

CAPTURING LANGUAGE: MEMORISING NEW LANGUAGE

Input

Input of new learning takes place in three stages.

1. First the new knowledge/understanding enters consciousness via one or more of the senses.
2. What seems important is then transferred immediately into short-term or 'working' memory (the equivalent of RAM, in computing terms) and the rest is discarded.
3. If the important new learning is to be retained ('saved' for future reference and used) it must be transferred to storage in long-term memory (RAM).

The mechanism for 'saving' new learning is not a simple key press, though; it is achieved through a process of familiarisation and consolidation. In MFL terms, this means providing a range of activities which lead the learner to rehearse and manipulate the new language in different ways which improve understanding and lead towards personal mastery of the new material. During this process new language elements are transferred into long-term storage.

The effectiveness of this transfer depends on the quality of the input and by the learner's interest and participation in the process. For example:

- If the learner is not paying attention, or is distracted, fragmentary or inaccurate information will be processed.
- If the learner has not understood the teaching point it will not be retained, or it will be retained inaccurately or incompletely. Careful monitoring, questioning and formative assessment is required to verify that quality of input has been achieved.
- If only partial information is provided by the teacher or included in the familiarisation tasks, only partial information can be stored (e.g. nouns without genders or words without the correct pronunciation). When such incomplete items are recalled at a later stage, it will be difficult for the learner to use them correctly.
- If insufficient time is devoted to the familiarisation process the new learning will not be 'saved' and will be lost at the end of the lesson. Just TELLING the class, therefore, is not enough to ensure long term retention.
- Different learners learn best at different speeds and in different ways. A mismatch between learning styles, or in the amount of time allowed will affect the quality of learning for some students. This is why a range of different activities is required, and why game-like activities are often used at this stage to retain interest, challenge and motivation while the necessary repetition is undertaken.

– Short-term or 'working' memory capacity is quite small. It can handle only a limited amount of information. Too much information at one time causes 'overload' and interferes with learning. Some learners have less working memory capacity than others, so it is important to know how much information a particular learner can handle at any one time. (see the note on 'chunking'.)

Output

Long-term memory is for storage only (ROM). In order to use the information it must be retrieved and transferred back into working memory (RAM). This is known as recall.

Sometimes it is easy to recall what has been learned; other times it is much more difficult. One way of easing the process of recall is to make use of external 'triggers' or 'pegs' at the input stage. Using the same triggers at a later stage can aid recall. Multisensory teaching builds in a range of triggers, some of which will be more important for some learners than others, depending on their learning needs and preferences. Some examples of effective triggers: pictures, colour, diagrams, mnemonics, songs, movements or signs.

Implications for lesson planning

Clearly, then, before the presentation stage, thought should be given to how the language is eventually to be used and what measures can be put in place to aid recall.

Planning should also include consideration of how the new language being learned will interact with previously learned language. Consolidation tasks should include recycling of relevant 'older' language to which the new language needs to be linked.

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