

Vocabulary Learning

For Secondary Latin Students

JOHN TUCKFIELD

Vocabulary learning has been a long-standing requirement of Latin courses. Traditional methods of learning and testing vocabulary, however, have not always been effective; they often yield short-term results. A different method, using a large number of words to be learnt, has shown very promising results for doubling the number of words in a student's long-term memory.

Why do students need to learn vocabulary?

It is not an idle question to ask whether students need to learn vocabulary at all. Since the introduction of the VCE, students have been allowed to have access to a dictionary when translating unseen passages for the final examination. This has flowed on into class and homework activities, where dictionary skills have become increasingly important for students (students need to understand the significance of dictionary terminology, such as when a verb is denoted as being *vi*, and be able to master the skill of finding the appropriate headword when faced with *arce*, for example). All VCE students have a dictionary: the *Latin Study Design* specifies a paper dictionary, but many use some form of digital dictionary as well.

Nevertheless, most schools still see the learning of vocabulary as a valued and necessary skill. Some of this retention is no doubt due to some element of inertia – vocabulary has always been part of language learning – but many teachers still see vocabulary as having relevance in the current system. While students do not need the encyclopaedic memory of vocabulary words that their predecessors may have required, a reasonable fluency of vocabulary allows students to translate without having to pause before every word to look it up, and in timed situations allows more time to think about the accident and syntax and thus work out how a sentence is organised. The value of having a dictionary in the final examination is that students need not be stuck simply because they do not know one particular word that may be crucial to an understanding of a passage; however, if they have to look every word up, they will run out of time. Some

level of vocabulary competence is clearly required.

How is vocabulary organised?

Major courses being used in schools now all have vocabulary lists to be learnt. Typically these are organised by chapter in the textbook. In the Cambridge Latin Course, there are about 20 words per stage (chapter) to be learnt. These are usually words that students have met three times or more in translating the stories in that or previous stages. Some effort is made to ensure that commonly used words are included in vocabulary lists, but there are some omissions, as well as inclusion of unusual words that may not warrant a student learning them.

There have been attempts to produce vocabulary lists on a wider basis. Many will be familiar with the work of Kenneth Masterman, who completed his famous *A Latin Word List* in 1945. Using Professor Lodge's study of the vocabulary of Caesar's *Gallic War*, some six speeches of Cicero and six books of the *Aeneid*, Masterman created three lists, ordering words by frequency; he also added in some words met less often in literature, but beloved by teachers in exercises. His *First List* contains some 600 words.

A new approach to vocabulary learning

The traditional method of testing vocabulary for school students is to set a list from the textbook, usually of approximately 20 words; students revise this, and then complete a written test (nowadays this may be done online). However, I have long had reservations about the effectiveness of this method. It seems to reward last-minute cramming, and all too often I have found that students can not remember a word that was on a test just a few weeks before. The testing was effective in getting words into students' short-term memory, but ineffective in getting words into their long-term memory – and that surely is the goal of vocabulary learning. This is all the more disappointing when the words in textbooks are usually consolidated by appearing regularly later on in reading and grammar passages.

In 2013 I tried a new approach with my students. I chose a Year 11 group of 19 students. They were

all boys, 16-17 years of age, and had opted to study Latin. Their ability was wider than I would normally expect at this year level, ranging from excellent to battlers, making them ideal for a new approach. It is important to note that there is a strong school culture of the importance of assessment and marks: students tend to take their work seriously and are generally conscientious.

In previous years we have built our Year 11 vocabulary around Masterman's *First List*. Typically we divide the list into groups of 20 words and have a weekly written test. However, this was unsatisfactory for a number of reasons. First, it becomes very tedious and allows the student little autonomy in their learning; the unending revision does not allow students to plan their time so that they can ease off on vocabulary at times when they have other competing demands and increase their vocabulary revision when there is some clear space. Second, I have found no correlation between vocabulary test scores and the time used with a dictionary when doing unseens: students who scored very highly on vocabulary tests would still be dependant on their dictionaries for even basic words. This raised issues of whether the students had assimilated the words into their long-term memory, or whether they had simply learnt the words for the sake of the immediate test.

