

How to Teach Vocabulary: Based on Effect of Semantic Transparency upon English Vocabulary Acquisition

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Abstract

This paper focuses on the vocabulary teaching strategy of semantic transparency (ST). In today's increasingly rigid vocabulary teaching, ST appear to be particularly important. This study elaborates on how to effectively teach vocabulary by enhancing ST, that is, by using lexical structure and word formation components to clarify semantics. This method helps students to understand polysemous words and compound words more accurately, remember vocabulary for a longer time, and improve the accuracy of vocabulary use. This paper provides new ideas for vocabulary teaching innovation, helps teachers optimize teaching strategies, and promotes students' vocabulary learning effectiveness.

Keywords

Semantic transparency; Vocabulary; English teaching.

1. Introduction

1.1. Background

Vocabulary plays a prominent role in English learning. Vocabulary is the basis for improving students' listening, speaking, reading and writing[6]. The English Curriculum Standards for Compulsory Education (2022) and the English Curriculum Standards for Senior High Schools (2017 edition, revised in 2020) both pointed out that acquiring vocabulary does not mean simply memorizing the pronunciation, spelling and meaning of words, but also includes understanding certain knowledge of word formation. More importantly, learning vocabulary means using words in contextualized activities such as listening, speaking, reading, spelling, and writing to comprehend and express information or ideas related to a variety of topics.

Semantic transparency refers to the degree of correlation between the meaning of each morpheme and the meaning of the whole word in a multi-morpheme word. Multi-morpheme words are very common in English vocabulary[3], at the same time, the representation and processing of multi-morpheme words is also a hot topic in the study of mental lexicon[9,11]. Vocabulary learning is a process of long-term accumulation. Li et al. proposed that without memory strategies and metacognitive awareness, it is difficult to master vocabulary effectively[4]. Therefore, teachers must pay more attention to vocabulary teaching and actively explore effective vocabulary teaching methods to improve the efficiency of students' vocabulary learning.

In view of the fact that simple vocabulary does not require teachers' intentional teaching to assist students' memory, this study intend to take multi-morpheme words as an example to explore the effect of enhancing ST upon Chinese senior high school students' English vocabulary learning and provide practical suggestions based on this.

1.2. Purpose and significance of the study

Firstly, this study is helpful for teachers to enhance their awareness of ST. Teachers can distinguish words according to ST and conduct classified teaching to improve the quality of

vocabulary teaching, consciously cultivate students' learning strategies. Secondly, this study contributes to the improvement and transformation of students' learning strategies. When encountering new words, students should pay attention to what type of multi-morpheme words belong to (derived, inflected or compound), whether they contain roots and affixes, the level of ST, and whether we can remember words or infer the meaning of words based on morphemes. Finally, this study is conducive to exploring English vocabulary teaching methods for teachers. Through this study, teachers are led to explore a variety of vocabulary teaching methods, innovate the old and single vocabulary teaching modes, increase students' participation, enhance students' interest in vocabulary learning, and raise teaching efficiency.

2. Effect of Semantic Transparency Upon English Vocabulary Learning

In recent years, there have been some domestic researchers study on ST. For example, researchers found that the proportion of fully transparent and translucent compound words in the two languages was higher, while the proportion of fully obscure compound words was lower[17,24]. It is found that under the condition of low repetition rate, the learning effect of words with high ST is significantly better than that of words with low ST[3], while under the condition of high repetition rate, there is no significant difference in the learning effect of words with high ST and low ST [1,10]. Therefore, it is necessary to improve the repetition rate of words with low ST [19,21]. Other studies showed that ST affects the representation and processing of multi-morpheme words. Libben et al. pointed out that, when the semantics are transparent, the priming effect of the priming word on the target word is significant[12]. When the semantics are obscure, the priming words have little priming effect on the target words. Researches demonstrated that ST affects the representation of compound words using the morpheme repetition priming method[6]. In terms of children's vocabulary learning, researchers pointed out that transparent words have a promoting effect on vocabulary learning. In the processing of transparent words, there is morpheme decomposition, while opaque words are processed in the way of whole words[4].

