

The word substitution technique – how to considerably increase your vocabulary size

 [universeofmemory.com /how-to-increase-your-vocabulary-size/](https://universeofmemory.com/how-to-increase-your-vocabulary-size/)

Bartosz Czekala

In the Oppressive Clutches Of The Comfort Zone

You slowly open your eyes. You're in your bed. It's nice and warm.

You know you should get up and start the day but somehow you cannot force yourself to do this.

The blissful numbness is radiating from every pore of your body. You try to lift your head but to no avail. Getting up seems impossible.

Maybe you'll just lie here for a few more minutes and... BAM! You're asleep.

As a consequence, you're late for job and get fired.

Your spouse realizes what a loser you're and leaves you. You end up getting homeless and fighting with sewer rats over the leftovers from Thai restaurant.

Alright, so maybe I've exaggerated a tiny bit.

But that's exactly what **the comfort zone** feels like.

It's blissful and cozy. **And that's the problem.**



Why?

Well, the simplified explanation goes like this: we use automated sets of behavior in every area of our lives.

It makes perfect sense. If they are automated, it means that the energy expenditure is considerably limited while executing them.

Take a close look at your speech patterns in your mother tongue. It might turn out that you use a relatively limited number of words and phrases in everyday life. And bear in mind that it's your mother tongue!

The problem is even more conspicuous in foreign language learning.

Our vocabulary defines the borders of our perception and thinking.

It's good to constantly keep on pushing them.

The following piece of advice is equally valid for beginners and advanced learners.

1. Identify words / phrases which you repeat frequently

You can do it on your own with a little bit of mindfulness or with a help of teacher.

Just take a piece of paper (or use the ready-to-use template at the end of the article!) and note down all the words and phrases which you tend to repeat way too often.

They usually tend to fall into one of the 4 categories:

- **COMMON PHRASES**

That's a great place to begin.

Have you ever noticed how often you repeat "I think that..." in a foreign language you learn? Sure, it's a very basic phrase. And necessary one as well!

But it's also damn boring.

There is a variety of counterparts in every language which can make your way of speaking more colorful.

"I believe that ... "

"I'm convinced that..."

"I trust that ... "

"I reckon that ... "

And the list goes on and on ...

- **ADJECTIVES**

Adjectives are used to describe nouns.

That's why you can go wild with your creativity!

Sure, you can say that some guy is big.

But why not:

He is a great hulk of a man / huge / of considerable size / enormous / gigantic etc.

Place to start:

I have very strict rule for my language students.

Excluding absolute beginners, you can't use "good", "bad" and "interesting" during my classes.

I kid you not. If I hear any of these words, my eyes turn red and start twitching.

I haven't hit anyone yet but I sense that this day is approaching inevitably!

Of course you can find other words which you tend to overuse. We all have our wicked ways.

I'm definitely guilty of using "creepy" and "awkward" almost every time when I speak English.

- **VERBS**

In most languages they don't give you as much creative freedom as adjectives.

However, it's still worth substituting some of them.

Place to start:

I like to start with synonyms of “explain”, “use” and “convince”.

General usefulness of these words makes them easy to apply in almost any context.

- **NOUNS**

Probably the hardest category to substitute.

Only one piece of advice here.

Try not to use the word “thing”. Every “thing” has its name.

Use it!

2. Substitute them

Once you’ve identified the words which you use way too often, it’s time to substitute them.

But how do you find good synonyms?

The best way is to ask your teacher or a befriended native speaker.

But if you don’t have this luxury, feel free to use a dictionary of synonyms, i.e. **Thesaurus**.

Here is a short list for some of the popular languages.

English

<http://www.thesaurus.com/>

Spanish

<http://www.sinónimo.es/>

French

<http://www.synonymes.com/>

Czech

<http://www.synonyma-online.cz/>

Polish

<https://www.synonimy.pl/>

Russian

<http://www.synonymizer.ru/>

Swedish

<http://www.synonymer.se/>

Italian

<http://www.sinonimi-contrari.it/>

Portuguese

<http://www.sinonimos.com.br/>

German

<http://synonyme.woxikon.de/>

It’s important that you understand (more less) the difference between meanings of different synonyms!

3. When is the good time to substitute a word?

There is only one reliable indicator of the time when you should start substituting some word.

Once your active recall of this word is effortless and immediate.

Only then. It means that the word is entrenched deeply in your long term memory and you no longer have to use it frequently in order to remember it.

And that’s actually the GREAT reason not to use it any longer or drastically limit its use. At least during your language practice.

I would actually go as far as to say that every time you repeat words and phrases you know actively, you waste your time. Every sentence is a new opportunity to grow as a person (and as a learner!). Don't waste it!
