

## *Vocabulary acquisition strategies*

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### **Resumen**

En este artículo se aborda la necesidad de enseñar vocabulario y cómo hacerlo de forma efectiva.

Nos centramos en algunos aspectos de la adquisición de vocabulario en lengua extranjera, como por ejemplo, el Diccionario Mental, así como las estrategias que tiene que desarrollar el estudiante de inglés para adquirir vocabulario.

Finalmente, para ilustrar los conceptos teóricos presentados, proponemos una actividad práctica para enseñar, en el aula de inglés, vocabulario contextualizado.

*PALABRAS CLAVE: Adquisición de vocabulario, Diccionario Mental, Estrategias.*

### **Abstract**

In this paper we will focus on the necessity of teaching vocabulary and how to do it in an effective way.

We have considered some relevant aspects of the processes of second language acquisition, as for example the «Mental Lexicon» and the strategies which students of English have to develop to acquire vocabulary.

Finally, to illustrate the theoretical concepts presented, we propose a practical activity to teach vocabulary in a context within the English classroom.

*KEY WORDS: Vocabulary acquisition, Mental Lexicon, Strategies.*

## Résumé

Dans cet article nous étudions la nécessité d'enseigner le vocabulaire, et comment le faire d'une façon effective.

Nous nous centrons sur certains aspects des processus d'acquisition du vocabulaire d'un langage étrangère, comme par exemple, le Dictionnaire Mental, et les stratégies que doivent développer les étudiants d'anglais pour acquérir encore plus de vocabulaire.

Finalement pour illustrer les concepts théoriques présentés, nous proposons une activité pratique pour enseigner, dans la classe d'anglais langue étrangère, du vocabulaire contextuel.

*MOTS CLÉ:* Acquisition du vocabulaire, Dictionnaire Mental, Stratégies.

## 1. Introduction

Do we as teachers feel the need to teach vocabulary? The obvious answer to this question is: yes, we certainly do. As Michael Lewis said (2000:8), «The single most important task facing language learners is acquiring a sufficiently large vocabulary.» In our everyday teaching practice, we see how students have a real problem when learning and using vocabulary. This is particularly serious when it comes to using the language in a somehow less controlled production. In situations of free spoken interaction vocabulary is poor and difficult to recall, even after it has been learnt, or so we think.

These considerations lead us to Krashen's distinction between learning and acquisition and to the contexts in which 1<sup>st</sup> language acquisition and 2<sup>nd</sup> language learning/acquisition take place. Differences such as: immersion in the language versus classroom practice; motivation, as native speakers need the language for communication whereas foreign students are placed in an artificial context: no need for communication in FL because in most cases, they share a 1<sup>st</sup> language; in a native language context competence is acquired following the natural stages in age, whereas it is not so in 2<sup>nd</sup> language learning. And so on.

In the first part of this paper, we will focus on two particular aspects of the learning process in relation to the acquisition of vocabulary in a foreign language. One of these aspects is what has been called the «Mental Lexicon», which is the way words «settle» and are stored in our minds, the relationships between them, and the significance this information has in teaching/learning vocabulary in a foreign language. The other is the kind of strategies a learner should develop to facilitate his/her own learning, more precisely applied to vocabulary acquisition.

In the second part, we will be putting into practise the principles previously laid out in an activity designed to teach vocabulary in English F. L.

## 2. Some issues to take into account when teaching vocabulary in a foreign language

### 2.1. *What knowing a word means*

Learning a word in isolation does not enable us to use it adequately, as words might need other particular words to accompany them. Learning the written form of the word does not mean that we can pronounce it properly. Unless grammatical patterns in which to use the word have been mastered we will not be able to use it accurately.

