How Do You Learn Vocabulary?
Part I: Learning Aymara Vocabulary

Background:
The first step in helping students improve their ability to learn new vocabulary is to help them recognize how they actually go about learning new words. Some may already be making use of association strategies and not even know it. The goal of this activity is to help students become more successful at making associations that will aid in committing new vocabulary to memory.

Using the Aymara language—an authentic South American tribal language—students can identify strategies to help them learn vocabulary more effectively. This activity has been used to help hundreds of students, staff, and faculty become more aware of association techniques.

We encourage you to take time to go through the entire activity step-by-step yourself so you have the opportunity to review your own approaches to vocabulary learning. The text in the activity can either be used as your teaching “script” for the exercise or you can copy the entire activity for students to read through on their own. If some students question the use of Aymara in this exercise rather than the actual target language, explain that using an entirely new language heightens the focus on the ways one learns vocabulary for the first time and not just how one recalls it in the moment. In other words, while you may have used an association to initially remember a word, if you use the word frequently, you may have integrated it into your stored memory and may no longer need to use an association.

Instructions:
1. Distribute the “How Do You Learn Vocabulary?” handout (Duplicable Masters section, p. DM-25). Give students about five minutes to learn the ten Aymara words.

2. When students have written down their answers for each of the Aymara words, have them compare with the original list to see how many they got right. Ask the class to report on how they tried to learn each word and what strategies they found helpful. If you have done the exercise yourself you can also share your own answers.

3. In the second part, have students indicate which words they got right and report whether they used rote memory or an association. Explain that learning vocabulary by rote memory refers to repeating the word orally or writing it down a few times without attempting to link it to something else. Using an association refers to any relationship you might have made between the word and something else. An example that is included on the exercise is usuta (sick) could be linked to “used up” (someone who is sick is used up). Note it’s common to initially assume rote memory was used, so encourage students to think carefully about how you really remembered the word.
How Do You Learn Vocabulary?
Part II: Using Association Techniques

Background:
Research has shown that using associations is more effective than mere rote memory for learning vocabulary. This exercise will teach students how to use association techniques to improve their ability to learn new vocabulary and may help students who already use some association techniques to add new techniques to their repertoire. This is designed to be used as an in-class activity, but it may also be used in consultation outside of class with individual students.

Note: This is a follow-up on the first Aymara activity (p. ACT-13). If you don’t use the first Aymara activity, you may choose to introduce the topic of using associations by having students review the association techniques chart and apply them to their own vocabulary-learning strategies.

Instructions:

1. Distribute the association techniques chart (Duplicable Masters section, p. DM-28) and have students identify which techniques they typically use. You may also want to share with them the techniques you use most often, to give them an example.

2. If you have already given your students Part I of the Aymara exercise, next distribute the “Part II: Using Association Techniques” handout (Duplicable Masters section, p. DM-29). Have students check each of the vocabulary words and indicate whether they used an association and, if so, to record which association from the previous chart (native sound, target sound, etc.). Then ask students to write the English word again on the next page, before they start memorization again. Ask them to scramble the order to make sure they haven’t just memorized the words according to their position in the list. Remind students that when learning these words they should try to use all the association techniques listed in the chart. They shouldn’t get too frustrated if they can’t come up with an association; some words are easier than others.

3. When the students have finished have them check the original list and see how many of the words they got right and which associations they used.

Debriefing:
Have students note the words, if any, for which they did not come up with associations. Was there any pattern to these words?

Discuss with the class what they have learned about learning vocabulary. Did your students use more associations in this part of the exercise and did their performance on the memory task improve?