

# Scavenging for English Vocabulary around a Persian-Speaking Town<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

The purpose of this article is to draw the attention of teachers and learners of English to the huge potential for English vocabulary learning in non-English settings, because it seems that exploiting that potential can significantly support the mainstream of authentic and contextualized input provided directly from native sources. The article suggests that English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners may reap valuable benefits if their awareness is raised to the abundant bits of English around them. Vocabulary gains from this additional input can be well integrated into the developing interlanguage of the learners as the vocabulary they learn is usually linked to deep-seated native associations. This article uses informal language and moves very fast from one scenario to the next, presenting many examples experienced by the author in diverse situations, both as a language learner and an English teacher. Although the examples occurred in the author's native land, Iran, readers from other countries are sure to understand them in the light of their own experiences and will surely think of similar examples and input from their own environments which can increase their English vocabulary and expand their vocabulary building techniques. The article also emphasizes the beneficial effect of this vocabulary learning strategy on learners' attitude and motivation.

## Resumen

El propósito de este artículo es llamar la atención de los maestros y estudiantes de inglés sobre el enorme potencial para el aprendizaje de vocabulario en diferentes entornos, lo que puede apoyar la corriente principal de llevar a aportes auténticos y contextualizados provistos directamente de fuentes nativas. El artículo sugiere que los estudiantes de EFL pueden cosechar un beneficios valiosos si su conciencia se eleva a los abundantes bocados son conscientes de numerosos ejemplos de inglés a su alrededor. Las ganancias de vocabulario a través de esta vía subsidiaria pueden integrarse bien en el desarrollo del interlenguaje del alumno, ya que generalmente están vinculadas a asociaciones nativas muy arraigadas. El artículo usa un lenguaje informal y se mueve muy rápido de un escenario a otro, presentando muchos ejemplos experimentados por el autor en diversas situaciones, tanto como aprendices de idiomas como maestros de inglés. Aunque los ejemplos ocurrieron en la tierra natal del autor, Irán, los lectores de otros países seguramente los entenderán a la luz de su propia experiencia vivida y estarán preparados para ejemplos e insumos similares que pueden mejorar su vocabulario en inglés y fortalecer su aprendizaje de idiomas. El artículo también enfatiza el efecto beneficioso de esta estrategia de aprendizaje de vocabulario en la actitud y motivación de los alumnos.

## Introduction

Today, input for learning a foreign language in learners' own native land is more accessible than any time in history, particularly for learning English. Thanks to technology, one does not need to travel abroad to hold conversations with native speakers. There are great language learning sites, and language teaching institutes are at learners' doorstep. They can read their favorite fiction or non-fiction in original or simplified forms, they can watch scads of movies and sitcoms for different tastes and at different levels, and it is mindboggling when you think of commercial materials targeting language learners or the resources and applications on the internet.

What you read below may seem unremarkable next to content and schemes usually found in top-notch progressive guides for teachers and learners. However, the purpose is to a) raise awareness to the availability of input, meagre as it may be, in EFL contexts and help readers notice similar input; b) suggest some additional ways learners may find compatible with their habitual styles of vocabulary learning; and c) hint at ways to spice up vocabulary learning, especially by those who are just beginning and need some guidance to get started on the right road to learning. Thus, they may open their minds to accessing richer resources and use strategies advocated by language teaching experts.

The writer of these pages is an old hand at language teaching, familiar with the wide spectrum of traditional and modern vocabulary resources in which learners can be immersed. However, without underrating the merits of mainstream resources, he supports the idea that language learners can add to their vocabulary stock by sharpening their eyes and ears to vocabulary bits available in the daily-life situations with which

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they may easily connect. He makes this proposal because he is influenced by his childhood experience, when he excelled above those who had access to the latest instructional materials and methods. He is also aware of the procrastinatory effects of perfectionist tendencies on the learners who may fall into inaction in their wait for “the best” or “ideal” materials, while even a small amount of learning, regardless of how it is acquired, may trigger more learning and good results. Moreover, it seems plausible that the awareness-raising and enhancement of input from learners’ culture may have a positive affective effect (see, e.g., Arnold, 2011) and cause reduced psychological and social distance (e.g., Schumann, 1976).