S. P. Nation (1990) explains in a chart what knowing a word means, both for receptive (R) and productive (P) knowledge. The following are the questions that a person «knowing» a word should be able to answer:

		Receptive (R)	Productive (P)
Form	Spoken form	What does the word sound like?	How is the word pronounced?
	Written form	What does the word look like?	How is the word written and spelled?
Position	Grammatical patterns	In which patterns does the word occur?	In which patterns must we use the word?
	Collocations	What words or types of words can be expected before or after the word?	What words or types of words must we use with this word?
Function	Frequency	How common is the word?	How often should the word be used?
	Appropriateness	Where would we expect to meet this word?	Where can this word be used?
Meaning	Concepts	What does the word mean?	What word should be used to express this meaning?
	Associations	What other words does this word make us think of?	What other words could we use instead of this one?

(Nation: 31)

According to Nation, in any English course, the old material is extremely important, as it has almost been learnt by students and, therefore, it can be handled in production work, implying continuous repeating and revising. This is a theory that may not have been thought of by educational authorities and people in charge of preparing English Primary and Secondary School curricula. The learning they expect to take place in a certain period of time is absolutely unrealistic, because syllabuses are too extensive. So teachers go through the contents quite superficially, no time allowed for revision, not even to use the language actively. That is one of the reasons why foreign language teaching/learning at schools is generally so inefficient.

Wilkins summarises very concisely what knowing a word means:

«Learning vocabulary is learning how words relate to external reality and how they relate to one another» (Wilkins 1972: 133). (Further discussion of this statement is provided in another part of this paper).

Richards' (1976) eight assumptions in relation to lexical competence are listed in Carter and McCarthy.

Native speakers continue to expand their vocabulary in adulthood. Little is known about the average language-user's vocabulary but anything from 20,000-100,000 words could be within a person's receptive vocabulary.

Knowing a word means knowing the degree of probability of encountering it and the sorts of words most likely to be found associated with it (frequency and collocability).

Knowing a word means knowing its limitations of use according to function and situation (temporal, social, geographical; field, mode, etc).

Knowing a word means knowing its syntactic behaviour (e.g. transitivity patterns, cases).

Knowing a word means knowing its underlying forms and derivations.

Knowing a word means knowing its place in a network of associations with other words in the language.

Knowing a word means knowing its semantic value (its composition).

Knowing a word means knowing its different meanings (polisemy) (1988: 44).

Richards' article is a very important contribution to the move towards what is now called learner-centred techniques, in this case concerning vocabulary acquisition.

Joanna Channell (in Carter, 1988) takes into account Krashen's distinction between learning and acquisition to state the following points: «I regard an L2 word as having been acquired by a learner when a) its meaning can be recognised and understood (rather than guessed at), both in and out of context, and b) it can be used naturally and appropriately to situation». (Channell 1988; in Carter: 84).

## 2.2. *The Mental Lexicon*

Most authors concerned with vocabulary teaching/learning refer to the way words «settle» in the mind according to particular sets of semantic relations, so forming a mental dictionary. In 1970, Bright and McGregor pointed out the importance of some «techniques», which prove useful when teaching vocabulary, being one of them the grouping of words round a superordinate term and then lowering to different levels of generality.

vehicles

buses, lorries, cars, motorcycles, bicycles, vans

saloons, sports cars, coupés, taxis

Mercedes, Ford, Volkswagen, Peugeot

Mercedes Benz 190D saloon, Ford Anglia saloon, etc.

(BRIGHT & MCGREGOR, 1970:38)

Wilkins (1972) is also a pioneer in realising the importance of the types of semantic relationships existing between words and their connection with teaching and learning vocabulary «... acquiring a language means acquiring its semantic structure...» (Wilkins: 124).

More recent authors as John Read (2000), M. MacCarthy (1997) or T. Huckin (1997), develop the theory of the Mental Dictionary and its implications for vocabulary teaching. Ruth Gairns and Stuart Redman establish the lexical relations: Synonymy, antonymy, hyponymy, converseness, reverseness (Cruse 1986-89), suggesting that words should be introduced to students according to these links, as foreign students, unlike native speakers, only have a limited time to learn a foreign language, therefore needing clues that can facilitate their learning. Knowing the patterns in which words are organised in our mind can be of great help to make our teaching/learning easier and more efficient.

