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Vocabulary Strategy Work for Advanced Learners of English

THIS ARTICLE SUGGESTS A SET OF EXPERIENTIAL, NON-PRESCRIPTIVE ACTIVITIES FOR teaching vocabulary consolidation strategies. These activities were used with a group of advanced adult learners of English as part of a voluntary, non-credit course the students attended at Graz University in Austria. The learners are all studying English as one of their degree subjects, either major or minor. The content of the non-credit course is negotiated between teacher and learners, and the approach is largely learner-centred. The activities described here are based on my experience with this group of learners and offered in the hope that they can be adapted to benefit students of all levels and types.

Past experience in this course, as well as a considerable body of research, has shown vocabulary to be a key concern of learners—the area they would most like to focus on—and a topic central to successful language learning. Therefore, I feel it justified to devote considerable class time to its instruction.

Why teach strategies?

There is much debate about whether an implicit or explicit approach is better for teaching vocabulary. It seems undeniable that extensive reading or substantial contact with the target language will improve vocabulary, but both of these approaches require unrealistic amounts of time for most language learners. However, research by Coady (1997), Oxford and Scarcella (1994), and Nation (2001) indicates that vocabulary learning can be enhanced when the learner's attention is directed consciously to vocabulary items or strategies. There appears to be no valid reason for advocating any approach in isolation; thus this article argues for direct instruction of strategies, supported by extensive student reading.

As it can be assumed that advanced adult learners have already passed the "high-frequency word threshold" (Nation 2001), any new words they learn are likely to be low-frequency words. Clearly, given the mass of words potentially available to learners, there is no way they can learn them all. It would therefore be more useful to teach them strategies for dealing with unfamiliar words. Furthermore, since most vocabulary learning takes place out of the classroom setting and tends to be done alone at home, it would be beneficial if students were given guidance on how best to approach this task on their own. If we wish students to continue learning efficiently after class and to be able to cope confidently without teacher support, then we should equip them with the skills to do so. As Cohen (1998) and Oxford (1990) point out, directly instructing students in vocabulary learning strategies is recognised as a way to empower students to take control of and responsibility for their own learning.

Arguably, some students already use strategies; however, they often do so unconsciously, and vocabulary learning strategies are more likely to be effective when their use is conscious and directed. Furthermore, as Ahmed (1989) and others point out, certain strategies are not intrinsically good, but even recognised useful ones need to be practised to be used efficiently. Finally, students are often unaware of strategies other than the ones they already use. Therefore, it is hoped that some direct instruction in strategy use will benefit students by developing their metacognitive knowledge about different strategies, by showing them how to use strate-gies efficiently, and by widening the range of strategies from which they can choose. As Wenden (1986, 315) says, "[T]o be self-sufficient, learners must know how to learn." So the aim here is to encourage self-sufficiency by helping learners recognise situations where they could use strategies, become aware of the strategies that are particularly suitable for them, and use those strategies effectively.

Given the number of potential variables affecting strategy use, it seems an oversimplification to separate people into "good" and "bad" learners when, as O'Malley et al (1988) point out, no single set of specific strategies works for everyone. Indeed, Rees-Miller (1993) and others have noted the rather prescriptive approach taken by earlier researchers of strategy instruction. Thus, the aim here is not to teach a single set of strategies used by supposedly "good" learners or to exemplify supposedly "good" strategies. Rather, it is to help students, as unique individuals, become aware of their own strategy use and the range of potential strategies available for learning vocabulary. The set of activities described here is based on an experiential approach to language learning (Kohonen 1992) that provides students with the opportunity to reflect on, experiment with, and practice a range of strategies until they discover those they feel comfortable with and consider effective. These may, of course, be the strategies they already use, but learners ought to have the opportunity to learn about alternatives and develop the metacognitive knowledge (Victori and Lockhart 1995; Wenden 1998) they need to allow them to make their own informed choices about vocabulary strategy use. The benefit of such an approach is that it takes the learner as an individual with previous experiences and beliefs as its starting point and can accommodate a variety of individual learning styles and preferences.

