Vocabulary Teaching Based on Semantic-Field

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Abstract

Vocabulary is an indispensable part of language and it is of vital importance for second language learners. Wilkins (1972) points out: "without grammar very little can be conveyed, without vocabulary nothing can be conveyed". Vocabulary teaching has experienced several stages characterized by grammatical-translation method, audio-lingual method and communicative teaching method before obtaining great attention from second language teachers and researchers finally.

This study states four proposals for the improvement of vocabulary teaching, which refer that: (1) apply componential analysis to vocabulary teaching; (2) foster learners' awareness of the difference between English and Chinese; (3) introduce lexical phrases; (4) develop effective word meaning acquisition strategies.

Keywords: semantics, semantic-field, vocabulary teaching

1. Introduction

Thornbury (2000, p. 1) states that "language emerges first as words, both historically and in terms of the way each of us learned our first and any subsequent languages. The coining of new words never stops, nor does the acquisition of words".

Even in our first language we are continually learning new words and new meanings for old words, let alone second language learning. Second language learners must learn thousands of words that speakers and writers of English use before they communicate smoothly with native speakers. Otherwise, learners may experience the following bewilderment: in language input, learners may confront words that are totally unfamiliar to them, or that are being used, according to their understanding, in novel or obscure ways; learners may meet concepts that are simply not represented by words in their first language; in language output, learners may not find the right words to fit the intended meaning or confuse one word with another. Vocabulary teaching has not always been very responsive to the above mentioned problems.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Vocabulary Teaching

Longman Contemporary English Dictionary defines vocabulary as "all the words in a particular language". According to field-theory, the vocabulary of a language is essentially a dynamic and well-integrated system of lexemes structured by relationships of meaning (Jackson & Amvela, 2000). The concept of lexeme coined by Lyons in analogy to phoneme and morpheme is considered all abstract linguistic units with different variants. Crystal (1995, p. 138) points out that lexeme or lexical item is "a unit of lexical meaning, which exists regardless of any inflectional endings it may have or a number of words it may contain". Allen (2002, p. 269) defines lexeme "lexemes can be regarded as groupings of one or more word forms, which are individuated by their roots and for derivational affixes". Hence, "the use of the term 'vocabulary' or 'word' has general common sense validity and is serviceable when there is no real need to be precise".

2.2 Field-Theory

What has now come to be known as the theory of semantic fields or field-theory was first put forward by a number of German and Swiss scholars in the 1920s and 1930s: notably Ipsen (1924), Porzig (1934) and Trier (1934). Here we will restrict our attention for the most part to Trier's version of field-theory, which is, according to Ullmann, widely and rightly judged to have "opened a new phrase in the history or semantics" (Ullmann, 1977, p. 54). Trier's field-theory is used to illustrate a linguistic field composed of a list of incompatible words referring to items of a particular class.

According to this theory, we can further draw another two points:

(1) Some words could form a semantic field under a common concept. For example, under the concept of "animal", the following such as cat, dog, horse, tiger, elephant, etc., can form a semantic field.

(2) The meanings of words in the same semantic field are interdependent and underdetermined. Thus, in order to determine the meaning of a certain word, we should first be aware of the relation with other words and its position in the semantic field. Take "Kinship" as an example, father, mother, grandfather, grandmother, brother, sister, cousin, nephew, etc., form a semantic field. If we want to know the meaning of "cousin", we should be clear about the relationship between cousin and other relatives. Moreover, we must also know the position of "cousin" in the field.

Semantic field theory is one of the most important achievements in modern semantic studies. According to this theory, we understand that words in language are self-systematic although the number is very large.

2.3 Leech's Seven Types of Meaning

Geoffrey Leech, in his famous book: *semantics—the study of meaning* (1981, 2nd ed.) divides "meaning" into seven types. Namely, conceptual, connotative, social, affective, reflected, collative and thematic meaning. In my opinion, this classification of meaning is of vital importance to semantic study. Thus I'd like to make a brief introduction of these seven types of meaning, focusing on their characteristics.

2.3.1 Conceptual Meaning/Denotative Meaning

Conceptual meaning is the most basic expressive meaning in language communication, which may often be found in dictionaries and has no direct relation with objective world or phenomena. Conceptual meaning has the following characteristics:

a. It can be divided into several semantic components. For example, the meaning of *man* and *woman* can be specified as follows:

man="human"+"male"+"adult"

woman="human"+"female"+"adult"

b. It varies with the change and development of the object since it is the reflection and generalization of the object. Take the word *deer* as an example, "deer" originally refers to "animal or beast", but now it only refers to one specific animal or beast, that is "鹿" in Chinese.

c. An English word may have different conceptual meaning in different context.

