Examining the Personal-Association-Based Components of the Head-to-Toe Method of Associations for Vocabulary Acquisition

Part III: People- and Nature-Based Associations

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I. Introduction

"All the world's a stage,
And all the men and women merely players;
They have their exists and their entrances…"

—As You Like It (Act 2, Scene 7)

We are all natural learners. Shakespeare astutely pointed this out by observing "[a]ll the world's a stage," and drawing attention to the various parts that we must learn to play. That is, the process of learning takes place in many roles and in many stages during our lifetime. The reality of learning is part of our DNA and an essential element that helps drive our cognitive evolution. Learning ensures survival and development as our drama called "life" unfolds. The more we learn, the more we grow and strengthen our knowledge and awareness of the world. This all, happens, of course, thanks to our brain, which is the most complex and elegant learning muscle we have. In order, then, to make the most of learning, we must also be aware of how the brain takes in information and stores it effectively in the long-term memory.

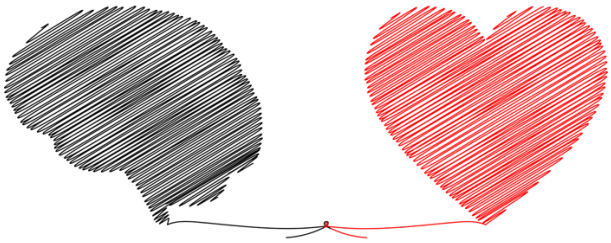
Our desire to acquire vocabulary is at the center of this passion for learning, and it is actually one of the basic instinctual drives we have (Ripolles et al., 2014). Learning new vocabulary is not only exciting, but it also allows us to express our thoughts and feelings, communicate our ideas and creations, and continue to learn more through advancing our understanding and employment of the spoken and written word.

In this series on personal-association-based components, I have shown how English language teachers (ELTs) can help English language learners (ELLs) acquire lexical items both in- and outside the classroom. This is done in a manner that transfers the items to their long-term memory by using the tools of my Head-to-Toe Method of Associations for Vocabulary Acquisition.

In Part I of this series, I introduced the sense-based associations; these included color, smell, sound, taste, and touch associations (Randolph, 2019a). In Part 2, I surveyed the mind-body associations. These focused primarily on personal memory associations (PMAs). (For more on these, please go to my TESOL presentation at https://youtube.com/watch?v=Tq792xbzfgc). In Part 2, I also discussed mind, soul, and body associations; dream and reality associations; question and answer associations; and time-related associations (Randolph, 2019b).

In Part 3, I will examine the two remaining kinds of associations: people-based and nature-based associations. First, I will briefly discuss the significance of associations and connections in learning. Here, I call on the insightful research of Caine and Caine (1994) and their work regarding "surface knowledge" and "meaningful knowledge" (p. 7). Next, I will introduce the people- and nature-based associations and show how I employ them in my lessons. I conclude by offering some of the major benefits of these vocabulary learning tools.

II. Making Connections, Creating Meaning



"Hold as 'Twere the Mirror Up to Nature"

—Hamlet (Act 3, Scene 2)

In their book, *Making Connections: Teaching and the Human Brain,* Caine and Caine (1994) go into great detail about the importance of helping students to find patterns, relate what they learn at school to their own lives, and make meaningful connections with the subject matter in their classes. In short, true education is essentially

> a matter of finding out how what is being learned relates to what the learner already knows and values and how information and experiences connect. In essence, we have to come to terms with meaningful learning and the art of capitalizing on experience. (Caine & Caine, 1994, p. 4)

Research in neuroscience (Bateson, 1980; Eagleman, 2015; Jensen, 2008; Willis, 2006) has shown us that the brain is a pattern-loving, meaning-making, connection-searching organ. For this reason, Caine and Caine (1994) argue that educators need to be aware of the implications of "surface knowledge" and "meaningful knowledge" (p. 7). They suggest that meaningful knowledge is far more beneficial and therefore encourage teachers to implement connection-building activities and teach in a way that enhances the connection-making pedagogy. Before moving on, let me explain what each kind of knowledge entails.

Surface knowledge is primarily based on rote learning (e.g., memorizing words or other information), and does not really take the rich history or the personal background of the students into account. It does not "hold a mirror up to nature" to show the depth of what is inside each student and elicit the abundant wealth of insights and ideas. Rather, "[s]urface knowledge is anything that a robot can 'know'" (Caine & Caine, 1994, p. 7). We need not necessarily get rid of rote learning, but simply add more meaningful knowledge to the mix when having students memorize the material in question.