A taxonomy of strategies

In considering which strategies exist for vocabulary instruction, instructors could turn to the recognised taxonomy offered by Oxford (1990, 18–21), but it is too comprehensive for our purpose, although it does offer a useful way of organising strategies. However, Schmitt (1997), in distinguishing between "discovery" and "consolidation" strategies, offers a more straightforward approach specifically concerned

with vocabulary. Schmitt (1997) divides discovery strategies for learning vocabulary into two types: "determination" strategies and "social" strategies. The determination strategies—widely acknowledged as important for coping with unknown words—include using cognate knowledge, referring to reference works, and inferring meaning from context. The social strategies include asking someone for help with unknown words. Because discovery and social strategies are commonly discussed in various classes, the focus in this article is mainly on the strategies that receive less attention in our teaching environment, namely the consolidation strategies.

Consolidation strategies include social strategies, such as cooperative group learning, asking the teacher for help and using native speaker contact; memory strategies, such as using imagery, loci method, grouping words, the keyword method; cognitive strategies, such as word cards and lists or vocabulary notebooks and reviewing techniques; and finally metacognitive strategies to help students have a controlled overview of their vocabulary learning (see Schmitt 1997, 207 for a full taxonomy). Although the focus of this article is on consolidation strategies, there will be overlap with other strategies, such as guessing the meaning of a word by analysing word parts or using the dictionary. The boundaries between the categories are not distinct, and some strategies may appear under different headings elsewhere. Furthermore, the list of strategies provided here is not meant to be exhaustive; students may be able to add others of their own.

Conditions for strategy use

One precondition for successful strategy instruction is the willingness by students to explore their beliefs about vocabulary learning. The Graz University students who were taught the strategies described here were highly motivated (as evidenced by their voluntary attendance of a non-credit course) and were from a cultural background open to explicit exploratory work. It therefore seemed likely that some direct teaching of strategies would suit their academic learning style and be welcomed by them. In teaching these strategies, it is important to make explicit to the students the rationale and purpose of tasks given to them and to provide them with adequate time to consolidate

and reflect on their learning. A further dimension to these tasks that is worth mentioning is the rich language generated for the genuine communicative task of discussing and developing students' own learning strategies.

What follows is a coherent sequence of activities for vocabulary consolidation strategies, as carried out in my setting. These activities are not a perfect solution to vocabulary instruction, nor are they intended to be used in isolation. Rather, they are intended to serve as a framework for teaching vocabulary-building strategies suitable for this particular context.

Principles guiding the activities

- A prescriptive approach is inappropriate because learners have their own learning styles and preferences.
- Learners researching their own learning style can raise their awareness of themselves as language learners and the role of vocabulary in language learning.
- Reflecting on and discussing strategies with peers is an essential part of learning.
- Metacognitive knowledge is crucial for helping students make conscious, directed, autonomous, and efficient use of strategies.
- Learners should be actively involved in tasks and personalise strategies to meet their own learning style and preferences.
- The rationale behind the various approaches and tasks should be made explicit to students.
- Students need to be given adequate examples of and guided practice in using the strategies if they are to consolidate them and use them independently and efficiently.
- Teachers should work in collaboration with students to guide them towards discovering and developing their own personal set of vocabulary consolidation strategies.

Stages in strategy work

Stage 1: Preparation

Before doing class work on strategies, students need to be aware of the strategies they currently use. So at the start of the course, the students were asked to keep a journal of their vocabulary encounters. A journal is easy to maintain and can be kept anywhere. To ensure that the students would understand the purpose of the task and where they should direct

their attention, they were given some general guidelines. The original intention was to allocate regular class time for a discussion and review of points raised in the journals, but time pressures necessitated that this was done only sporadically. Nevertheless, students reported that keeping the journal caused them to reflect on vocabulary's role in language and their encounters with English vocabulary; helped raise their awareness of strategies they use, hence of themselves as language learners; and made them aware of their own learning styles. As noted earlier, such awareness is essential in developing metacognitive knowledge about one's own language, which in turn is important if students are to become independent, self-directed learners.

The next step is to ensure that students understand the fundamental principle that knowing a word does not simply mean knowing its meaning. (See Nation 2001, Chapter 2, for a detailed analysis of what is involved in knowing a word; look under the key headings, *form, meaning,* and *use.)* Therefore, the class began with a task to clarify what is involved in knowing a word. In small groups, the students drew up a list of at least five features they believed essential to knowing a word and provided an example of each. After brainstorming, they reported back to the whole group, and on an overhead projector (a laptop computer would work even better) we collaboratively constructed a list of all these features, including examples. This list was then made into a handout to guide the students throughout their studies. Providing the opportunity for whole group feedback ensured that I, as the teacher, had the opportunity to mention and illustrate points not raised by the students. The students came up with the following list of features required to know a word: pronunciation, translation, spelling, collocations, register, grammatical patterns, word class, synonyms, and different meanings depending on context.

