

## The aim of this leaflet

One of the biggest problems with vocabulary learning is that what's 'learned' today is often forgotten tomorrow! We've all experienced this problem: what can be done about it? This leaflet presents some solutions.

## How can I learn vocabulary?

There are three main ways of learning vocabulary:

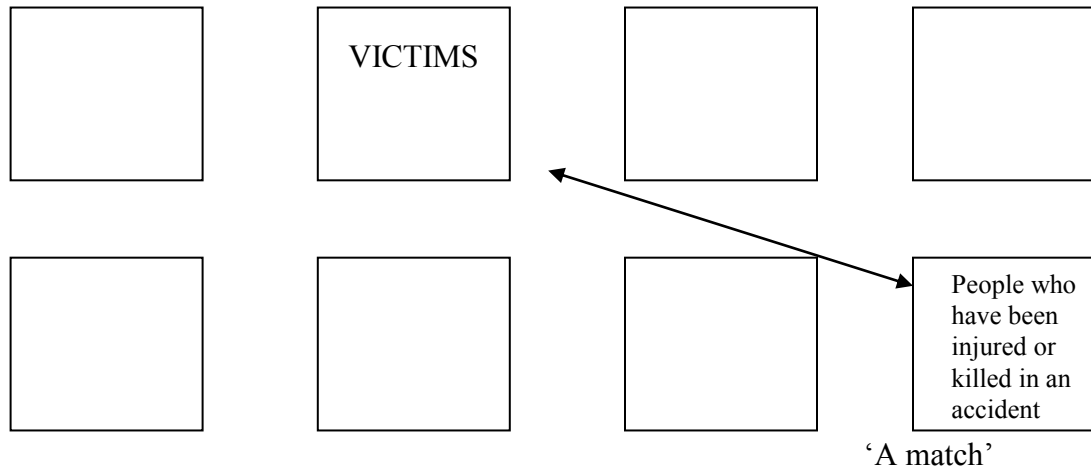
### 1. Memorizing

Here are some strategies for memorizing that you can try:

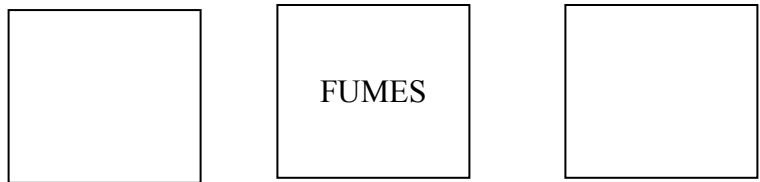
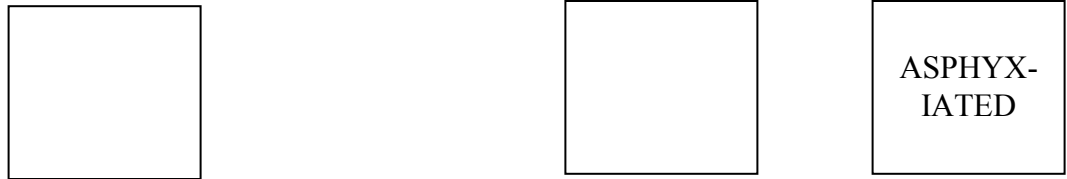
- **Say or write the words** you are learning — this can help you remember them.

- **Record the words/phrases** you are learning to disks or as audio files, and play them to yourself whenever you have some spare time (e.g. when travelling) — this way you will get used to the spoken form of the word as well as the written form. If you record them on an audio player, you can access each word easily.
- **Ask a native or fluent speaker to record target words** for you. You can then listen or record your own pronunciation of the words as well.
- **Play audiotapes or videotapes repeatedly** (e.g. songs or part of a movie) — after a while you will find that you remember the words.

- **Write the words** you are learning on pieces of paper/stick-it notes and put them round your room or home.
- Write the words on cards, with the meanings on separate cards. You can then **play games** such as 'Memory' or 'Snap' with a partner (or on your own) by matching words to meanings. You turn all the cards (words and meanings) face down, so that the blank sides of the cards are facing upwards. You then turn over two of the cards at random. If the cards match, then you have 'a pair' (a score for you) and you remove them:

