

# Learning foreign language vocabulary: the keyword method revisited

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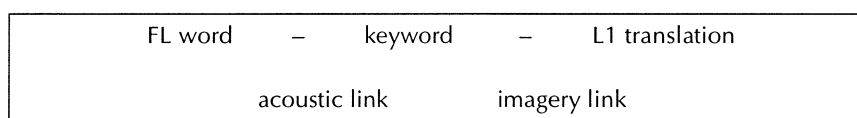
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Numerous attempts have been made in the last few decades to optimize the teaching of foreign language vocabulary. Some researchers claim that optimization allows for far more effective vocabulary learning than having the learner resort to his own instructional decisions. This claim was prompted by research findings which point to considerable variability in learning rates across subjects. These were ascribed to differences in learners' individual abilities, on the one hand, but also to the strategies that learners employ in order to master vocabulary.

The keyword method represents one attempt to optimize learning foreign language vocabulary. The idea emerged in an experimental psychologist's laboratory and was mostly tested in laboratory (or semi-laboratory) conditions as well. Its use in a practical foreign language teaching situation has not been given sufficient attention.

The keyword method divides vocabulary learning into two stages. First, the learner associates the spoken foreign language word with the keyword, which is an L1 word that sounds like some part of the foreign word, that is, it is similar in sound but has no other relationship to the foreign word.

In the second stage, the learner forms a mental image of the keyword «interacting» with the L1 translation. Thus, the keyword method consists in forming a chain of two links connecting a foreign word to its L1 translation. This can be shown graphically as:



Testing how well the learners learned the vocabulary in question can be made through the so-called forward associations (going from the foreign language to the native language) or backward associations (going from the native language to the foreign language).

Some studies carried out with subjects learning Spanish and Russian found consistently significant differences between the keyword groups and the control groups, especially in backward associations.

The aim of the study (Bosiljevac 1996) to be described here was to find out how effective the keyword method can be when used in an authentic classroom foreign language learning situation.

The hypothesis made at the beginning of the study was that the experimental group using the keyword method in order to learn EFL vocabulary would be more successful than the control group.

The sample included 72 subjects aged 13-14 (37 male and 35 female). Their L1 was Croatian, a Slavonic language, and they had been learning EFL for three and a half years prior to the experiment. The subjects were divided into two experimental and one control group.

The first experimental group (N=22: 9 male + 13 female) had been given both the acoustic links and the imagery links.

The second experimental group (N=27: 13 male + 14 female) had been given the acoustic links and had to generate own image linking.

The control group (N=23: 15 male + 8 female) learned the vocabulary in the way they usually did, that is, they were not shown any special strategies of vocabulary learning.

The corpus of EFL vocabulary to be learned comprised 16 words: kin, crooked, peal, creek, flump, wreak, boreal, croon, pard, infant, cardigan, pare, diminish, poultry, frolic, peak. All the vocabulary were keyword-supplied items. The keywords were selected using empirical criteria and the committee approach was employed.

The experimental groups were first trained in using the method. Three already familiar words (*pass*, *fountain*, *purse*) were shown on transparencies together with their Croatian equivalents. The keyword was written between the English and the Croatian words. The English words were pronounced by a female native speaker voice at 10-second intervals.

The first experimental group were explained the procedure. They were supposed to notice the keyword on the transparency and the image, and were told that this would help them to remember the meaning and the orthography of the English word.

The second experimental group were told to try and form an image that would in some way connect the keyword and the translation equivalent as this would help them remember the meaning. In the case of *pass*, the keyword used was /pas/, meaning «a dog». The subjects were asked to describe the image link (most subjects depicted a dog passing down the street) they made and the experimenter could, in this way, check whether they had grasped the procedure.

After a short break the subjects were submitted to two tests. They were first presented with the 16 English words on transparencies, heard them on the cassette player and had to write down their translation equivalents. The experimental groups were urged to try and remember the keywords and/or the images.

In the second test, the subjects were shown transparencies with Croatian equivalents and were asked to write down the English words.

In order to measure the long-term effects of the keyword method the same tests were administered two weeks later.

The second test was followed by a written interview focusing on the subjects' attitudes to the English language, to vocabulary learning and to the keyword method.