I started by dividing the list into two separate sets: one of nouns, adjectives, adverbs, pronouns and conjunctions, and one of verbs. The first set contained some 360 words, and would be the focus for Semester 1; the second set contained 190 words, and would be the focus for Semester 2. Each set would be tested online. Vocabulary testing is ideal for digitisation: it is straightforward to set up and has right/wrong answers. A free online testing instrument was used; while it took time to write the test, that investment in time is worthwhile, as marking is done automatically (a not inconsiderable factor, as teacher reluctance to do marking is sometimes an inhibitor to assessment activities). The test can be reused *ad infinitum*, and there are automated analytic tools available which give insight into student achievement and effort (such

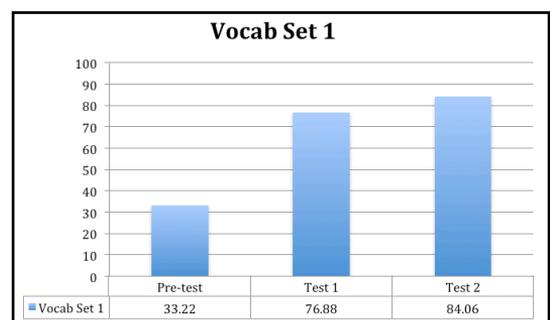
as number and duration of practice attempts). This also allowed students to practise under the same conditions as the final test as many times as they liked.

Students were first given the test on the first set with no advance notice – a 'pre-test'. This was to give a baseline of the students' vocabulary knowledge, and remove the 'cramming' factor – that any test with warning could simply show how much the students had crammed the night before. Incidentally, it also served as an audit of the success of previous four years' vocabulary learning. The pre-test took one whole class period, approximately 40 minutes.

The results of this pre-test were not particularly surprising: the average score was 33.22% correct. It is interesting to note that if the aim of the previous four years' vocabulary learning and testing had been to move the words into the students' long-term memory, then that had been a failure.

The students were then told they would be given exactly the same test two times more, at given dates over the coming semester. This would be noted on their reports. Students would be given access to a replica copy of the test to use for unlimited online practice. No class time was spent on revision, and students had to organise their own revision.

The results of the tests were as follows:



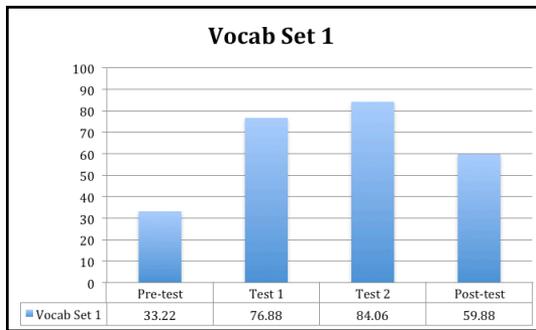
On average, students practised the test well (the maximum number of times for any one student was 15), and this is reflected in the dramatic improvement. For test 1, the average score was

76.88%; for test 2, that had increased to 84.06%.

These results indicate that this new approach of a smaller number of very large tests (opposed to a large number of small tests) was successful in helping students to learn the set.

However, this still did not demonstrate whether this new approach had improved students' long-term retention of the words. A post-test was thus conducted, similar to the pre-test. This was held 2 months after the last of the tests and without any warning to eliminate the chances of the words being in the students' short-term memories.

The results of the post-tests were as follows:



This is the most heartening part of this experiment. I would not expect the students to do as well on a surprise test as they did on test for which they had notice and they revised hard; however, on the post test they did remarkably well, especially when compared to the pre-test results. What the post-test result indicates is that there was a major increase (almost double) in the words in the students' long-term memory after doing the two large tests.

A similar approach was taken in the second semester, where the focus was on verbs. One problem here was that students were now in a position to 'game' the situation: a cynical student could deliberately do poorly on the initial test to produce a greater degree of improvement in the final test, thus giving a distorted impression of their efforts. To combat this, a slightly different approach was taken to the first set. There was no pre-test, as this could be too

easily gamed. Instead, there were only two tests, both of which were advertised to the students well in advance. As an incentive to try their hardest, students were told that a score of 90% or higher on the first test would give the student an automatic A+ and that they would not have to attempt the second test. This incentive had a positive effect. 85% of students practised for the test and 60% were able to achieve a score of 90% or higher. The class average for the test was 78% (compared to 77% for the comparable test for the first list). By the second test, the average score was an astonishing 95%.

Conclusions

This testing regime broke some long-standing beliefs of mine. First, students were able to revise very large numbers of words for a single test, far more than I had thought possible. Second, it demonstrated the ineffectiveness of traditional methods of learning and testing vocabulary. Third, it showed that it is possible to get a large number of words into students' long-term memory.

This is just one experiment: I would like to see it repeated in other settings to test whether it is valid in a wider setting. However, it is a very exciting start.

Camberwell Grammar School
 jwt@cgs.vic.edu.au