

# EFFECTIVE ENGLISH LEARNING

## Unit 6: Vocabulary



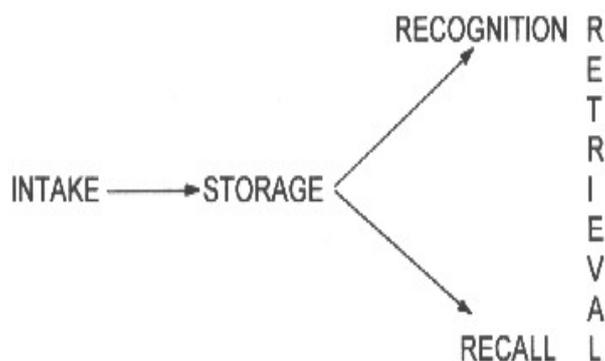
Most of us feel that our lack of second language vocabulary is an obstacle to more effective communication and comprehension. Although some students seem to pick up English vocabulary easily, the evidence from research is that learning new words and structures of another language requires **conscious mental effort**.

We also tend to get frustrated because we can't recall the right words **when we need to produce them**, even though we are able to recognise the same words when we read or hear them.

***Recall** is influenced by events or processes at various stages of memory. Three stages can conveniently be distinguished: **intake, storage and retrieval.***

(McDonough 1981:66, emphasis added)

**Retrieval** includes both *recognition* of words when we hear or read them, and *recall* – the ability to produce appropriate words (often referred to as 'active vocabulary'). These stages can be shown in a diagram:



In this unit we will be looking at some practical ways in which what you do can do **actively** at the *intake* (learning) stage will lead to more effective storage in long-term memory, and so facilitate *recall*.

### Organising the input

*It is well known in psychology that if the material to be memorized is organized in some fashion, people can use this organization to their benefit. This happens because organized material is easier to store in and retrieve from long-term memory.*

(Thompson, 1987: 46)

So our next Language Learning Principle is:

## Principle 8: Organise

### Task 6.1

Do you organise English vocabulary in any way when you learn it? If so, how?

(This is an open question, so see whether you can discuss it with someone else, face to face or on-line).

It is reasonable to suppose that the way we approach learning new words will affect the way they are stored in our memory. Psychologists have found that we don't store the vocabulary of our first language as a list of separate items like a dictionary. Instead, we store them in a complex **network of associations**.

So when you set out to extend your English vocabulary, try to learn words, not individually, but as parts of a **framework, or network, of interrelated meanings**.

The specific benefits of creating a network are:

- *Words are not perceived as separate items, but as members of larger semantic [meaning] networks.*
- *It activates our store of existing vocabulary, thus encouraging recall.*
- *Association aids retention.*
- *We develop a knowledge of the semantic relationships between words and the networks to which these words belong. That allows us to make predictions as we read or listen, which is an important skill.*
- *A knowledge of the relatedness of words in a language is necessary for fluency in speaking and writing.*

(Machalias, 1991: 20)

The next three tasks explore practical ways of organising your vocabulary learning to consolidate **meaning links**.

One relatively simple way of learning vocabulary in **fields** of meaning is to collect words together under a general heading.

**Task 6.2: Listing**

In the space below, write down as many words as you can think of under the heading STUDY (some examples are given):

<u>STUDY</u>
<i>lectures</i>
<i>exams</i>
<i>research</i>
<i>library</i>
<i>read</i>

Lists like that are not organised internally. Looking for a creative ways of organising words helps make our learning more focused, more interesting, and therefore probably more effective.

**Task 6.3: Classifying**

On a sheet of paper, group the words you listed in Task 6.2 into categories, according to the criteria you think are appropriate.

The simple example below shows how word-fields can be organised to show **networks** of meanings. This is similar to a 'mind-map' or 'spidergram'.



#### Task 6.4: Building a network

Extend the *Research* diagram by adding as many words as you can, in appropriate places.

## Synonyms

English words with similar meanings (*synonyms*, or near-synonyms) can be confusing, so an important aspect of learning words in sets or fields is learning the differences between them.