Aitchinson (1996) takes the idea of the Mental Dictionary to all possible implications in foreign language learning. After researching word association in different contexts, she concludes that the main links that exist between words in the human mind are as follows:

Co-ordination. The commonest response involved «co-ordinates», words that cluster together on the same level of detail, such as *salt and pepper; butterfly and moth...* Opposites come into this category, as they are co-ordinates in a group consisting of only two members, as with *left and right*, or they are the two commonest members in a larger group, as with *hot, cold, warm, cool..*

Collocation. The next most common response involved a word which is likely to be «collocated» (bound together) with the stimulus in connected speech, as with *salt water, butterfly net, bright red*.

Superordination. Less often, a «superordinate» occurred. The cover term which includes the stimulus word. For example *insect* was elicited by «butterfly» and *colour* was a response to «red».

Synonymy. Occasionally, a rough synonym of the original word was found, as with *starved* beside «hungry». (Aitchinson: 75)

Her investigation into «tongue slips» also proves that words tend to group in semantic fields and that co-ordination is the strongest link between them.

When looking for an elusive word, people frequently fumble around not only in the same general semantic area but often within a group of coordinates... In the «tip of the tongue» experiment, subjects who could not remember the word *sextant* recalled other navigational instruments, such as *compass* or *astrolabe*.

(AITCHINSON: 76).

Collocation is, for Aitchinson, the second strongest and lasting link between words in human minds. This tendency, for words to associate can make certain word groups become idioms or clichés (Aitchinson: 78). Hyponymy and superordination are also strong links as long as the superordinate is a common word that can be easily recalled.

She concludes that

... humans link words together in their minds... words seem to be organised in semantic fields, and, within these fields, there are two types of links that are particularly strong: connections between co-ordinates and collocational links

(AITCHINSON: 85).

Nowadays, as Khishnamury (2001) points out, thanks to the software industry many public corpora have become available, providing enough data on vocabulary frequency, concordance and collocations which make easier the study of vocabulary teaching and learning.

### 2.3. *Language Learning Strategies and Vocabulary Acquisition*

According to Rebecca Oxford, the process through which the acquisition of a foreign language takes place can be speeded up by the developing and use of

strategies. She introduces her system of language learning strategies, which she divides into two broad types: direct and indirect strategies, from which a lot of more specific types are derived.

Thus, she puts forward the idea that learners should be trained to make profitable use of these strategies throughout the process of their learning. The first step would be for them to be aware that not only are there some that they already use, but there are also others that they can be taught to use effectively during their learning process.

Oxford accepts Krashen's distinction between learning and acquisition, but not as two rigidly separated parts of a process, but as the process itself considered as a continuous experience. All through this process, learning strategies can help to reach the final goal, which is proficiency in a foreign language.

Language learning strategies contribute to all parts of the learning-acquisition continuum. For instance, analytic strategies are directly related to the learning end of the continuum, while strategies involving naturalistic practise facilitate the acquisition of language skills, and guessing and memory strategies are equally useful to both learning and acquisition.

(OXFORD: 4, 5)

Oxford categorises strategies in two main groups: direct and indirect strategies. The first group, concerning learning directly, comprises memory, cognitive and compensation strategies «The direct class is composed of memory strategies for remembering and retrieving new information, cognitive strategies for understanding and producing the language, and compensation strategies for using the language despite knowledge gaps» (Oxford: 14,15). The second group is not directly concerned with learning, but is of great help.

The second major strategy class —indirect strategies for general management of learning— can be likened to the Director of the play. This class is made up of metacognitive strategies for coordinating the learning process, affective strategies for regulating emotions, and social strategies for learning with others.

(OXFORD, 1990:15)

This initial division in direct and indirect strategies widens with a lot of subdivisions until it comes to practical, everyday— strategies such as «using mime or gesture», which is a compensation strategy and «summarising» or «repeating», in the group of the cognitive strategies. In the group of indirect strategies, «using laughter» is an affective strategy you can use to lower your

anxiety or «co-operating with proficient users of the new language», classified as a social strategy. (Oxford 1990:17).

