

THE KEYWORD METHOD IN A DIGITAL CLASSROOM

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ABSTRACT

By taking advantage of the affordances of a digital-classroom environment, a two-stage mnemonic vocabulary-learning strategy called the keyword method can be used to create a multimodal, student-centered vocabulary learning tool. This paper will introduce the original keyword method (Atkinson, 1975), and then outline how modern technology was used to extend the method in a first-year reading and writing class at a University in Japan.

INTRODUCTION

One of the biggest challenges facing the second language (L2) learner is the daunting task of accumulating a large enough vocabulary to be both receptively and productively fluent. Vocabulary acquisition strategies can be grouped into four broad categories: rote repetition, structure analysis, semantic strategies, and mnemonic devices (Cohen, 1987). Several studies (e.g., Schmitt & Schmitt, 1993; Fewell, 2010) have found rote repetition to be the most prevalent vocabulary-learning strategy among Japanese students, even though mnemonic devices, especially the keyword method, have been shown to be more effective (Kasper, 1993).

The keyword method, developed more than 40 years ago, involves the creation of a mnemonic sentence that uses both an acoustic link and an imagery link (Atkinson, 1975). The original version of the method stops at the creation of the keyword sentence, but thanks to advances in technology, these visually-rich keyword sentences can now be easily and quickly shifted from the written text mode into still images and shared using social media. For first-year Japanese university students in an English reading and writing course, it has the potential to be a novel way of studying vocabulary.

A PERSONAL JOURNEY

When I first moved to Japan, I spent hours using the rote repetition method of writing and rewriting Japanese vocabulary items, but despite my best efforts, I was unable to make much progress with the language. Then, one day I came across a book by James Heisig (1977) that

caused me to reassess my learning strategy. It contained a method of remembering the meaning and writing of Chinese characters (*Kanji*) using mnemonic techniques. Heisig's method used imagination to create a visual image of the elements of the *Kanji* interacting in a memorable way. This struck me as a novel learning strategy that might also be useful for remembering Japanese vocabulary, and it was with renewed enthusiasm that I turned to my list of the 90 most common verbs in Japanese, and set about creating a mnemonic sentence for each one.

All of the verbs ended in *masu*, which I knew I could remember easily, so I decided to only focus on the pre-*masu* part of each verb, known as the verb stem. I then thought of English words or phrases that roughly approximated the sound of this verb stem, and created a sentence in which the keyword and the English translation were interacting with each other.

An example of this would be the verb 'to get off a train', which is *orimasu* in Japanese. The verb stem is *ori*, which sounded to me like the English word 'ollie', a skateboard manoeuvre used to jump the board into the air. This led to the creation of an image in my mind's eye of champion skater Tony Hawk doing an ollie to get off a train (see Appendix A). Just like that, the Japanese verb was mine, never to be forgotten. I did the same with 89 other verbs, and in one day I accomplished something that had eluded me for four months: I remembered the meaning and pronunciation of 90 Japanese verbs.

THE KEYWORD METHOD

Mnemonic techniques can be categorised as being verbal, such as using words in a sentence, or imagery, when a clear image is used to link the information (Cohen, 1987). However, in reality, these two methods often overlap as it is difficult to "manipulate visual imagery and verbal elaboration separately" (McLaughlin Cook, 1989, p. 4). The keyword method is a verbal mnemonic that aims to create an image in the mind of the student. It is a two-step mnemonic process that uses a keyword to create a chain of two links in order to build a connection between an L2 word and its L1 translation (Atkinson, 1975).

In the first stage, the acoustic link, a keyword is created by choosing an L1 word or phrase that has a similar sound to the L2 word. As the keyword is the only memory aid the learner has when trying to produce the word, it is imperative that the keyword completely reproduces the sound of the L2 word (Beaton, Gruneberg, Hyde, Shufflebottom & Sykes, 2005). In my example, 'ollie' was the keyword.

The second stage, known as the imagery link, involves creating a mental image of the keyword interacting with an L1 translation of the L2 word. Research has shown that picture pairs are remembered more easily if they are imagined interacting with each other (Paivio, 1991), and

while this interactive image does not need to be bizarre, it does need to be vivid to be effective (Levin, 1981). The keyword sentence I created was, "Tony Hawk did an ollie to get off the train." This one sentence includes both the English meaning of the Japanese verb (to get off a train), and the pronunciation (ollie). A visual representation of the process involved in keyword method can be found in Appendix B.