### Task 6.5: Comparing elements of meaning

Can you complete the following grid? Put ticks in the appropriate boxes (the ones for pour have been put in already).

	accidentally	liquid	solid particles (e.g. salt, sand)	dispersed in small quantities
Pour		✓	✓	
Spill				
Scatter				
Sprinkle				

To check your solution against the Feedback, click [here](#)

Task 6.5 illustrates the **substitution** relationship between words. The four words are all from the same *word-class* – verbs – and a choice has to be made between them.

## Words that go together: Collocation

A second important type of relationship between words is **collocation** – the tendency for certain items to occur together in sentences.

Learning words contextualized in typical phrases or sentences can help you use them appropriately. Noticing the typical patterns in which words are used is an important skill.

### Task 6.6

How many words or phrases can you suggest to fill the blanks in the following?

1. In a recent \_\_\_\_\_, Brown (1994) provided evidence that ....
2. The results \_\_\_\_\_ that the risks of chronic heart disease are significantly increased by smoking.
3. These findings \_\_\_\_\_ our hypothesis.

To check the Feedback, click [here](#)

Later in this unit we will be looking in more detail at how to find out about the regular collocations of English words.

Many sets, or *families*, of words are systematically related in both meaning and form, for example:

<i>analyse</i>	<i>analysis</i>	<i>unanalytical</i>
<i>misanalyse</i>	<i>analyst</i>	<i>analytically</i>
<i>unanalysed</i>	<i>analytical</i>	<i>analyser</i>

Such sets of words are related by **derivation** (origin). Formal, academic writing use many words like these, which are built up from 'component parts' – prefixes, stems, suffixes, etc. – carrying different elements of meaning and grammatical information.

So it is very useful to know the most usual types of meaning which the most common prefixes, stems and suffixes represent.

### Task 6.7

List as many words as possible derived from the following:

*synthesise*

*function*

*union*

*evaluate*

*interpret*

To check your solution, click [here](#)

Notice that the tasks you have just done may not have involved using any *new* vocabulary, but **reviewing** your vocabulary knowledge in a particular field.

When you are learning **new** vocabulary, combining that with a review of what you know will help you form appropriate meaning associations.

**Task 6.8**

The words shown below are significantly more frequent in academic writing than in general English. (They come from the *Academic Word List*, which we look at under 'Resources').

1. Study them and select any you **don't know**, or whose meaning / use you are **unsure** about.
2. Check their meanings in a dictionary. We recommend the Cambridge Online Dictionary: <http://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/british/>
3. To help you learn them, try to find links between them and the words you know, using the techniques illustrated in **Tasks 6.2-6.7**.

*adjacent**albeit**assemble**collapse**colleague**compile**conceive**convince**depress**encounter**enormous**forthcoming**Incline**integrity**intrinsic**Invoke**likewise**nonetheless**notwithstanding**ongoing**panel**persist**pose**reluctance**straightforward**undergo**whereby*

Both **meaning** and **sound** associations are important in retrieval: **meaning links** appear to facilitate **recall**, when we need to produce appropriate words, while **recognition** relies on **sound**.

One clear conclusion from research is that language learners should pay special attention to the **stress pattern** when learning new English words (Channell 1988).

### Task 6.9

1. For all the words in the Task 6.8 list with **two or more** syllables, underline the syllable that has the main stress. For example,

***integrity***

(If you are not sure, check in the dictionary)

3. Then write the words in **groups with the same stress pattern**.

Check your answers [here](#)

## Principle 9: Use mnemonics

Another approach to helping recall of vocabulary, which many learners have found useful, is the use of memorising tricks or techniques called *mnemonics*:

*"Mnemonic" means "aiding memory" ... and since so much of language learning depends on being able to memorize and retrieve all kinds of language routines, it is somewhat surprising that foreign language learners... tend to know little about them.*

(Thompson, 1987: 43)

The value of mnemonics has been recognised since ancient times. Three mnemonic techniques which have been found to be effective are: *paired associates*; *sound and meaning links*; and *spatial grouping*.

### Mnemonic technique 1: *Paired associates*

In this technique you think of a **word in your own language which has some similarity in both form and meaning** to the 'target' word in English. The similarity need not be very strong. The first language word acts as a kind of link between the English word and its translation. These link words have been called *security words* (Curran, cited in McDonough 1981: 67).

