

Insights into the Spaced Word Practice Strategy and its Role in Fighting Lexical Attrition and Enhancing Retention

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Abstract

The problem of retention and attrition of foreign language vocabulary is an important issue of debate. As a fundamental objective, language teachers struggle to present the most needed information to their students and foreign language learners strive to retain this information. One of the serious problems in teaching and learning a foreign language is the inability of language learners to retain new learned words in the long term memory and retrieve them at will.

The main pursuit of the present article is to highlight the benefits of spacing learning as opposed to cramming learning. It is an attempt to voice out my concern regarding the need to help foreign language learners enrich their lexical competence by using the spaced word practice strategy that is known to help them solve the problem of memory through enhancing long-term learning and fighting short-term one.

Keywords: Strategy, Vocabulary learning strategies, Spaced word practice, Comprehension, Retention

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1.Introduction

^ Learning a language is primarily a matter of learning the vocabulary of that language. Vocabulary is ultimately the basis of any language learning, and memory is a very important cognitive aspect of learning that allows learners to encode, store and recall vocabulary whenever needed. No doubt, word knowledge is a pivotal prerequisite for language learning. However, retaining new L2 words and recalling them at will is a great challenge for both teachers and learners. Indeed, Learners need additional help to remember all the words learned in many sessions study.

Foreign language teachers often strive to guarantee a qualified teaching in order to engage all their learners in the learning process. They endeavor to make them remember as much information as possible. They are quite aware that remembering strategies are the only clues that can help their learners process and transfer the acquired knowledge from the short term memory to the long term memory. This can occur by helping them develop their memory, cognitive, and metacognitive abilities through the use of appropriate learning strategies.

Spaced word practice strategy also known as ‘repetition’, and ‘spacing learning’ has always been the center of my interest throughout long years of teaching in public secondary schools and later at the university. It has been hypothesized and then confirmed that by training learners on the spaced word practice strategy, an effective learning and long term retention of vocabulary might be obtained (Oxford, 1990; Schmitt,1997). In 2013, I undertook a study with final year secondary school learners entitled “Retention and Attrition in EFL Vocabulary learning. The aim of the study was to find out the different strategies our secondary school learners use in order to understand and remember the new learned words. The findings revealed that secondary school learners use appropriate strategies to grasp the meaning of new words but are unable to recall them after a period of time because they do not use appropriate strategies that involve deep processing of information and known to enhance long term retention. Spaced word practice is one of these deep processing strategies and involves constantly reviewing what has been learned through different periods of time. It goes without saying that, before applying this strategy, it is of utmost importance to know and put forward the main objectives of learning vocabulary.

2. The importance of vocabulary learning goals

It is important for language teachers to set forth vocabulary learning goals when they plan a lesson so that they can guarantee success for their learners. This should be done through teaching vocabulary in isolation and in context. Needless to say that “one cannot speak, understand, read or write

a foreign language without knowing a lot of words so, vocabulary learning is at the heart of mastering a foreign language” (Thompson, 1994, p.79).

The main goal of vocabulary learning should be to determine the meaning of a new word, to retain it in the mental lexicon for a long term in order to retrieve it for appropriate use and therefore enlarge the learner’s lexical repertoire. Two important learning goals of vocabulary learning are ‘comprehension’ and ‘retention’.

Comprehension is “the identification of the intended meaning of written or spoken communication” (Richard and Schmitt, 1985, p.99) while **retention** is “the ability to recall or remember things after an interval of time” (Richard and Schmitt, 1985, p. 457) Through comprehension and retention, we can limit attrition which Chamot (1999, p.286) defines as “the loss of a second or foreign language after instructions”

Nation (2001, p.6) rightly remarks that “it is useful to be able to set learning goals that will allow us to use the language in the ways we want to”. So a good learner should set for himself/herself important goals such as to understand, store words in the long-term memory and not in short-term memory only and recall them at will. To achieve these goals, the learner must pay attention and take into consideration “the number of words in the language, the number of words known by native speakers and the number of words needed to use the language” (Nation,2001, p.6). It is in this way that students can enlarge their vocabulary and improve their language proficiency.