3. Current Situation of Vocabulary Teaching in Middle School

In the compulsory education stage, students have a basic understanding of the sound, form and meaning of words. In senior high school, vocabulary teaching should focus on the depth and breadth of vocabulary use. Nowadays, although learners are fully aware of the importance of vocabulary learning, there are still problems such as large amount of memorized words, poor memory effect, and inability to use words, which affect the cultivation of students' language ability and the development of the core competence of the English subject[7]. As a result, they are not interested in English learning and the low efficiency of learning still exists.

3.1. The separate establishment of vocabulary teaching is out of touch with teaching activities

Vocabulary teaching, a crucial part of language education, currently predominantly manifests in the form of isolated language point learning that takes place right before the introduction of new teaching units. Regrettably, this approach often results in a lack of deliberate and engaging vocabulary activities, which fails to fully stimulate students' interest and enthusiasm for vocabulary acquisition. One of the prevalent methods employed by teachers to handle vocabulary is to assign students the task of previewing the text prior to the class. During this previewing process, students are required to mark the Chinese meanings of the unfamiliar words within the text. This simple act is intended to familiarize students with the new words in advance. However, it mainly focuses on rote memorization of meanings rather than deep understanding. Another common approach is the explanation of the vocabulary list. Teachers

guide students to read through the vocabulary list found in the appendix of the textbook. They briefly touch upon the basic meanings of the words, and then make an attempt to expand on the derivations of the vocabulary, such as introducing related prefixes, suffixes, or root words. In this process, teachers single out some key words among the list, deeming them more important or frequently used. These key words receive more concentrated explanation, including detailed illustrations of their usage in different contexts, collocations with other words, and even examples from real-life scenarios. Yet, despite these efforts, the overall teaching still lacks a comprehensive and interactive approach to truly enhance students' vocabulary mastery.

3.2. The single form of vocabulary processing ignores the comprehension and application of words in context

Teachers often place a significant emphasis on the pronunciation and meaning of words during the teaching process. In the crucial part of language acquisition, they typically adopt a rather traditional approach. For instance, they mainly give example sentences to illustrate the usage of words, painstakingly explain the different parts of speech each word can assume, and meticulously distinguish between synonyms to help students understand the nuances[23]. Drawing on their own years of teaching experience, teachers single out what they believe to be the key words that frequently appear in exams, or those words that have rich connotations and numerous derivatives. After presenting these words, they provide a plethora of examples, ranging from simple and straightforward ones to more complex and contextually rich ones. Subsequently, they design a series of exercises such as translation tasks and fill-in-the-blank questions to enable students to consolidate their understanding. However, the classroom teaching mode is predominantly teacher-centered, where the teacher does most of the explaining, and students are left with the tasks of taking copious notes and mechanically doing exercises. This makes the learning process rather dull and unengaging. As a result, students mainly interact with and practice vocabulary at the level of isolated words and single sentences, and they sorely lack the ability to comprehend and apply vocabulary appropriately within authentic contexts, which greatly hinders their overall language proficiency development.

3.3. Learners lack guidance on vocabulary learning strategies

English words, in fact, have an elaborate set of formation rules. For example, the use of prefixes like "anti-" (meaning against, as in "antibiotic") and suffixes such as "-tion" (which often turns a verb into a noun, like "education" from "educate") can be systematically understood. When students grasp these rules, it becomes easier for them to decipher the meaning of new words they encounter. Moreover, the ability to use context and semantic clues is crucial for reading. By analyzing the surrounding words and sentence structures, students can make reasonable guesses about unfamiliar words. However, in reality, these reading strategies are frequently overlooked in the classroom. Teachers may be more inclined to quickly move on to the next grammar point or text, not spending enough time training students in these vital skills. As the proverb goes, "Give people fish and you feed them for a day. Teach them how to fish and you feed them for a lifetime." In vocabulary teaching, concentrating solely on pronunciation, meaning, and usage is inadequate. Mechanical teaching methods, like simply asking students to copy word definitions multiple times or recite long lists of words, result in fragmented learning. Students end up memorizing words in isolation, unable to use them flexibly in real-life communication. This not only impedes their progress in English learning but also dampens their enthusiasm for the language, as they struggle to see the practical application and enjoyment in such a monotonous learning process.

