



Vocabulary Teaching in College from the Perspective of Semantics

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How to cite this paper: Fengping Cheng. (2024). Vocabulary Teaching in College from the Perspective of Semantics. *The Educational Review, USA*, 8(12), 1515-1519. DOI: 10.26855/er.2024.12.016

Received: November 18, 2024

Accepted: December 16, 2024

Published: January 14, 2025

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Abstract

Vocabulary teaching has always been the cornerstone of traditional English education, forming the foundation upon which more advanced language skills are built. It is of paramount importance not only in traditional, text-based classrooms but also in those that adopt multimedia or communicative teaching methods. These diverse teaching styles, each with its own strengths and approaches, all recognize the critical role that vocabulary plays in enabling students to communicate effectively in English. However, despite the advancements in teaching methodologies and the increasing complexity of language learning materials, it is still common to find college students heavily relying on the vocabulary they acquired in middle school. In response to this challenge, this paper delves into the various strategies for vocabulary teaching in college English. It explores the concept of semantic fields, which group words together based on their meanings and usage, helping students build a more coherent and interconnected vocabulary. The paper also discusses collocational theory, which examines the patterns of word combinations that occur naturally in language. Furthermore, the paper considers the importance of semantic features, which refer to the specific characteristics of a word that define its meaning. By focusing on these features, educators can help students to differentiate between similar words and to understand the nuances of meaning that exist within the English language. The paper also touches on associative meaning, which refers to the additional layers of meaning that words can carry based on their cultural, historical, and personal contexts. By exploring these associations, students can develop a deeper understanding of the language and its complexities. Finally, the paper discusses lexical relations, which describe the relationships between words within a language. These relationships can include synonyms, antonyms, hyponyms, and hypernyms, and by understanding them, students can expand their vocabulary more effectively and develop a more nuanced understanding of language structure and usage.

Keywords

Semantic Field; Collocational Theory; Semantic Features; Associative Meaning; Lexical Relations

1. Introduction

Vocabulary teaching has consistently been a focal point in the realm of college English instruction, posing significant challenges for both educators and learners alike. The sheer volume of vocabulary encountered in texts, especially in

articles spanning approximately 1,000 words, often leaves teachers feeling overwhelmed and uncertain about the best approach to introduce and explain the myriad of new words and phrases. On one hand, teachers strive to balance contextual understanding with the necessity of defining unfamiliar terms, yet the extensive list of vocabulary can seem daunting, making it challenging to decide which words merit detailed explanation and which can be left for students to infer from context.

Students, on the other hand, often find themselves floundering in this sea of vocabulary. Confronted with numerous unfamiliar terms, they may resort to the glossary as a quick fix, scribbling down definitions in the margins of their texts. This habit, while seemingly diligent, can lead to a superficial understanding of the words, with students merely retaining the definitions without truly grasping their nuances or how they are used in sentences. Furthermore, as exam dates loom, the sight of students engrossed in repetitive writing exercises, transcribing words and phrases onto paper in an attempt to commit them to memory, becomes a common spectacle. This mechanical approach to memorization, while perhaps effective in short-term retention, raises questions about its long-term efficacy.

The issue at hand is not merely the quantity of vocabulary but the quality of learning. Merely reciting definitions and copying words onto paper may lead to short-lived recall, but it does not guarantee a deep understanding or the ability to use the vocabulary correctly in real-life communication.

It is not surprising at all to see that students still have no idea how to make use of the words or phrases in their daily speech or writing assignments, even for those who said they memorized many words. As the research indicates, the vocabulary that students used in the composition writing of the Test for College English Band-4 (CET-4) is still the word they learned in high school. Even though they use some new words learned in college, there is a great tendency for them to misuse them.

Both teachers and students are fully aware of the necessity and importance of vocabulary teaching and learning, which lays a significant foundation for the aim of achieving proficiency in English. This term paper focuses on vocabulary teaching in college from the perspective of semantics. There are ways to teach vocabulary in terms of semantic field, collocational theory, semantic features, associative meaning, and lexical relations.