In stark contrast, meaningful knowledge (or also referred to as "natural knowledge") is knowledge based on a meaningful relationship between the students and the material. It is highly important and necessary in developing meaning that connects the material to each student's unique life, personhood, and personal history. According to Caine and Caine (1994), teachers who develop meaningful knowledge "use the background and information students bring to class, including their experiences with parents, power, and love" (p. 6). Meaningful knowledge is genuinely learned and not easily forgotten, because the students use the valuable connections that underlie the new information and understand how it relates to their lives on a personal and intimate level. In short, meaningful knowledge helps both students and teachers see that education is an all-encompassing experience—one that exists in all aspects of life. As I stated at the beginning, we are all natural learners, and this concept of building connections in the classroom with the material enhances the learning process in a most profound way.

So often, however, ELTs, and teachers in general, forget to integrate the students' rich backgrounds of stories, experiences, and insights with the class material. Caine and Caine (1994) offer a palpable example using the geometry concept of parallel lines. They point out that when students encounter this idea in their geometry class, they will have experienced seeing or even creating numerous examples of parallel lines. However, most often—from what Caine and Caine have observed—teachers do not Socratically elicit the concept of parallel lines from their students; but rather, they draw the idea of parallel lines on the board, and then write out the definition as though it were a whole new concept. Instead of overlooking the profound wealth of meaningful and natural knowledge already in the room, teachers need to make vital connections with the material and the students. "Because the learner is constantly searching for connections on many levels, educators need to *orchestrate the experiences* from which learners extract understanding" (Caine & Caine, 1994, p. 5).

Without question, our ELLs have many experiences that they can draw from, and we will most certainly leave a lot on the table if we fail to tap into these experiences. In terms of vocabulary pedagogy, ELTs often teach vocabulary by going over the definitions, part of speech, and register—if the students are lucky. In most cases, however, students are asked to find the definitions on their own (a challenging task in and of itself) and then memorize the meanings for

quizzes, tests, or other homework assignments. In contrast, in order for the students to really learn the terms more meaningfully and effectively, I suggest that ELTs elicit stories and experiences, patterns and connections, and inquire about insightful observations that are associated with the terms being taught.

For instance, instead of going over the definition of "a myriad of," the teacher could simply start by asking his/her students, "What is it like looking up into the endless starry sky on a warm summer's evening?" or "Have you ever walked on the beach and felt the infinite grains of sand squish between your wet toes?" "How many stars do you think you saw that night?" or "How many grains of sand were there between your toes?" Immediately, the students will recall their own private insights and connect to their feelings, their memories, and the various multisensory experiences. After having the students recall their own connection or association with a countless number of stars or grains of sand, then the teacher can introduce the phrase, "a myriad of." The new term will now have an immediate relation to their own lives, and it will "stick" the moment it is introduced. By having students associate their own lives with the vocabulary terms, they naturally create meaning, and consequently the other aspects like the definition, use, and register will make more sense and fit nicely into their lexical puzzle, completing a beautiful scene in the mind and memory.

People-Based Associations

"My very worthy cousin, fairly met!
Our old and faithful friend, we are glad to see you."

—Measure for Measure (Act 5, Scene 1)

People-based associations, like the other associations in my Head-to-Toe Method of Associations, connect the students' individual backgrounds with the lexical items we are studying. The associations make an immediate impact on the students because the connections are unique to each ELL, and they elicit very intimate emotion-based responses. Each of these aforesaid points (i.e., being personal and emotion-based) are essential for transferring information into the long-term memory (Eagleman, 2015; Jensen, 2008; Medina, 2009; Willis, 2006). The more connections there are, the deeper the memory of the term gets forged into the neural pathways of the brain.

The genesis of people-based associations evolved from the convergence of three experiences. The first being my own language learning experience in Niigata, Japan. I soon learned that I could recall a word, phrase, idiom, or grammar point easier and faster if I simultaneously recalled the person's face that I was looking at the moment he or she taught me the particular Japanese lexical item or grammar point. As a consequence, when I wanted to recall a word, expression, or grammar point in Japanese, I merely summoned the person's image to my conscious memory, and the lexical item or grammar point followed like a faithful shadow. Years later, while developing my Head-to-Toe Method of Associations, a student from Saudi Arabia asked me if we could add "family faces" to our list of associations. As we got to talking, he seemed to have the same experience with English as I had with Japanese. In class, I then discussed the idea of associating newly learned vocabulary terms with friends and family from ones' life, and the students reacted with a strong sense of enthusiasm. "I like the emotion I feel when thinking of people and vocabulary," one student said. Her comment was all I needed to hear, and I soon implemented this component and added it to our list of effective associations.

