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

Part II: Mind-Body-Based Associations

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I. Introduction

"Though this be madness, yet there is method in't."

—Hamlet (Act 2, Scene 2)

In Part I of the Personal-Associations-Based Components, I introduced the idea of sense-based associations and their relationship to lexical items. I focused on how our senses, particularly our use of color-associations, help students encode and learn vocabulary. That is, through using their own neural network of personal associations, students develop strong connections with colors as a tool to learn and understand the meaning and use of English words, phrases, and idioms.

This segment highlights the employment of mind-body based associations. These include: (1) personal memory associations; (2) mind, soul, and/or body associations; (3) dream and/or reality associations; (4) question and/or answer associations; and (5) temporary and/or permanent time associations. The focus of this article will investigate the personal memory association component and then briefly touch on the other associations.

I will first survey the various kinds of human memory systems and discuss the importance of memory as a learning device. I will, then, define the concept of personal

memory associations (PMAs). Next, I will explain how the PMAs are used in the Head-to-Toe Method. To show how effective PMAs are, I will offer three student samples that demonstrate how students make detailed connections and associations with the PMAs while learning new vocabulary items. These samples also include the benefits that language learners receive from using memory-based associations. This is followed by a discussion of the cognitive benefits of PMAs. I will conclude with a brief look at the other mind-body associations and show how they are used to help language learners play with and learn vocabulary.

II. Memory: The Core of How We Learn

"I'll note you in my book of memory."

—William Shakespeare

It can easily be argued that the human mind and its consciousness are a collection of memories: This includes patterns of memories, memories of memories, and thoughts of memories. And, it is this personal connection to these memories that help us learn. These memories are what keep us grounded in the present, and they also help us entertain future thoughts and events; thus, memories are a crucial source for creativity and imagination (Ratey, 2002).

According to John Medina (2014), we *are*, in essence, our memories. From the ancient Greek philosophy of Plato (see *Phaedrus*, trans. Hackforth, 228b, 275a) to our modern neuroscientists like Eagleman (2015) and Levitin (2007), thinkers and scientists alike have shown that memory plays a leading role in helping us develop our own identity and make connections as we attempt to understand the world around us; for without memory, we would not be able to function from one day to the next. We learn because we can remember, we survive because we can remember, and we celebrate life because we can remember.

There are three basic kinds of memory that they are currently aware of in the field of cognitive psychology: (1) *sensory memory* or sometimes called *first level memory* (i.e., the sound or sight memory of an object); *working-memory* (i.e., the kind of memory we

retain for a short time and may later develop into a long-term memory); and *long-term memory* (i.e., the type of memory we hold onto for life, hence the name "long-term").

Long–term memory is highly complex and is divided into a number of distinct categories. Declarative and procedural are two very important kinds of long-term memory. Declarative memory refers to thoughts and events that can be described with words, and procedural memory refers to how we execute physical actions. Declarative memory is further comprised of episodic memory (i.e., memories of personal experiences) and semantic memory (i.e., memories of facts, dates, and concepts).

For the purpose of our PMA component, we will primarily be concerned with episodic memories. These kinds of memories are autobiographical in nature and consequently deal with personal thoughts, events, and experiences. Willis (2006) has pointed out that episodic memories can be used as very powerful learning devices because they contain vivid sensory elements and human emotions—two crucial ingredients needed in the encoding and learning process.

A cheerful and useful episodic memory I have from early childhood is when I learned the word "balmy." I can recall the scene with great detail. It happened one July evening when I was 4. I heard my parents discussing the current weather. The moment they said the word "balmy," my whole world turned into an uncontrollable universe of giggles. I immediately fell in love with the word and was equally enchanted by how its sound made me feel (Randolph, 2016). The memory of this experience ran deep into my psyche and worked its way into my long-term memory because of the significant emotional content. This memory, however, is not only a recollection of the event, but it is also a collection of various emotions and sensations. That is, not only do I associate the emotions of happiness, excitement, and humor with the memory, but I can also immediately recall the feel of the cool, evening grass; the sensation of the firm earth as I rolled on it; the smell of the pine trees in the air; and the sight of the delightful smiles on my parents' faces.

