
TIPS FOR TEACHERS

Applying Memory-Enhancing Techniques in Language Teaching

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Imagine memorizing a thousand random digits in an hour or 300 random words in 15 minutes! Contestants in memory game competitions perform such feats despite having only average intelligence and memory capacity. Now, further imagine the potential if we could help language learners, apply the techniques of memory champions to the study of, for example, new vocabulary in a language class.

I began to consider this possibility after reading a book with the intriguing subtitle, *The art and science of remembering everything* (Foer, 2012). Foer chronicles his yearlong quest to compete against top “mental athletes” in the 2006 U.S. Memory Championships, which he eventually won. He recounts the critical role that visual images play in preserving knowledge and history in societies that depend on a strong oral tradition and laments our loss of a trained “internal memory” in the face of the vast “external memory” exemplified today by our mobile devices and the Internet. He reveals how successful cabbies, chess champions, and the aforementioned mental athletes create personalized images or “memory palaces” to move information from short-term memory into long-term memory.

This last point led me to wonder how I could apply visual imaging techniques to language learning and teaching. Of course, language teachers often use visual images, such as photos, video clips, whiteboard drawings, and body language to clarify the meaning of new words and expressions for our students in the short term, but could I, for example, help my students use visual imagery to understand and recall, for the long term, illusive expressions such as phrasal verbs? Phrasal verbs—those 2- or 3-word VERB + PREP expressions that pepper everyday speech but are notoriously difficult for English language learners to use well because they are often idiomatic, sometimes polysemic, and occur in separable and/or inseparable forms. In particular, I wondered whether I could help students create personal images of phrasal verbs that linked the literal meanings of the component words,

which they know, to the meaning of the idiomatic expression, which they struggle to remember. What follows is a procedure for adapting the use of visual imagery in the teaching of vocabulary with accompanying notes, examples, and caveats.

Procedure

1. (Optional) Read an online article about memory palaces to learn more about how experts create and use visual images to enhance their memory of new (and even trivial) information.
2. Plan a new vocabulary lesson as usual.
3. For several of the target items in your vocabulary list, prepare visual mnemonics, the more humorous or outlandish the images, the better. For example, I created a lesson based on [look + PREP] expressions and drew whimsical pictures designed to link the literal and idiomatic meanings in several of them (see Appendix).
4. Introduce the target vocabulary or ask students to preview it as they normally would for any new vocabulary lesson. For example, I asked pairs of students to investigate the meaning of the target expressions.
5. Introduce students to the visual imagery aspect of the lesson in an age- or level-appropriate way and show them the images you have created as examples. For example, I explained my drawing of look for, asked them to try to identify the look expression illustrated in the other three drawings—look up, look on, and look out—and then create their own images for the remaining expressions (see Appendix).
6. Have student pairs or volunteers draw their images on the board while their classmates guess which item from the list is being depicted.
7. Provide time for students to copy, adapt, or create their own visual memory cues for the entire list of target vocabulary. Note that after students understand the use of visual imagery, less class time will be required for lessons like this one because more of the work can be done at home or shared online.

Caveats

- 1.1 This activity based on look phrasal verbs is designed as a humorous introduction to the strategy of using visual memory devices to assist with vocabulary acquisition. It is not intended to imply that entire lessons on phrasal verbs are desirable. At the same time, readers who are interested

in such lessons will be surprised at how many phrasal verb activities, including illustrated ones, are freely available online.

- 1.2 In lessons where the target vocabulary is drawn from situational, thematic, or content-based texts, students can be encouraged to create images integrating the vocabulary with the content of the lesson. For example, if the topic is a traditional festival or holiday, encourage students to situate their vocabulary mnemonics in a drawing related to the festival.

Conclusion

As teachers, we appreciate the effectiveness of using visual images, such as photos, to aid our students in understanding new expressions in the moment. However, those moments of understanding are often fleeting. We can enhance the chances that those fleeting moments of understanding become long-term memories if we teach students to store information, such as new words and meanings, in visual images—the more outlandish and personal, the better. Creating their own visual mnemonics and sharing them with their classmates, contextualizes the target language, fosters autonomy, and builds confidence. It taps into visual and kinesthetic learning styles, lowers the affective filter, boosts motivation, and improves group dynamics. All of these factors further enhance the retention of new information.

References

- Foer, J. (2012). *Moonwalking with Einstein: The art and science of remembering everything*. New York: The Penguin Press.
- Lagazzi, A. (2013). Using the Matteo Ricci's Palace of Memory Method in Teaching English at Secondary School. (Unpublished senior thesis). Prague: Gymnazium Na Zatlance.

About the Author

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APPENDIX

Phrasal Verbs with “look”

Directions

1. Work with a partner.
2. Study the example for *look for*.
3. Can you identify the other three illustrated *look* verbs?
4. Choose one of the remaining *look* verbs, and create a picture to fit its meaning.
5. Write 2-3 silly or personal example sentences for your *look* verb.
6. Be prepared to teach your classmates the meaning, sentences, and picture memories you will use to remember your *look* verb.

look ahead *look back* ~~*look for*~~ *look forward to*
look on *look out* *look through* *look to, look up*