In sum, when teachers teach vocabulary, one of their goals should be to help their students in setting learning goals. It is important to make them quite aware of the importance of pronouncing well and spelling words correctly, retaining the new words by using appropriate strategies and then using them to express their ideas and thoughts appropriately. To this end, they need to know and be trained on the use of the most suitable strategies.

3. Vocabulary Learning Strategies

Vocabulary knowledge is a very important element and a key success in learning a language. Learners should be made aware that it is the pillar of any skill and without it nothing can be done in the classroom. And in order to enrich their lexical repertoire, learners need to use appropriate strategies that are known to enhance the learning and retention of vocabulary. So, what is meant by ‘vocabulary learning strategies?’

3.a- Defining Vocabulary Learning Strategies

During the last decades, vocabulary learning strategies have witnessed increasing attention in second/foreign language acquisition field. Their importance has rapidly increased and become a non-neglected area among language educators (Meara, 2002).

Learning words and using them appropriately requires much effort and takes much time. This is why learners have to learn specific techniques and take specific actions that help them in storing the new L2 words and retrieve them when needed. This can be done by being introduced to different types of vocabulary learning strategies so that they can take in charge their own learning.

Recently, vocabulary learning strategies have become one of the most important researched topics in foreign language education. It is quite well known among educators that effective and appropriate strategies are needed to learn L2 words. It goes without saying that if a foreign language learner is not equipped with a sufficient amount of words, then he will not be able to interact with others because vocabulary is the fundamental building block of any language; that is why, Wilkins (1972, p.111-112) advocates that “without grammar very little can be conveyed, without words nothing can be conveyed”

There are numerous definitions of vocabulary learning strategies. Takac (2008, p.58) defines strategies as being “a resource that learners can turn to in solving language learning tasks”, and “they cannot be characterized as inherently either good or bad but as potentially useful”. Cook (2001:126) states that using a strategy tends to be “a choice that the learner makes while learning or using the second language that affects learning”. Moreover, Oxford highlights the importance of using strategies in second/foreign language learning gripping special attention to six main benefits. She defines them as being “ specific actions taken by the learner to make learning easier, faster, more enjoyable, more self-directed, more effective and more transferable to new situations” (1990,p.17), this goes in line with O’Malley and Chamot (1990), who state that strategies are “the special thoughts or behaviors that individuals use to help them comprehend, learn, or retain new information” (p. 1), and later with Chamot who added that “strategies are “the conscious thoughts and actions that learners take in order to achieve a learning goal” (2004,p.14)

All these definitions have something in common: Vocabulary learning strategies are intentional actions that foreign language learners consciously select and use in order to better learn and retain words in the mental lexicon in order to recall them at will.

According to Nation (2001) a strategy must have the following characteristics:

- 1-Involve choice; that is, there should be several strategies to choose from.
- 2-Be complex; that is, there should be several steps to learn.
- 3-Require knowledge and benefit from training.
- 4-Increase the efficiency of vocabulary learning and vocabulary use (2001, p.217)

In this article, vocabulary learning strategies are taken to mean “activities consciously chosen by learners with the purpose of regulating their own language learning” (Griffith, 2007, p.91). There are many vocabulary learning strategies that language learners need to know and be trained on in order to foster their academic success. The ‘Spaced word practice strategy’ is an important metacognitive strategy that should not be neglected if we talk about positive learning outcomes. So, what are the metacognitive strategies and what is the relationship between these strategies and remembering (retention)?

4. Metacognitive strategies and retention

The prominent figure of vocabulary learning strategies is Schmitt (1997). According to him, language learners need to use metacognitive strategies in order to retain words. Indeed, this type of strategies “involve a conscious overview of the learning process and making decisions about planning, monitoring, or evaluating the best way to study” (Schmitt, 1997, p. 136).

Schmitt (1997) summarizes the metacognitive strategies in the following table:

Metacognitive strategies
1- Use English language media (songs, movies, newscasts)
2- Use spaced word practice (expanding rehearsal)
3- Test oneself with word test
4- Skip or pass new word
5- Continue to study word over time

Source: Schmitt (1997, p. 134)

According to Schmitt (1997), spaced word practice is the second important metacognitive strategy that is known to enhance learners’ autonomy and remembering. Metacognition is a support necessary to develop basic skills essential for storing words. Indeed, words are organized in our mental lexicon (which is a kind of dictionary containing word’s knowledge) and spacing learning improves the vocabulary learning outcomes by maximizing retention in learners’ mental lexicon and minimizing attrition. Therefore, the mental lexicon is “a memory system in

which a vast number of words, accumulated in the course of time, has been stored” (Hulstijn, 2000, quoted in Takac,2008).