For example, an English-speaking learner of Russian might notice that the Russian word for eye,

***glaz***

reminds them of the English word ***glass***. This could be associated with the target word through a security word such as *glasses* (which you wear over your eyes), or perhaps *glass eye* (a false eye) or *eyeglass* (a sight aid with a single lens).

An Italian student at Edinburgh told us he had used a similar technique to learn the English phrasal verb

***put up with***

which has a similar meaning to the more formal word *tolerate*. The sound of *put up with* reminded him of the Italian verb ***sputare***, which means 'spit'. He associated the action of spitting with angrily rejecting something you cannot *put up with*.

#### Task 6.10

Can you see any **risks** or **disadvantages** in using mnemonic methods which make connections between your first and second languages?

To see our answer, click [here](#)

## Mnemonic technique 2:

### *Sound and meaning links in the second language*

Cohen and Apeh (1980) found that the most efficient technique for their students was to look out for possible **sound and meaning connections** between words in the second language.

For example, the same Italian learner who described learning *put up with* also learned the phrase *prick up one's ears* by associating it with *pick up*, which has similarities in form and meaning.

## Mnemonic technique 3: *Spatial grouping*

Thompson (1987: 45) reports research which suggests that “rearranging words on a page to form patterns, such as a triangle, appears to improve recall”. A **pattern** seems to work better than a simple column, and several columns are better than one.

### Task 6.11

Have you ever used one of these three techniques, or some other trick, to help you remember words?

### Task 6.12

Select a new word or word that you want to learn (for example, from the list in **Task 6.8**). Choose a suitable mnemonic technique, and see if it works for you.

## Practice and revision

Research confirms the important of actively using and revising new vocabulary. Studies of vocabulary learning strategies conclude that good vocabulary learners

- find opportunities to try out new words in real-life communication – this is likely to be more effective than ‘safer’ contexts such as in class or private study
- ask questions to check what they know about words
- test themselves
- revise regularly – ‘little and often’ is better than occasional, large-scale revision

(based on findings reported in Nunan, 1991; McCarthy, 1990; Thompson 1987)

These points underline our twelfth **Language Learning Principle** (explored further in the *Speaking* unit)

**Make the most of your opportunities**

## RESOURCES

### What vocabulary do I need to know?

Every day during your programme of study you will be reading (and perhaps hearing) dozens of English words and phrases that are new to you, or whose precise meaning in an unfamiliar context is not clear.

It is impossible – and unnecessary – to learn **all** the new words you meet. So you need some way of **selecting** appropriate vocabulary for learning to make the intake manageable.

**Task 6.13**

How can you decide which words you need to learn?

**'Core' vocabulary**

For successful everyday communication in English you need a minimum 'core' vocabulary of around 2000 words. Some EFL dictionaries such as the *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English* and the *Macmillan English Dictionary* (see the section on **Dictionaries**, below) contain a basic list of *defining vocabulary* like this, often in the back of the book. The explanations of words in the dictionary are written using only, or mainly, this basic vocabulary.

**Task 6.14**

Check to see if the English dictionary you use contains such a list of 'core' or 'defining' vocabulary. If it does, read through the list. You should find that you know (at least one meaning of) all, or almost all the words listed.

Make a note of any that you didn't know, and **try to learn them**, using any of the techniques from this unit.

**Academic Word List (AWL)**

A useful guide to the words you are likely to need for academic study is the *Academic Word List*. This is the outcome of research by Dr Averil Coxhead (Coxhead, 2000). You can read more about her work at

<http://www.victoria.ac.nz/lals/about/staff/averil-coxhead>

From her research, Coxhead identified 570 *word families* which are frequent in academic writing, but much less common in general English use.

The AWL does not include very specialised or technical words related only to specific subjects – it identifies words that are in frequent use across a wide range of academic disciplines.

The list represents each word family by a *headword*; for example, the headword *assess* represents its ‘family’ of derived words: *assess*, *assessment*, *assessor*. So the list of 570 headwords gives you access to a much larger list of academic words.

