

Activating memory in the language classroom

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Research about memory seems to suggest a few core principles:

- The bulk of forgetting happens soon after any learning session, though after that first major loss any subsequent losses occur more slowly
- Things that are stored together tend to be retrieved together, as the mind tends to automatically 'chunk' memories in terms of relationships
- Distributed practice – exposure over time interspersed among other items – tends to result in more effective memory retention than massed practice – numerous consecutive exposure to an item
- Sentences are easier to learn if the student meets them in a meaningful context, possibly because such contexts require more complex processing and therefore greater engagement
- We seem to learn best when there's not only meaningful engagement, but also a strong personal stake
- People can learn language at faster rates than we may expect, and teachers' beliefs about how much – and how well – learners are capable of learning seems to have an impact upon how well they do

Given all of the above, here are some basic approaches that prioritise the activation of memory in the classroom:

1 Modelling

Before asking students to do any speaking task / activity, give an example of your own. Modelling is one of the great unheralded arts of teaching – and plays a central role in activating memory in class. Modelling tasks seems simple on first inspection, but it actually achieves several things: firstly, it gives students a clear idea of exactly what kind of turn you want them to now take when they attempt to relate tales from their own lives – and it validates a culture of story-telling and anecdote-sharing within the group. Secondly, and more pertinently, it exposes students to plenty of useful lexis and grammar, both language that they'll have encountered before, and also language that they might now be more able to use themselves in their own Student Talking Time.

As you get more experienced at doing this, you use your voice more consciously to draw attention to language, and you become more adept at ensuring the language is not only graded correctly, but also contains plenty you've already taught before, thus forcing it back into students' consciousness.

2 Helping students say what they've been trying to say in better English / reformulation

The way I now round up after speaking tasks is NOT to focus predominantly on error correction (though I do still sometimes do a bit of this), but rather to reformulate utterances. If students are to get better, they don't just need practice in speaking – they need to know how to say things they want to say in better English. By picking up on what students are trying to say – or thinking about how they could say what they're already saying in better English – and getting whole sentences / mini-conversations up on the board while students are speaking, with gaps in appropriate places, the teacher has a language-focussed way of rounding off student speaking slots.

Obviously, the words you choose to gap need to be easily guessable – and ideally need to be the only possible words that could go in the gap you've chosen. Strong collocations or key grammatical words work especially well. To elicit them, you basically need to re-tell the stories that they came from, paraphrasing / padding meaning and maybe giving one or two letters of the word if students need a helping hand.

With this kind of round-up, you win on both fronts: either students know the language and feel good about being seen to remember it – and you get to use the democratic, open access process of asking the whole class for language – and using the stronger students to feed the weaker ones, in a kind of Robin Hood style, whilst also giving them whole sentence, fully grammaticalised input that has covert revision purposes as well – or else you create the need for the language and create a feeling of completion by then providing it.

Obviously, getting good at doing this takes time and needs practice. Working out which language to focus on – and being able to choose words which are the only plausible answers – is hard. When I look back at some of my early attempts to do this, I can sadly recall such disasters as the following:

I'm lucky, because I've got a really job.
I have quite a lot of, which is great.

so I'm not saying this is easy – and I'm not saying it means students automatically remember everything, but nothing ventured, nothing gained!

One thing you might want to try and do, if this kind of reformulation is not something that's part and parcel of your everyday teaching yet, is CHEAT! The way you do this is BEFORE you get students doing a speaking task in class, you sit at home – or in the staff room – and predict what students might say in response to the task. Actually say – or write – what you imagine might be said. Then select some choice vocabulary – or grammar you want to just briefly go over again – from all of this and SCRIPT your boardwork in advance. You then lead into this by simply saying OK. STOP THERE. THAT WAS GREAT. LET'S LOOK AT HOW TO SAY SOME OF WHAT YOU WERE TRYING TO SAY BETTER. I HEARD SOMEONE SAY . . .

Students never ask WHO said these things. They're simply glad to be getting some new and relevant language. The fact the language seems to be connected to their own output may well also serve to make it slightly more memorable.

3 Test and remember

This technique basically involves students doing an exercise in a coursebook – ideally one that involves matching questions and answers or statements and possible responses . . . or else perhaps the beginning of sentences with the endings ... or verbs and possible collocations, or matching descriptions of an event or thing or crime, say, to the actual names of the things. The teacher then goes through the answers, working on any language that's caused any problems, asking questions about it, providing extra examples and maybe writing up some extra boardwork to consolidate all of this. Then, quite simply, give students a minute or two to remember the language from the exercise; put students in pairs – As and Bs – and tell B to close their books. A reads out their sentences, B tries to say the correct responses – and A corrects them if needs be. After a couple of minutes, stop the students and change the pairs round, so this time B is testing and A is trying to remember.

There are several advantages to this kind of activity: firstly, it helps you deal with mixed-level classes in that in every pair, you can always make the stronger student of the two Student B – the one that closes their book FIRST – meaning Student A gets more time / support before they're out on the spot. It's also something students can test themselves on at home – and that can easily be recycled the following lesson, either in pairs again or simply with the teacher playing the role of Student A and the whole class shouting out the responses that B said the lesson before. Finally, yet again, it sends subliminal messages to the students that it's not enough to DO exercises, practise them in class and move on: they have to notice and try to remember the language, and this process can extend over time.