Metacognitive strategies (MET) concern the “planning of learning, setting of goals, thinking about the learning process, monitoring of performance, as well as evaluation of results and the learning process” (Takac, 2008, p.53). According to Oxford,1990, cited in Celce-Murcia 2001), Metacognitive strategies signify performing the following:

- Gathering and organizing materials
- Arranging and planning learning
- Monitoring mistakes
- Evaluating

As a matter of fact, learners use the metacognitive strategy (the spacing learning) to test and assess their own learning. At this stage, learners decide about cramming, spacing, or evaluating the best way to study (Schmitt, 2000). This, in fact provides “input into the effectiveness of one’s choice of learning strategies, providing positive reinforcement if progress is being made or a signal to switch strategies if it is not” (Schmitt, 1997:216). Spaced learning is known to be a highly structured and effective strategy.

It is clear that if we want to learn a language and be able to communicate both in oral and written form, we must enlarge our vocabulary by learning a ‘package’ of words. However, knowing a long list of words does not prove that learners will be able to store, memorize and use them whenever needed. So, how can our learners overcome attrition?

5. Lexical Attrition and Memory

Forgetting (also known as Attrition) is an important issue in relation to the acquisition of lexical competence. This point has often been discussed with English inspectors of secondary education stressing that our secondary school learners tend to forget words that were presented and practised in class soon after being tested. Most of the time, students complain about their inability to retain words for a long period of time even when they spend hours memorizing long lists of words. In order to understand where the problem lies, it is essential to understand how memory works. So, first what is memory?

Memory is a cognitive process and an important means of information processing. It is the power of the brain and our faculty to acquire knowledge

(**encoding**), maintaining information (**storage**) and using the information that was stored (**retrieval**) (Atkinson & Shiffrin, 1968).

Researchers make a distinction between two types of memory: *Short-Term Memory* and *Long-Term memory*.

The Short term memory (STM) is often interchanged with Working Memory and it is our ability to retain items for few seconds. In short term memory the given or perceived information gets dismissed after a few minutes. Thornbury (2002:23) describes it as “the brain’s capacity to hold a limited number of items of information for periods of time up to a few seconds”.

The Long term memory (LTM) is that memory which stores words for a longer period of time. In the long term memory, information is taken from the short term memory store and creates long lasting memories. Comparing the short-term memory with the long-term one, Schmitt (2000:131) states that STM is “fast but has a 24 small storage capacity” while LTM “has an almost unlimited storage capacity but is relatively slow”. Thus, the learned vocabulary is supposed to move from “the quickly forgotten to the never forgotten”. (Thornbury, 2002:24)

Learning a language is not only a matter of learning a long list of words but also retaining them because “learning is remembering” (Thornbury, 2002:23). However, retaining the learnt words is not an easy process and requires specific techniques to do it. The majority of learners find it extremely difficult to call information to mind when taking exams. The best way for achieving this goal (remembering) is by creating several different recall pathways to memories; hence, the spaced word practice.

6. What is the Spaced Word Practice Strategy?

Spaced word practice strategy is a metacognitive vocabulary learning strategy through which learners review the new vocabulary over an extended period of time. It is generally used to build upon the information being learnt and recall it at will. The spaced word practice strategy is an immensely powerful technique helpful in fighting lexical attrition. According to Wyner

Spaced repetition...[is] extraordinarily efficient. In a four-month period,

practising for 30 minutes a day, you can expect to learn and retain 3600

flashcards with 90 to 95 percent accuracy. These flashcards can teach you

an alphabet, vocabulary, grammar, and even pronunciation. And they can do it without becoming tedious because they're always challenging enough to remain interesting and fun. (2014,p.156)

When language learners learn new vocabulary once and do not review it after a specific period of time, this vocabulary will be attrited in a matter of days. Spaced word practice strategy is considered to be an exercise session that trains learners into remembering the new learnt words for a better use. It is generally opposed to cramming sessions where words are learnt for a short period of time and then forgotten. Indeed, it is very important for EFL learners to get into the habit of using the spaced word practice strategy all along their learning process. According to Oxford (1990), the new vocabulary makes its way into the learner's long-term memory each time it is reviewed. The spaced word practice strategy is a metacognitive strategy that involves deep processing of information in order to ensure long term memory (Schmitt, 2000).