The following is one of the initial classifications in Oxford's Strategy System:

LEARNING STRATEGIES

Direct Strategies:

Memory Strategies  
Cognitive Strategies  
Compensation strategies

Indirect Strategies:

Metacognitive strategies  
Affective Strategies  
Social Strategies.

(OXFORD, 1989:17)

The whole of chapter X in I. S.P. Nation is concerned with strategies applied to vocabulary learning, especially to the guessing of unknown words in a reading passage. Among the strategies mentioned are word building, grammar, learners experience, etc. In chapter IV, the idea of «effort after meaning» is put forward. In order to remember new vocabulary, students must make an effort, otherwise everything will be quickly forgotten. This can be achieved through guessing games, the use of clues or teach and test exercises. (Nation, 1990: 64, 65).

Paul Nation and James Coady (Carter, R. and M. McCarthy 1988) also propose a strategy for developing guessing skills that students must learn and use to infer the meaning of unknown words in a reading passage. The idea is that reading is a skill that should never be neglected, as it is a source of new vocabulary for the learner.

This strategy consists of five steps:

Finding the part of speech of the unknown word.

Looking at the immediate context of the unknown word and simplifying this context if necessary.

Looking at the wider context of the unknown word. This means looking at the relationship between the clause containing the unknown word and surrounding clauses and sentences.

Guessing the meaning of the unknown word.

Checking that the guess is correct.

(CARTER & MCCARTHY, 1988: 104, 105)



The authors explain that, even if these steps might slow down the reading pace in the initial stages, it is worthwhile training our students to follow them, as they will then become automatic and help greatly in reading comprehension and acquisition of vocabulary.

Joanna Channell, links the concept of a mental dictionary to the use of strategies in vocabulary acquisition. For her, the mental lexicon of a native speaker is organised according to phonology and syntax; but when learning a foreign language, semantic links must be added.

To optimise production, learners need accurately programmed lexical associations, enabling them to make choices which faithfully reflect intended meaning. We know that on the production side, access is via meanings, and there is psycholinguistic evidence in favour of a psychological model in which words with like meanings are «close together» in accessing terms. This has led to the now quite widely propounded idea that vocabulary teaching should make overt associations between semantically related words.

(In CARTER & MCCARTHY, 1988: 90)

This has clear implications for classroom practise. Vocabulary should not always be integrated with other aspects of the language, but sometimes taught separately, in itself, paying a lot of attention to pronunciation, particularly word stress. Words must also be taught grouped in semantic fields, so learners can establish links and associations which facilitate the receptive and productive use of new vocabulary.

James Nattinger distinguishes between the strategies we need for comprehension and those we need for production, both to be worked on in the classroom.

«Comprehension of vocabulary relies on strategies that permit one to *understand* words and store them, to commit them to memory, that is, while production concerns strategies that activate one's storage by retrieving these words from memory, and by using them in appropriate situations.» (J. Nattinger. In Carter & McCarthy, 1988: 62).

Strategies for comprehension include: not panicking when we do not understand absolutely everything, taking advantage of redundancy, grammatical markers, intonation or clues from the context. Also the use of mental mapping and word families.

Interacting with the environment through physical movements, what Asher (1969) called Total Physical Response, is another strategy worth using for remembering vocabulary.

For production, Nattinger suggests getting students to use the language very soon, so — to avoid inhibition and to acquire fluency. To enable them to recall vocabulary quickly for production, words should be learned in situational sets (vocabulary referred to a particular situation) and semantic sets, which again must be grouped according to sense relations: Synonyms, antonyms, co-ordinates, superordinates. Collocation, learning how words group together, is also important.