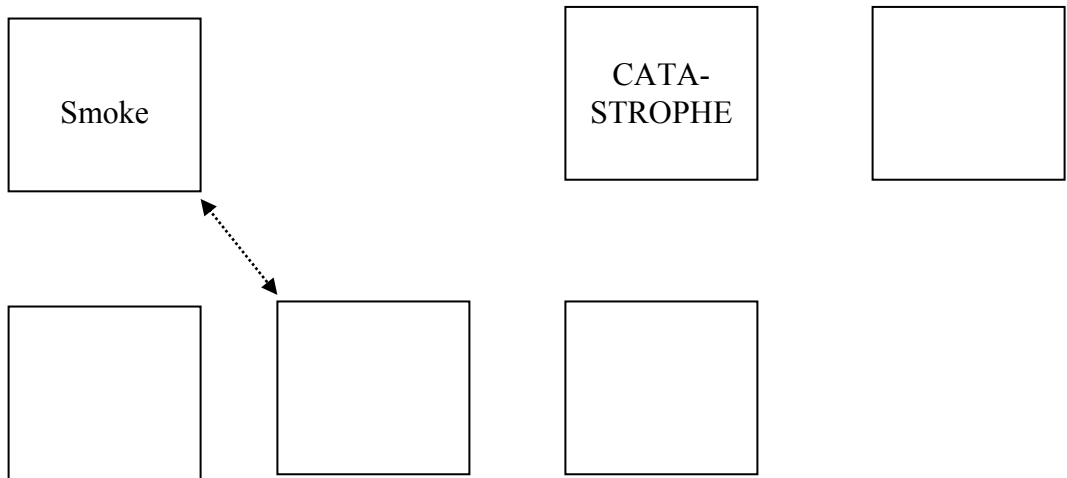


You or your partner then turns over two more cards. If the cards do not match, then you do not score anything, and you return the cards (face down) to their places.



‘No match’

Now you will need to remember which card was where, as in the next play, you or your partner may turn over a card which matches one of the ‘face-down’ cards:



‘Match with hidden card’

The winner is the person with the most ‘pairs.’ ‘Snap’ is a similar game. Two players divide up the cards between them. Each player holds their cards face down in their hand. One player puts a card face up onto the table, the other player puts one of their cards on top of the first card, the first player puts a card on top of the second card, and so on. As soon as two consecutive cards match, the first player to call out “Snap!” wins the cards that were placed on the table and adds them to her/his pile. Play continues until one player (the loser) has no cards left. It’s a very simple game — the fun is in trying to react more quickly than your partner and be the first to shout out “Snap!” when there’s a match!

- **Put the words into sentences.**
- **Connect the new words to words** belonging to the same topic or situation that **you already know** (e.g. in tables, diagrams or pictures).

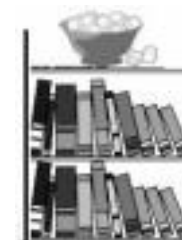
See *English Vocabulary in Use*, unit 2 (*Vocabulary shelf*).

- If you are a visual person (e.g. if you prefer to access a computer by clicking on icons rather than by typing in letters and numbers), you may like to **use the Keyword method**. This method has been found to be very effective with small numbers of words (e.g. a few hundred), even over many years. It is especially useful with ‘concrete’ words that can be easily visualised (e.g. *mountain*), but may not be so useful with abstract words (e.g. *emotion*). How does it work? You associate the target word in the foreign language with a word that sounds similar in your own language. This is the **keyword**. Then you form a picture in your mind that combines the keyword and the meaning of the target word.

Every time you see the target word, you remember the picture you have formed, and then remember the

meaning of the target word. For example:

- an English-speaker, learning the French word *petit* (‘small, little’) might think of the English word *pet*, picture a small pet such as a very small dog, and then remember the meaning for *petit* — i.e. ‘small’.
- a Cantonese-speaker, learning the English word *sugar*, might think of the Cantonese word *syu ga* 書架 (the keyword) and picture a bookshelf with a bowl of sugar on it, as in the picture on the right: They would then remember the meaning of ‘sugar’ — i.e. 糖.



- **Combine the target word with similar-sounding English words to form a picture** — e.g. ‘mourning’ (= ‘being sad because of someone’s death’) + ‘morning’ → picture: ‘being sad about someone who died in the morning’.
- **Use your knowledge of the parts or roots of words** to remember the meaning — e.g. ‘greenhouse’ = building where (green) plants are grown; ‘evacuated’ = made into a vacuum, i.e. made empty. See the Advice Sheet **Learning Parts of Words (Wordbuilding) (V9)**.

If you are interested in creating visual images or mind maps, or in learning more about memory techniques, check out any of the videos or books by Tony Buzan in the Library, e.g. ‘Use your Head’, ‘Use your Memory’, ‘Use your Perfect Memory’.