There is compelling research and evidence that support being on the lookout for bits and pieces of the target language in the linguistic landscape of learners’ mother tongues in order to help the process of foreign language vocabulary learning. Many studies of incidental vocabulary learning, which is the accrual of vocabulary as a by-product of language use or other learning attempts, have emphasized the importance of extending vocabulary learning beyond direct exercises by incorporating it in informal learning contexts (e.g., Brown et al., 2008; Nassaji, 2003; Paribakht & Wesche, 1999; Schmitt, 2010; Sternberg, 1987; Webb, 2008). While these studies may vary in the detail of their suggestions, the element they share is that much vocabulary is gained incidentally if learners are exposed to the right input within a context to which they can connect.

Widdowson (2003) introduces the notion of learner authentication as a precondition for input to become intake. For him, a necessary condition for the input to be taken in is its connection to the learner’s world. If this condition is ignored, the learners will not be engaged and will not authenticate the materials however authentic and native-like they are. The vocabulary learning strategy proposed in this article is also in line with the constructivist ideas of *interlanguage* and *creative construction hypothesis*, which consider second language acquisition a learner-internal process and do not see possible inaccuracies in the input a threat to the developing linguistic system (Larsen-Freeman, 2013).

More recently, some authors have suggested the use of multilingual writings learners encounter in the “linguistic landscape” of their own environment. Linguistic landscape was first introduced by Landry and Bourhis (1997) as “the language of public road signs, advertising billboards, street names, place names, commercial shop signs, and public signs on government buildings” (p.25). Churn and Dooly (2014) found these as useful resources, particularly those in metropolitan cities, and designed English learning tasks, which they called “literacy walks” to be implemented in Taipei, Taiwan. They commented that their “ideas might be of interest to EFL teachers in other globalized cities around the world” (p.13). Mari (2018) designed a lesson plan, which was based on pictures and photos of local multilingual sights and could be adapted to language learners of different localities and levels of proficiency.

### **Snapshots of my School Days**

I was a school boy in a remote underprivileged village. There were few books at home other than my schoolbooks, some of which I had finished reading while I was still midway through the school year. The excitement of literacy and learning was with me even when I was shepherding lambs in nearby fields. The sight of pages mostly from discarded schoolbooks fluttering on wire lines to scare away birds from crops tantalized me into absorbed reading either from the hanging sheets of paper or after detaching them. I got engrossed, although they were from diverse subjects and at levels above or below mine. At ten, I moved away from my family to the nearest town, where higher grade school levels were available. English was my weakest subject while I aced the others. Towards the end of high school, the smile of a language teacher changed the game and I fell in love with English. I began to explore every nook and cranny of English writings, such as brochures and wrappings, as well as texts printed on tins and boxes. The gain was visible. More importantly, it helped to develop my love of English and my interest to learn it.

My habit of scavenging for learning and language input was still alive years later when I was a university English teacher with credentials in applied linguistics. One day, leaving a general English class with low-motivation learners, I found myself next to a group of students gazing at a bilingual banner for a conference on Heat Transfer. It crossed my mind that

*A typical learner of English is exposed to such English mini-bits practically everywhere in Iran or any other country for that matter. Many of these bits may have something to offer to English learners even though they are designed for purely practical purposes and are not sorted according to levels. Unfortunately, the valuable input is mostly left*

*unprocessed. What if we helped learners open their eyes and take in this contextualized input? It is like baby socialization. Learners are immersed in input and take in what is learnable and ready to filter through.*

So, I compiled the following, mostly based on my experience in a pretty small city; larger cities will, of course, afford more diverse experience. It goes without saying that people from other cultures should extrapolate the scenarios and examples here to their own.

