

***The Difficulties and Semantic Elements in Teaching
Vocabulary Items***

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1. Abstract

This paper aims at emphasizing the importance of semiotic elements and difficulties in teaching vocabulary items. It summarizes the types of vocabulary, vocabulary selection, vocabulary teaching techniques proposed by various researchers, moreover, semantics as one of the most effective ways of teaching culture. The researcher mentions the role of semantic elements in vocabulary learning and teaching, problems caused by being unfamiliar with cultural semiotics of the target language. The use of semiotic elements in literature and the role of the language in teaching vocabulary lesson are taken into account.

Section one

1.1 Introduction

Background of Vocabulary Teaching

The Grammar Translation Method and the Reading Approach were the leading language teaching methodologies at that time. Both of these approaches involved a great deal of direct vocabulary teaching and learning.

(Murcia , 1991 : 296)

A- The Grammar translation method

aimed to provide the student with a detailed literary vocabulary which is learned through long lists of translated items and a bilingual dictionary and practiced through sentence translation with title opportunity to try out pronunciation.

B- The Reading approach attached more importance to vocabulary than grammatical skills .The vocabulary of the early readings was strictly controlled (Rivers;1981:20-30).

C- The Direct method made emphasis on interaction for language acquisition and acquiring an acceptable pronunciation from the beginning. It introduced vocabulary through classroom object, mime, drawings, and explanations (ibid:32-33).

D- The Oral approach and Situational Language Teaching

In Oral approach, grammar and vocabulary are carefully chosen and graded.

In Situational Language Teaching, the meaning of words was not to be given via explanation in either the mother tongue or the target language but was to be induced from the way the form was used in situation.

E- The Audio lingual Method

In this method the amount of vocabulary presented was kept low and was chosen for its simplicity. It was also stressed that knowing too much vocabulary would cause students to have a false sense of security (Thornbury; 2002:14).

F- The Communicative approach

Senel (2002:243-244) emphasized that new words are not presented in isolation, but in the context of a complete sentence, and in a meaningful situation. The words acquired meaning when they appeared with a particular definition in a determined contexts.

G- The Lexical approach

This approach stressed the importance of vocabulary as being basic to communication. It is claimed that if learners do not recognize the meaning of keywords, they will be unable to participate in the conversation, even if they know the morphology and the syntax of the foreign language (Lewis;1997:7).

In recent years, content-based instruction has gained popularity in foreign language learning and teaching. In this approach, vocabulary is completely contextualized and courses which have carefully designed the scope and the spiraling sequence of the content manage to recycle both the content and the associated vocabulary (Stryker and Leaver; 1997:291).

1.2 Types of Vocabulary

Al-Hamash (1985;19) and Berry Sesnan (2000:36) explain that there are passive and active vocabulary. Our passive vocabulary is the total number of words we understand. Our active vocabulary is the total number of words we use. For an educated person like a teacher, both the active vocabulary and the passive vocabulary are large. The passive vocabulary always be larger simply because there is so much we read and so much we hear that we don't talk or write about.

There are other divisions:

a. The Speaking Vocabulary:

It contains those words which one understands and uses without effort in one's speech. It is the smallest one.

b. The Writing Vocabulary:

This is larger than the former. It contains the items of the speaking vocabulary plus those words used in writing.

c. The Reading Vocabulary:

This includes both the previous two and usually many more words that are understood from their contexts but whose meanings are reader to be used with confidence in speech or writing (Al-Hamash; 1985:110).

1.3 Vocabulary Selection

1. The initial stages of language learning demand that a minimum of content words introduced should be mainly from among those called function words.
2. The more advanced stages require the enlargement of the learner's vocabulary. The choice of words is decided by:
 - a. frequency
 - b. ease

Utility which comes before ease is decided by

- a. frequency
- b. closeness to the needs of the learner.

Ease is determined by a variety of factors among which are

- a. The size of the word.
- b. The number of sounds and sound features contained in the word that do not exist in the native language.
- c. The deviation of the form and spelling of the word from the established morphological and spelling patterns of the language (AL-Hamash;1985:112-113).

