

Role of Memory in Language and Acquisition of Vocabulary

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Abstract

Memory and language learning are interconnected. Without memory, all learning, including language learning will come to nothing if memory is not able to retain it. An attempt has been made in this article to show how a child learns vocabulary and how memory helps him to retain it in his mind for the use in his communication. The article also focuses on describing the categorization of vocabulary into Working and Passive vocabulary. And the ways to acquire vocabulary through encoding, storage and retrieval.

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Man is the crown of all creation. He has been endowed with the highest power of memory. It is only with the help of memory that man takes part in imagination, idea, reason and decision. In every day-to-day activity, man has to rely on his memory. He would have neither been able to learn anything nor would have been able to establish any kind of association. So, with the help of memory, individuals remember important facts, real names and other items of information accurately. Memory gives man the impression of efficiency; without memory man becomes lazy and inaccurate. Memory, therefore, is the function of the mind by virtue of which it records, and produces ideas gained by its own activities.

Various scholars have tried to define memory in different ways :-

J.S.Ross says "Memory is a new experience determined by the disposition laid down by previous experiences, the relation between the two being clearly apprehended."

James Drever was of the view, "Memory is the characteristic of living organism, in virtue of which what they experience leaves behind effects which modify future experience and behaviour, in virtue of which they have a history and that history is regarded in themselves."

From the above definitions it can be said that memory lays stress on the resurrection of the past experience and it also molds and modifies our future behaviour.

Memory and Language Learning:-

Memory and Language learning are inter-connected. All learning including language learning will come to nothing if memory is not able to retain it. The following steps are taken in language learning :-

- 1) A child first learns to name objects and people. The relationship between objects and people is arbitrary. There is no logic why a table is called table and not chair.
- 2) When a child learns a language, he tries to remember what things are called in that language code. Every language has its own nomenclature. A child learns the relationship between the world and the things it signifies.

3) When the words have been required, the child tries to remember the conventions of how the words are combined to form a meaningful sentence in that particular language. The child tries to internalize and apply the sentence structure.

4) In the next step, a child stores chunks of words and lexical phrases in his memory. Such lexical phrases e.g. "as far as possible", "I know", "In my opinion" etc. are prefabricated and are readily available for productive use. A child also registers lexical collocations e.g. "bread and butter".

Role of Memory in Acquisition of Vocabulary:-

Vocabulary means the stock of words used in a language. If one wants to express one's ideas exactly and clearly, one must build up a good vocabulary. Vocabulary can be divided into two major categories:-

a) Working Vocabulary :- Working Vocabulary is the stock of words in our daily life. This is the vocabulary which we use actively in our day-to-day life. It is also known by the name of active vocabulary or productive vocabulary.

b) Passive Vocabulary :- There are certain words which we recognize or understand but do not actively use them. Such vocabulary is known as passive/recognition/receptive vocabulary.

Memory plays a very significant role in acquisition of vocabulary. Vocabulary is acquired in the following manner :-

1) Direct Association with Objects :- Vocabulary is learnt by creating a direct association between the words and their meanings.

2) Association with Pictures and Models :- Where it is not possible to show objects directly, their models and pictures can be made use of instead. Picture of lake or the model of a mountain can help a learner in acquisition of vocabulary in an interesting manner.

3) Association with Demonstrations :- Some actions can be demonstrated or shown in pictures e.g. the verbs like jump, bend or yawn etc. can be learnt through demonstrations.

4) Activity Methods :- Several activity methods have been evolved for building up the vocabulary of students. Flash cards, word games of various kinds, quiz-competitions, moveable word-steps, word-lists and student's own word-dictionaries can be helpful for the learners in learning vocabulary.

5) Associative Clustering and Categorical Recall :- Associative clustering means that are recalled together with association with each other. For example, life and death, rice and dal, butter and bread, slow and steady etc. Categorical recall means dividing the words in head categories and learning vocabulary related to these categories e.g. under the head word "computer", we can learn words like key-board, mouse, wi-fi, bluetooth, windows etc.

6) Morphological Devices :- The formation of words is explained by morphology. Words can be learned by looking at the suffix, prefix attached to the root word. For example, words like "courageous", "encourage", "encouraging", "discouraging" etc can be learnt with the word "courage".

Vocabulary will be acquired through these stages but memory will assist the learner in this process. The first stage in the process of memory is

1) Encoding or Acquisition :- We are all the time receiving information from the outside world through our sensory experience. Sensory impressions are transmitted to the mind where they are encoded or changed to usable form. These graphic units are transformed into the meaningful units and stored. Out of this crowd of impressions, the mind selects only that which is relevant.

Encoding of impressions can be done in three ways :-

- a) Visual Representation or Iconic Memory
- b) Acoustic Representation or Echoic Memory
- c) Semantic Representation

Through encoding, we :

- 1) Select the word that we need to register in our vocabulary.

2) Try to register the word with its associated visual, acoustic and meaning representation

3) Register the order of letters/words in a sequence and learn to use the word contextually.

2) Storage :- Once the information is recorded in our mind, it is stored there as per our requirement. Some word which are used less often are stored in passive/short-term memory where as the most frequently used word become a part of active/long-term vocabulary.

3) Retrieval or Recall :- When we have stored the vocabulary in our mind, we can retrieve or call it with our memory. Sometimes, this information can be recalled immediately which is called Free Recall or Cued Recall.

In other cases we may not be able to recall the information immediately or the way it was first encoded.

The things which we have learnt recently are easy to recall because of the "Recency Effect" and the things that happened long ago and are difficult to recall due to "Primacy Effect".

To conclude, it can be said that memory plays a significant role in acquisition of vocabulary. If we don't memorize or register the words in our mind, our life will become difficult. We would forget the names of the things around us, names of our friends or relatives, their addresses and telephone numbers etc. It is only memory that relates us to the world outside.

Author's Bio :

The Author is working as an Assistant Professor in English at Government College Roopnagar, Punjab. She has a passion for the english language and is working as a Coordinator of Add-on course in Spoken English for communication skills. She has also set up a state-of-the-art language laboratory in her college.