### 3. What are the implications for our practical teaching?

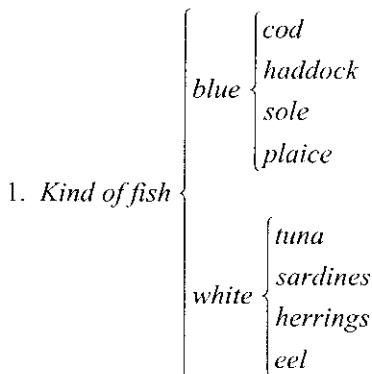
#### 3.1. *Using a traditional English recipe to teach vocabulary related to food and cooking*

The Fish Pie Recipe. Activity plan and comments.

#### **Part I. Skills practised: Listening, speaking and reading**

We start by brainstorming for words related to the topic, which will soon be written on the blackboard: Do they know the two basic kinds of fish? Could they give examples of each? Then: Who sells fish? And: What does he/she do to it when we buy it? Finally: Ways of cooking fish and things you need when doing it.

This information is either elicited from the students or presented by the teacher. All this is done orally, trying to get the students to talk as much as possible. Writing on the blackboard comes immediately after the talking. Thus comes the following on the blackboard:.....



2. *Who sells fish and what does he/she do to it before we take it home?*

<i>fishmonger</i>	}	<i>scrapes scales</i>
		<i>skins fish</i>
		<i>takes out guts</i>
		<i>removes bones</i>
		<i>cuts it into pieces</i>

3. <i>Ways of cooking fish</i>	}	<i>boiling (you use water and a pot)</i>
		<i>baking (in the oven)</i>
		<i>frying (some oil and a frying pan are needed)</i>

Some of these words are previously known by the students. Others are not, but they are all easy to explain through mime or with a brief definition. We want them to learn all of them, as most will be used later in the activity.

The teacher mimes the actions for some of the words on the blackboard and the students have to say the words now, trying not to look at the written form. Then the teacher says the words and the students mime them.

The students have three minutes to memorise as many of the words on the b/b as they can. Then the teacher rubs out words at random and asks the whole class to say them. Eventually everything disappears from the blackboard, but the teacher still keeps pointing to where the different words were, asking the students to say them.

### *Comments*

We are presenting and getting our students to use vocabulary actively by grouping words in semantic families and making them visual through semantic maps. We are trying to apply the idea, put forward by Aitchinson and other authors, that coordination and superordination are very strong links between words in our *Mental Lexicon*.

«Creating mental linkages» is one of the memory strategies commented on by Oxford (1990), who also mentions semantic mapping as a device to learn vocabulary. By associating the written form of the word with its pronunciation, we are «grouping images and sounds», also in Oxford's group of memory strategies.

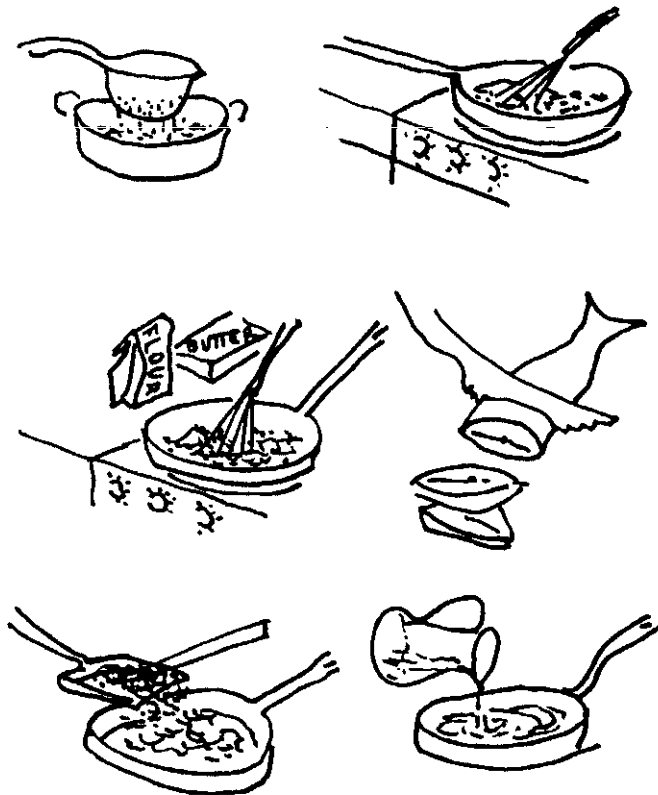
The repetition work that is done in steps b and c, that can be considered practising, comes into the group of cognitive strategies.