### **A romp through examples and situations**

Two plumbers, presumably of little literacy, are installing taps in your bathroom; you overhear the head plumber asking his aid to fetch him *an o-ring*. You curiously watch over as the assistant gives the O-ring to the other plumber to put in place. You are leaving the cinema, this time, however, you read *Exit* above the exit door. As you pass through, you remember a similar wooden sign you saw when you entered. You are out buying books in Tehran Enghelab Avenue or touring Tehran International Book Fair. You occasionally look at the back covers of Persian books. Persian books, whether original or translated, sometimes include useful and memorable English titles, either on the back cover or on the copyright pages. In the case of translations, the good news is that the English title is usually a good communicative equivalent of the Persian one. Recent translations are *Fire and Fury: Inside the Trump White House*, *Becoming*, *the Gaze...* These are repeatedly heard through different outlets.

The names of frequently mentioned movies and series stick to memory for a lifetime but they are generally left unanalyzed. It requires some attention from the English learner to enrich vocabulary: *In Treatment*, *Friends*, *Diary of a Vampire*, *Game of Thrones*, *Prison Break*, *Lost*, *Days of Thunder*, among others. Some learners go further; they routinely listen to songs and watch movies in English; many have reported language learning benefits.

When I read translated works, particularly those targeting academics, I take the equivalents in the footnotes or endnotes seriously. They serve good vocabulary learning purposes and the learning stays because it happens in good contexts with strong associations. If an English learner happens to read a translation of *The Little Book of History*, they may winnow out many lucid useful English words in footnotes to deposit in their vocabulary.

Many borrowed words such as *goal*, *supermarket*, *hypermarket*, *bank*, *automobile*, *mobile*, *top* and *share*, can be incorporated into learners' lexicon. There may be phonological and other aberrations in the usage of the borrowed words, but these deviations are expected to be redressed along the way as the learners make headway. Iranians may use some well-established words, e.g., *politic*, *post*, very differently from their original ones, but the learner can use and explore them further.

You are on your way to Gahar Lake near Doroud, Lorestan Province, when you overhear a girl addressing her fiancé in Persian: *Do you have your headlamp with you?* You look up headlamp to find out that it is not on your phone dictionary! It is not rare nowadays for English words with acceptable and intelligible pronunciations to be appropriately used in movies and serials targeting the general public. For example, it is the 13<sup>th</sup> episode of the hugely popular sitcom *The Capital City* and a police officer promises to *cover* one of the major characters who is sent on a short spy mission. Other examples are *mining*, *takeoff*, *depress*, and *live*.

Technology and daily life words like *Split*, *router*, *desktop*, *board*, *hood*, *holder*, *switch*, *dashboard* can become points of departure for their respective users, especially when approached with etymological curiosity. Some popular brands and makes of cars, machines, and other products frequently are, or include, words in English: Gallant, Elegance, Pride, Chuckles, Blackstone, Snapp, Kickers. Paying attention to familiar people's names such as Daisy, Jack, Smith, Beans, Harry, Rod, and Grace, which have regular usage besides their naming functions, can enrich the learners' vocabulary. Because there is shape, sound, and spelling familiarity, part of the memory load is already lifted and the learners only need to link the familiar forms with new meanings, associations and uses. Awareness of their non-name meanings and having their learning on the table can help their incorporation into the learners' lexicon.

I am passing by a banner for a conference on desertification. The banner is in Persian but *Every Day is Earth's Day* and *Let's Combat Desertification* are also inscribed on it. I enter the conference hall and see a bilingual slide shining next to a beautiful picture for the waiting audience: *The Earth does not belong to us;*

*we belong to the Earth.* The next time I visit that building, I see this English sentence next to some switches: *Please turn the lights off when not in use.*

Labels and instructions are good resources, and of great variety and ubiquity. With the great range of the products comes the range of vocabulary. They may be bottled water, chewing gum, tooth paste, telephone sets, medicines, DVDs, etc. While continued deliberate attention to labels at shopping centers may be overwhelming, you can sometimes take a tour around the house and just check how much English is around you and how much of it is of interest to you. You may read the names of the products, ingredients and parts, instructions for use, warnings, etc. directly on the products, on the packages, or on separate leaflets.