Stage 2: Discovering current strategy use and developing a taxonomy of vocabulary strategies.

To uncover the vocabulary strategies they were already using and the role vocabulary plays in language learning, the students, in groups, drew up their own lists of vocabulary strategies, drawing upon their journal entries and prior experiences.

After this initial group activity, the students examined and discussed a taxonomy of consolidation strategies (see Appendix A), which we discussed, using examples. The students then categorised their list of strategies, either according to these headings or their own. (The distinction between categories may be unclear to students, and there may be overlap, depending on their perspective. The taxonomy I provided was simply a way to help the students organise their own list of consolidation strategies. If they find a way to categorise the strategies in a way that makes better sense to them, that is fine.) After a feedback session involving the entire class, the resulting list of categorised strategies was made available to the students as a handout. They could use the handout or devise a version of their own. The list they chose provided an essential link for measuring their changes and development. At this point they ticked any of the strategies they were currently using. (At the end of the course they returned to the sheet and repeated the process to see whether at the end of the course they used any more or different strategies than at the outset.)

Stage 3: Exploring and experimenting with various strategies

The list of strategies described above was then taken as the basic structure for a series of lessons to follow. Clearly the strategy list could provide months of potential practice, but in our case, time restricted our programme of activities to three sessions. To remain as learner-centred as possible, I asked the students which strategies they wanted to learn more about, but here I will just illustrate a method for each main strategy area.

Before doing so, however, it should be noted that to give the class a real sense of purpose and coherence, it is desirable to have a topic to serve as a framework for all work throughout the semester. Usually, my students choose from a list of topics at the start of the term. However, for certain tasks in the particular set of activities described below, it was necessary to select words that the learners would not be likely to know. In those instances we used the University Word List (Nation 2001), a list of decontextualized words covering academic vocabulary and including frequency ratings for each word. This is a relevant and valid source from which to choose words for students in this particular context.

Cognitive strategies

To establish a framework for independent vocabulary work, it is useful to discuss with students ways of organising vocabulary learning. To this end, students brought their vocabulary storage systems with them to class and—guided by a series of questions on vocabulary storage systems (Appendix B)—the students explained their systems to each other in groups and provided a rationale for their use. Because the students were talking about their own systems, they viewed the task as relevant and motivating. Moreover, by reflecting on an approach to vocabulary, then explaining and discussing it with peers, the students reached a vital stage in their awareness of possible strategies.

An important point to stress here is that I do not take a prescriptive approach toward vocabulary organising and learning strategies, nor do I evaluate students' systems for accomplishing these tasks because each student has his or her own learning style and preferences. Rather, the approach here is designed to raise students' awareness of all options available to them. To do this requires that the purpose of the tasks be made clear to them so they understand that no judgement of their own system is implied, and they may benefit by learning and taking ideas from each other.

During their discussion of the various vocabulary storage systems with their groups, the students compiled a list of features of the systems by frequency of occurrence. They then reported back to the whole class, and the common features with their frequency ratings were drawn up into a class list to provide a statistical overview of the features used. (The benefit of such an approach is that it encourages students—particularly academically oriented ones, as my students were—to "research" their own learning. Moreover, the experiential nature of the tasks helps them discover for themselves their own learning styles and preferences.)

After returning to the compiled list of features for knowing a word and considering the implications for vocabulary storage systems, the students brainstormed about vocabulary storage features they wished to add to the list. These were given the statistical frequency 0 on the list, and a new list was compiled and handed out for reference. The students expressed amazement at the discrepancy between what they had said was necessary to "know" a word

and the information they in fact stored in their vocabulary systems. In their feedback at the end of the course, the students said the comparison had been revealing and resulted in their including not just a word's translation in their storage system but also sample sentences and grammatical patterns, as well as the word's pronunciation, synonyms, and collocations.