2.3.2 Connotative Meaning

Connotative meaning is the communicative value an expression has by virtue of what it refers to, over and above its purely conceptual content.

The word "woman" is a case in point, conceptually, it is specified as:

woman="human"+"female"+"adult"

In the past woman has been burdened with such attributes ("frail", "prone to tears", "cowardly", "emotional", "irrational", "inconstant") as the dominant male has been pleased to impose on her, as well as with more becoming qualities such as "gentle", "compassionate", "sensitive", " hard-working".

2.3.3 Social/Stylistic Meaning

Social meaning is that which a piece of language conveys about the social circumstances of its use. According to Leech, the practical use of language can be divided into several different "layers" due to the circumstances.

2.3.4 Affective Meaning

Affective meaning reflects the personal feeling of the speaker, including his attitude to the listener or something he is talking about. It is often explicitly conveyed through the conceptual or connotative content of the words used. For instance, with the purpose of getting people to be quiet. We might say either:

(1) I'm terribly sorry to interrupt, but I wonder if you would be so kind as to lower your voices a little.

(2) Will you belt up?

2.3.5 Reflected Meaning

Reflected meaning is the meaning which arises in case of multiple conceptual meaning, when one sense of a word forms part of our response to another sense. Some polysemious words have one certain sense which would cause some bad associative meaning. Such words are called taboo words and some linguists take this as "taboo contamination".

2.3.6 Collocative Meaning

Collocative meaning consists of the associations a word acquires on an account of the meanings of words which tend to occur in environment. Pretty and handsome share common ground in the meaning "good-looking", but may be distinguished by the range of nouns with which they are likely to co-occur or collocate.

2.3.7 Thematic Meaning

Thematic meaning is the meaning communicated by the way in which a speaker or writer organizes the message, in terms of ordering, focus and emphasis.

(l) Mrs. Smith donated the first prize.

(2) The first prize was donated by Mr. Smith.

Obviously, we know that they suggest different contexts: the active sentence seems to answer an imp1icit question "What did Mrs. Smith donate?" While the passive one seems to answer an implicit question "Who was the first prize donated by? or "Who donated the first prize?" That is (1) in contrast to (2) suggests that we know who Mrs. Smith is.

Nevertheless, as for the classification of meaning, the following three points should be born in mind:

a. The meaning of language is very complicated;

b. The purpose of classification is to study, observe and analyze language;

c. Different school or people may have different sorts of classification.

2.4 Characteristics of Word Meaning

In this section the following four characteristics of word meaning, namely multiple and multi-dimensional, decomposable, relational and context sensitive are elaborated.

2.4.1 Word Meaning Is Multiple and Multi-Dimensional

Several scholars have proposed ways of classifying meaning into types, and the various proposals by no means agree in their details. In this thesis, Cruse's classification of meaning will be introduced in order to illustrate the multiplicity and multi-dimensionality of word meaning.

Cruse (2000) classifies meaning into descriptive meaning and non-descriptive meaning. Each of the two categories of meaning can be divided into two dimensions: descriptive meaning can be studied in intrinsic dimension and relative dimension, while non-descriptive meaning can be studied in expressive dimension and evoked dimension. As for intrinsic dimension, it can be further divided into 6 perspectives: quality, intensity, specificity, vagueness, basicness, viewpoint; while relative dimension can be further divided into 3 perspectives: necessity and expectedness, sufficiency, salience. This classification has clearly manifested the multiplicity and multi-dimensionality of word meaning.

2.4.2 Word Meaning Is Decomposable

Some semanticists and lexicologists suggest that meanings of words can be analyzed into a finite number of features or components, which are universal to all languages, and from which the meanings of all words can be decomposed into new unique combinations. Such an approach is called componential analysis (Leech, 1974).

2.4.3 Word Meaning Is Relational

Following the holistic view, the meaning of a word can not be known without taking into account the meanings of other words in a language. Inspired by J. R. Firth's dictum, Haas claims that words shall be known by the company they keep. He points out that the meaning of a word is a semantic field which contains words that belong to a defined area of meaning. The field then becomes the context within which meaning relations are established.

