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TEACHING TACTIC

Assessing Vocabulary Acquisition Using Spaced Repetition Software

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The context

I use this tactic in a beginning-level Koine Greek class. Although it works particularly well for language learning, it could be easily adapted for other subjects.

The pedagogical purpose

Every theological language course that I have encountered uses quizzes of some kind to assess vocabulary acquisition. Yet both logic and experience show that such quizzes are pedagogically problematic: most students cram for the quizzes beforehand, increase their stress levels in the process, and then forget a significant proportion of the vocabulary in the days and weeks that follow. These problems only multiply in an online learning environment. To address these concerns and train students in long-term language learning, I have developed a method of assessing vocabulary acquisition that measures the quality, quantity, and regularity of vocabulary creation and review.

Description of the strategy

On the first day of class, we explore the two fundamental vocabulary learning skills (memory associations and active recall) and their benefits for learning. I then introduce them to [Anki](#), a highly customizable and free flashcard system, whose vocabulary reviews are based on a spaced repetition algorithm ([here is a full introduction](#)). I provide verbal and written instructions on how to set up their decks. I also provide a template that creates additional fields for their memory associations that can be hidden and revealed independent of the question and answer sequence. After practicing creating new cards with memory associations, the students are expected to add new vocabulary items into their Anki deck and review it at least five times per week.

Students then digitally submit their Anki deck six times over the course of a semester: once near the start to make sure they understand the nature of the task, then five times, spaced every two to three weeks, to ensure that they remain on top of the creation and review of their cards. Anki provides in-depth [reporting features](#) and an open database structure, which I use to assess the quality of their cards and reviews. On this basis I provide written feedback and a grade out of twenty, marked according to a rubric provided with the syllabus.

Why it is effective

This assessment structure trains students to put time and energy into learning methods missing from traditional quizzes: the creation of associations to strengthen memory pathways and active recall with decreasing frequency over time. By assessing both the memory associations and the regularity of students' reviews, this assessment structure encourages the formation of good learning habits in an efficient manner that promotes effective long-term learning. The digital nature of the assessment structure also allows for simple student revision, submission of their entire system, and easy storing of submissions.