

# A perfect way to learn vocabulary

Chris Durrant believes he's found the perfect tool to help his language students improve their vocabulary – and he's done the research to prove it.

With the demands on students to be perfect in their vocabulary knowledge if they want to achieve Merit and Excellence grades, 100 per cent recall is essential, particularly when the difference between grades can come down to knowing one word. For the very best, doing this means not only learning in context as we go but also spending a lot of time drilling vocabulary again and again to fill in the weak spots.

Like all language teachers, I've photocopied lists, made CDs, put them on our intranet, in fact any number of ways to help students with this sometimes dreary part of language learning. For the dedicated students this has worked but, if they're less than dedicated, spending class time on vocab tests doesn't always feel like a good use of those precious student contact hours.

## My story with Language Perfect

I began using the Language Perfect site only a few months ago and was immediately impressed with the enthusiasm with which my kids took to it. As a result, I started conducting some research for the Ministry of Education on its effectiveness. The initial results of this research – which measured the learning of 50 words by traditional means against using solely Language Perfect – show an improvement in ALL students who used the programme, five to 40 per cent. Even the top student, who scored 49 out of 50 on the first test and then 50 out of 50 on the second, so achieving statistically no better, said that she "spent less than half the time learning the second list" when she learnt online as opposed to the amount of time it took to learn the first list in the traditional manner.

Mid-range students tended to improve most and those from low to mid range reported increased exposure to target language – which means they heard and read the words again and again. All students who used Language Perfect improved scores on the second test. Of course, the next thing to do will be to research how much the students have retained beyond the initial testing! They also remarked on improvement in English spelling and typing skills, which appears to be an unexpected positive by-product of this programme.

## A tool students are happy to use

The Language Perfect software gives students another way to learn vocabulary and uses a tool that our students today are happy to use: The computer online in game/test format with immediate recognition of what's right or wrong. Although this might sound like learning around examination knowledge rather than a holistic approach, surely knowing all the words on these lists is the basis that our students need to be able to speak the language and to start making their own determinations about new words.



**Did you know?**  
Otago Girls' High School students answered 1.27 million questions in 2008!

Comments from Year 10 and 11 students who took part in the research:

"Listening to the words was really good because you could hear how it was spoken as you were learning it."

"I spent way more time on the list. Normally I only spent a minute because it is so boring but with this one it was easier because you don't need anyone else to help and you can't cheat and fake learning it."

"I like how it shows you what you did wrong and which ones you learnt straight away."

"You can do it while you're on Bebo and then switch between the two."



By the end of Year 13, vocabulary learning becomes an individual activity and the ability to draw on deep knowledge is essential to infer the meaning of unfamiliar words when our students are confronted by the unexpected. So, like all things, basic knowledge is necessary before you can extend and Language Perfect helps kids gain that basic vocabulary.

The reaction from all the girls was that this was a very useful site and they enjoyed using it. Many said they would use it as their primary source for language vocabulary learning while a small minority said they would use it in conjunction with the methods they already used. Language Perfect is definitely on our department's purchase list for next year. ▲

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## WHAT IS LANGUAGE PERFECT?

Developed by brothers Craig and Shane Smith, it's an online website that tests New Zealand language students on NCEA vocabulary lists. Currently available in French, German Japanese and Spanish, there are plans to introduce Māori and Latin. Last year, Language Perfect ran the hugely popular 'Vocabulary Olympics', where students and schools competed against each other to learn the most words. The site also allows teachers to make their own lists, and students can access the site at home.

[www.languageperfect.co.nz](http://www.languageperfect.co.nz)