All in all, word meanings do not exist in isolation but are "defined through the sense relations they have with other words" (Carter, 1998, p. 19).

2.4.4 Word Meaning Is Context Sensitive

The meaning of a word is context sensitive because the meaning expressed through uttering it may vary from occasion to occasion, ever as the word's standing meaning in the language remains fixed (Cruse, 2000), for example, in the case of path in *He was coming down the path to meet me even before I reached the garden gate and We followed a winding path through the woods* (Cruse, 2000, p. 105), a different mental image of a path is conjured up in the two cases.

2.5 The Importance of Teaching Vocabulary

According to Ur Penny (1996), the following six aspects of vocabulary should be taught:

First, pronunciation and spelling. Ur Penny points out that the learner has to know what a word sounds like (pronunciation) and what it looks like (spelling) (Penny, 1996). Only when a new word is pronounced and spelled correctly, can it be recognized, so second language teachers should make sure that both the form and the pronunciation of the word are accurately presented.

Second, grammar. The grammar of a new item needs to be taught if this is not covered by general grammatical rules. A word may have unpredictable change of form in certain grammatical contexts or may have idiosyncratic way of connecting with other words in sentence, so it is necessary for second language teachers to provide learners with relative grammatical information when teaching the original form of a word, for example, when teaching a verb, second language teachers should introduce its past form and past participle form if that verb is irregular. Second language teachers should also note whether that verb is transitive or intransitive. In a word, second language teachers should make sure that the information they have provided about a certain word is enough to enable learners to use that word correctly in a certain grammatical context. Only when a word is used conforming to grammatical rules, can it be accepted by standard English.

Third, collocations. According to Firth (1975), collocations are actual words in habitual company. Pawley and Syder claim that in collocations there are expressions for a wide range of familiar concepts and speech acts; if the speaker can retrieve these collocations automatically, he can minimize the amount of clause-encoding work and can have more time to plan larger units of discourse (Wallace, 1982). Frequent and correct use of collocations enables learners to speak more like native speakers.

Fourth, aspects of meaning: different meanings of words and sense relations between one word and other words. From the functional perspective, the role of language is to communicate meanings, so second language learners should acquire the label-meaning relations. Only when the meaning of a word is proper in a certain context, can we say that the word is used appropriately.

Fifth, word formation. Some words are formed according to certain rules. An introduction of word formation roles to second language learners can help them memorize words more easily and even help them guess the meaning of the word according to some form features.

Thus, the standards for good vocabulary learning are: correct pronunciation and spelling; correct use of grammatical form; appropriate use of vocabulary in a given context and the ability to retrieve vocabulary that has been taught.

3. Body Part

The experiment is carried out in my class, and 120 students are selected from the school of mathmatics in Henan Polytechnic University. The experiment lasted from September, 2015 to January, 2016. There are 4 hours every week in my class. In the class, I used the semantic field theory in vocabulary teaching, which includes hyponymy, synonym, anyonym, meronomy and homonymy build semantic network between new words and known words. Semantic feild theory can provide a theoretical basis for vocabulary teaching. I guided the students to understand,

digest, and memorize the words in the corresponding semantic field. This teaching method also can help students to overcome some difficulties in their vocabulary learning.

Here is a sample lesson in the class:

I. Teaching aims and demands

a. (1) Learn about understand friendship.

(2) Learn about the criteria for making friends.

(3) Learn about how to describe friends.

b. Learn some useful words and sentences:

(1) Trust, respect, affection, virtue, enjoyment, laughter

(2) Life without a friend is death.

(3) A hedge between keeps friendship green.

(4) They look different, but they are good friends.

c. Describe people's appearances:

d. Describe people's clothes:

(1) Color

(2) Size

(3) Material

e. Describe people's character:

f. Describe people's hobbies:

II. Teaching aids

Word cards/blackboard/pictures/multi-media

III. Teaching Plan

Step I. warming up

a. Leading in by freetalk with the students:

T: Who is the impressive person in your mind?

S: My bosom friends.

T: What impressed you most?

S: His character.

T: What is his character?

S1: He is optimistic.

S2: He is considerate.

Using the conversations like that to teach students more words such as introverted, extroverted, talkative, incommunicative, sociable, pessimistic, boastful, open-minded, sympathetic, generous, tolerable, confident, intelligent.

Show students the power point of other words to describe persons.