Eight revision activities

1. **Rote-learning**
Get students to make a list of words expressions they want to learn over the following week. They could do this at home or they could do it at the end of the lesson. Take it in and correct it. Get students to write it out afresh on a clean piece of paper. Give them a week to learn them. You could also use these lists for some of the following activities.
2. **Choose three expressions**
Students choose 3 expressions from their notes, mingle and discuss:
 - a. why you like them
 - b. why you think they are useful
 - c. what they mean!
 - d. when you used them.
3. **Act or draw**
Make a list of words / expressions and hand them out. In pairs, Student A acts or draws one of the words and Student B guesses. With lower levels let Student B see the list of words.
4. **Team games**
Divide class into 2 teams. One person from each team sits at the front of the class with their back to the board. Write a word / expression on the board. Each team explains the word to their team member at the front of the class. The first person to guess gets a point. A quicker (but perhaps less fun way is for the teacher to simply explain the word/or expression and the team shout out or write down their answer.
Another variation is to have a word on the board and students can only shout out collocates rather than explanations.
5. **Translation**
Get students to translate the expressions they learnt in the previous lesson and compare with someone from the same language group.
At a later date students could use their list of translations to test each other. One points to the translation and the other says the English.
6. **What do you remember about the text**
 - a. read out a text students have studied. Stop mid sentence / collocation / expression and let students shout out the rest of the sentence.
 - b. get students to discuss what they remember in pairs and/or whole class. Reformulate what they say reminding them of the new language they saw.
 - c. get students to complete a collocation / expression grid based on a text they studied. Cut it up and use it at a later date for students to reconstruct the text.
7. **Repeat activities they've previously done.**
Get students to look back at the relevant activity / language. Let them ask questions about anything they've forgotten. Make them close their books and repeat the task. You might also then do a further practice / extension with students personalising the task / language.
8. **Organising / grouping language**
Make a list of language taught and get students to organise the words / expressions into groups. You can:
 - a. provide the groups yourself. Sometimes they may be slightly bizarre - rooms in the house or countries.
 - b. say how many groups but not the titles.
 - c. allow students complete free range.

In all cases students can discuss their groupings in pairs / groups.

Below is a copy of an advice sheet I usually hand out to students. It's basically ten tips to encourage them to take some responsibility for the learning / remembering of language we cover in class.

Self-study Tips

It is important to revise regularly (preferably daily), looking again at the parts of the book you have studied in class as well as your notebooks. The language in your coursebook and the language your teachers give you on the board are good models of English. It's a good idea to try to copy this as much as possible. Moving from understanding language in class to actually using it outside the classroom should be the focus of your self-study. The activities below are good ways to revise language at home.

1. It might be a good idea to have two notebooks. One for in class and one for revision. When you get home, have a look at the notes you took in class and organise them in your revision notebook. You can organise language according to **topic** (for example, food, weather, describing people, talking about sport, etc.). You can also organise lists of collocations and expressions common verbs (e.g. *get, make, do*, etc. so that you list things like *How long does it take you to get here in the mornings?, I didn't get to bed until 3*, etc. under GET) Make sure you always have an example sentence of how the collocations are used. A good English learner's dictionary such as the Macmillan dictionary of the Collins Cobuild Learner's Dictionary can help.
2. Pick 5–10 expressions and translate them into your language. Do not use a dictionary when you do this. You can do this with a partner who speaks the same language or on your own. If you find the translation difficult, check the meaning of the expression with your teacher in your next class. A few days later, look at the translated sentences and translate them back to English. Compare your translations to the original sentences in English. Think about any differences. Repeat a few days later and see if you translated the whole expression correctly this time.
3. If you work with a study partner, you can also test each other by saying the translations in your own language. Your partner then says the English collocation or expression. Only do this with collocations or complete sentences, not with single words.
4. Do any gap-fill exercise from the book again and see if you remember the missing words. To make this a bit more challenging you can redo a gap-fill without looking at the words given.
5. If you work with a study partner, you can also test each other by reading out sentences from the book or from your notes, but leaving out the words in the gaps – or saying MMM instead of the words. Your partner then says the words in the gaps.
6. Re-do any exercise from the book, especially ones you found difficult.
7. With a study partner, re-read a conversation from the audio scripts in the back of the book. Close the book and try to have the same conversation again. When you get stuck, have a quick look at the audio script, close the book and carry on with the conversation.
8. With a study partner, make a list of words / expressions you want to remember. Student A: act or draw the words. Student B: guess.
9. Choose up to five expressions that you like and think are useful. Think of a situation when you might use them. Then try to use them in the week ahead. Don't worry about making mistakes. You learn from mistakes.
10. Re-read a reading text from the book. Underline 8-12 key words. Then, using only these keywords, try to retell the story. When you get stuck, give yourself a minute to check the text, close the book again and carry on. You can do this on your own or with a study partner.

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