To date, there are five different people-based associations:

- family and friends
- famous people—writers, poets, scholars, artists, sports stars, actors, musicians,
- careers/jobs
- male or female
- age-associations—from infancy to the elderly

I use these associations both in class and as homework. However, in order to reap the benefits of this kind of association and make it most effective for the students, we do this association in class for the first two weeks of the semester. Another important note is that I will not usually use all five associations for one term. However, the family and friends-based associations and the career associations are two that are frequently used due to their high level of personal impact and immediate connections.

The implementation of the people-associations, then, is addressed after employing the basic points of the Head-to-Toe Method. So, after I have elicited the definition for a term through using multiple examples and identified the part of speech and verbpathy (i.e., the "intuitively" positive or negative feeling that a term evokes), a color-association (e.g., blue or red), and an emotion-based association (e.g., happy, excited, surprised), I ask the students what family member or friend they associate with the term in question.

Once, when we were learning the term "coherent," a student said, "That's easy, my grandfather. He is the head of his company, and he needs to communicate clearly and coherently to all his workers." Another student volunteered and said, "My older brother because he studies philosophy at university." Next, we moved to careers. For "coherent," students listed jobs such as accountants, bankers, teachers, writers, and businessmen and women. The other categories like famous people, gender, and age can then be filled out on their worksheet for homework if there is not enough time in class. For instance, the Japanese student who associated "coherent" with his grandfather, later wrote that his grandfather loves "Natsume Soseki"—a great Japanese novelist. As his grandfather is a male, he connected the male gender as the representation or

association for “coherent.” And lastly, he wrote “elderly” for age, as “being older is wiser” in Japan and his grandfather, who was the “family-association” for this term, is an elderly person.

In some cases, each people-based association ushers in completely different connections or associations. In other cases, like the one above, the person who the student associates the term with will guide the rest of the associations. I have not done research on which one is more effective, but I urge teachers to try this and perhaps conduct their own research to see if one is more useful or effective than the other.

Once the students have done these associations a few times, the pacing can go very quickly. Here is an example I have recorded when we studied the adjective “vicarious.”

Patrick: So, who do you associate with this term?
Student 1: My mother. She has never travelled but lives through me and my travels.
Patrick: Nice! What about a famous person?
Student 2: I’d say, the quarterback for the Kansas City Chiefs.
Patrick: You mean Patrick Mahomes?
Student 2: Yes, I live a vicarious experience when I watch him play.
Patrick: Very good. What about careers?
Student 3: An actor.
Student 4: A novelist.
Patrick: Good! Why those?
Student 4: They both create things, and we live through those experiences.
Patrick: Nice! What gender?
Student 1: I’d say it depends—both. If you look up to a man, it’s male; if your hero is a woman, it’s female. I look up to my mum and so does my father. So, it’s female for me.
Patrick: I like that! So, it could be both. And what about age?
Student 1: For me, it’s an older person who I respect and live through her life, like my mother.

It should be noted that whether these associations are done in class or as homework, it is best to have the students write these on a designated handout. I feel that writing these down and submitting them as homework helps the students reinforce the experience, the associations, and the personal connections. With respect to the teacher, it gives a heightened sense of awareness and developed knowledge about his or her students. This is valuable information that can be used later when working on different vocabulary terms. For example, I referred to Natsume Soseki in an example during a later class and that really connected with the Japanese student who associated his grandfather with the adjective “coherent.”

Nature-Based Associations

"Merrily, merrily shall I live now
Under the blossom that hangs on the bough."

—The Tempest (Act 5, Scene 1)

The last category of personal-association-based components is the nature-based associations. These were originally intended for younger ELLs; however, I discovered that my adult ELLs were equally enthusiastic about connecting or associating nature-related elements to lexical items. Perhaps it is because the whole idea of "nature" (i.e., our immediate environment—the air we breathe and the earth we walk on) is innate and primal, as it rests at the heart of our psyches and at the base of our physical connections to life. We, after all, are a living, breathing part of nature. So, this association is really like holding a mirror up and looking at the self.

The nature-based associations include the following:

- animals
- the five basic elements: earth, water, fire, air, and space
- the seasons
- the weather

Once we have finished with the people-based associations, we turn to the nature-based associations. Depending on the vocabulary item we are studying, we typically use one or two of these (e.g., season and animals or weather and the elements). That said, there are also days when we can use three or all four. For example, when we studied the adjective "coherent," we worked with the seasons, animals, and the weather. A number of students associated either "spring" or "fall" with "coherent." The reason was that they said they could easily see a "coherent" (i.e., orderly, methodical, and clear) transformation or change in the season's foliage. The Japanese student used spring and cherry blossoms to show how nature is "organized" or "coherent." There is the appearance of the bud, then the blossom, and finally the leaf. Fall or autumn elicited similar responses in that students felt fall represents a "coherent" or well-organized progression of transformation—the leaves change from green to red, yellow, or orange and then to brown.