The word families are grouped into **10 sublists**, according to their **frequency**: Sublist 1 contains the most frequent words in the AWL, and so on. The words you worked with in Task 6.8 came from Sublist 10, the least frequent.

Information about the **AWL**, the list and sublists themselves, and advice on how to learn them is available on-line at

<http://www.victoria.ac.nz/lals/resources/academicwordlist/>

Some other excellent Web resources offer ways of using the AWL to build up your academic vocabulary:

**Academic Vocabulary** (Sandra Harwood, Nottingham University)  
<http://www.nottingham.ac.uk/~alzsh3/acvocab/>

**Exercises for the Academic Word List** (Gerry Luton, University of Victoria)  
<http://www.englishvocabularyexercises.com/AWL/index.htm>

On the **Academic Vocabulary** site you will find the **AWL Highlighter**, which highlights in bold the AWL words in any text you paste in. You can also use the **AWL Gapmaker** to test yourself on AWL words in a text.

Another useful tool using the AWL is the **English Vocabprofiler**, which you can find on the **Compleat Lexical Tutor** website (Tom Cobb, University of Quebec at Montreal):

<http://www.lextutor.ca/>

Choose **Vocabprofile** from the opening menu. That takes you to 'Web Vocabulary Profilers'. Select **Classic VP English v. 3** (the version number may have been updated).

Here, you can copy and paste in a text into the large window (to replace the instructions) and obtain a **profile** of the vocabulary used, using a colour code:

- *green* for words from the most frequent first 1,000 list
- *blue* for the second 1,000 list
- *yellow* for AWL words
- *red* for "off-list" words.

**Vocabprofile** shows you the percentages of words in each group in your text.

#### Task 6.15

Use *Vocabprofile* to analyse a sample of your own writing. Select a sample text (up to 2000 words), and paste it into the *Vocabprofile* window.

Click on the **Submit** button.

What are your **percentage** figures for the four categories of words?

Coxhead found these typical frequencies in academic texts:

the first 1,000 most frequent English words	75%
the second 1,000 most frequent words	5%
the 570 AWL keywords	10%
off-list	10%

If you want your own written English to create a more academic impression, you should aim for approximately these percentage figures.

### Task 6.16: Testing your vocabulary

On the *Compleat Lexical Tutor* site, choose *Test* from the home page menu. From the English section you can choose from **recognition** or **production** tests.

For an **academic word recognition** test, choose the **2k – 10k** Tests from the first group of tests (Levels Test: Recognition), and scroll down to the **University Word List** test (the University Word List is similar to the AWL). This is a multiple choice test.

To test your **productive academic vocabulary skills**, select the Test Menu from the second group (Levels Test: Production) and choose **University Word List** from any of the three versions.

Additional academic vocabulary learning resources are available at <http://www.uefap.com/links/lang/language.htm>

Scroll down to 'Vocabulary', where you will find links to around twenty vocabulary resources, including the ones we have looked at so far in this unit.

## Concordancers

A *concordancer* is a programme that allows you to search a large language database (*corpus*). This is a very handy way to find real-life examples of a word, phrase, or combination of words, and see how it is normally used. There are several simple concordance tools available on the Web.

One way to use a concordancer programme is to find out the most usual **collocation** patterns of a word (its tendency to go together with certain other words).

To search the **British National Corpus**, click on

<http://www.natcorp.ox.ac.uk/>

#### Task 6.17

One of the words in AWL sublist 10 (Task 6.8) is *invoke*. Use the British National Corpus to find out what kind of words usually follow *invoke*.

Compare your findings with ours [here](#)

You can find another on-line concordancer in the **Compleat Lexical Tutor** site:

[http://www.lextutor.ca/concordancers/concord\\_e.html](http://www.lextutor.ca/concordancers/concord_e.html)

The Resources section in the *EEL* unit on Grammar contains further practice in using concordancers.

## Dictionaries

**A good English-English dictionary is an essential resource for learners.** Some are intended for native English speakers, while EFL dictionaries are designed for learners of English and vary according to the level of learner they are aimed at.

