



How Vocabulary is Learned



Oxford Handbooks for Language Teachers

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18 Keyword technique

Programme strand	Language-focused learning from reading
Learning goal	Learn the forms and meanings of new words
Learning conditions	Deliberate elaboration
Research evidence	The keyword technique is the most thoroughly researched vocabulary learning activity, with the vast majority of experiments indicating that it outperforms any default deliberate learning activity by around 20%.
Further reading	Pressley (1977)

Description

We briefly described the keyword technique in Chapter 4. This deliberate learning technique is a mnemonic device for relating the form of a word to its meaning in a memorable way. It draws on four components:

- 1 the form of the L2 word to be learned
- 2 a keyword that the learner chooses from their L1 (or is provided for them) which resembles all or the beginning of the L2 word form
- 3 a visual image that links the meaning of the keyword with the meaning of the L2 word
- 4 the meaning of the L2 word.

For example, in order to learn the L2 word 'funds' (= money), a Thai learner might choose the Thai keyword 'fun', which means 'teeth'. The next step is to visualize an image combining the Thai keyword with the meaning of 'funds', for example someone sinking their teeth into a pile of banknotes. The effect of this is that whenever the learner encounters the word 'funds', the form of the word will remind them of the keyword, and this will prompt them to visualize the associated image, which conveys the meaning of the L2 word. While this may seem a rather clumsy and elaborate process for memorizing a word and its meaning, it has proved to be very effective. It need not be used to learn every word—only for those that do not stick readily in memory. (The keyword technique can be used very effectively in conjunction with *17 Flashcards*, though it is not limited to being used in this way.)

Lexical information

In order to use the keyword technique, the learner needs to have both the form and meaning of an L2 word available for processing. This means the keyword technique does not provide new information about the word; it simply provides a memorable way of linking the form and meaning of words.

Learning conditions

The major learning condition underpinning the keyword technique is deliberate elaboration. Pressley's research (1977) looked at the various components of the keyword technique to see what made it work, and he concluded that the image combining the meaning of the L1 keyword and that of the L2 word was central to the effectiveness of the technique. Simply providing an image of the meaning of the L2 word was not nearly as effective as the linking image created using the keyword technique.

Repetition is not an integral part of the technique, although once the keyword technique has been applied to a word, coming back to the word again and again using flashcards is an effective way of ensuring that the word is learned. However, supporters of the keyword technique might argue that if the linking image is truly memorable, then repetition would be rendered unnecessary.

Improving vocabulary learning

- 1 The effectiveness of the keyword technique initially depends on the choice of keyword and then on the memorability of the linking image. In most studies of the keyword technique, the keyword is an L1 word. Some languages, like Mandarin, which are largely monosyllabic and have a very limited range of syllable structures, may not provide a rich source of keywords to match to L2 words. In these cases, learners can be encouraged to choose keywords from other languages they know, or from the words they already know in the L2.
- 2 Learners need a reasonable amount of guided practice with the keyword technique before they become comfortable using it. The goal of the practice should be to make it so easy for them to use the technique that they use it whenever they have the opportunity to do so. Teachers can model choosing keywords, interacting with the class, and eventually get learners to work in groups and choose keywords themselves. Similar practice can be done in creating linking images.
- 3 An important part of the keyword technique is visualizing the linking image rather than just describing it. Learners should therefore be encouraged to close their eyes and visualize the linking image as a way of making sure that it will truly work. This visualization is thought to result in dual coding (Paivio & Desrochers, 1981), whereby information about the word is stored both linguistically and visually.