2. Ways to Teach Vocabulary

2.1 Semantic field

The concept of a semantic field is a crucial aspect of lexicology that highlights the organized structure within a language's vocabulary. It represents a distinct subset of words that are related to a particular general term or concept. This grouping allows for a more nuanced understanding of how words are interconnected and how they contribute to the overall meaning-making system of a language.

Take the kinship semantic field as an example. This field encompasses a range of terms used to describe relatives, such as grandparents, parents, brothers, sisters, uncles, and more. These words share a common denominator—kinship—and together, they form a cohesive group within the larger lexicon. This grouping not only facilitates communication about family relationships but also reflects the cultural and social constructs around kinship within a given society.

By examining semantic fields, learners can gain insights into how language evolves, how words are related to each other, and how they contribute to the overall richness and complexity of a language. Understanding semantic fields thus helps in a deeper appreciation of language and its role in shaping human thought and communication.

According to the theory of the semantic field, words are interrelated with each other semantically. They form a complete system or network (Huijuan Chen & Xia Zhao, 2023). For example, the semantic field of fruit may include apple, banana, orange, grape, and coconut. The semantic field of meat may include beef, pork, mutton, sausage, and shrimp. The semantic field of vegetables may include cabbage, spinach, cucumber, pea and mushroom. Grain may include rice, wheat, barley, corn. While, fruit, meat, vegetable and grain form the semantic field of food. On thinking of any word in the semantic field, students will recall any other one.

Take the text *A Virtual Life* as an example. In this essay, the author Maia Szalavitz explores digital reality and its consequences. She also compares the digital world to the “real” world, acknowledging the attractions of the electronic dimension. Centering on the theme of a virtual life, we may obtain such semantic field as: Internet mailing list, computer-assisted, take data in, Net critics, cyber-interaction, typed dialogue, and restore balance. etc. It will be an efficient way for students to learn those words by heart if they understand that those words actually form the semantic field indicated as above.

Moreover, students should be motivated to recall and learn as many words as possible that fall within the same semantic field. Taking the semantic field of "internet and cyberspace" as an example, students are not only required to grasp fundamental vocabulary such as "surf the Internet" and "online shopper," but they should also delve deeper into more

specialized expressions.

Terms like "log in" and "log out," which are essential for navigating online platforms, should be part of their repertoire. Furthermore, students should familiarize themselves with concepts related to the darker side of the internet, such as "cyberterrorism," which refers to criminal activities carried out using computer technology. Understanding such terms not only broadens their vocabulary but also enhances their awareness of cybersecurity issues.

Moreover, expressions like "junk mail" and "cyberspace" are crucial for understanding the online environment. "Junk mail" refers to unsolicited emails that often clutter inboxes, while "cyberspace" is a metaphorical term used to describe the virtual environment created by computer networks.

Additionally, the rise of blogging has led to the popularization of terms like "blogger," which refers to someone who maintains a blog. Incorporating these terms into their vocabulary allows students to keep up with the evolving language of the internet.

By teaching through the theory of semantic fields, educators can help students expand their vocabulary in a faster and more effective manner. This approach encourages students to make connections between related words, which not only aids in memory retention but also fosters a deeper understanding of the language.

2.2 Collocational theory

Collocation is a relation within a syntactic unit between individual lexical elements (Fangfang Gao, 2023). It is used especially where words specifically or habitually go together. For example, blond collocates with hair in blond hair or their hair is blond.

Sinclair had a thorough study of the collocational example of the word "back" used before the verb.