1.4 Vocabulary Teaching :

Teaching vocabulary is a significant factor in language teaching. Since words play an important role in expressing our feelings, emotions, and ideas to others during the act of communication, foreign language teachers should attribute importance to teaching vocabulary in their classes. It is evident that communication is a mutual relationship between the speaker/writer and hearer/reader (Kim, 1996:3).\

As for semiotics, it is the study of all communication phenomena arising from and by way of signs.

There are two central concerns of semiotics. First, it deals with the relationship between the sign and its meaning. Second,

semiotic studies the way by which signs are combined through following certain rules (Kim; 1996:3).

The full mastery of vocabulary item demands the mastery of its:

- a. pronunciation
- b. spelling
- c. morphological structure
- d. and meaning

In presenting meanings of words, the following considerations are important:

1. The use of the mother tongue is to be restored to only when other methods failed, so as to save time.
2. Definition of words are useful provided they are easy enough to be understood by the learners.
3. The use of synonyms is often helpful but it can lead to some serious difficulties, because few words have exact synonyms.
4. Pictures and quick sketches on the blackboard are useful but often they have limited value, since they can demonstrate only a few words with concrete meaning.
5. Words are best presented in context because context is essential in
 - a- Showing the word
 - b- Demonstrating its meaning.
6. The study of function is an integral part of the study of the grammatical system of the language (Al-Hamash,1985:113-116).
7. The learning of a word in all its aspects demands the repetition and contents, functions and structures.
8. The teacher should pay special attention to the following types of words in the process of explaining them:
 - a- words that denote cultural objects

e.g.: cricket, bat, grammar school.

b- false cognates, words that seem to have exact counterparts in the native language but which are different from their native counterpart.

e.g.: asphalt. (Ibid:116)

c- words whose connotations differ from the connotations of their Arabic counterparts.

e.g.: old, fat, woman.

d- words whose areas of meaning overlap slightly with their counterparts in the native language.

e.g.: even, very, too.

e. words containing sounds and sound features that do not exist in Arabic.

e.g.: children, coat.

(Al-Hamash; 1985:113-116)

1.5 Word Formation

1. Forms:

One of the definitions of a morpheme (the smallest meaningful element in the language). It can be classified into free morphemes, they can be used alone and bound morphemes affixes. Affixes are bound morphemes, they cannot be used alone. Free morphemes can be classified into

- a. function words.
- b. content words.

The first include articles such as a, the, that, some, any etc. Preposition-conjunctions and auxiliary verbs. The second group content words can be classified into:

- a- nouns
- b- verbs
- c- adjectives

- d- adverbs and pronouns belong to the class of nouns.
2. Affixes are classified in terms of their position in relation to the root, into:
- a. **Prefixes:** those that occur after the root, **e.g.:** **unhappy, re-write, mismanage.**
 - b. **Suffixes:** those that occur after the root, **e.g.:** **boxes, goldener, smallerer.**
 - c. **Infixes:** those that occur within the root, **e.g.:** **write-wrote; man-men; foot-feet.** They are called repulsive.
 - d. **Super fixes:** those that occur above the root, **e.g.:** **'export-ex' port.**
3. The process of word formation which include:
- e. compounding, joining roots together to form compounds **like: father-in-law.**
 - f. affixing, the addition of affixes to roots. **like: take, mistake, mistakes.**
 - g. reduplication, the creation of words **like: zig-zag, ping-pong** (Berry Sesnan (2000:124) and Al-Hamash (1985,105-107)).
 - h. Acronymy, reducing the size of the word **like: chap man** into **chap, United Nation** into **U.N.**
 - i. blending, the formation of **smog** form **smoke**, and **fog**.
 - j. backformation, the creation of edit from **editor** in analogy.

(Al-Hamash; 1985: 105-107)

Section Two

2.1 Techniques in Presenting New Vocabulary

Murcia (1991:301-302) lists different techniques used in presenting new vocabulary as follows:

- visual aids (pictures, objects)

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Dunia T. Hameed

- word relations (synonyms, antonyms)
- pictorial schemata (Venn diagrams, grids, tree diagrams, or stepped scales)
- definition, explanation, examples and anecdotes.
- context
- word Roots and Affixes.