Of course, the problem is to remember words for a long period of time, to learn them so well that they become ‘known’, fixed in your memory. For suggestions on how to do this, see below under ‘How can I avoid forgetting what I have learned?’

## 2. Using

Here are some strategies for using what you have learned (especially if you are learning vocabulary for speaking or writing). Using vocabulary in speech or writing helps it to stay learned. As they say: “Use it or lose it.” For example, you can:

- **Create sentences of your own** for the words you are learning, relating them to your own situation.
- **Write a story** that includes all the words you have learned.
- Learn words for a certain topic/situation, and then **write about the topic** using the vocabulary learned, or **have a discussion or conversation** with a partner or partners, trying to use the words appropriately.

## 3. Recycling

Here are some strategies for recycling what you have learned. If you try to read, listen to, speak about or write about the same topic over a number of weeks, you will find that the same vocabulary keeps occurring. If you follow the same topic over several weeks, it is likely that you will meet some of the words you have tried to learn earlier. Meeting the words in context will help you remember them

naturally without having to ‘study’ them. For example, you can:

- **Follow a news story that is printed or broadcast every day** for several weeks. These are not always available, but look out for: ongoing natural disasters (e.g. floods in China, earthquakes in Japan), war (e.g. Kosovo, Israel/Palestine), ongoing political events (e.g. US presidential elections).
- **Focus on one type of news story** that occurs almost every day (e.g. Crime, Disasters, Sport, Weather).
- **Watch movies or read books or magazines on particular topics** (e.g. Astronomy, Business, Crime, Romance, Technology, Travel).
- **Read books at particular vocabulary levels.** You have a high chance of meeting repeated vocabulary in simplified readers.
- **Read several books by the same author** (e.g. Jane Austen)
- **Read several books featuring the same characters** (e.g. Dilbert, Peanuts, Sherlock Holmes, The Simpsons, Tintin)

In addition to these three main methods, another way to remember vocabulary is to:

- **Test** yourself frequently. One system of testing is given below in ‘How can I avoid forgetting what I have learned?’ For more suggestions, see the Advice Sheet **Evaluating Your Vocabulary Learning (V5)**. If you are not sure how to organise your vocabulary learning, or if you find that there’s too much to cope with, check out the Advice Sheet **Organising Your Vocabulary Learning (V3)**. For more suggestions,

see Units 6 and 7 of *Increase Your Vocabulary* (Vocabulary shelf).

### How can I avoid forgetting what I have ‘learned’?

Here are some suggested methods for reducing the ‘forgetting problem’:

- **Learn words repeatedly, with increasing intervals between learning sessions.** We all know that if learning is not repeated, we will forget

the words we have learned. But research in Psychology shows that we do not forget things gradually. Instead, as the graph below shows, most of our forgetting occurs within 20 minutes after we have first ‘learned’ something. More is forgotten within one hour, and still more within 8 hours — but after 8 hours, the rate of forgetting stays surprisingly steady.

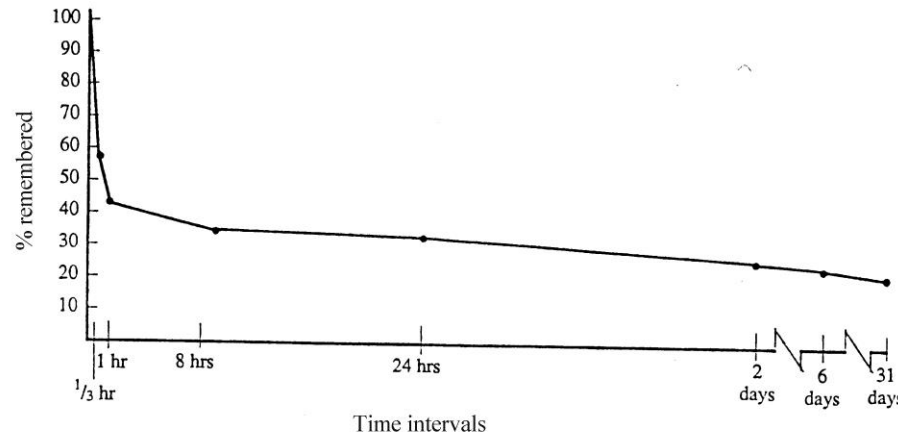


Figure: The rate at which items are forgotten (Ebbinghaus, 1884)

This suggests that it is **most useful to use or test yourself on vocabulary as soon as possible after you first meet it**. After that, you need to keep using the vocabulary/testing yourself, but you can gradually increase the gaps between each learning session. In other words, intensive study is useful within

one hour and within 24 hours after the first learning; after that, using/testing can be done less frequently — e.g. one week later, then one month later, then six months later etc.