If I want to learn a new vocabulary word in any language, that type of vivid episodic memory is like gold, for I will be able to associate the emotional and sensory elements of that childhood memory with a new word, phrase, or idiom I wish to learn. For instance, when my wife taught me the Turkish word for "happy" — mutlu — I recalled that magical childhood scene when I was rolling on the evening grass listening to my parents use the word, "balmy." And, what's more, I actually felt that summer evening run through my soul once again. And when a friend recently taught me the Albanian word for "summer" — verë — I also reflected on the sensory and emotional elements of that summer evening. Both the Turkish and Albanian words were relatively easy for me to learn because of the PMAs from my personal history.

III. Defining the Personal Memory Association and Explaining Its Use

"Tis in my memory lock'd, And you yourself shall keep key of it."

—William Shakespeare

My current working definition of a Personal Memory Association 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. (Randolph, 2018)

PMAs are most often episodic, but they could also be related to any kind of memory that helps a student connect a vocabulary term to a memory. The above memory of "balmy" is a perfect example of an episodic memory. A student, however, might also use a semantic memory of a recently learned fact to help learn a lexical item. That is, if a student just learned the teams, date, and place of the first Super Bowl (The Green Bay Packers versus the Kansas City Chiefs, 1967, Los Angeles, California), he or she might use that to create a connection while learning a new lexical item, for example, "legendary." The basic idea of a PMA, though, is to associate with a personal element, so a memory that is intrinsically a part of a student's psyche or intimate being will be the most effective.

Employing the Personal Memory Associations

I use the PMAs as a review component or reinforcement tool to help students both reacquaint themselves with the terms being learned as well as develop a deeper intuitive feeling for them. For every new term we study, I ask the students to write down the definition of the lexical item; identify its part of speech; assign its verbpathy; and discuss its associations with color, emotion, and a body part. I, then, ask them to craft their own example sentences for homework. Before they turn in their vocabulary packet, I have them review each term by completing the bubble diagram in Figure 1.
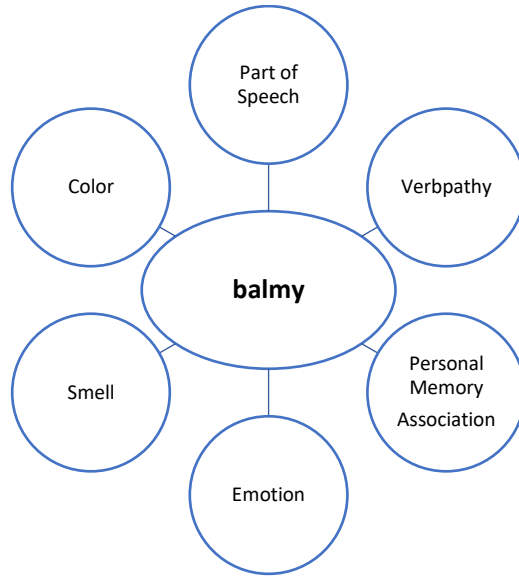
Figure 1. The vocabulary bubble used for review.

As we can see from Figure 1, the Personal Memory Association is one of the bubbled features. I ask the students to write one to two sentences near the bubble about how that lexical item is related to or associated with a specific, personal memory from their own lives. Some students write a short sentence that succinctly expresses their association to the term via a special memory; for instance, "The word balmy reminds me of the breeze I felt this morning." Other students write two to three sentences, offering more details and descriptions. On occasion, I even have students who will attach an extra sheet of paper to the bubble diagram because they choose to write a short paragraph about each lexical item and their respective PMA.

This review work (which will be discussed in more detail in the Repetition-Based Component installments) acts as an important re-exposure to the terms and their web of components. Moreover, because students are personalizing each review point through the PMA, the impact is highly effective. The examples from the PMAs are very personal, and "[t]he more personal an example, the more richly it becomes encoded and more readily it is remembered" (Medina, 2014, p. 140). PMAs help to solidify a deep understanding of each term, create a vivid memory association, and ultimately make each term highly tangible.

