

COPING WITH LEXIS IN LANGUAGE TEACHING

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The aim of this paper has been to point out some lexical problems and suggest ways of overcoming them, thus facilitating the acquisition of lexis. It also suggests that lexis is not only single words, but multi-word units, and the learner's attention should be directed to larger chunks of language such as collocations and idioms. Consequently lexis should be appropriately organised and learning strategies devised.

Introduction

Most language learners maintain that unknown vocabulary items are at the root of their language - learning problems and whenever they stop at a difficult word in a text they consult their pocket-size bilingual dictionaries. Although the development of a substantial core vocabulary is of significant importance and the dictionary, when used judiciously, does play an important role in the process of acquiring it, the overuse of such materials should be discouraged as they can seriously impede advanced linguistic development. In addition to its meaning, knowing a word is knowing its form, morphology, relation to other words and grammatical features.

What is lexis? Some basic problems.

Lexis can be thought of as words found listed and explained in dictionaries, but the meaning of most words is governed, in part, by the presence in the language of other words whose semantic functions are related in one or more ways to the same area of situational environment or culture (Robins, 1980). So words can be treated as "containers" of meaning or as fulfilling "roles" within a situation

described by a sentence, and they also have "relationships" (Yule, 1985). To describe different lexical relations, the following terms are used: synonyms - two words with very closely related meanings, e.g. *hide - conceal, answer - reply, big - large*, etc.; antonyms - two words with opposite meanings, e.g. *true-false, tall-short, open-close*, etc.; hyponyms - when one word is included in the meaning of another, e.g. *mackarel-fish, cat-animal, apple-fruit*, etc.; meronyms - when a thing is part of a superordinate form, e.g. *body-arm*,. Some other less well-known are: homophones - when two different (written) forms have the same pronunciation, e.g. *break-brake, two-too, flower-flour*, etc.; homonyms - when one form (written or spoken) has two or more related meanings, e.g. *bat* (used in sports) - *bat* (flying creature), *pupil* (in the eye) - *pupil* (in school) etc. Relatedness of meaning accompanying identical form is called polisemy.

Another aspect of our knowledge of words is quite different from the forementioned factors. It is collocation. Collocations are those combinations of words which occur together in an established partnership and with great frequency. There are no good reasons, grammatical or lexical why they go together, but they just do and should be learned in their partnership, rather than separately, e.g. *obtain / produce / achieve / gain * / win* a result. The first three often collocate with "result", *gain* is possible but unusual, and *win* does not collocate at all.

Idioms are among the most common lexical phrases. "They are relatively-fixed expressions when the meaning on the whole is not transparent from the meanings of the constituent words" (Lewis, 1997). An idiom is fixed and recognized by a native speaker, e.g. "At the meeting *I felt a bit out of my depth*." If you are out of your depth you are likely to be in a situation which you do not understand for some reason. "*Depth*" here has a metaphorical meaning.

Metaphors and idioms pervade all language including everyday speech and writing. They are also important because the metaphorical use of a word is more common than its literal use. This often poses serious problems to the learner, which cannot be solved solely by the use of an unsuitable dictionary.

In addition to these lexical items, some other areas of lexis might prove difficult to deal with such as colloquial language or slang (e.g. *bloke, tear-jerker, come off it*, etc.), difficult word pairs (e.g. *lie - lay*), alliterative expressions (e.g. *mish-mash, flip-flops*) and rhyming expressions (e.g. *nitty-gritty, willy-nilly, la-di-da*, etc.).

The area of lexis called sexism is also worth noting when listening to and reading authentic material. The most common words in current English are probably *bimbo* (toy-boy), *wimp*, *whiz-kid* and *mate*. They are used to refer to stereotypical portrayal of men and women in society. Words ending in -man, such as *chairman*, have annoyed some feminists who see them as sexist. This area of lexis is often an area of personal taste and public controversy.

Connotation may be considered another problematic point in lexis acquisition. The connotations of a word are the ideas and qualities that are associated with it beyond its basic meaning. *Slim* and *thin* have precisely the same meaning when describing a person, but have different connotations. *Slim* suggests "not at all fat, of ideal waist size", while *thin* suggest "underweight, possibly to an

unhealthy degree". Similarly, there is a different connotation between these pairs of words: *lean-skinny*, *use-exploit*, *jump-leap*, etc.