7. The spaced word practice strategy and Memory

The history of the spaced word practice strategy goes back to the nineteenth century, when Ebbinghaus (1885) postulated that the degree at which people inadvertently fail to remember information increased dramatically with time. However, if an item was systematically and constantly revised, it turned to be forgotten at a slower rate, the latter gradually decreasing with each repetition (Hudlainen and Klepikova, 2016).

Spaced word practice (also known as Spaced Repetition, Recycling, Memory Schedule and Spiraling) is a learning strategy based on learning and reviewing at different time intervals. It is often referred to as learning disposed and assigned across time rather than massed into a single study session.

There is no doubt, memory is the most important aspect in learning a foreign language, but this aspect needs to be widely explored by educators and language researchers because many learners find it very difficult to remember vocabulary. That is why, Pimsleur (1967), suggests a possible solution to all our learners' problem of attrition. This solution is 'the graduated interval recall ', considered to be a "schedule of repetitions which is sufficiently frequent to raise the student's memory level appreciably" (p.73). It is a strategy based on systematic reviewing throughout time. Pimsleur (1967) also encourages learners to systematically revise and repeat the new vocabulary just after the first encounter and then progressively, periodically and regularly increase repetition at different timespan.

According to Sobel (2011, p.763) the spacing effect “refers to a memory advantage that occurs when people learn material on several separate occasions, instead of a single massed study episode”. The remembering of new vocabulary is successful when words are spread over longer periods of time instead of being crammed in one single session. In other words, learners need to regularly review the new L2 words to ensure learning transfer from the short term memory to the long term memory (Pashler, 2006).

Along the same line, Nation (2001) argues that words that are distributed and spaced across a period of time are better retained than those learned in a ‘single block’ because “this spaced repetition results in learning that will be remembered for a long period of time” (p.76). This is in agreement with Oxford (1990)’s spiralling and Pimsleur (1967)’s Memory’ Schedule. Oxford (1990, cited in Nemati, 2009) advises learners to adapt a ‘structural’ reviewing which consists in reviewing at different intervals. It is worth mentioning that spaced word practice is also called ‘spiraling’ because learners “keep spiraling back to what has already been learned at the time they are learning new information” (Oxford, 1990, p. 42)

According to Thornbury, there are two factors responsible for determining Retention: Firstly, words that are easy to learn are better retained. Secondly, if vocabulary learning occurs over spaced learning sessions, then words are retained much better than if learned in ‘concentrated burst’ (2002:26). Therefore, Thornbury advocates that in order to guarantee that every learned word moves into permanent long term memory, learners have to adapt the spacing strategy and rehearsal which are viewed to be very helpful in recalling words. He suggests that the ‘spaced review’ of what is learned can have a great effect on minimizing “the rate of forgetting “(2002, p.26).

In consonance with the previous scholars, Schmitt suggests that language learners ought to constantly check and see if they can recall words they have studied. Therefore, “if they can remember them, they should increase the interval before the next review, but if they cannot they should shorten the interval” (2000, p.131). This is in general agreement with Baddelly (1990) (cited in Schmitt, 2000, p.130) who advocates that ‘expanding rehearsal’ is important in reducing attrition. The learning of new vocabulary can be accomplished when learners keep repeating the new words just after they have been taught and then revision should be done throughout ‘increasing time span. Thornbury hypothesizes that adapting spacing learning and gradually reviewing what is learned can have a positive effect on reducing ‘the rate of forgetting’ (2002). This is why, Nation, (2001), Schmitt (2000) and Thornbury (2002), all advise learners and teachers to recycle vocabulary in order to fight attrition. Hence, recycling can be “a remedy against forgetting” (Thornbury, op.cit, p.26)

Spacing learning is more significant than cramming learning. As a matter of fact, forgetting decreases when there is spacing revision of the new learned information, and as vocabulary is a core element in learning a language much attention must be given to it through helping learners enrich their vocabulary repertoire. This can be done through the metacognitive spacing strategy.