IV. Three Student Examples

"Memory, the warder of the brain."

—William Shakespeare

For the purpose of this article, I asked three talented English language learners from an advanced writing course to write a PMA for a lexical item of their choosing that we studied during the semester. I also asked them to comment on any benefits they feel the PMAs offer. Below are their written associations and their responses regarding how they feel it helps them learn vocabulary.

vicarious

After being introduced to the meaning of the word "vicarious," I immediately saw my dad smiling in front of me. I could clearly hear his words of encouragement and excitement about my life, especially about my travels. I saw him sitting in our spacious living room on our huge, creamy white couch with our big, purple flower print pillows. I saw him sitting there, smiling at his phone as he looked through all the photos from my travels to Germany, London, Amsterdam, and America, including my Christmas trip to Florida. I saw him smiling happily and proudly, living a "vicarious" life through my travels.

For me, the personal memory association is a good tool for successfully learning vocabulary. Using strong memories filled with sentiment to help me remember a word, phrase, or idiom is a very effective and pleasant way to learn new lexical terms. There is no need to laboriously try to "memorize" a term; rather, I merely search for memories from my own life—those special moments of excitement and happiness which bring enjoyment and reflection. In addition, this method helps me to think about my own life and moments worth remembering.

—Nikoleta Dubjelová, Slovakia

be on cloud nine

When I learned the meaning of "be in cloud nine," I instantly thought of Women's Day. I was on cloud nine because I made my mother feel so elated. On that day, I was here in the United States, so I thought of sending a present to my mother to please her. I got through to my younger brother and sent him money to buy our mother a gift. On the following day, my mom wanted to talk to me, but I missed her call. My brother later texted me, saying that our mother loved the present and that he has never seen her look so happy. My father reached out to me too, "I wonder what you did for your mother, I haven't seen her smile or hear her laugh like that in months." I felt joy for all the powerful reactions. So, whenever I read or hear this word, it takes me back to this memory of this year's Women's Day.

Imagining the idiom, "be on cloud nine," and its relation to the recent Women's Day is powerful, for it brings back emotions related to the memories. Literally, my heart becomes ecstatic. In addition, I love being in the kitchen with my mother while she prepares food for us. She likes putting tomatoes in every food she cooks, including rice. Therefore, I could visualize the red appearance of every kind of food she makes. The red color helps me keep associations of the memories locked into the meaning of the idiom, "be on cloud nine." Emotions are effective learning devices, and they are elicited very effortlessly when I associate the term with the memory. Likewise, colors also help encode the terms in my mind. In fact, personal memories are very useful in that they help me call to mind, remember, and learn English vocabulary terms.

—Olivier Niyonshuti Mizero, Rwanda

exuberant

The vocabulary term, exuberant, is an adjective that I associate with the memories at my grandparents' farm in Oman when I was a child. As "exuberant" means a deep feeling of energy and joyfulness, it reminds me very much of when my grandparents used to take my cousins and me to their farm located in northern Oman. My grandparents, who lived in the countryside, were very traditional people. Their farm was very important to them, so they would go to check up on it every day, especially in the evening when the sun would cool down. The moment we reached the farm, I remember my cousins and I would jump and run around with a deep feeling of exuberance. The farm was huge. There were cows, goats, sheep, and chickens. Also, there were some fruits and vegetables, and I remember that we used to help my grandmother pick these fruits and veggies. We also enjoyed helping my grandparents' hired hand feed the goats and sheep. In addition, there was a *falaj* that we used to swim in on the farm. The water was pure, clear, and warm. Remembering the feeling of my body in the warm water is what mostly reminds me of the word "exuberant," because I was filled with so much joy while swimming in the warm pool. My cousins and I used to splash the water at each other, and my grandfather used

to sit by the frankincense tree and watch us and laugh. It was one of the best memories in my life.