Finally, the English used in formal written communications is in some ways different from the English used in informal conversation. Part of "knowing a word" is knowing in what circumstances it would be possible to use, for instance, offspring or kids instead of children.

Organising lexis

As the human mind tends to cluster semantically related words, the method of teaching vocabulary, taking into account the psychological relatedness of the meaning of words, would prove extremely efficient. So in order to make lexis more accessible to learners, we must find helpful ways of organising it.

Topic is very useful as an organising principle for traditional vocabulary and most coursebook units follow this principle. Words can be organised around topics such as: Crime and Punishment, Travelling, The Environment, Fashion and Clothes, Advertising and many others.

Related word groups is another organising principle. Words may be grouped according to different criteria. Animals, for example, may be grouped in terms of physical or perceptual features; they may also be grouped in terms of nonphysical features such as: pet, wild, food, etc. From a stylistic point of view, the verbs like steal, pilfer, lift, pinch, swipe and snitch may be grouped in terms of being formal (steal, pilfer), colloquial (lift, pinch) and slang (swipe, snitch).

Some other word related groups are: body related word groups, types of books, ways of reading, drinking, driving, friends, money, materials and many others.

Collocation forms a central feature of a lexical view of language and noticing collocations is a central pedagogical activity (Lewis, 1997). Many different word combinations are possible, but the most important kinds according to Lewis are:

adjective + noun (*golden opportunity*)

verb + noun (*cancel flight*)

noun + verb (*a war broke out*)

adverb + adjective (*fully aware*)

verb + adverb (*react calmly*)

noun + noun (*drug addiction*)

Idioms can be organised in different sections. Wright (1999) in his book *Idioms Organiser*, gives four sections of the most important English idioms: Areas or Metaphor, Individual Metaphor, Topics and Key Words.

In areas of Metaphor there are 12 important metaphors which cover major areas of English - *Time is Money*, *Business is war*, *Seeing is Understanding*, *Life is a Journey*, *Life is Gambling*, *A Company is a Ship*, *Moods are weather*, *The office is a Battlefield*, *A Project is a Race*, *Economics is Flying*, *Organizations Are Gardens*, *People Are Liquid* (e.g. in the nick of time).

Individual metaphors also cover many areas, e.g. animals - *I smell a rat*; clothes - *It fits like a glove*, etc.

Idioms can also be organised by topics like family, speed, work, etc. e.g. *Debbie and Jill are like two peas in a pod*, and by keywords like all, like, things etc., e.g. *I suspect him all long, I slept like a log*.

Sources and methodology

Most coursebooks are topic organised and give a fairly satisfactory range of exercises to deal with lexis. At higher levels of language learning, this might not be enough. New lexis is formed every day due to the rapid development of science and technology, which should certainly be taken into account. With this in mind, at these levels, more topics should be covered in the syllabus and from different sources (newspapers, professional journals, electronic media etc.). They are all excellent sources for a wide range of topics and using them in the classroom requires preparing different types of exercises and methodology. This means the inclusion of basic exercise types, the use of dictionaries, the introduction of etymology and eventually the help of L1.

a) Basic exercise types

2. Identifying

Identifying words or chunks is the single most fundamental strategy, the basis of lexical teaching.

Learners who identify them correctly can make better use of dictionaries, translate better and avoid certain kinds of mistakes. (Lewis, 1997).

3. Matching

This type of exercise was originally used in grammar practice and is now given a lexical focus. Learners can match words to pictures, words to definitions or synonyms, etc.

4. Completing

This exercise type has also been taken from grammar practice and given a lexical focus and the gaps may contain semantically related words, relatively fixed collocations, semi-fixed expressions etc.

5. Categorising

In this type of exercise learners are asked to sort out words or expressions according to categories they perceived or according to some guide lines suggested by the teacher.

E.g. Underline and categorise the unknown words as follows: financial terms, special language for the text, any other unfamiliar vocabulary

- Scan the text for any collocations and list them under the following headings

- Find any metaphorical language, i.e. idioms, phrasal verbs, expressions specific to your topic.