You arrived back on the Thursday / May bring it back into fashion / We climbed back up on the stepladder / They had come back to England / She never cut back on flowers / It possibly dates back to the war / The bearer drew back in fear / We drove back to Cambridge / You can fall back on something definite / I flew back home in a light aircraft / He flung back the drapes joyously / Don't try to hold her back / She lay back in the darkness / He leaned back in his chair / He looked back at her, and their eyes met / Pay me back for all you took from me / Pulled back the bedclothes and climbed into bed / I pushed back my chair and made to rise / Shall I put it back in the box for you / She sat back and crossed her legs / Edward was sent back to school / He shouted back / The girl stared back / They started walking back to Fifth Avenue / He stepped back and said / He then stood back for a minute / The woman threw head back / These could be traced back to the early sixties / He turned back to the bookshelf / She walked back to the bus stop / We waved back like anything

Sinclair categorized all kinds of collocation before and after the word "back". He reached the conclusion that: First, the collocation of words seems changeable, as a matter of fact, it follows some certain patterns; Second, the occurrence of words appearing simultaneously in two kinds of collocational patterns is seldom beyond once; Third, the evidence we possess now cannot prove that the collocational pattern can be reflected into the semantic structures.

Collocation in collocational theory does not refer to any kind of collocation in any sense. It is different from the collocation in idioms and it also differs from free word combination. It is kind of in-between. For example, "to button up your lips", "to kick the bucket", and "to hit the ceiling" are the collocation in idioms. "To take the bus", "to buy a cup of beer", and "to explode a house" are free word combinations. "tables of content", "flat bee", and "explode a myth" are collocations in the sense of collocational theory.

Collins Cobuild English Language Dictionary is the most complete dictionary on collocation. Students should be encouraged to consult dictionaries as often as they can. Some college students even have no dictionaries at hand, which does no good to their English study. There are lots of collocation patterns in dictionaries, which might shed light on their study. A successful English learner should be able to teach himself or herself with the help of dictionaries.

2.3 Semantic features

Some linguists believe that the whole meaning of a word can be divided into several different components or factors. The analysis of these components is so-called componential analysis. Semantic features are the abstract generalizations of the human experience. They belong to metalanguage, which is used to describe the semantic meaning of the language (Yu Wang, 2024).

When we define the semantic features of a noun, the different angles from which we analyze, the different semantic features it will result in. Take the noun "mother" as an example. Mother = [Human] + [Female] + [Adult]; a mother is a female adult in the biological perspective. In the kinship perspective, mother = [Lineal] + [First Ascending Generation] + [Female].

It is difficult to define the semantic features of words loaded with rich connotations. For example, we can also define the word mother from a sociological perspective. Mother=[Married]+[Social]+[Complex Thought]. Therefore, if the inner semantic features are to be defined specially, we cannot do that without the language context in which the word is located. For instance, “He doesn’t want any special treatment,” says night manager Johnny Baker, who struggles to call the boss by his first name as a recent corporate memo commands. (College English 2 the new edition Page 34)

The memo is a short-term memorandum. Most people would think of “Bei Wang Lu” as its Chinese equivalence, meaning a note of something to be remembered. But when we take a second thought, we may know that memo means something different in this context. The word “memo” can mean a usually brief short communication for interoffice circulation in American English. In another case, literature can be printed information produced by organizations that want to sell something or tell people about something. For instance: Do you have any sales literature available?

Yet another example is the word “Friday”. The word itself indicates a time or a date. While in the phrase like Robinson’s man Friday, it is well-known to us that Friday is a male adult. Its semantic feature goes like this: Friday=[Man]+[Animate]+[Adult]. It has nothing to do with time or a date.

Therefore, students should not only have a basic understanding of the words but also have a general idea of the context of the text. The context in which the word is in should be taken into consideration since a word is known by the company it keeps.

2.4 Associative meaning

Leech (1981, p. 9) proposed seven types of meaning, which include conceptual meaning, connotative meaning, social meaning, affective meaning, reflected meaning, collocative meaning, and thematic meaning. Connotative meaning, social meaning, affective meaning, reflected meaning and collocative meaning are so-called associative meaning.

Take the word “peasant” as an example. Most students would take “Nong Min” as its Chinese equivalent. But the two are actually quite different in many aspects. For Chinese people, Nong Min indicates something that could not be conveyed by the word “peasant”. The associative meaning of the word “Nong Min” is as time goes by. When we speak of “Nong Min”, what comes to our mind is an image that a person who undergoes a lot of difficulties and miseries in the old days turns into a person who enjoys much better living conditions and welfare nowadays. For instance, we have such phrases as “Nong Min Ke Xue Jia”, and “Nong Min Qi Ye Jia”.