I receive a souvenir from a student; it is wrapped in a used plastic bag with this writing on it: *Warning: keep this bag away from babies and children. Do not use in crabs, carriages or play pens. May cling to nose and mouth and prevent breathing.* The catalog you receive with your newly purchased BMX bike includes illustrations of the parts (*seat, seat post, front wheels*) and installation instructions. This is a time when you are highly receptive as well as cognitively and emotionally responsive. The unpacking experience happens myriad times for medicines, TV sets, tableware, shampoos, stockings, light bulbs, etc. The language may suffer from errors, sometimes terrible ones, but it does not need to be a reference, but a point of departure.

You are travelling in a bus on a motorway and bored to the bone without your headphones when you notice messages crawling on the display. They seem pretty correct English: *Safety rules are made for our protection, To ensure your safety please cooperate with the attendant, Please do not drop any litter in the bus, The crew wish you a pleasant trip.* The font, light and size are very reader-friendly and do not bother the eyes, nothing like the cheap bus-trip movies. The downside is that there are long Persian intervals of equivalent sentences although for some this can be an advantage.

A T-shirt in a pro-environment rally reads: *The snowflake never feels responsible for the avalanche.* Other T-shirt writings I remember include *Trump triumphs, Change we need, Run: Slow, Fast, A little, A lot, Happy, Sad, Just run,* and just a few hours ago, in a U.N.-sponsored gathering of children with uniform T-shirts: *United against Hate.* T-shirts and other eye-catching clothes writings can be learning opportunities, as are stickers on vehicles: *Baby on board.* The downside is that sometimes there are errors like *God Remember* or *Never forget God.* Slogans are memorable because they are contextualized and associated with daily talks.

The bilingual street signs, shop signs, billboards and banners you see are expectable particularly in large cities: *The embassy/consulate of..., To the Holy Shrine.* Yet sometimes you find interesting pieces of language in very unlikely places: I was in the final stage of my hiking day passing by a cherry orchard in a remote valley of Neyshabour, Khorasan Province, when I noticed *People are shady* on the back of a T-shirt worn by a small village boy playing with a friend at a rivulet below a snow patch. I learned a new meaning for *shady: dishonest or suspicious,* although I did not agree with the sentence.

As I am waiting for my turn at a local e-government office in Semnan City to renew my health insurance, I look at a poster jointly prepared by UNHCR and BAFIA (Bureau for Aliens and Foreign Immigrants Affairs). The poster, targeting immigrants residing in Iran, includes neatly itemized information in simple English and Persian to raise awareness about procedures related to health insurance. Some days later, I am in a post office; waiting again, I take a look at the board announcements and catch sight of a colorful poster: The Eight Principles of Quality Management. Next to a small descriptive picture in Persian, the English equivalents are in the bottom right corner in pretty letters: *Customer-Focused Organization, Leadership, Involvement of People, Process Approach.* Some of these items may not make much sense to most language learners but the seven fundamental principles that the local Red Crescent branch has put on display on the exterior of its office certainly make good sense for many English learners: *humanity, impartiality, neutrality, independence, voluntary service, unity, and universality.* Such wall writings may not be frequent, but they are usually heart-melting and inspirational.

Now that I am writing examples of my experience in offices around town in recent days, I remember an experience in 1988 during Iraq-Iran war. I was at a Red Crescent office in Mashhad and noticed a poster depicting a large number of children in a small space as prisoners of war. The caption read: *Does the conscience of humanity tolerate such treatment of children?* I have used this sentence along with the experience of my first encounter with it to illustrate the meaning of some of the words in it in several classes.