When asked to mime the words, students are «interacting with the environment» (Oxford, 1990:66) through T.P.R., another memory strategy.

Finally, we are using visual memory to recall words by remembering their form, their sound, their meaning and the place they occupied in the blackboard. This can again fit into what Oxford calls «applying images and sounds», also in the group of memory strategies, and leads us to J. Channell (1988), who considers phonology, together with semantic and syntactic links, so important for storing and using vocabulary in a foreign language.

## Part II. Skills practised: Reading, writing, speaking

- a) The students read the recipe, number the pictures below according to it and write the instructions, in the right order, underneath the pictures.



FISH PIE            SERVES 6

Any kind of white fish may be used for a fish pie and mashed potatoes can be used as a final covering.

- 1 1/2 lb. (675 g./1 1/2 lb. white fish
- 1 pt. (600 ml./2 1/2 cups) milk
- 2 oz. (50 g./4 tbsp) butter
- 2 oz (50 g/1/2 cup) plain flour (all purpose flour)
- Salt and pepper
- 1 1/2 lb (675 g/1 1/2 lb) freshly cooked potatoes
- A good bunch of parsley
- 1 large egg

Skin the fish and cut it into conveniently sized pieces. Put it in a pan with the milk and simmer it for ten minutes or until it is just beginning to flake. In another pan, melt the butter and stir in the flour, cooking the roux gently for one minute. Drain the fish, and gradually stir 1 pt. (600 ml/2 1/2 cups) of the fish liquid into the roux. Bring the sauce slowly to the boil, stirring it all the time, then simmer it for two or three minutes, stirring occasionally. Season the sauce well with salt and pepper. Finely chop the parsley leaves and stir a good handful into the sauce. Flake the fish, stir it into the sauce and turn it into a fairly deep pie dish.

Freshly cooked potatoes should be well mashed, seasoned with salt and pepper and enriched with the beaten egg before spreading over the fish mixture.

Bake this potato-topped pie in a moderate oven at 350.° F (180.° C), gas mark 4 for 30 to 35 minutes or until the potato is golden brown.

(Adapted from Kathie Webber: *Traditional English Cooking*).

- b) The following are «cooking verbs» that appear in the recipe. Students are asked to infer their meaning from the context or relate them to other words they already know, either in English or in Spanish:

- Flake (corn flakes)
- Drain (drenaje)
- Season (sazonar)
- Chop (chops or «chopped», the kind of cold meat pronounced /'tʃoped/ in Spanish)

- Are they regular or irregular verbs?
- What is their simple past? And their past participle?
- How are they pronounced?

- c) The students are given the following scrambled words so they write correct sentences with them. They should not look back at the recipe while doing it, but afterwards, to check their sentences.

conveniently into pieces and the fish skin it cut sized  
 pan in a it put the milk with and it simmer  
 butter the melt in pan another  
 stir and the flour add, one minute cooking  
 roux into the liquid 1 pt. of the fish gradually stir one for minute.  
 salt and pepper well with sauce season the.  
 fish the flake, it the sauce into stir.

- d) The following chart must be completed according to the instructions given in the recipe:

VERB	WHAT (COMPLEMENT)	HOW/ WHERE/ WHEN
Skin	the fish	
cut	it	
	1 pt. of the fish liquid	
		slowly to the boil
		for two or three minutes.
Season	the sauce	

- e) With the pictures in Part II, a) in an O. H. P. the teacher points to them in the right order, so the students say the recipe orally, if possible in choral work.  
 Students chosen at random or volunteers start explaining, in English, how to make a Spanish omelette. As everybody is supposed to know how to cook something, all the students must join in the talking.