*An appropriate learner's dictionary will suit your general-purpose needs better than a native user's dictionary.*

Below are our recommendations for EFL dictionaries. Most now come with a CD-ROM. Most include very helpful information on **collocation**, **synonyms** and the **use** of words, to help you build your vocabulary knowledge.

**Macmillan English Dictionary** This has 'Language Awareness' pages, including a section on Academic Writing.

**Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary** You can look up definitions from this dictionary on-line at

<http://dictionary.cambridge.org/>

**Longman Exams Dictionary** This highlights **AWL** words, and gives information on frequency.

**Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English**

**Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary**

A **good quality translation dictionary** can also be very useful. **Pocket** dictionaries (English-English, or translation) are convenient, but are not adequate for university study purposes.

These two websites allow you to look up various dictionaries, including translation dictionaries:

<http://www.yourdictionary.com/>

<http://www.onelook.com/>

For the technical terms you need in your academic field, find out whether there is a **specialist** dictionary, like these:

<http://www.chemistry-dictionary.com/>

<http://www.biology-online.org/d/a.htm>

<http://www.tuition.com.hk/geography/>

Small **electronic dictionaries** make it quicker to key in a word than to look it up in a book, but they bring several disadvantages.

### Task 6.18

What do you think are the disadvantages of electronic dictionaries?

To read the Feedback, click [here](#)

## Vocabulary books

The following are books we think are particularly **suitable for your study needs**, and can be used for independent learning.

*Academic Vocabulary in Use* by Mike McCarthy and Felicity O'Dell  
(Cambridge University Press)

*English for Academic Study: Vocabulary* by Colin Campbell (Garnet /  
University of Reading). *Based on the AWL Sublists.*

*Exploring Academic English* by Jennifer Thurstun and Christopher Candlin  
(National Centre for English Language Teaching and Research) *Based on  
samples of concordance data.*

## ADVICE FROM INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS

We have stressed the importance of actively using new vocabulary. This first student's remarks testify to this principle:

### Student 1

Conversation (listening and speaking) is very important in order to improve my vocabulary.

Firstly, in conversation, I can ask the meaning of a word that I do not know directly. The word will be remembered easily, because it has emerged in certain different circumstances. However, it depends on who I'm speaking to. If I'm speaking to a close friend then it is easy.

Secondly, after I find a new word, I try to use it in conversation. I use it in different situations to get familiar with that word. After I have used it more than three times I will always remember its meaning and use.

**Listening** and **reading** provide opportunities for receptive practice and consolidation of what you have learned, and for meeting new words in context, as the next two students confirm:

### **Student 2**

I have tried to expose myself to English as much as possible - reading books, newspapers, watching TV and so on. It is rather easy to keep on reading and listening, because I am interested in a variety of things. I think motivation and curiosity are important.

### **Student 3**

What I usually do to improve my vocabulary is to listen to the radio or watch television and try to catch some of the words I don't know the meanings of, but whose pronunciation is clear enough to allow me to find the word in the dictionary. Linking the pronunciation with the way the word is written is for me a useful way to remember it.

## **Recording vocabulary**

### **Student 4**

I try to make notes on words to improve my vocabulary. It is difficult to keep on making word notes, as it sometimes takes much time; however, I am going to try to keep it up.

### **Task 6.19**

1. Do you keep a record of words you have tried to learn, or have you done so in the past? If you do, what are your reasons for doing this?
2. If you record vocabulary, what is your preferred method? What do you write it on? How do you organise it? What information do you include, and where do you find the information you need? Do you record the words' pronunciation?
3. Think about the possible disadvantages of your system. Can you now think of any ways in which your system could be improved?

For Feedback, click [here](#)

You can also compare your answers to Task 6.19 with this student's comments:

### Student 5

Another way I use to remember words is to look up the word in the dictionary and write it down. It is not important for me to keep the word, but it is the act of writing the word down in my own handwriting that helps me. So sometimes I throw it away. But if I keep the words I usually try not to put them in a list, but instead try to differentiate them, writing one at the top of the page, one at the bottom - maybe in different colours or different shapes, etc.

### Task 6.20

Do you think Student 5's technique resembles any of the mnemonic strategies described in this unit?

Do you think there might be any disadvantage in trying to keep words separate?