The fore-mentioned exercise types imply numerous activities which enable the learner to learn, retain and finally use a lexical item. It is to be noted that vocabulary should co-exist with grammar. The actual lexis says where you can put it in a sentence and it sticks in the learners mind if it is connected with grammar.

Dictionaries

Nowadays when pivotal importance has been given to lexis, much research is being done on which lexis is most used. Vocabulary is taught on the basis of its frequency. A variety of dictionaries is at the learner's disposal from bilingual, monolingual, conceptually organised to specialised dictionaries. In monolingual dictionaries the entries give the pronunciation, grammatical information, meanings, idiomatic usage, common collocations, connotations, register and sometimes the history

of a word. On the other hand, bilingual dictionaries lack all these things except for the pronunciation and the meaning(s) of a word. This should, in turn, encourage the use of monolingual dictionaries and teachers of English should also assist their students in choosing one. It is of great importance that dictionaries should be up-to-date and students' skills in dictionary use be developed.

Teaching dictionary skills should be integrated into the learning process and help students to use the dictionary as effectively as possible. "Even when students may not actually need to refer to it, it is always a good idea to have it handy and form the habit of checking whenever they are in doubt" (Wright, 1998).

Etymology

Etymology, the study of word origins, can also help in language acquisition, as it has all the attributes of what educational psychologists term meaningful learning. This type of learning is connected to what has been learned before and so is more highly retainable and generalizable, which makes it superior to simple rote learning of lexis. If it is introduced into language learning it should not be used as the scientific study of the origins and the history of meaning and forms of words, but on an amateur basis. When, for example, the word POSH (smart, upper class) is explained the story of its origin may help students memorize it more easily. It is said that the word originated when wealthy people travelled by ship to and from India when under British rule. To avoid the hot sun in the Indian Ocean during the voyage, they specified that their cabins should be on the left side ("port") of the ship going out of India, and on the right side ("starboard") on the way home. Port Out, Starboard Home: POSH. The teacher and student, by becoming serious amateur etymologists, would find themselves more sensitive to the meanings of words and their relationship with other words both from history and other languages.

Translation and lexis

L1 has been banished from language teaching for too long. This is due to the old and most despised grammar-translation methodology, which, for well known reasons, was abandoned some thirty years ago. Since then both materials and methods have changed greatly and translation has become a surprisingly fruitful activity in classroom practice. Learners "have an instinctive understanding that languages have what we shall call equivalents, correct translations which are totally

different from manufactured word-for-word "translation" (Lewis, 1997). Whenever they lack a means of expressing themselves in L2, they resource to L1. Sometimes it may be a single word they need, but mostly it will be chunks. Teachers should help students to develop a principled methodology for translating lexical items, such as collocations and idioms, whenever it is possible.

Conclusion

Learning a second language is a complex process involving a variety of factors, both individual and instructional, which can impact the effectiveness of its acquisition. In addition to comprehending and producing information, students must learn to use grammar and the sound system, social and cultural behaviours and vocabulary. Students will often admit the use of repetition to learn vocabulary, which although beneficial, may not be enough and more efficient strategies may be necessary. The forementioned lexical problems and the methods of overcoming such problems and, above all, students' awareness of them will certainly help them to learn and remember it for a long period of time.

The ideas presented in this paper go beyond the traditional text reading, where a limited number of topics is available and the amount of language to which students are exposed is also limited. Acquisition of lexis is an on-going process helped mostly by extensive reading and listening tasks as well as a systematic recording of new language. The teachers' role here is facilitator and adviser, as nowadays the opportunities for this are wide and varied.

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Jadranka Ančić: Problem leksisa u učenju jezika

S a ž e t a k

U ovom radu cilj je ukazati na neke leksičke probleme i predložiti načine kako bi ih se prevladalo i tako olakšalo usvajanje leksika. Također se ističe kako leksik ne sačinjavaju pojedinačne riječi, već jedinice sastavljene od više riječi, te bi se pažnja studenata trebala usmjeriti na takve jedinice kako što su kolokacije i idiomi. Prema tome leksik je potrebno usustaviti i odrediti strategije učenja.