This personal memory association helps me recall the word easily because I not only remember this word due to the personal memory, but I also recall other senses such as hearing and smell. In addition to the feeling of joyfulness I was filled with, I can hear the water splashes and my grandfather's laughter when I see the word "exuberant." Since exuberant reminds me of my grandparents' farm, I also get a sense of being with the animals, and I recall the smell of the grass. Furthermore, I can imagine "exuberant" to be a bright and vibrant color such as yellow. Yellow can also be connected to the personal memory because of the sun during our time on the farm. In addition, the word exuberant gives a sense of intensity because of the pronunciation. The first syllable gives this sense of excitement. The above factors convey the definition of "exuberant" to me and thus it's easy to recall.

—Ishraq Al-Abri, Oman

V. The Benefits of the Personal Memory Associations
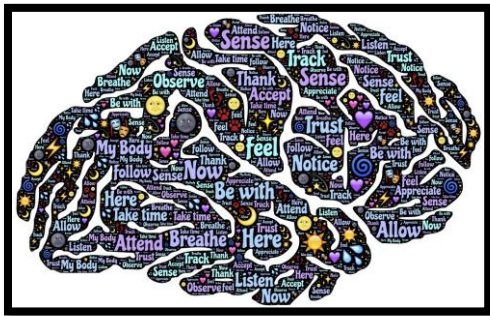
"Praising what is lost makes the remembrance dear."

—William Shakespeare

If we reflect on how we learn vocabulary and what causes us to become enthusiastically engaged in the learning process, I think three inspiring concepts come to mind: personalization of the lexical items; interest in them; and the use of human emotion to acquire a deeper understanding. That is, if we personalize the vocabulary terms, develop an interest in them, and use our emotions to connect with them in a self-actualized way, then the learning will naturally become effective, useful, and fun. These three tools of personalization, interest, and emotion are richly supported in the neuroscience community. In fact, Medina (2014) and Willis (2006) have argued that a personal relation to any subject matter, an interest in it, and the use of the emotions are

almost essential if one wants to truly learn the content and form a long-term memory of it.

The PMAs are a natural facilitator of these three essential learning tools. When a student uses his or her personal memory and ties it directly to a lexical item, there is an almost immediate personalized insight reinforced by both interest and emotion. This is apparent in the above student samples. Furthermore, "[e]ngaging in the process of learning actually increases one's capacity to learn" (Willis, 2006, p. 8). Creating PMAs engages the students in their own unique way of learning by using their individual history and unique personhood, and they naturally become excited about both the new lexical item being studied and the discoveries being made through the process of association.

The Other Mind-Body Components

In addition to the PMAs, I ask students to associate vocabulary items with (1) the soul, mind, and/or the body; (2) dreams and/or reality; (3) questions and/or answers; and (4) a temporary and/or permanent feeling of time. For example, let's take our word "balmy" and analyze it through the above associations. Recently, one student said he would associate the pleasant weather term, balmy, with the "body" simply because it feels the weather. Although one could "dream" about this kind of weather, he felt it is more "reality" based. In terms of "questions" and "answers," he said balmy could be both, because one could ask and answer questions about the current weather conditions. And lastly, he said that "balmy" weather is very "temporary," lasting only a brief time. As we can see from the above analysis of associations, the student is thinking about and associating the term "balmy" through several insightful lenses. This simple method helps transform even the most abstract term into a concrete, personal, and well-understood concept.

VI. Concluding Remarks

The purpose of the mind-body associations, specifically the PMAs, is to help students connect with English lexical items on a concrete, visceral, and intuitive level. As I have attempted to show, memories are a powerful part of our daily existence: They can take us back to unique experiences in our life and recreate those moments with a fantastic

sense of awe and appreciation. This is why, I believe, the PMAs are so beneficial and why I encourage English language teachers to implement them in the vocabulary lessons. The memory associations are very easy to employ because they are such a major part of who and what we are. And, as our students' minds have a myriad of memories at their fingertips, they can pull them forth with ease to help personalize new lexical items, and, in the process, often recall a pleasant moment in their life to make the learning process more enjoyable and full of inspiration and intrigue.

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