

Teaching Note

Using Emotions and Personal Memory Associations to Acquire Vocabulary

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Introduction

Of all the possible tools we have to help our English language learners (ELLs) acquire vocabulary, the use of emotions is one of the most powerful because “we are learning that emotions are the result of multiple brain and body systems that are distributed over the whole person” (Ratey, 2002, p. 223). If we go one step further and connect emotions to memories, we have a very effective set of teaching and learning tools. This procedural Teaching Note, then, looks specifically at how the use of Personal Memory Associations (PMAs) and their link to the emotions significantly help ELLs personalize, internalize, and genuinely learn lexical items.

Explanation and Employment of Personal Memory Associations

PMA is a particular, personal, and genuine memory that a student has of a person, event, or place. It does not have to be sensational in any way; rather, the memory can be very simple. It merely needs to have value in the student’s psyche and involve a crucial emotional connection.

Once the essential information of a term, such as definition and part of speech, is addressed (see explanation of the process below), I have my ELLs connect a PMA with the lexical item (i.e., the word, phrase, or idiom) we are studying. My current and former students have become avid proponents of PMAs primarily because of the immediate connection these associations have to their lives. From an instructor’s point of view, I consider the PMAs to be instrumental because they are real, student-generated, and directly linked to each ELL’s unique and complex emotional network.

Let's take the lexical item "blissful" as an example. One student recently wrote the following about the term: "Blissful' reminds me of my fifth birthday. I can still see the pink cake, taste the cake. There was great joy on that day." Another student wrote, "This term reminds me of my father looking with affection at my mother at the dinner table." As we can see from the content of these PMAs, the associations are very personal and based on strong emotional attachments. These associations fortify a long-term bond with the lexical items and create a special sense of tangibility in the students' minds. The words take on an intimate quality and consequently develop into a fixed, genuine, and meaningful part of the students' personhood.

A Note on the Head-to-Toe Method of Associations for Vocabulary Acquisition

It should be noted that I do not use the PMAs in isolation. I have found it best to use them in conjunction with other parts of my Head-to-Toe Method of Associations for Vocabulary Acquisition. I typically use the first six components of my method and then address the PMAs. The six parts include having the students:

- (1) infer the definition of a term;
- (2) identify its part of speech;
- (3) decide the *verbpathy*; i.e., the positive or negative "feeling" of the term (e.g., "blissful" would be positive);
- (4) associate a color with the term (e.g., "blissful" is often associated with green or pink);
- (5) associate an emotion with the term (e.g., "blissful" evokes emotions like "excitement," or "peacefulness"), and
- (6) come up with student-generated examples that demonstrate proper use and understanding of the term.

Once these six components are employed with confidence and comfort, we turn to the PMAs. For a full explanation of this method and its tools, see Randolph (2016).

Variations of Using and Producing PMAs

The cultivation of PMAs can be done in a number of ways. An instructor can

- (1) elicit PMAs from volunteers in class as a group activity (this is done in the same way that example sentences are elicited);
- (2) have students pair up and exchange the PMAs for each term and then write them down;

- (3) assign one- or two-sentence PMAs as written homework; or
- (4) assign a short-paragraph of a PMA as homework.

Recommended Levels

Using PMAs can be employed at all levels of instruction, from basic to advanced. However, the more vocabulary a student has, the better he/she will be able to articulate a PMA and relate it to a lexical item. I recommend that instructors vary the depth of PMA descriptions to correspond with their students' vocabulary knowledge. Although I have not used this at the K-12 level, I think it would work nicely given the proper scaffolding. I have used PMAs in most levels of my IEP and also in my advanced English university classes for ELLs with great success.

Concluding Remarks

Neuroscientists, Davidson and Begley (2013), have shown that “emotions... are central to the functions of the brain and to the life of the mind” (p. xi). Medina’s (2009) research has demonstrated “[t]he more elaborately we encode information at the moment of learning, the stronger the memory” (p. 110). My ELL students consistently claim that the six basic components of vocabulary acquisition truly help elicit powerful memories; these memories are then turned into the crucial tools to help encode vocabulary through the PMAs. Moreover, PMAs allow ELLs to combine the meanings of terms with their own memories and feelings. These meanings, memories, and feelings are synthesized and consequently form a solid and intricate web of profound lexical item understanding and use.

References

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