*Comments*

The learners are constantly being given feed back in this activity, as the teacher gets them to work on each part orally as well as in writing. When looking at the «cooking verbs» we are again combining sounds with images, already mentioned as one of R. Oxford’s strategies. Associating the words with others

previously known, either in L1 or L2, belongs to the subgroup «analysing and reasoning», in the wider group of cognitive strategies. Asking the students to infer the meaning from the context develops a compensation strategy.

By asking them to unscramble the sentences and complete the chart, we are teaching them to «recombine» and to «transfer», both in the group of Oxford's cognitive strategies.

In the last part of this activity, the students use, in free production, the vocabulary they have just learned. That means, in Oxford's words, «practising naturalistically». This is a somehow relaxing activity, that everybody will enjoy and is bound to bring laughter to the classroom, thus being an «affective strategy» which will «lower your anxiety» (Oxford, 1990: 19).

When teaching words that tend to associate in a certain way. *Salt and pepper; cut the fish but chop the onion*, we are remembering Richard's eight points you need to master to be able to know a word: «Knowing a word means knowing the degree of probability of encountering it and the sorts of words more likely to be found associate with it (frequency and collocability) (In Carter and McCarthy, 1988:44).

The theory that students must make an effort to acquire vocabulary (Nation, 1990: 64) is present —throughout the activity, as they have to go through a process in which they take an active part—, being given the necessary feedback only after they managed to cope with the different stages.

#### 4. Conclusions

The concepts of a Mental Lexicon and the learning strategies must not be taken separately when it comes to practical vocabulary work. In fact, the knowledge of how words are settled in our mental dictionary provides very valuable clues on how to organise our teaching, and the strategies we want our students to develop depend greatly on this knowledge of how this new vocabulary is going to settle in the learners' minds. It is in our hands to facilitate that settling and make it faster and more efficient. Now we know that students remember the meaning of words better if they learn them in situational sets rather than if they are given a list of words in alphabetical order. They learn better if they are presented vocabulary in semantic maps or according to hyponymy and superordination.

Not so long ago, students used to be given random lists of words, translated into the modern tongue, to be learnt by heart. The aim seemed to be to make these words settle automatically in the learners' minds. But the only link between those

words was that they all belonged to a particular written passage, and the system proved absolutely unsuccessful unless a lot of revision was offered.

In the exercise proposed, we have tried to put into practise some of the principles laid out by various authors, as summarised on the first part of this paper. This activity was successfully used in the classroom with a group of 15 young adult learners, in the context of a lesson on food and cooking.

The reading material was an authentic English recipe taken from a book on traditional English cooking, and the fact that it is «real life» vocabulary undoubtedly increases the students' interest. «... people commonly attempt to link items together in sense units, or find some reason to associate them, or look for personal significance. All these can be harnessed in teaching.» Ur, 1996: 67).

In the «Fish Pie Recipe», vocabulary is presented orally, some of it elicited from the students, and soon written on the blackboard, so learners not only associate the sound with the written form but also learn the words as a semantic group. All the words introduced at the beginning are practised all throughout the activity, at first more receptively and in controlled work, through listening, reading or responding with T.P.R. Then comes a more productive use of the vocabulary to be learnt, unscrambling the words to make sentences or filling in a chart, which can also be considered as a kind of test to check that the process is going well. Finally the students use the words orally in free production.

The broad principles behind these stages have been the grouping of words in a semantic field as well as in a situational set, taking into account the semantic sense relations (Nattinger, 1988: 69 and Aitchinson, 1987-96:72); the association of the written word and its sound, as well as other strategies like taking advantage of visual memory, word association or practising naturalistically (Oxford, 1990: 19). Other strategies, like the student's active part in the process of his/her learning (Nation, 1990: 64, 65), repetition or T.P.R. have also been taken into account.

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**Interesting websites (data from corpora)**

English corpora: British National Corpus: <http://info.ox.ac.uk/bnc>

Corpus Software: [www.oup.com/elt/global/catalogue](http://www.oup.com/elt/global/catalogue).