- **Have the words you want to learn with you wherever you go**, so that you can use any ‘dead’ time, e.g.

travelling to and from university. Word cards or vocabulary notebooks are useful. So is an electronic dictionary which allows you to select the words you want to learn and test yourself on them, in random order.

- **Set aside a regular time for vocabulary learning or**

**memorising** — e.g. just before you go to bed, or when traveling to and from university.

- **Spend more time on the words that you find difficult.** Often, when learning vocabulary, people create a list with the target words on one side and meanings on the other, and go down the list from the first word to the last, trying to memorize each one. This method can have two problems: firstly, the words at the top of the list tend to be remembered better than those further down; and secondly, time is wasted going over words that the learner has already learned. One way of overcoming these problems is to spend more time on the words that you find difficult. A simple way of doing this is to delete the words

you know from the list. If you **sort** in *Word*, you can also change the order of the list, so that it's not the same every time. An alternative is to post words onto a wall or board, and take them down when you know them.

A more systematic method uses the principle of 'increasing learning intervals' mentioned above. In this method, learners vary the frequency at which they learn particular words, according to whether they remembered them at the previous learning session. Words remembered correctly will then be tested less frequently; words not remembered will be tested more frequently. Here is a simple version of

the method, involving three testing frequencies: daily, weekly and monthly.

Let's say you are trying to learn the following 10 words (from an SCMP article on a fire which killed 170 people on board an Austrian ski train that was trapped in a tunnel: 12-11-00): *asphyxiated, blast furnace, blazing, catastrophe, evacuated, fumes, expressed condolences, fumes, inferno, mourning, victims*. You write these words on cards or type them into a computer document. You also create three small boxes, or sections on a notice board, or tables in a computer document, labelled 'Daily', 'Weekly' and 'Monthly'. As all ten words are new to you, you put them into the 'Daily' box first, as shown here:

DAILY	WEEKLY	MONTHLY
asphyxiated blast furnace blazing catastrophe evacuated expressed condolences fumes inferno mourning victims		

A day later, you test yourself on all 10 words, and find that you have remembered six of them. So you move these six to the ‘Weekly’ box:

DAILY		WEEKLY		MONTHLY
asphyxiated blast furnace				
	→	Blazing		
	→	Catastrophe		
evacuated expressed condolences				
	→	Fumes		
	→	inferno		
	→	mourning		
	→	victims		

You continue testing yourself on the remaining four words each day and soon know them all, and move them to the ‘Weekly’ box. One week after you started, you test yourself on the words in the ‘Weekly’ box. This time, let’s say you remember eight, but get two wrong. The forgotten words are moved back to the ‘Daily’ schedule, whereas the remembered words can now be moved to ‘Monthly’ checking only:

DAILY		WEEKLY		MONTHLY
asphyxiated	←		→	blast furnace
			→	blazing
catastrophe	←		→	evacuated
			→	expressed condolences
			→	fumes
			→	inferno
			→	mourning
			→	victims

After a month, any of the ‘Monthly’ words not remembered will return to

‘Weekly’ checking. And so on. As you can see, words are moved in either

direction from one box to the next, depending on whether they have been

remembered or forgotten. The method may sound complicated, but it combines two principles that seem to be important in vocabulary learning:

- (a) learn words repeatedly and frequently (which increases your learning load)
- (b) spend more time on the words you find difficult, less on the words you find easy (which reduces your learning load)

### And now...

If you would like any help or advice, or just a chat about your progress, please get in touch - **we are here to support your independent learning!** To contact us:

- Make an appointment to see an adviser. For details of advisers and their availability, please go to <https://ilang.cle.ust.hk/language-adviser-timetable/>.
- E-mail your questions to **iLANG** ([lcilang@ust.hk](mailto:lcilang@ust.hk)).
- Ask at the reception counter of the Language Commons — if the receptionist cannot help you directly, s/he will pass your query on to one of the advisers.

### What else can you do?

- Browse the many physical (<https://ilang.cle.ust.hk/language-commons/#resources>) and online materials (<https://ilang.cle.ust.hk/resources-vocabulary/>) for Vocabulary.
- Join a Vocabulary activity or short course (<http://ilang.cle.ust.hk/vocabulary/>).

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