4. Strategies

To teach vocabulary, the first thing to know is what to teach. In other words, what aspects of vocabulary should be taught? As shown in Table 1, generally speaking, form, meaning, and usage. Traditional teaching methods are often rigid and inflexible, and it is difficult to mobilize students' enthusiasm and interest for learning effectively, so that students cannot really understand the vocabulary thoroughly. The teaching method of promoting ST pays more attention to guiding students to deeply explore the connotation and logical connection of vocabulary.

In teaching practice, how to effectively stimulate students' enthusiasm for vocabulary learning and significantly improve the actual efficiency of vocabulary learning is always a key issue to be overcome. Table 2 clearly shows the significant difference between the traditional vocabulary teaching method, which focuses on mechanical indoctrination, and the teaching method dedicated to promoting vocabulary ST, which focuses more on guiding students to explore the connotation and logical connections of words. In view of this, based on my own practical experience and relevant literature at home and abroad, the author puts forward several teaching suggestions based on ST, hoping to provide new ideas and directions for vocabulary teaching.

Table 1. The components of vocabulary

Form	Meaning	Usage
pronunciation		subcategorization
spelling	basic and literal meanings	collocation
inflections	derived and figurative meanings	sociolinguistic and stylistic
derivations	semantic relation connotation	restrictions
		slangs and idioms

4.1. Separate teaching of Sematic Transparency for different vocabulary

Teachers, in the pursuit of more effective vocabulary instruction, can make a significant impact by distinguishing words based on their ST levels during lesson preparation. When dealing with words that have a high ST, it is crucial to clearly differentiate between compound words and derivative words. For compound words, such as "blackboard" which is composed of "black" and "board", the focus should be on explaining the related morphemes, as this helps students understand how the combination of two simple words creates a new meaning[8]. For derivative words like "unhappiness" (derived from "happy" with the prefix "un -" and the suffix "-ness"), emphasizing the roots and affixes gives students the tools to break down complex words. As students accumulate more lexical knowledge, multi - morpheme words can become less semantically transparent. However, for words with low ST, teachers have alternative and engaging methods. They can use etymology, like explaining how the word "panic" originated from the Greek god Pan and his habit of causing sudden fear in people. Allusions, such as referring to "Achilles' heel" to teach the concept of a fatal weakness, can also be very effective. Additionally, pictures can be used to visually represent words like "cactus", helping students establish a strong connection between the word and its meaning. These approaches can greatly enhance students' vocabulary - learning experience.

Table 2. The traditional vocabulary teaching method and the method of enhancing semantic transparency

	traditional vocabulary teaching method	the method of enhancing semantic transparency
Step 1	The teacher followed the vocabulary list. Before teaching a new lesson, the teacher will explain it in the order of the vocabulary list. The first step is to lead the students to spell the words according to the phonetic symbols and ask a few students at random to demonstrate. Most of the students can explain the meaning of the words after reading correctly.	Before the teacher explains the vocabulary, first introduce the meanings of the roots and affixes contained in the target vocabulary to the students in Grade One. When memorizing words, we should consciously pay attention to the roots and affixes, and remember through the roots and affixes. At the same time, the meaning of some words is closely related to the etymology, and we can remember these words through the etymology. After students understand the basic meanings of the roots and affixes, they learn the words.
Step 2	Teachers explain vocabulary usage and fixed collocations through blackboard writing or courseware. In the actual class, teachers often list the words and meanings in isolation, and attach a few simple example sentences or pictures.	The students spell the phonetic symbols by themselves, and then the teacher corrects them. Then, ask the students to guess whether the word can be divided into several parts according to the knowledge they have learned. The teacher explains the meanings of the morphemes of each part to the students and gives examples. Some words are suitable for the explanation of the etymology of allusions. At the same time, according to the attention hypothesis, the use of bold, underline and other ways to attract students' attention, so that students consciously pay attention to the form of the target language.
Step 3	The students practice making sentences. Give students a better understanding of how words are used in sentences. After clearing the vocabulary barrier, let the students read and learn.	The students practice making sentences. According to students' knowledge, teachers can choose to let students translate from Chinese to English or from Chinese to English. Then, ask the students to draw the fixed collocations in the example sentences to strengthen their memory. In addition, context in example sentences increases semantic transparency. At the same time, expand the words with the same root affix to enhance memory.