Arithmetic means and standard deviations were looked into.

With forward associations (See Appendix, Tables 1 and 2), no significant differences were found between the control and the experimental groups in both administrations of the tests. The analysis of variance carried out in order to see the effects of the method on memorizing the vocabulary showed no significant interaction between the method and the time of testing. There was a significant effect of the time of testing: all the three groups were better at the first administration of the tests, which is an expected result.

As far as backward associations (See Appendix, Tables 3 and 4) are concerned, no significant differences were found between the groups in the first and second testing. No significant interaction was found between the method and time of testing. It is interesting to note that, with backward associations, the analysis of variance showed no significant effect of the time of testing either. Thus, the three groups showed similar results in both the first and second testing, which means that the effect of forgetting was negligible.

In the interview (See Appendix, Table 5) the majority of the subjects reported that they liked

the English language as well as learning it at school. Their answers concerning the use of the keyword method were the following:

1. *Did you find the new way of learning vocabulary interesting?* YES: 86 %
2. *Was it more difficult than your usual way of learning?* YES: 84 %
3. *Would you like to continue learning in this way?* NO: 70 %

Our results, thus, did not confirm the hypothesis that using the keyword method would lead to better acquisition of EFL vocabulary.

No significant differences were found in backward and forward associations. Thus, the results contrast Atkinson's (1975) and Pressley's (1977) findings. The following explanations may be possible.

In Atkinson's study the subjects were psychology students who learned vocabulary as part of an isolated experiment and were, otherwise, not engaged in language learning at all. In Pressley's study the primary school subjects learning Spanish vocabulary were not engaged in learning Spanish at school either.

Our study was carried out in an authentic foreign language learning situation with subjects who were learning EFL as a compulsory school subject and were supposed to be assessed at the end of the term. Thus, all of our subjects (including the control group) were supposedly more motivated than the subjects in the above mentioned studies. Students of psychology do not learn a new vocabulary with a view of ever really using it and vocabulary learning is for them only a means of testing a research methodology or an approach in psychology. The different motivations the two types of samples have makes them qualitatively different.

Learners who have been learning a foreign language for some time develop own conscious and unconscious strategies that help them master foreign language vocabulary. A new strategy, especially in the beginning, may be seen by the learner as imposed and may make vocabulary learning more difficult.

«Authentic» foreign language learners are probably more focused on the material they are learning than on the structure of the experiment and, thus, it is possible that our subjects may have, to some extent, stuck to their own strategies and disregarded the experimenter's instructions.

Also, with the psychology students sample, the new vocabulary stood out in their memory because of its exotic nature. With «authentic» students, we may suppose that interference from the vocabulary learned between the first and second testing could have occurred and affected the vocabulary being learned.

All this confirms the well-known but often ignored fact that the value of a foreign language learning strategy can only be fully appreciated when it is tried out in authentic foreign language learning situations.

## APPENDIX

**Table 1: FORWARD ASSOCIATIONS: First test administration**

Group	N	M	SD
Control Group	19	2.2	2.39
Exp. Gr. 1	24	2.5	1.82
Exp. Gr. 2	18	2.5	2.12

F= .17; p> .04

**Table 2: FORWARD ASSOCIATIONS: Second test administration**

Group	N	M	SD
Control Group	18	1.9	2.42
Exp. Gr. 1	22	1.5	1.50
Exp. Gr. 2	17	1.1	2.00

F= .67; p> .52

**Table 3: BACKWARD ASSOCIATIONS: First test administration**

Group	N	M	SD
Control Group	19	1.6	1.89
Exp. Gr. 1	24	1.0	1.33
Exp. Gr. 2	18	1.5	2.18

F= .57; p> .57

**Table 4: BACKWARD ASSOCIATIONS: Second test administration**

Group	N	M	SD
Control Group	18	1.4	2.25
Exp. Gr. 1	22	1.1	1.51
Exp. Gr. 2	17	1.2	2.21

F= .89; p> .35

**Table 5: INTERVIEW results**

	YES	NO
Did you find the new way of learning vocabulary interesting?	86 %	14 %
Was it more difficult than your usual way of learning?	84 %	16 %
Would you like to continue using the keyword method?	30 %	70 %

## REFERENCES

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