I see a witty sentence on the wall of my professor's office at Esfahan university: *Have you looked at your watch recently* (hinting at students' long stays). The next time I pass by that office, there is a different printout: *Never look down, keep your head up and look straight in the eye of the world.*

I run the English mode on the automated teller machine (ATM) and read a lot of business and accounting words and phrases: *balance enquiry, other amounts, transaction, etc.*

You may be using a massager for physiotherapy or accompanying somebody to use it. Next to the machine, there is a bilingual poster illustrating different positions, body parts, and procedures. Some are a bit technical, but others are everyday words and expressions: *hamstring massage, place a mat on the platform.* On leaving the massager, you see other posters, with useful words and illustrations: *transferred pain, poor posture, muscular problems.* Thus, reading the instructions may activate the same brain cells as a Total Physical Response (TPR) exercise (Asher, 2009, Rule et al., 2006).

On window-shopping with my family in an upmarket Avenue, the *aroma* on a beauty product rings a bell; I remember a recent read: *The mouthwatering aroma from the kitchen ...* A few hundred meters on, I notice the sign including the word *equine* on a horse-riding gear store. Not as frequent as *woodcraft*, though, this word is proof of the range of vocabulary available in a foreign context.

### **Social Media**

The interesting short clips and bilingual posters that users share on social media topped by Telegram, Instagram, and Facebook in Iran are so varied. Some are in Persian, some include minimal English, some are bilingual, and some are only in English. Health messages, such as nutritional advice, benefits of exercise and solutions to various ailments are among the favorites.

I receive a 30-second bilingual animation: *Five Rules for a Healthy Spine*, depicting correct and wrong habits when carrying rucksacks, driving, being at the Computer, lifting objects, and working with the phone. I receive a barrage of posters depicting Yoga positions and moves. Surely, reading *cracking your neck is dangerous* along with a picture of a lady doing the action will cause precise understanding and graphic memory.

The English-rich content is not limited to health and personal care. Society, culture, politics, science and research findings are also frequently circulated in social networks. Someone who does not know English shares a map of the world captioned *What each Country Leads the World in...* with related statistics. I receive a dubbed clip but the chunk *terrifying ordeal* is still there.

The profiles of people on social networks and messaging apps can be great sources of vocabulary learning. Even those not familiar with English sometimes put up beautiful pictures laced with beautiful heart-melting aphorisms, proverbs, and quotes: *Sometimes words are not enough; There is not so soft a pillow as a clear conscience; Kindness is like snow: it beautifies everything it covers; Humanity should be our Race, Love should be our religion; I don't exactly hate you, but if you were on fire and I had water, I would drink it; Never put the key to your happiness in someone else's pocket; Life has no remote, get up and change it yourself.* These images are updated periodically to excite curious contacts.

### **TV and Other Media**

TV seems a proper place for scavenging. It displays everyday life and all types of vocabulary snacks: the European Nations League match between England and the Netherlands, social issues or specific discussion forums, product ads, reports from New York. You are sure to detect some English if you have perceptive eyes. Yes, the English-only channels are there for most learners, but for the uninitiated and unmotivated, more may be less and less, more.

I am watching my favorite humor contest. It is time for the ad break. Despite emphasis from authorities not to use "foreign" words in ads and other occasions, the word *spacer* is used in an ad for a shoe brand. This is my first time to hear this word. Interestingly, toward the end of the program, when the three judges are complimenting each other, the one on the right extends his thanks to the one in the middle for acting as a *spacer* [my translation] between him and the one on the left.

R & D reports and documentaries provide many English words. You are watching a documentary translated from English about how parasites can be used in treating diseases. Many English words and chunks are frequently heard including *pediatrician* and *false economy*.

Printed media sometimes provide parenthetical English for new coinages, cultural words, and newly translated words. I am reading a story about a night club in Saudi Arabia and the Persian label is supportively glossed *high-end café*. I am skimming through an article about Mahak Charity entitled Life in Mahak in a Persian newspaper. The phrase *NGO Benchmarking* stands out in parentheses among Persian sentences which praise the recent good performance of this NGO. A deeper sense of understanding dawns on me about the meaning of *Benchmarking*, of which I had a shallow understanding. An article in an Iranian daily newspaper explains an idea and uses an obscure label for it, but the expression *post-truth*, used parenthetically first and alternatively later, more effectively expresses the meaning. In the political news, I read: Shiraz municipality has used the expression *Dawn with USA* instead of *Down with the USA*. Both expressions are laced with communicative translations in Persian. Some national and local newspapers now include have English pages which contain topics ranging from health benefits of marriage to promoting tourist attractions such as Shahzade Garden in Mahan, Kerman.

