third possibility, an L2–L2 (two different languages) bilingual dictionary, which falls beyond the scope of this paper.
- 2 The referent can be a verbal action.
- 3 Actually, at the same time that they learn words, children are also building their semantic categories. But this is a much more difficult matter to depict and I am not discussing it here, since that is rarely the case of L2 learners.

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