For example, if we want to express one's hobbies, we can say he or she likes photography, philately, hand-embroidery, traveling, bird-watching, sewing and playing the flute etc. Through this way, we can help the students build a semantic field about the words to describe others, and design the chart about these words to help students understand the relations between theses words. And then teacher showed the semantic field about words to describe persons through power point.
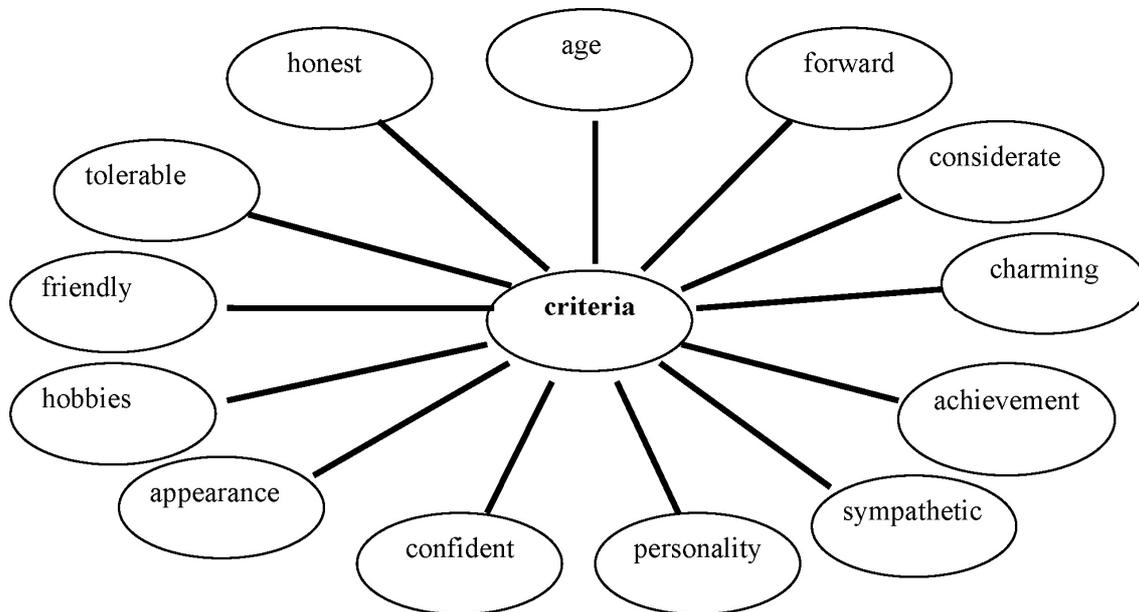
Figure 1. The criteria for making friends

Table 1. Words describing friends' appearance

figure	stature	hair colour	hair style	shape of face	complexion
overweight	tall	dark	long	oval	fair
thin/bony	short	red	short	narrow	pale
plump	strapping	black	straight	chubby	tan
slender	small	auburn	curly	square	dark
slim	medium	brown	ponytail	bony	yellow
fat		blond	pigtail		white
		grey	baldheaded		
			crew cut		

Step II. Practice

S1: Who is he in the picture?

S2: He is one of my friends.

S1: Why do you choose him as your friend?

S2: He is optimistic.

S1: What is his figure?

S2: He is fat.

S1: And how about his stature?

S2: He is medium height.

Step III. Home work

1) Rember the words to describe others.

2) Make up a new dialogue about tell others one of your friends.

3) Try to write a short passage to describe your family members.

Applying semantic field theory to English vocabualary teaching is effective and useful, the data and result we got could confirmed that.

Table 2. The students' satisfaction degree of semantic field in vocabulary teaching

Satisfaction degree	Number	Percentage
highly satisfied	17	14.17%
partly satisfied	65	54.17 %
satisfied	26	21.67%
dissatisfied	7	5.83%
highly dissatisfied	5	4.17%

From the chart above, we can see most of students are satisfied with the application of semantic field in vocabulary teaching. Most of the students believe that the semantic field could help them improve their reading ability, basic knowledge, writing ablity, and their ablity of vocabulary acquisition.

The student's vocabulary directly affects the development of one's linguistic competence. Therefore, the primary task of vocabulary instruction is to enlarge learner's vocabulary. In English class, vocabulary learning is an extremely complex process which covers many aspects of English, such as semantic, lexical, syntactic, and sound. If the students cannot master vocabularies, which will affect their learning results. So the in-depth comprehension of semantics can help students to master words, help them gain an insight into the implication lexical and collocation relations of the words system, and enhance their ablity of synonym discrimination and improve their ablity of using language and communication.

