The Question Behind “How Do You Say…?”: The Boomerang Program

What teaching more than 3,500 adult learners revealed about vocabulary, memory and language learning

Sylvia Langford | Santiago, Chile | 1980-1986

When years of learning were not enough

While teaching English at her language institute in Santiago, Chile, Sylvia Langford kept running into the same problem.

Many of her adult students had studied English for years. Some for a long time. And yet they still couldn’t hold a basic conversation.

A few had given up on the idea that they could learn the language at all. Others kept showing up to class mostly because their jobs required it, not because they felt they were getting anywhere.

Despite all that study, one question came up again and again:

“How do you say…?”

The students usually knew what they wanted to say. They just couldn’t find the English words for it. That pattern got Sylvia thinking about two things:

Why were people spending so many years studying English without building the vocabulary they needed to actually talk?

And what did it do to their motivation when all that effort produced so little visible progress?

Identifying the difficulty

Sylvia started looking more closely at the connection between vocabulary knowledge and the struggles her students were having.

Learning a language involves many things at once: listening, speaking, reading, pronunciation, grammar. But what she kept seeing in the classroom was that a lack of accessible vocabulary was often the first barrier. Students could study grammar rules and fill out exercises, but if they didn't know (or couldn't recall) the right words, they couldn't express even a simple idea.

That became a central point in her thinking: knowing how a language is structured doesn't automatically mean you have the words to use it.

She began looking at ways to teach vocabulary more directly and systematically, so learners could recognise, remember and retrieve words without constantly falling back on translation.

Developing a different approach

Based on what she was seeing, Sylvia built a vocabulary-learning program.

Instead of treating vocabulary as something students would pick up along the way while studying other parts of English, the program made it a deliberate focus.

The original version covered about 2,500 English words, taught over 70 hours of face-to-face instruction. It used memory techniques like visualisation and associating words with their meanings, and one of the core principles was helping learners connect a word directly to what it represented, rather than always running it through Spanish first.

The goal was to make vocabulary easier to recognise, hold onto and recall through structured presentation and practice. The program wasn't meant to replace other parts of language learning. It was meant to strengthen a resource that learners needed before everything else could work.

The teaching experience

Between 1980 and 1986, Sylvia used this approach with more than 3,500 Spanish-speaking adult learners of English in Santiago.

Period	1980-1986
Location	Santiago, Chile
Participants	More than 3,500 adult learners
First language	Spanish
Target language	English
Program	Vocabulary learning program
Vocabulary target	Approximately 2,500 words
Instruction	70 face-to-face hours
Reported result	Approximately 90% long-term vocabulary retention

According to Sylvia's original account, the students roughly retained 90% of the vocabulary they'd learned through the program over the long term.

She also noticed improvements in her students' ability to communicate. Expanding their vocabulary let them express ideas that had been out of reach before.

Those were encouraging results, especially given how frustrated many of these students had been when they started.

A few caveats, though. The original account doesn't specify exactly what interval counted as "long-term," and there aren't enough details about the testing process to verify that 90% figure independently. These results should be read as outcomes from Sylvia's teaching experience, not as findings from a controlled experiment.

What this experience revealed

One of the biggest takeaways had to do with the relationship between knowing words and being able to use a language.

A student might understand a grammar rule perfectly well and still be stuck in conversation because the words they needed weren't there. And recognising a word when you see it is different from being able to pull it up on your own when you need it.

The teaching experience turned Sylvia's attention to that gap between being exposed to vocabulary and actually being able to retain and retrieve it.

It also brought up questions about motivation. For students who had spent years feeling like they weren't getting anywhere, being able to recognise and use words that were new to them gave them something concrete to point to. That suggested motivation isn't just about how interested or determined someone is at the start. The experiences and results they encounter along the way matter too.

Vocabulary on its own won't make someone fluent. But Sylvia's experience reinforced that it's an essential part of being able to understand and be understood.

Understanding the findings

This case study describes what happened over six years of Sylvia's teaching. It wasn't a controlled experiment comparing her vocabulary program against other methods.

The learners weren't randomly selected, and the available records don't include independent assessments or detailed information about how retention was measured.

So the reported outcomes can't guarantee that every learner would see the same results, or that the memory techniques alone were responsible for the progress. What the experience does offer is a historical record of how Sylvia spotted a recurring problem, designed a structured response and watched it play out with a large group of adult learners.

Final reflection

The question "How do you say…?" turned out to be more than a common classroom phrase.

It was the voice of learners who had put in real time and effort but still couldn't get to the words they needed.

For Sylvia, the experience drove home the value of figuring out what learners haven't yet picked up and designing learning that goes after that gap directly.

It also pointed to a difference between spending time on a language and actually building the knowledge and skills needed to use it.

The central lesson: vocabulary acquisition shouldn't be left to chance. It can be a deliberate, structured part of language learning, with real opportunities for learners to remember and use what they've been taught.

This case study presents Sylvia Langford's historical teaching experience between 1980 and 1986. The reported outcomes reflect her original account and should not be interpreted as independently verified results or predictions of outcomes in other programs.