



USING THE MIND PALACE TECHNIQUE FOR LEARNING ENGLISH COLLOCATIONS AND IDIOMS

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Abstract

This article explores using an effective mnemonic technique called the Mind Palace (or Method of Loci) to learn English collocations and idioms. Knowing idioms and collocations is crucial for developing and improving writing and speaking skills, but foreign language learners struggle with memorizing them because of their figurative meanings and contextual variations. Sherlock Holmes, the most famous fictional detective known for his unique intelligence, popularized this method. Learning collocations and idioms in connection with a familiar environment is more effective than traditional memorizing methods (repeating, rote learning, and word lists). This study reviews the theoretical foundations of this method. It highlights the way of using this strategy to learn foreign languages and the practical steps for designing individual Memory Palaces. According to the findings, this Mind Palace method is not only effective for memorizing words but also for enhancing idiomatic and collocational knowledge for English learners.

Keywords: Mind Palace, mnemonic, imagination, collocations, idioms, English language learners, method, foreign language, Method of Loci.



Introduction

Learning collocations and idioms is one of the most challenging aspects of learning English, but they are more potent than the usual and everyday vocabulary. They also help to make conversations and speeches more natural and professional, like those of natives. For instance, native speakers use the collocation “make a decision” instead of “do a decision,” and the idiom “when pigs fly” is used more than “never” by natives. Therefore, expressions like these cannot be translated word-for-word into other languages, which makes them more difficult for learners to memorize and use correctly.

Traditional memorizing methods, such as rote learning and word lists, are not effective enough for students to remember and recall idioms and collocations for the long term. Learners usually forget these phrases because of their complex meanings and figurative nature. Nowadays, mnemonic techniques have gained more attention as powerful tools to improve memory and learn difficult foreign words easily. One of the most effective and well-known mnemonics is the Method of Loci, but it is commonly known as the Mind Palace.

This mnemonic method is based on spatial memory, one type of memory. In this type, humans memorize words by connecting them with physical locations. Although the method is rooted in classical rhetoric, it was popularized by Sherlock Holmes. This method requires mentally placing items that should be remembered in familiar places, like a home, a street, or a store. When learners mentally “walk” in these places, they can recall the target easily because the familiar things help them to remember new information. According to recent research, if this method is combined with visualization and spaced repetition, the result will significantly improve language learning outcomes, especially for the figurative and context-dependent words like idioms and collocations [Qureshi et al., 2014; Ciocan, 2025].

This paper aims to explore the application of Mind Palace techniques to learning English collocations and idioms. It will first review the theoretical and practical methods, then the results of real experiments, and finally, discuss its cognitive advantages.

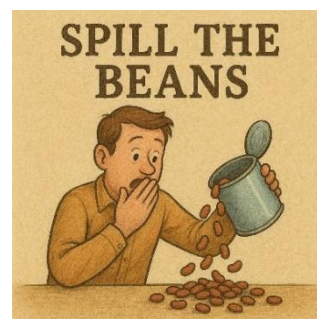


Literature Review

Mnemonic research shows that mnemonic strategies are crucial for improving foreign language knowledge, especially for boosting vocabulary. Among these strategies, the Method of Loci (Mind Palace) is one of the oldest and most beneficial approaches. It originated in ancient Greece and Rome, where orators used it to memorize lengthy speeches by associating ideas with familiar locations [Yates, 1966].

Several researchers have learned how to apply the Method of Loci in education and learning foreign languages. Qureshi et al. (2014) showed that this technique is effective in recalling information using visual images and remembering places. According to the results of these studies, this technique helps learners not only remember new information but also use it automatically when needed. Moreover, SmowlTech (2023) learned the psychological underpinnings of the Memory Palace and noted its connections to dual-coding theory, elaborative encoding, and spatial organization—all of which strengthen memory retention and move new information to long-term memory.

Specific to language learning, idioms and collocations usually present many specific difficulties because of their figurative and contextual meanings [Ciocan, 2025]. The study shows that these phrases can be learned with the help of memory strategies, including imagery, keyword methods, and the Method of Loci. For instance, if the idioms like “when pigs fly” and “spill the beans” are linked to visual images, it makes recall both engaging and durable (*1st picture*).



1st picture

Overall, resources show that Mind Palace's method is not only theoretically grounded but also practically useful for learning languages. It is especially



suitable for learning collocations and idioms because they require meaningful associations and contextual understanding rather than simple translation.

Method

3.1. Participants

Twenty English language learners at the intermediate level participated in the study. They were divided into two groups:

The first group (Control) has learned collocations and idioms using traditional rote memorization and word-listing methods.