In terms of animals, I have found that students associate a wide range of creatures with "coherent." Some have associated cats and dogs with "coherent" because these animals, they feel, are very "coherent" in the way they request affection and food. Other students, however, have associated such animals as gorillas and parrots, claiming they too are very coherent.

Essentially, as with most associations, the connections depend on what the students are used to or what kind of pet/s or animals they are familiar with in their native country.

Weather is also a very popular association-tool among the students. As weather is a daily phenomenon and a universal reality, all ELLs can relate to this association with an immediate, and often visceral, response. For instance, when we studied the term "juxtaposition," another one of my Japanese students said she immediately felt a cool breeze from the Sea of Japan on a hot day." So, she wrote down on her worksheet "juxtaposition" = *cool and hot*. This worked well as there was a "side by side contrast" of weather at the sea. When we studied "amiable," a young Taiwanese student said he felt "the warmth of the early morning sun." He then wrote, "amiable" = *warm morning weather*.

In sum, the various nature-related associations usher in effective connections with each student's personal life and history of experiences, and each association helps link a new lexical item quickly to their memory and develop their growing repertoire of English words, phrases, and idioms. The fact that weather is tangible, and we can actually "feel" it on our skin, makes it a very practical and helpful association. Often the terms we teach are highly abstract and have very little meaning for our students, so any time we can create a concrete connection to assist in encoding the terms, we ought to take full advantage of it. Using nature-related associations helps our ELLs make abstract terms tangible by making connections and associations with what they know and what they have experienced (Immordino-Yang, 2016).

III. The Benefits

"My love is strengthen'd"
Shakespeare, Sonnet 102

The people- and nature-based associations create a wide variety of advantages for our ELLs during the encoding and learning process. Moreover, their love for learning is strengthened because they begin to see that acquiring lexical items starts with who they are as individuals, and they also begin to understand that learning is a personal moment-to-moment process, which is intricately connected to their immediate world. This connectedness is a powerful motivating factor. Below, then, are three major benefits for using these tools while learning vocabulary.

- *Personalization and Ownership*

Allowing the students to personalize and genuinely own the material by investing their own ideas and insights is one of the most effective teaching methods there is (Caine & Caine, 1994; Randolph, 2013; Randolph, 2016; Ratey, 2002; Sousa & Tomlinson, 2018; Willis, 2006). The fact that the students are freely able to speak and write about their personal associations deepens their understanding and intuitive feel for the vocabulary (Davidson & Begley, 2013). Here, they are essentially doing what Craik and Lockhart (1972) termed "elaborative processing" (p. 680). That is, the more something is processed, perceived, and manipulated (e.g., like with the associations), the better chance the students will encode it and successfully transfer it to the long-term memory. In short, the benefit of personalizing and owning the lexical items ensure effective encoding and learning.

- *Creativity and Stories*

Another benefit of these associations is that they foster creativity in expression. This is a much needed (and often forgotten) ingredient in language growth and development (Csikszentmihalyi, 2013; Jensen, 2008; Robinson, 2009). In addition, these associations encourage students to tell and share stories about their experiences in the class. The simple act of storytelling is also a very effective way to learn and acquire vocabulary (Porras González, 2010). Although the stories regarding the associations are relatively short, they are powerful because the emotions they often elicit last in both the memory of the storyteller as well as the audience; that is, the classmates who are listening.

- *Community and Repetition*

Perhaps one of the most enriching benefits that these associations create is the sense of classroom community. Both the teacher and the students get the unique chance to hear and share their stories and experiences regarding the lexical items (Iacoboni, 2009). This develops a genuine community of shared learning, and it nurtures an environment where the new vocabulary and its meanings and uses are repeated in a number of examples in an isolated period of time. So, there is the additional benefit of spaced out repetition of hearing and using the lexical items. This is yet another way to help cement the terms in the students' long-term memory (Bennett, 2019; Craik & Lockhart, 1972; Ebbinghaus, 1885/1913) while fostering a very interactive and positive classroom community.

IV. Concluding Remarks

"All the world's a stage, [a]nd all the men and women merely players…" We are all involved with learning and embrace it as a fundamental desire to create a better life. For the more we learn, the wiser we become, and we consequently understand how much more there is to learn about ourselves and life. Learning vocabulary is also an endless task, but if we learn to associate lexical items with special people and aspects of nature, it becomes not only fun but effective in equal measure. This article has tried to show the importance of using students' backgrounds and personhood to make the learning process meaningful and productive. Through discovering connections within old and new associations, the students can make learning a joy versus a burden, and ultimately they can become their own best teachers.

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