

Language Learning Strategies – Memory Strategies

As I observe students of Chinese, I notice that they use different learning strategies, some which are more effective than others. What are some of their good strategies which will help you acquire Chinese faster than the average student? Let's look at some *memory* strategies. These enhance the *storage* and *retrieval* of information.

The linguist Earl Stevick in his book *Memory, Meaning and Method* says that the greater the personal investment of mental energy that we spend on vocabulary, the easier it is to get it into our long-term memory. If this is true, what types of activities will be of more use to you in achieving your goal?

Flash cards: the one most commonly used is flash cards, i.e. blank name cards (or pieces of paper) with the Chinese written on one side and a picture/drawing or your mother tongue on the reverse side. Even better, include a sentence illustrating the use of the word. Writing them out yourself is better than buying ready-made ones as the actual process of writing them aids memory. But, having written them out, what should you do with them? Here are a couple of ideas:

Place them on a table with the picture or English facing upwards and try to guess the Chinese; then try it the other way round. This game is more fun if two or three people play it together. Another idea is to take a small oblong-shaped box and divide it into sections. After learning the new vocabulary of the first lesson, place the flash cards in the front section of the box. Then move on to the next lesson. When you have completed that lesson, take out the cards in the front section and test yourself. Those that you remember, place them in the next section back (thus freeing up space for the new vocabulary cards); those that you failed to recall, leave them in the front section, and so on through the textbook. When you fail to recall the Chinese of any flash card no matter where it is in the box, place that card in the front section. For those vocabulary words which stubbornly refuse to stick in your long-term memory, place the flash cards in your top pocket (or purse/wallet) and go through them when you have a few spare moments.

Record New Vocabulary: record the new vocabulary – the Chinese plus the English definition; then listen to it several times. Use the 'pause' button to test yourself.

Counting: in order to memorize the numbers, carry some loose change with you (9 @ RMB1, 9 @ RMB10, etc.) and when you have a few minutes, get the money out and count it.

Saying the Action: naming actions as you do them will help you memorize faster. For example, the daily routine of getting washed and dressed: "I shave my face, I brush my teeth, I take a shower, I dry myself, I comb my hair, I put on my clothes" (naming each item of clothing). Another example would be cooking: "I turn on the gas, I fill the pan with water, I slice the meat and vegetables, etc."

Labeling Items: label household items and the rooms in your apartment or dormitory, e.g. curtains, window, chair, light switch, kitchen, bedroom, etc., and then say the word aloud when you use that item or enter that room.

Grouping under Topics: group or classify vocabulary under different subjects. Use your computer or notebook and divide it into topic areas, e.g. weather, place names, food items, transport, etc. Then, as you learn new vocabulary from either your textbook or Chinese friends, write the vocabulary items under the relevant topic area. When you have sufficient words under a particular topic, write a story using those words and get your teacher to correct it. For example, when you have acquired several 'animal' words, write a story about 'A Day on the Farm'; or 'weather' words, write 'Tomorrow's Weather Forecast for China'. Then, when you exchange English for Chinese conversation or hire someone for talking practice, you can choose one topic area each time you meet, using the vocabulary you have acquired as a basis for conversation.

Word Mapping: write a key word in the middle of a piece of paper (e.g. breakfast), then link words related to the topic 'breakfast' by means of arrows, e.g. bread - butter - jam / coffee - milk - sugar / knife - fork - spoon. Drawing or downloading *pictures* of the words is more effective than just writing the English with the Chinese.

Visual Association: linking the visual with the verbal (i.e. *picturing* the vocabulary item along with the Chinese pronunciation) is a more effective way of storing vocabulary in your memory as it utilizes both the left and right side of your brain.

Looking for Similarities: look for similarities between Chinese and English (or any other language you know). This isn't easy with Chinese, but have a go anyway. One good example I heard was the Mandarin word for 'head' sounds just like the English word for 'toe' – right at the opposite end of the body!!

Drawing Diagrams and Pictures: draw diagrams and pictures, because it utilizes your right brain, will also help you memorize groups of words. For example, draw pictures to represent the Place Prepositions 'behind', 'in front of', 'opposite', 'next to', etc. Drawing faces to express different emotions (happy, sad, angry, bored, etc.) will also aid memory.

Remember that applying the same strategy to all tasks does not work, so try to discover those strategies which best help compensate for your weaknesses. And once you have found them, continue using them, discarding those strategies that are ineffective.