Webster’s Third New International Dictionary of the English Language interprets the word ‘peasant’ as a rather uneducated uncouth person in the lower income group. Collins COBUILD English Language Dictionary explains that if you refer to someone as a peasant, you are saying that they are rude or ignorant.

To think of it, the word peasant originated from old French, which indicates a strong negative meaning. It was used to name the lower layer of society in the old times. It is related to a lower status or a disrespectful origin. From this point of view, the word peasant is not quite an adequate equivalence of the Chinese “Nong Min”. In this case, it is necessary for students to have an idea of the associative meaning of the word peasant. Otherwise, students are likely to misuse the word.

The dictionary presents us with the conceptual meaning of the words. The conceptual meaning is stable and standard, which means the same for all language learners. Therefore, the concept of the words forms the core of the meaning of the words. In contrast, the associative meaning is unstable. It is influenced by such factors as culture, experience, belief, social background, etc.

In the process of vocabulary teaching, teachers should attach great importance to the conceptual meaning of the words. Meanwhile, they should not ignore the associative meaning of the words. Take “statesman” and “politician” as an example. Their conceptual meaning is the same, which means a political or government leader. However, they possess different associative meanings. “Statesman” indicates a leader who is respected as being wise, honorable, and fair. “Politician” indicates a leader who is skilled at dealing with people or using the situation in an organization to bring advantage to themselves. That’s why it is appropriate to describe Premier Zhou Enlai as a capable statesman, but not a capable politician.

2.5 Lexical relations

Lexical relations include homonymy, polysemy, synonymy, antonymy, hyponymy, part-whole relationships, etc. Homonymy is two or more lexemes or words with the same form and same sound, but different in meaning. Polysemy is one lexeme or word with a variety of referents. Synonymy is a word that has the same, or nearly the same, meaning as another word. Antonymy is a word that is opposite in meaning to another word. Hyponymy is a subordinate, specific term whose referent is included in the referent of a superordinate term.

Take synonymy as a case. Synonymy is the relation between two lexical units with a shared meaning. It is generally

agreed that the absolute synonymy is non-existent. The absolute synonymy is the one that can replace each other in any circumstance. Usually, the synonymy shares the conceptual meaning but differs in other aspects. For example, the difference in the register, that is the formal usage or the informal usage of the words. “Steed” is usually used in the writing of poems. “Horse” is a common usage. “Nag” is the slang language. “gee-gee” is the language used by children. “Domicile” is quite formal, while “residence” is formal, “abode” is used in poems, and “home” is the common language.

An antonym is word that is opposite in meaning to another word. There are gradable antonyms and non-gradable antonyms. If terms A and B are gradable antonyms and if A can be used to describe a particular referent, then B cannot be used to describe the same referent, and vice versa. If A and B are non-gradable antonyms, if A cannot describe a referent, then that referent must be described by B, and vice versa. Some antonyms are gradable because there are often intermediate forms between the two members of a pair. Therefore, it is a matter of degree. For example, freezing---cold---chilly---cool---lukewarm---warm---hot. A pair of complementary antonyms is characterized by the feature that the denial of one member of the pair implies the assertion of the other. For example, dead-alive, boy-girl, man-woman, male-female, brother-sister, married-single.

Pairs of words that exhibit the reversal of a relationship between the two items are called relational opposites. For example, buy-sell, give-receive, lend-borrow, husband-wife, parent-child, left-right.

In the process of vocabulary teaching, lexical relations are better to be defined between words. Students may be impressed by the different lexical relations between words, thus having a better understanding of them.

3. Conclusion

To sum up, there are various ways to teach vocabulary in terms of semantic field, collocational theory, semantic features, associative meaning, and lexical relations in the process of college English teaching. Vocabulary teaching in college is as crucial as it was in middle school. College teachers should be aware of different ways of vocabulary teaching and put different theories into practice. Only a thorough understanding of such theories as a semantic field, collocational theory, semantic features, associative meaning, and lexical relations, could lead to a successful process of vocabulary teaching.

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