It is an anti-arms demo in London and the word Trident is flashing on placards everywhere. I learn that it is a trademark for a chewing gum as well as a kind of missile with nuclear warhead, both with strong U.S. associations. The next report has the word *exclusive* on the top corner of the screen. Another day, I am watching the 2 o'clock news and hear *virtual water* in a report on water shortage. Interestingly, from that day on, I hear and see this expression more frequently because I pay more attention to it. On a September day in 2019, the TV reporter announces that we would see a *super-moon* that night.

It is the third week of 2019 FIVB Volleyball Nations League competitions. The reporter speaks in Persian but some game-related items like *points, attacks, spike, technical time-out, monster block, set point*, are displayed. Moreover, you can see ads around the stadium for natural mineral water, chain stores, a brand of chewing gum, among others, in English, and a product with the name *faucet* on it swirling in a top corner of the screen once in English, once in Persian. A small dose of English also trickles through the ads in the between-set rest intervals.

### Specific Practical Suggestions

The following are examples of activities and projects which teachers can use to exploit the target-language input available in the mother-tongue context:

1. Teachers or students bringing photos, pictures or realia of interesting bits and pieces of the target language used for all or particular everyday products and sharing them with other members of the class.
2. Presenting and discussing slide shows or video clips including target-language items with follow-up practice of selected vocabulary.
3. Learners making a tour around their dwellings and reporting "the target-language harvest" to the class.
4. Recording native language TV/ radio programs and listening to them in the class to single out target language items. These items can then be further studied using monolingual dictionaries with authentic examples and collocations.
5. Learners listing the English words which they encounter during specified spans of time.
6. Learners collaboratively creating a mini-dictionary or a thematic lexicon based on the target language they may find in a particular daily-life setting, e.g., home.
7. Learners working in pairs or groups to evaluate and possibly correct pieces of language.
8. The teacher or students writing words or expressions on the board, the class making guesses about the context they could have come from.
9. Engaging learners in writing activities in which they design bilingual labels and/or brochures for different products after being exposed to enough examples.

Most of these hands-on activities can be adjusted to the levels and interests of learners. Moreover, many of them can be assigned as out-of-class projects. While all these activities can be performed individually, they may stir more excitement when done in pairs or groups because of their emotional and social associations.

## Conclusion

This is an attempt to illustrate situations with potential for English vocabulary learning in Iran. A learner may not experience all of them and is sure to come across many others with such potential which can be mediated by settings and topics with different degrees of technicality and specificity-generality. Scavenging for intermittent chunks of language and vocabulary can constitute a substantial track next to the main course the learner is following. This track may not be as wide as English songs and movies; but, when a learner gets the habit of attention and follow-up over the vocabulary bits, a long distance is travelled. Raising awareness to this potential and encouraging some intentionality and focus may go a long way toward success. As an interesting activity, learners can prepare banks of English chunks from their neighborhoods, cities, trips, homes etc. and revise them or collaboratively author "dictionaries".

These remarks may seem at odds with techniques and strategies approved by language teaching experts. However, considering motivation problems with many foreign language learners and the fact that many of them need to get used to learning raises the possibility that giving up perfectionist tendencies and encouraging learners to pay attention to meaningful bits of English in the daily life may create a pseudo-acquisition situation (see Ellis, 2015) and take learners aboard so that, after a while, they may embrace the mainstream and invest more, taking their leaning into their own hands and using more trustworthy materials. One should also separate exploiting these opportunities from promoting English-culture hegemony (see, e.g., Phillipson, 2013).

And this was my latest vocabulary scavenging experience. I was reading a Persian translation of a book on ancient Greece when I came across comments on "*Spartan conditions*" and "*draconian severity*". The English footnotes added to my knowledge of English and I felt happy that my childhood learning self was still alive and bustling.

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