THE KEYWORD METHOD IN THE CLASSROOM

In 2014, Kanda University of International Studies (KUIS) decided to make all freshman students purchase iPads. This decision, along with the installation of campus-wide Wi-Fi, resulted in all of the classrooms in the university, not just a select few, becoming digital classrooms. This environment made it possible for me to incorporate the digital keyword method into a first-year reading and writing class.

The First Step: Collaborative Keyword Sentences Using Google Docs

In the first stage of the digital keyword method, students used their iPads to create keyword sentences. All of their sentences were typed into a single Google Docs document that I created and then shared with each student in the class. Each week, the shared document had 12 English words (with Japanese translations) taken from the TOEIC Service List (Browne & Culligan, 2016). This list was chosen because students in the International Communication (IC) department at KUIS need to attain a score of 650 or better on the TOEIC test in order to graduate. Students were split into six small groups of three or four to think of keyword sentences for two different words each from the 12-word list. Groups that finished quickly were then asked to help other groups. Even though students proved capable of creating vivid and interactive keyword sentences, they still seemed to be relying on rote-learning to remember the vocabulary items for the weekly vocabulary quizzes. I needed a way to explicitly show the image that was included in the keyword sentence.

The Second Step: Modal Ensembles Using Pic Collage

I was able to accomplish this by using a free application, Pic Collage, which allows the user to create montages containing images and text. Students used Google images to find photos that they could manipulate into a single image that would visually represent the original keyword sentence. Text was then added to the image, using a different colour for each salient feature (i.e. the English word, the keyword, and the L1 translation), to create a modal ensemble (Bezemer & Kress, 2008). Appendix C contains a link to a YouTube video I created to show students how to use Pic Collage.

The Third Step: A Virtual Learning Community Using Instagram

Each student then posted their keyword sentence image on Instagram using an account they created with their university email address. A unique hashtag, #kwvocab17, was added to enable other members of the class to search for it. Time in class was given for the students to search for the hashtag, look at the images, and interact with the person who posted it by either liking the image, or adding positive comments to the posts.

CONCLUSION

This paper has outlined how, in a digital-classroom environment, the original keyword method can be extended into a multimodal learning tool. Modern technology such as iPads, applications and other online resources can be combined in order to encourage students to start to think creatively in their approach to memorising vocabulary. The collaborative process of creating a multimodal image for vocabulary items offers an alternative to the rote-learning method that is most commonly used by Japanese students, and may, therefore, be an interesting and fun addition to the EFL classroom.