In a nutshell, space word practice is an excellent learning strategy for EFL learners in general and Algerian foreign language learners in particular. It is a teaching and learning strategy that provides learners with the ability to store words in the long term-memory and use them in an appropriate and accurate way whenever needed.

8. Survey of Studies on spaced-word practice strategy

It is worth mentioning that a great deal of experimental research has displayed the fact that using spaced word practice boosts the long term retention of vocabulary. Several studies have demonstrated that cramming learning and trying to absorb much knowledge within a short amount of time is not an effective learning strategy and results in short-term recall, whereas spacing learning is a useful strategy that enhances memory and ensures a long-term learning.

In 1981, Bloom and Shuell conducted a study with secondary EFL school learners. They divided the class into two groups. Each group was given a list of twenty words, all new for learners. The spaced word learning group was given ten minutes to learn and revise the L2 words all along three consecutive days while the massed word learning group studied the words only once for thirty minutes. Four days later, both groups were tested on their ability to recall the words. The findings displayed the fact that learning L2 vocabulary using spaced word practice strategy results in higher retention as the spacing group could easily recall and retrieve the learned words whereas the other group who learned the words in one study period showed a poor retention of these words and thus confirmed that cramming leads to disappointing results.

Childers and Tomasello (2002) examined children's ability to memorize words. These children were given words throughout two different conditions; spacing and massing. The results showed that the participants could retain all the words that were repeated once a day for four days whereas they showed poor retention of other words that they heard eight times in a single day.

Kornell (2009) undertook a study with undergraduate students aiming to test the effectiveness of retaining words through the use of two strategies: spaced word practice and massed word practice. The language learners were

given 40 words to be learned using flash cards. The students were trained to learn and retain these words using the above mentioned strategies. Thus, the 40 words were distributed as follows; 20 words were studied in spaced condition while the 20 left words were studied in the massed condition. After going through a test, the findings revealed that the twenty words learned using spaced word practice were better retained than those learned with massed word learning. Kornell (2009, p.1305) concluded by saying that “studying one relatively large set of flash cards over a period of days (i.e. spacing) was superior to concentrating on a separate day of flashcards each day (i.e. massing). Spacing was also superior to cramming (i.e. studying intensively)”.

Another study was undertaken by Sobel et al (2011) with middle school learners in order to see if spaced learning would help them remember words. The participants were given eight new words with their definitions. The language learners exposed to the learning through the massing strategy showed difficulty to recall the words while those exposed to the spacing condition resulted in significantly better and long term retention and therefore outperformed the first group.

In a nutshell, all the aforementioned studies reveal the fact that the spacing of vocabulary learning helps learners to perform vastly better than the massed learning, and that “the spacing effect benefits retention in real world classroom” (Bloom and Shuell, 1981.p.765)

9. Conclusion and Recommendations

The literature has shown that spaced word practice strategy has a positive effect on intensifying EFL long term retention of vocabulary. Spaced practice is superior to massed practice and it is a valuable resource that should not be underestimated. Learners’ long term memory increases when the revision of vocabulary is spaced out over time. This is well-confirmed by Lotfolah & Salehi, (2017) who believe that spacing learning across time is twofold: it does promote the long term retention and also puts an end to the belief that learners benefit from cramming more than spacing.

Both foreign language teachers and learners have to move away from the stereotypical way of teaching and learning. Teachers have the responsibility not only to impart knowledge but also train their learners on the use of the spaced-word practice strategy in order to reinforce their memory and by the same token help them learn how to take control of their own learning. It goes without saying that language learners need to have a good knowledge and understanding of the spaced word practice strategy so as to recycle their knowledge of vocabulary by engaging in a repeated and systematic revision.

It is hoped that foreign language teachers think seriously at implementing the spaced word practice strategy in their teaching syllabus. It is also important for learners to stop cramming and realize that spacing learning outweighs massing learning.

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