If time had allowed, the students could have consolidated the lesson by forming groups to evaluate three example storage systems in the light of work just done (e.g., Schmitt and Schmitt 1995). They then could have discussed the advantages and disadvantages of each system, chosen the one they thought best, presented it to the class, and explained why they chose it.

Memory strategies

The second strategy area considered was how to memorise words that need to be learnt. To further develop the idea of students researching their own learning, the students were given a list of 20 words taken from the University Word List. Examples of these words from the British National Corpus (BNC) were also included to provide context, and students had their dictionaries in class. (The BNC is a 100 million word collection of samples of written and spoken language from a wide range of sources, designed to represent a wide cross-section of current British English, both spoken and written.)

To further the idea of learners "researching" their own learning, the students conducted a small experiment to discover what strategies they use when trying to memorise words, an idea adapted from Oxford (1990). The students worked in pairs, with one taking notes on the words within five minutes and the other trying to learn as many words as possible in that same period of time. (Be sure to select words that the students do not know at the start of the activity. Also, make certain that the students do not see this as a test, but rather a discovery of how they approach the task of memorising words.) The students then reported on their approach to the task using the "think aloud" technique, on which they had previously received guidance, including the kinds of things that should be reported (Cohen 1998, Oxford 1990).

After a short break (to allow short-term memory to clear) when the students did a totally unrelated quiz, they then tried to see

how many words they could remember. The process was repeated with a different 20-word set, with the roles reversed. Together the students compiled a joint list of all the strategies they used. At the end, they reported back to the whole class on the methods they used. Again a class list was drawn up and compared to the taxonomy handout constructed at the outset to see which techniques were most popular and whether new techniques came up that were not on the list.

To exemplify the difference that an organisational strategy can make, the "grouping and labelling" strategy suggested by Oxford (1990, 101) could have been used. This strategy—which involves organising words into small, cohesive units and labelling them—shows how words can be made easier to memorise and provides a nice contrast in strategies to those described above.

A discussion of the list of memory strategies followed, involving the entire class. This discussion ensured that the students understood how the strategies work and could provide an example for each of them. The students then broke into groups to discuss suggestions for memorising new words, the perceived advantages and disadvantages of each suggestion, and the strategies they prefer. Each student then had to choose a strategy he or she had not used before but which sounded as if it would be fun or interesting to try. (It doesn't matter if more than one person in the group picks the same method.) The students were told to carry out the same kind of experiment used in the previous activity and report back to their respective groups the following week.

As the course continued, the students did the same with other strategies. This kind of involvement in researching a topic and experimenting with learning strategies makes the learning experience more meaningful and memorable. Furthermore, because students have the freedom to choose a new technique, try it out, and accept or reject it, they are motivated to experiment in a safe, non-threatening environment. At the end of the course, the students reported that they were glad they had been required to try out new memory strategies. Most of them say they now use either some adaptation of their usual vocabulary learning strategy—the most popular being the use of index cards, a mixture of card games,

coloured pens, and sticky notes—or a totally new strategy.

Metacognitive strategies

The final strategies to consider are metacognitive ones. Students are generally unaware of the importance of "distributed" practice, that is, the need to review and expand the time they spend in rehearsing or practising tasks (Thornbury 2002). Distributed practice is a technique generally acknowledged to aid memory, since people are less likely to forget something if they review it in different enriching ways spaced over a period of time. To provide practice in this technique, students were asked to discuss in small groups the following statement designed to spur discussion: *"[M]assed, concentrated repetition results in more secure learning than meaningful, spaced repetition"* (adapted and inverted from Nation 2001, 77 at the suggestion of Alan Waters). The students discussed whether they agree with the statement or not, and what the statement's implications are for vocabulary learning. Although they showed interest in this idea, only one person at the end of the course felt that the discussion and work had had any impact on their vocabulary learning. It would perhaps have been better if the students had again carried out a mini-research task on its effects and success as a strategy from the students' perspective in order to experience it for themselves. They could have done this, for example, by testing themselves on two sets of vocabulary, one a control batch, the other a spaced, recycled set. They could then report their experiences and results in their journals.

Consolidation

It is important to consolidate the strategy training by ensuring that students are aware of the strategies available to them and the situations in which they could be used. To do this, the Graz students, working in pairs, were asked to respond to a series of vocabulary-related "complaints" expressed by former students (Appendix C) by suggesting to their partner strategies for resolving the situations and why they choose the particular strategies they did.