According to Ur (1996:63) there are different ways of presenting new vocabulary. In the following, different techniques of presenting the meaning of new vocabulary are shown:

- concise definition
- detailed description (of appearance, qualities...)
- examples (hyponyms)
- illustration (picture, object)
- context (story of sentence in which the item occurs)
- synonym
- opposite (s) (antonyms)
- translation
- associated ideas, collocations.

2.2 The Difficulties and Semiotic Elements in Vocabulary Teaching

Teachers of English have certain difficulty in teaching vocabulary items that reflect the cultural characteristics of the English language. Since colour manes, proverbs, idioms, compound words and the use of lexical items in literary texts exhibit culture specific properties. Language teachers may encounter some problems in teaching these items to their students. In the following difficulties in teaching culture-specific vocabulary items that possess semiotic elements within their nature will be summarized (oktem,2000:59).

A. The difficulties and Semiotic elements in teaching Color Names.

Oktem (2000:59) says that colour names express more or less the same meanings in many languages they may indicate different meanings among different cultures. In the following table various colors and their meanings across different cultures, are shown:

Table 1 : Various colours and their meanings across different cultures

color	Japanese	Latin American	Iraqi	Chinese	American	Turkish
Red	Blood, sun, flag, excitement, some terror	excitement, happiness, festivals	blood, bride, royal	happiness, good things	Blood, danger, communist India (redskin)	flag, hot, blood
Yellow	foolishness, crazy people, unripe, pitiful	New Year's Eve	envy	cheerfulness, cowardice, autumn	autumn, sickness, gold
Green	beginning, growth	spring	life	good luck, wealth, adultery	unripe, young, spring, envy, sickness	unripe, fresh, wish
Blue	sea, happiness	feeling blue	happiness, sky	purity	feeling blue, blue blood (noble)	sea
White	happiness	happiness	purity	mourning	Purity, race	purity, bride
Black	formality, sadness, grief	funerals	darkness, sadness, war, loneliness	mourning	funeral, race	darkness

(oktem,2000:59)

In the following color names and related meanings are given to show the existence of semiotic elements in vocabulary items related with colour:

1. Black and related meanings:

The word black can express a number of meanings in English. Some of the meanings expressed by the word black are as follows:

e.g.: According to the latest scale figures, things look very black for us. ' **things are very bad or hopeless for us**'.

2. white are related meanings.

e.g.: Her face was white as a sheet. ' **pale with fear or illness**'.

3. Red and related meanings.

e.g.: We will give him the red-carpet treatment. ' **a special ceremonial welcome to an important guest**'.

4. Yellow and related meanings.

e.g.: He is yellow. ' **not brave, coward**'.

5. Green and related meanings.

e.g.: She turned green when she smoked her first cigarette. ' **to become unhealthy pale in the because of sickness, etc**'.

6. Blue and related meanings.

e.g.: I am feeling rather blue today. ' **sad and without hope; depressed**'.

7. Grey and related meanings.

e.g.: His face turned grey as he heard the bad news. ' **of a person's face of a pale color because of sudden fear or illness**'.

B. The Difficulties and Semiotic Elements in Teaching Proverbs

Proverbs are an essential and enduring part of daily speech in all societies by stating basic principles of folk wisdom and conduct. Each language has its of own proverbs. Once the concept of the proverb is understood, students can often relate it to similar concepts in their own languages. The following proverbs can be seen in many languages (Collis;1994:ix).

e.g.: In unity there is length.

' a group of people with same goals can accomplish more than individuals can'.

e.g.: Don't judge a book by its cover.

'don't form an opinion about something based on appearance alone'.

When teaching the meanings of proverbs, language teachers can use visual materials. For example, using cartoons helps illustrate the meaning and usage of each proverb. In other words, the use of semiotic elements (using cartoons) helps students both visualize the meanings of the proverbs within their minds and accelerate the learning process in the long term memory of the students (Ibid,1994:ix).