Teachers also can make use of the semantic field theory to assist the students to learn vocabularies dimensionally so that the students' willingness to learn can be promoted and the effectiveness of vocabulary learning can be reinforced. So, the author uses the following methods for vocabulary teaching in my class:

1) Hyponymy

Hyponymy is a relation of inclusion. A hyponymy includes the meaning of a more general word. The more general term is called the superordinate or hypernym. Much of the vocabulary is linked by such systems of inclusion, and the resulting semantic networks form the hierarchical taxonomies mentioned above.

By the virtue of field theory, students can enlarge their vocabulary and strengthen memory effect through in-depth understanding of the lexical meanings. Teachers can fully play a leading role in helping students learn word meaning, where necessary, to sum up the same types of words, and give demonstrations of one or two examples of hyponyms and then to mobilize the enthusiasm of students in active thinking, meanwhile the classroom atmosphere will be active.

2) Synonymy

Synonyms are different phonological words which have the same or very similar meanings.

In teaching, teachers may use synonyms to help students enlarge their vocabulary. For example, when the teacher tell the word "glimmer", he or she can also tell the synonyms of glimmer, such as *beam*, *gleam*, *glow*, *glitter*, *shine*, *flash*, *dazzle*, *shimmer*, etc. Teachers then ask the students to memorize these words together, and try to make the differences among them. Take the following for example, when the teacher explain the words such as *states-man*, *thrifty*, *Black*, *scholar*, *childlike*, etc., they can ask the students to associate their derogatory words, *politician*, *miserly*, *nigger*, *highbrow*, *childish*. In this way, the students can master the words properly. When they speak or write, they can express themselves exactly, freely and vividly.

3) Antonymy

Antonyms are words which are opposite in meaning. It is useful, however, to identify several different types of relationship under a more general label of opposition.

In order to help students better grasp more words quickly, teachers often use "contrast" (compare). With the method, students can easily remember pairs of antonyms with appropriate usage. However, not all the words have a fixed antonym. Take "fresh" for example; it can make up of a lot of phrases such as fresh bread, fresh air, and fresh flowers. *Fresh* in each phrase, the semantics are different. If some corresponding anti-sense phrases are given, such as stale bread, stuffy air, faded flowers. The meaning of this word will be clear for students.

4) Meronymy

Meronymy is a term used to describe a part- whole relationship between lexical items. Thus cover and page are meronymys of a book. We can identify this relationship by using sentence frames like *X is part of Y*, or *Y has X*, as in *A page is part of a book*, or *A book has pages*. Meronymy reflects hierarchical classification in the lexical somewhat like taxonomies: a typical example may be: a *week* includes *Sunday*, *Monday*, *Tuesday*, *Wednesday*, *Thursday*, *Friday*, and *Saturday*, so we can say the relationship between *week* and *Sunday*, *Monday*, *Tuesday*, *Wednesday*, *Thursday*, *Friday*, or *Saturday* is meronymy. Sometimes meronymy is a little similar to hyponymy, but they are different in transivity. Hyponymy is always transitive, but meronymy may or may not be. A transitive example is: *nail* as a meronym of *finger*, and *finger* of *hand*. We can see that *nail* is a meronym of hand, for we can say *A hand has nails*. A non-transitive example is: *pane* is a meronym of *window*, and *window of room*; but *pane* is not a meronym of *room*, for we can not say *A room has a pane*. Or *hole* is a meronym of *button*, and *button of shirt*, but we would not want to say that *hole* is a meronym of *shirt*.

Teachers can use graphics and tables to describe meronymy. By the way of teaching meronymy, students' interest can be better cultivated, and they can learn words systematically.

4. Conclusion

In summary, the ability to use word meaning correctly and appropriately is an important part of linguistic competence. Given the complexity of word meaning and semantic relations involved, "the acquisition of word meaning is neither a simple process nor one that is ever complete" (Wilkins, 1972, p. 178). Since the acquisition of word meaning is difficult and everlasting, the exploration of effective methods for the teaching of word meaning is also a challenging and continuous process. Due to the time limited, the researcher has not conducted research on the above purposed methods which must have some limitations and drawbacks. Therefore, further study should be conducted to test the validity of the suggested methods and more effective and better methods for the improvement of vocabulary teaching and learning should be explored in the follow-up study.

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