Finally, the students were given a questionnaire to work on alone (Appendix D) which considered the future development of their vocabulary learning. (This is, of course, a metacognitive strategy for organising vocabulary learning and an ideal way to focus the end of

their in-class vocabulary strategy training.) The students needed time to reflect on this and completed it at home; they then discussed it in groups in class the following week. In light of this discussion, they wrote three short sentences setting their own goals, which they intended to display somewhere at home to serve as a constant reminder and focus.

Stage 4: Evaluating the instruction

The students finally also had the chance to review their strategy use and for this they returned to the handout of the taxonomy of strategies that was created at the beginning. They ticked the strategies they use now and compared these to the ones they ticked at the beginning. They then briefly discussed their findings with a partner, evaluating their own strategy use, any changes that had taken place, and possible reasons for those changes.

To evaluate the programme students also received an anonymous, open-ended questionnaire and, in addition, some students volunteered to be interviewed. As Oxford (1990) reports that some students "resist" and dislike direct strategy instruction, I felt it particularly important here to evaluate the students' personal response to this more experiential approach to strategy work.

Results of the evaluation

I am aware of the limited nature of the use of this series of activities and my own subjectivity in interpreting the results of the questionnaire, but the feedback seems to be very encouraging. Importantly, many students reported that as a result of the course they had realised that there are other strategies available than the ones they had been using. Many claimed that it was valuable to learn of other possible approaches and that on reflecting on their own strategy use they discovered that they may not be using the best strategies for them as individuals. Perhaps even more importantly, one student in a recorded interview about the course reported that she felt relieved to discover that a strategy she had instinctively been using for years was not necessarily "wrong," although in her previous learning experiences she had been led to believe there was only one "right" way to approach vocabulary learning. This is precisely the myth that the activities discussed here aim to dispel. She also maintained that the course helped her to feel more positive and self-confident about her

vocabulary learning. Clearly any gains in self-confidence as a result of this strategy work are desirable given the established link between self-efficacy, motivation, and performance (Bandura 1997, Zimmerman 2000).

Furthermore, every student reported using at least two new strategies as a result of the class. These included strategies associated with the use of index cards, imagery, word memorisation, colours, and diagrams, as well as the inclusion of other information in their storage systems such as pronunciation, grammatical information, collocations, and meaningful sentences. The students' central criticism focused on the limited amount of time available to practice the strategies in class.

Conclusion

This article has attempted to show how students can be actively involved in the research, discovery, and exploration of vocabulary consolidation strategies. It is hoped that the form of "action research" work illustrated will raise students' awareness of options available to them, encourage them to experiment with alternative approaches, and take an active role in their own vocabulary learning.

Additional research is needed to determine if strategy training programmes for language learning, such as the one described here, result in direct linguistic gains or perhaps rather more in indirect gains such as increased learner motivation, self-efficacy, awareness of language learning options, and awareness of oneself as a language learner. However, it can be said that the approach to strategy training and learner development described here proved to be, at the very least, motivating and enlightening for teacher and students alike.

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(This list is based in part on the taxonomy offered in Schmitt 1997.)

1. Memory strategies.

- Using imagery.
- Using sense relations (lexical fields, synonyms, antonyms, hyponyms, scales, etc.).
- Using cognates, parallels in other languages.
- Using word parts.
- Grouping in patterns (visual, meaning, spatial, etc.).
- Using phonological or orthographic form (rhymes, salient written form, keyword technique, etc.)
- Peg method.[1]
- Loci method.[2]
- Using semantic grids.
- Paraphrasing.
- Chunking.
- Create and learn meaningful sentences containing the word. (Possibly invent whole story as framework for learning key words.)
- Link to personal experience.

2. Cognitive strategies.

- Written repetition.
- Verbal repetition.
- Word lists.
- Word flashcards.
- Vocabulary notebooks.
- Note-taking from books, lectures, etc.
- Making tape recordings.
- Sticky note labels.
- Using word books, such as dictionaries or a thesaurus to activate passive vocabulary.