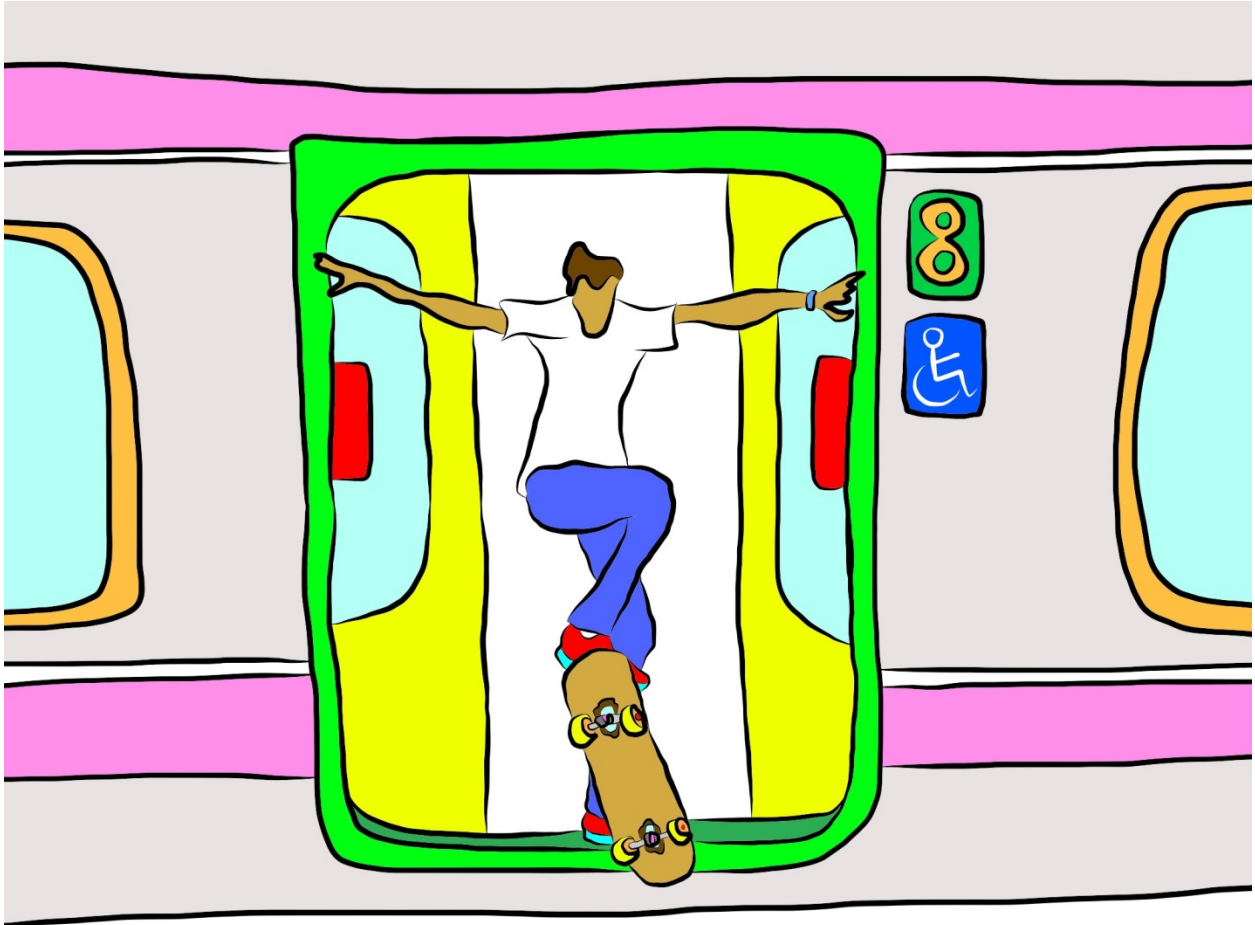
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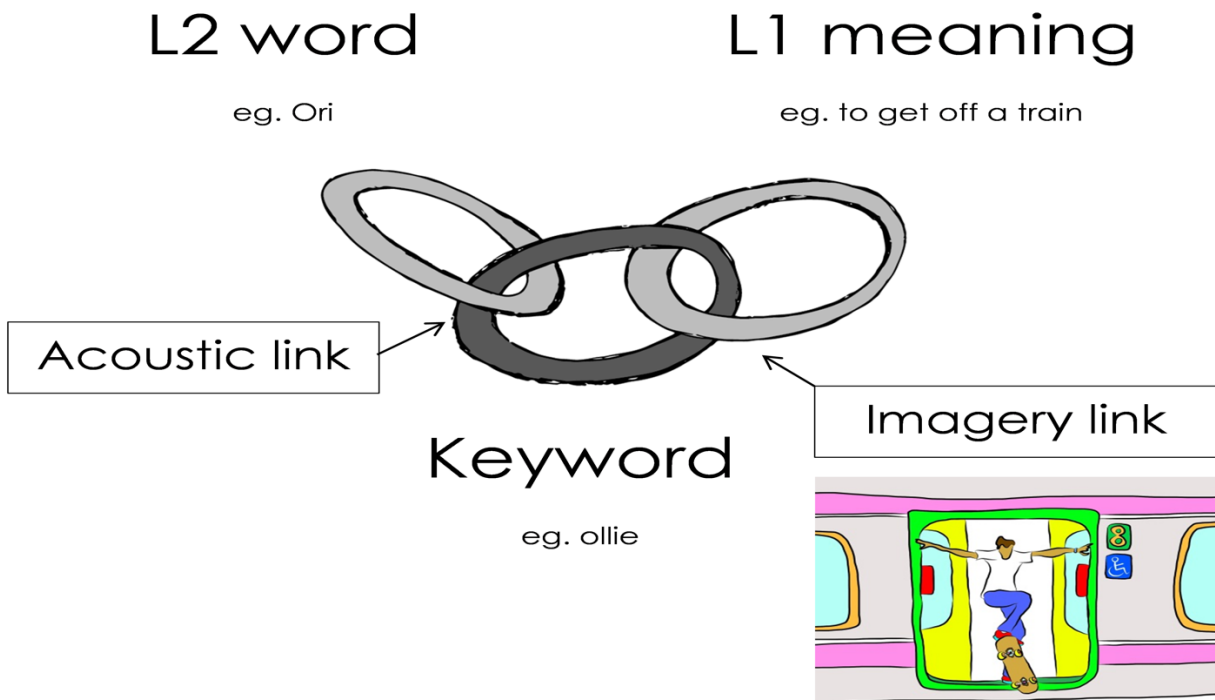
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Appendix A - *Orimasu*

Tony Hawk did an **ollie** to get off the train.



Appendix B – The Keyword Method



Appendix C – Pic Collage

How to use Pic Collage

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_M7vAJf6jOo