C. The Difficulties and Semiotic Elements in Teaching Idioms.

Wallace (1988:116) states that idioms are a special form of collocation encountered by every learner. A practical definition of idiom for teaching purposes contains three elements:

1. Idioms consist of more than one word.
2. Idiom are fixed collocations.
3. Idioms are semantically opaque. Some of the idioms with their meanings are as follows:

e.g.: - Let the cat out of the bag 'reveal a secret'

- Rain cats and dogs 'rain heavily'.

Since the number of changes that can be made in idioms is very limited, idioms are fixed collocations. Another important thing which all idioms have in common is that they cannot be decoded from the literal or ordinary meaning of the words they contain: we can say that they are semantically opaque.

D. The Difficulties and Semiotic Elements in Teaching Onomatopoeic Words.

Onomatopoeia is the imitation of sound by sound. Here the sound is truly an echo to the sense. The referent itself is an acoustic experience which is more or less closely imitated by the phonetic structure of the word. Terms like, buzz, crack, growl, hum, plop, roar, squeak, squeal, whiz are onomatopic words. (Utlman;1979:84)

Since they are related with the sense of hearing, they have semiotic value. Students of English have difficulty in understanding the meanings of these onomatopoeic words as they are used to expressing these onomatopoeic words in a different way in their own languages. The following examples show the case clearly:

e.g.: The buzzing of the bees 'making a continuous low sound.

e.g.: Creaking nuts ' causing to break open nuts'

e.g.: The lion roared give a deep loudly continuing sound' (Ibid,1979:84).

E. The Difficulties and Semiotic Elements in Teaching Compound Words

In the existence of semiotic elements can be seen many compound words in English,. The examples such as shoe-maker, lambs wool, fingerprint, leather-jacket, knee deep, raincoat, mousetrap, seahorse, zebra fish, ice bag, etc., show the case clearly. However, in many compound words, the lack of semiotic elements makes it difficult for the students to understand the meanings of the compound words. The following examples show the case clearly:

e.g.: Willy-nilly 'regardless of whether it is wanted or not'

the new law will be passed willy-nilly so we will have to consider it affects us.

e.g.: Wishy-washy 'without determination or clear aims and principles'

wishy-washy ideas (Ulman, 1997:84).

2.3 Acquiring Vocabulary Through Context Based Approach.

-Rationale

Guessing vocabulary from context is the most frequent way to discover the meaning of a new words. Honey ,J(1977:69) stresses the importance of context by arguing that even with a functional vocabulary of the 3,000 most frequently occurring items in English. Learner will still not know approximately 20 percent of the items they will encounter in an un simplified text. (Kruse 1979; Nation 1980; Grain and Redman 1986) agree that to learn words in context and not in isolation is an effective vocabulary learning strategy. A word used in different contexts may have different meaning thus simply learning the definition of a word without examples of where and when the word occurs will not help learners to fully understand its meaning. Learning an isolated list of words without reference to the context is merely a memorization exercise which makes it difficult for learners to use the words in spoken and written language. Looking at the context in which the word appears seems to be best way of learning vocabulary. Good readers also take advantage of their background knowledge in processing the content and in creating expectations about the kind of vocabulary that will occur in the reading.

4. Conclusions

It is a fact that foreign language teaching should pursue the god of providing the learner not only with linguistics , but with on intercultural competence

Students know vocabulary development is essential for them to learn English, but often they do not have a clear understanding of how to go about really learning vocabulary, helping students

understand how complex a task they are facing giving them the tools to learn vocabulary and making them work with the words.

Motivating students to become autonomous vocabulary learners is important in foreign language teaching. If the teachers teaches the students morphology, syntax, semantics and the pragmatics of word, students become autonomous to some extent because they may decipher the meanings of words by making use of the grammatical knowledge. Motivating students to use Computer-assisted vocabulary teaching programmes can also lead to autonomous vocabulary learning.

In conclusion, it can be stated that language teachers should master not only the sound and spelling system but also the lexicon and the semiotics of the English language.

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