3. Metacognitive strategies.

- More conscious contact with the target language (e.g., reading extensively in English, watching films, listening to the radio, communicating with native speakers, getting a pen pal).
- Testing yourself on vocabulary.
- Working and practising with peers/in groups.
- Principle of expanding rehearsal time, repeatedly reviewing.
- Setting aside specific time for vocabulary learning.
- Setting priorities about which words are essential, not so important, not important at all and to what extent (passive, active).
- Setting goals for learning vocabulary.

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[1] The peg method works by memorizing a rhyme and creating an image which is linked to the *peg* word. When the rhyme is then repeated, the images mentally linked to the *peg* words are recalled.

[2] Similarly the Loci method works by remembering a familiar place such as a street or room and mentally placing the items to be remembered at certain places in the chosen setting. In order to recall the words, the person has to mentally move to the locations and 'retrieve' the words associated with each location. (Schmitt 1997, 213)

Appendix B | Vocabulary Storage Systems

Vocabulary Strategy Work for Advanced Learners of English • *Sarah Mercer*

In groups you are now going to discuss how you organise your vocabulary and explain to each other why you use such a system and how it works for you. Begin by guiding each other through your vocabulary storage systems, explaining the rationale behind them. Consider the following points, adding any others you feel are important. Try to establish the similarities in your systems and the differences.

- **What form does it take?** (a notebook, loose-leafed paper, index cards, etc.)

- **How are the words organised?** (according to meaning, alphabetically, as they come up in class, etc.)

- **What information is noted with the word?** (translation, collocations, pronunciation, stylistic notes, examples of use, etc.)

- **Are any visual/audio supports used?** (pictures, diagrams, cassettes, etc.)

- **What do you use the system for and how do you use it?** (just for learning by heart, for reference like a personal dictionary, etc.)

- **Any other information?** (specific examples of its success, a more compact version to carry with you, further information on entries already added, etc.)

Now that we have discussed and compared various vocabulary storage systems, do you feel there are any changes you wish to make or ideas you wish to add to your system and the way in which you use it? If so, what are they, and why do you feel those changes would help?

The following are all based on statements from former students. Imagine they had asked you for advice in the following situations; what strategies could they use? Remember—they might work differently than you, so try to give them all possible strategies that you are aware of. Remember that some strategies will be applicable to several situations.
Work in pairs as that will help you generate more ideas.

1. I am able to learn vocabulary for my test in class, but then I forget the vocabulary less than a week later.

2. My sister bought me a thesaurus, but I've no idea what to do with it.

3. I come across so many new words when I read and just hope I'll remember them if I ever come across them again.

4. I learn my words in a list in a notebook, but it's just so boring.

5. I recognise words when I read them but would never think of using them myself.

6. I know what words mean but I often use them inappropriately, according to my teacher.

7. I can recognise words in writing, but I often don't recognise them when a native speaker uses them.

8. Learning for an exam on a certain topic, I'm lucky if I remember half of the words I'd like to.

Now decide which of the strategies you would choose if you were in the situations described above. Discuss this with your partner and explain the reasons behind your choices.

VOCABULARY STRATEGY WORK FOR ADVANCED LEARNERS OF ENGLISH • *Sarah Mercer*

1. Rate on a scale of 1–10 (1 = very satisfied, 10 = extremely dissatisfied) how satisfied you are with the way you handle the following areas of vocabulary learning:

Area of Vocabulary Learning	Rating
a. Ability to remember words.	_____
b. Ways of expanding your vocabulary.	_____
c. Vocabulary storage system.	_____
d. Use of reference works, such as dictionaries, thesaurus, etc.	_____
e. Amount of time dedicated to vocabulary work.	_____
f. Amount of contact with English outside of class.	_____

2. Now award each area points (1 = very important, 5 = not important at all) according to how important you consider it for you.

a. . . . . ._____   d. . . . . ._____

b. . . . . ._____   e. . . . . ._____

c. ._____   f. . . . . ._____

3. Look back at the two questions and consider the relationship between what is important to you and how satisfied you are with your competence in that area. Based on this, complete the following table for short and long-term goals by stating a specific goal and setting yourself a deadline for it. The first one can serve as an example.

Short-term goal	Deadline
E.g. Memorise all the frequency 1–3 items from UWL.	Three weeks from now.
1. _____	_____
2. _____	_____
3. _____	_____

Long-term goal	Deadline
E.g. Re-organise my vocabulary storage system.	Before the start of next term.
1. _____	_____
2. _____	_____
3. _____	_____