VOCABULARY ACQUISITION: DECIDING WHICH WORDS TO LEARN

- Definitely learn to use the first 2000 most frequently used word families of English first. You can find links to these lists on Tom Cobb’s website (www.lextutor.ca).
  (Or search on Google for GSL (General Service Word List) frequency). At this level, you probably know most of these words already, but you may not know how to use all of them. (*See below for learning how to USE a word, as opposed to just learning the meaning.)

- Once you have learned the words in the first 2000 most frequently used word families, learn the words on the Academic Word List (AWL). You can find links to the AWL at Tom Cobb’s website (www.lextutor.ca). (*See below for learning how to USE a word, as opposed to just learning the meaning.)

- When you encounter a new word or expression, make a note of it in a separate section of your notebook, but don't attempt to learn it the first time you hear or read it. Instead, just write it down. Every time you write down a new word in that section of your notebook, first check to make sure you have not already written it before. If you have, put a check mark next to the word or expression. Once you have two or three check marks next to a word or expression, it's time to learn it.

Lynn Bonesteel
Boston University
lboneste@bu.edu
USING WORD CARDS FOR DIFFERENT LEVELS OF VOCABULARY LEARNING

-Learning the meaning only: Make this kind of card when you are trying to learn the meaning of a word that is new to you. The card should be very simple--the word or expression on one side, and the translation and/or a simple English definition on the other side of the card and/or an illustration (if appropriate, and if you like to draw). You can also include an example sentence if that helps you to understand the meaning of the word, but leave a blank space for the word so that you can mentally complete the sentence with the missing word when you are reviewing your cards. In other words, for a meaning card, the word should only appear on the front side of the card to force you to retrieve the word from your memory.

-Learning other words in the same word family as a known word: Make this kind of card if you know only one form of a word, but you want to learn other word forms. Write the known form of the word on one side of the card, and the other forms of the word on the other side of the card, with their parts of speech written next to them.

-*Learning how to USE a word whose meaning is already familiar to you: Write the word on one side of the card, along with its part of speech. On the other side of the card, write information about how the word is used, and several example sentences with blanks for the word. For example, if the word is a verb, you should write whether it is transitive or intransitive; if transitive, what kind of object can it take? (noun/pronoun/verbal--gerund or infinitive or both/noun clause) If intransitive, what preposition (if any) follows it? If the word is a noun, you should write whether it is count or non-count, as well as the plural form (if there is one). Then when you review your cards, look at the word and try to remember as much about the grammar as possible.

-Learning new meanings for words that are already very familiar to you: Write the word and the familiar meaning on one side of the card. On the other side of the card, write the unfamiliar meaning, along with an example sentence or two.

Lynn Bonesteel
Boston University
lboneste@bu.edu
REVIEWING YOUR CARDS

- Review at least some of your cards on a daily basis. Reviewing frequently for short periods of time—10-15 minutes—is more effective than reviewing for a longer time once a week.

- Try to vary the locations where you review your cards—for example, different rooms in your house, on the bus, at school, etc. Research has shown that this will increase your retention of the words.

- Always shuffle your cards before reviewing them.

- As you review your cards, separate them into two groups: words that you have gotten correct several times in a row, and words that you are having more trouble with. Put the well-learned cards away for a few days and concentrate on the other cards. Then shuffle the well-learned cards back in, and check to make sure you still remember them.

- As you accumulate a lot of cards, separate them into packs of about 50 cards/pack. Only review one pack at a time. Remember to shuffle the cards before reviewing.