The second group (Experimental) has also learned similar idioms and collocations, but using a different technique: the Mind Palace Technique.

All of the participants were aged 17–19 and had an English proficiency level of B1–B2 according to the CEFR scale.

3.2. Materials

A set of 30 collocations (e.g., make a decision, heavy rain, catch a cold) and 20 idioms (e.g., spill the beans, hit the sack, once in a blue moon) which were selected by experts, considering the participants' English level.

Two types of tests (pre- and post-tests) based on these new vocabularies to check both recognition and production skills of participants.

3.3. Procedure

First, the pre-test, which experts created to assess learners' current English level, was administered to both groups.

Then they divided into two groups, and the lists of new vocabulary were given to both groups. The phrase was similar, but with different descriptions. The first group (Control) has studied word lists with translations and practiced through drills. However, the second group (Experimental) was trained in the Mind Palace Technique: they created a mental journey through their own houses with the help of instructors, assigning each location to a collocation or idiom with a vivid image.

Then both groups were tested immediately after learning new phrases and again after two weeks to check how many words they could move to their long-term memory. A feedback survey was conducted to collect learners' subjective experiences.



Result

This study's results clearly showed that learners who used the Method of Loci to memorize new vocabulary outperformed the group that used traditional remembering techniques. The scores from pre- and post-tests showed the positive effects of mnemonics on both learning and long-term recall.

4.1. Test Score Analysis

Before teaching began, the results of both groups were almost the same. The participants of the experimental team gave 25 correct answers out of 50 questions, while the control group scored 27 out of 50; the small gap fell well within normal chance ($p > 0.05$), and the samples started on the same footing.

After two weeks of learning, the post-tests resulted in very different outcomes in each group, with gains especially clear in the experimental group:

- The experimental team's participants jumped to 45 correct answers, a leap of 25 points.
- The control class climbed to 35, rising by only 8 points.

4.2. Retention After Two Weeks

After two weekly holidays, students were tested again, and the test's results showed the following:

The group that used memory tricks remembered 43 out of 50 in what they had learned.

The group that relied on traditional methods could move only 31 words to their long-term memory.

Summary of Key Findings

Group	Pre-test results	Post-Test Results	Retention results (after 2 weeks)
Experimental (mnemonic)	25/50	45/50	43/50
Control (traditional)	27/50	45/50	31/50

4.3. Learner Feedback Summary

The experimental group members' feedback on the Loci method reported enjoyment, creativity, and a sense of personal connection with the expressions.



The opinions of the second group (traditional) are different. The technique that they used is that they reported boredom, difficulty recalling idioms, and a lack of motivation.

Discussion

The results show that the Mind Palace Technique increases the strength of memory for collocations and idioms on both short term and memory recall. The second group was significantly more successful in retaining the information than the rest. Conversely it stated that Mnemonics support stronger remembrance in the long run toward rote.

Research shows that students use their spatial and visual memory to retain information. The mind palaces we form in our heads unify all the thoughts and memories to form strong relationships, making them easier to retrieve in life.

Students also showed a lot more enthusiasm whenever they used the Mind Palace. It made learning a lot more fun than just reading books. This aspect of motivation is vital due to the importance of learning language motivation.

Pedagogical Implications

1. Teachers can teach students vocabulary through the Mind Palace Technique so they participate more.
2. It should be required for teacher programs to teach education with those mnemonic book things.
3. Technology can enhance the Mind Palace experience. VR can practice interactive environments around a learner's mental maps.
4. The Mind Palace exercises develop teams that work together naturally and enhance creativity.

Limitations and Future Research

One significant limitation of the present study is the relatively small sample size, which may constrain the statistical power and limit the generalizability of the findings. To address this, future research should employ larger and more diverse samples, encompassing participants from various cultural and linguistic backgrounds, to enhance external validity. In addition, subsequent investigations



might systematically examine the Mind Palace technique's effectiveness across a broader spectrum of language learning dimensions, including grammar acquisition, the use and comprehension of discourse markers, and phonological development. Longitudinal studies could also assess the sustained impact of this technique over extended periods, while experimental designs comparing the Mind Palace to other mnemonic or interactive methods would further clarify its relative efficacy.

Conclusion

In summary, this study's findings indicate that the Mind Palace technique is an effective instructional strategy for enhancing the acquisition and retention of English collocations and idioms. Specifically, participants who utilized this technique demonstrated improved long-term memory retention and reported higher levels of motivation. While these results suggest clear pedagogical benefits, the Mind Palace method should be viewed as a complementary tool rather than a replacement for existing teaching approaches. Its integration into language instruction offers a promising means to support and enrich learners' experiences.

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