4.2. Cultivate students' ability of guessing words according to the context

For words with high ST, teachers can play a pivotal guiding role[2]. They can encourage students to make intelligent guesses by combining their knowledge of morphemes or roots and affixes with the context. For example, when encountering the word "supermarket", students, aware that "super -" often means "above" or "more" and "market" is a place for trading, can easily surmise its meaning as a large - scale trading place. When the meaning of the target word

is relatively transparent, this approach allows students to quickly deduce the word's meaning based on related morphemes. This not only enriches their vocabulary but also significantly boosts their reading comprehension, as they can smoothly progress through texts without constantly relying on dictionaries. In contrast, for words with low transparency, relying solely on guessing strategies often leads to misinterpretations. Take the word "pragmatic" for instance. If students simply try to break it down by morphemes without proper context, they might struggle to grasp its real meaning of being practical and realistic. Thus, it is essential for teachers to offer learners a rich context. This could be in the form of sample sentences, short passages, or real - life scenarios. By examining the context, students can validate their initial guesses. Once they detect any semantic discrepancies, they are prompted to abandon their over - reliance on morphemes and instead, fully understand the word in its proper context.

4.3. Use a variety of ways to highlight important content

In the teaching process, teachers have a plethora of effective ways to better highlight the key points. When it comes to PPT presentation, the clever adjustment of font size is a frequently - used and straightforward means. For example, for crucial knowledge points like the rules of word formation in English vocabulary teaching, teachers can enlarge and bold the font. This simple action immediately draws students' eyes to the most important parts. Additionally, using eye - catching color - changing processing can further enhance the effect. Just as in a math class, the teacher might mark the definition of a complex theorem with red to make it stand out vividly, and highlight the corresponding formula with blue, creating a visual hierarchy that helps students quickly distinguish different elements. During the lecture, the teacher's voice modulation plays a vital role. By flexibly raising the tone of voice when introducing important concepts, such as emphasizing the significance of context in understanding low - transparency words, the teacher can jolt students' attention. Conversely, timely reducing the tone can create a solemn and thinking - conducive atmosphere. For instance, when posing a thought - provoking question related to the teaching content, the teacher lowers the voice, leaving students in a moment of quiet contemplation. Moreover, offering reasonable pauses, say, for about 5 - 10 seconds after explaining a complex idea, gives students time to digest and absorb the knowledge. These combined techniques can successfully attract students' attention to the key content, ultimately improving the overall teaching effect.

5. Conclusion

In short, vocabulary teaching is an arduous and cumulative process that demands unwavering effort and infinite patience from both teachers and students. During English vocabulary learning, students often find themselves entangled in the web of negative transfer from their native language. For example, Chinese - speaking students may struggle with the correct usage of prepositions like "in", "on", and "at" because the concept of prepositional usage in Chinese is less distinct. This makes it extremely challenging for them to apply vocabulary in the appropriate context. Therefore, teachers play a pivotal role in creating a conducive context for students' knowledge meaning construction. The content presented should be carefully crafted to aid students in understanding and memorizing the target vocabulary. An overly abstract context, such as using complex philosophical texts to teach basic vocabulary, is counterproductive as it fails to help students acquire and internalize the words. Instead, teachers should shun the fragmented and context - free vocabulary teaching methods that merely focus on rote memorization of isolated words. For instance, when teaching the word "grocery", rather than just providing a definition, teachers can create a context related to students' daily life, like a dialogue in a grocery store. This context not only closely connects with students' original knowledge and experiences but also allows them to practice using the word in a practical situation. By doing so, it can achieve a far better vocabulary teaching effect.

In conclusion, teachers should subtly infiltrate various methods and strategies into daily teaching. For example, through regular reading exercises with context - rich materials, students can continuously practice the skills of inferring word meanings from context. This consistent practice will gradually enhance their language proficiency and enable them to use vocabulary more accurately and fluently.

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