Click [here](#) for Feedback

That's the end of this unit, which I hope has expanded your ideas for improving your English vocabulary while studying at the University of Edinburgh.

If you have found any errors in the text, or web links no longer working, or if you would like to suggest other informal learning techniques for this unit, you are welcome to email me at [A.J.Lynch@ed.ac.uk](mailto:A.J.Lynch@ed.ac.uk)

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## Vocabulary:

## Study Notes and Answers

Tasks 6.1 - 6.4 are open questions.

To go back to the page you were on, click [here](#)

### Task 6.5

	accidental ly	liquid	solid particles (e.g. salt, sand)	dispersed in small quantities
<i>Pour</i>		✓	✓	
<i>Spill</i>	✓	✓	✓	
<i>Scatter</i>			✓	✓
<i>Sprinkle</i>		✓	✓	✓

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### Task 6.6

Some possible answers:

- 1 *paper, study, report, article*
- 2 *suggest, indicate, show, confirm, provide further evidence + that...*
- 3 *support, lend support for, are consistent with, confirm, disconfirm*

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### Task 6.7

*synthetic(ally), synthesizer*

*(dys)functional(ly), malfunction*

*(dis)unite, (dis)unity, (dis)united, unify, unification, unifier*

*(un)evaluative(ly), evaluator, evaluation*

*misinterpret, (mis)interpretation, interpretative(ly), interpreter.*

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**Task 6.8** is an open question.

### Task 6.9

#### 2 syllables

*colleague*  
*incline (noun)*  
*likewise*  
*panel*  
  
*collapse*  
*compile*  
*conceive*  
*convince*  
*depress*  
*incline (verb)*  
*invoke*  
*persist*  
*whereby*

#### 3 syllables

*adjacent*  
*albeit*  
*assemble*  
*encounter*  
*enormous*  
*forthcoming*  
*intrinsic*  
*reluctant*  
*straightforward*  
*ongoing*  
  
*nonetheless*  
*undergo*

#### 4 syllables

*notwithstanding*

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### Task 6.10

Learners may be encouraged to make too strong associations between the first and second language words. For instance, in the case illustrated, the learner of Russian may remember **glaz** as meaning glasses.

There is also the risk that the learner may associate the second language word with the first language pronunciation system, and pronounce it incorrectly.

More importantly, perhaps, techniques depending on word-for-word translation ignore the fact that words often do not have the same range

of meanings or uses as their “equivalents” in the other language. As McDonough warns (1981: 66):

*...learning new words by translation equivalents is notoriously misleading.... new vocabulary items in the second language need to be placed in a framework which is faithful to the aspects of meaning coded in the new language.*

To return to the page you were on, click [here](#)

**Tasks 6.11 and 6.12** are open questions. Most of these techniques may be easier to use with more concrete words referring to actions, things, qualities, etc., which can be clearly visualized, than with more abstract word meanings, which may be best learned in context (i.e. with typical collocations).

**Tasks 6.13-6.16** are open questions.

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### Task 6.17

Our search on these two concordance sites showed that **invoke** is frequently followed by words referring to rules and rights (e.g. *rule, regulations, principles, rights, curbs*), and to supernatural beings (e.g. *gods*).

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### Task 6.18

One problem with small electronic dictionaries is that it is harder to get an overall impression of the content, because you can only see a few lines of text at a time.

Some electronic dictionaries use a synthesized voice to give an (American) model of the pronunciation of words. This does not sound very natural.

To go back, click [here](#)

## Task 6.19

Possible reasons for writing down new words and expressions:

- to reinforce the **visual form** of the word
- the **process** of writing down encourages intake (active involvement)
- to allow **organization** (e.g. into semantic fields)
- for later **review** and **reference**.

What might be recorded:

- spelling
- explanation of the meaning(s) in English
- synonyms, antonyms, etc.
- translation into first language example of use
- notes on grammar, stress, pronunciation, derived words.

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## Task 6.20

The fact the student uses patterns and avoids lists perhaps suggests the **Spatial Grouping** technique – although it is not clear that grouping is actually involved.

There may be a disadvantage in terms of storage: this method seems to de-emphasize the links between words, which we know helps recall.

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