

Prototype and English Vocabulary Teaching and Learning

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English vocabulary teaching and learning is indispensable in the process of English teaching and learning. For most of college students, the quantitative of English vocabulary they master is often not enough, which not only influences students for learning English, but also brings about certain obstacles in developing diverse teaching and learning activities. The paper tends to be based on prototype to shed some light on English vocabulary pedagogy can provide to EFL, showing the necessity to apply educational strategies to improve the students' English vocabulary acquisition.

Keywords: prototype theory, English vocabulary, pedagogy

Introduction

Prototype theory originates from anthropology and cognitive psychology, and becomes one of theoretical base of cognitive linguistics shortly after being put forward. With the development of cognitive linguistics, its significance also domains. Since 1970s this field of research has already begun abroad, at home earlier and comprehensive introductions regarding this theory started in the late 90s. Afterwards, correlated specific researches have been conducted. Though they are not systematic enough, they refer to the research areas of semantics, syntax, pragmatics and dictionary paraphrase. Considering the position in cognitive linguistics, and owing to the essential enlightenment for the form of the conception and category, the author thought that it should be applied in the research area of the current foreign language pedagogy in order to correct the misunderstanding in the process of foreign language pedagogy. Therefore, to effectively promote the development of foreign language teaching and learning, particularly that of English vocabulary teaching and learning. English vocabulary teaching and learning plays a great role in the process of English teaching and learning. If the quantitative of vocabulary students acquire cannot reach certain amount, they are easily to run into snags at every turn in the process of English learning, which not only affects normal classroom learning, but also strikes their study initiatives. In the course of English teaching and learning, the main issue is lacking necessary lexicon, as a result, the learning quality for students has been quite influenced as well as teachers encounter certain obstacles in teaching and learning activities (Zhang, 2013). Due to teachers cannot solve how to feel free to remember the root, the word and a group of words. To solve these issues, it urgently calls for effective educational strategies and methods. Based on prototype, to put a root into a familiar word to remember, to apply abduction to bear one word in mind and to employ spreading activation model to learn one group of words by heart. After finishing settling

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with these primary issues on the basis of prototype, the teaching effect of English vocabulary can be enhanced, thus to improve the students' ability of application in the process of English communication.

Prototype theory

Prototype theory is the development of modern philosophy thought and produced on the foundation of the investigation result of anthropology combined with experimental research of cognitive psychology. Rohee, an American psychologist, firstly come up with prototype at the beginning of 1970s. Soon it is widely used in linguistic research, especially the research fields of semantic and pragmatic have been greatly influenced. Rohee believed that it is unnecessary to distinguish any property from a category. In other word, prototype is the most typical and the most representative member of a conceptual category. When elaborating certain phenomenon, prototype theory, in fact, regards some sort of individual belonging to this phenomenon as the prototype and holds the characteristics of other individuals among this kind of phenomenon under the circumstance of insisting the same notion of the general feature of this prototype. The more characteristics a word includes, the closer to its conceptual category, otherwise the non-prototype member. Prototype theory tries to explain the psychological process for people for forming, grasping and understanding the concepts. The component analysis of structural semantics supposed that meanings of words consist of the very basic semantic primitives. Every concept has its own given series of semantic primitives, for instance, meanings of "chair" can be divided into "utility seat" and "with backrest".

Problems of English vocabulary teaching and learning

Traditional teaching method of English teaching is single and inefficient. For a long time, English teaching usually adopted the pattern of assigning lexical transcription tasks to match the vocabulary dictation in the classroom. Without the detailed elaboration of English vocabulary, just guide the students simply browse lexicon in the class, which makes the majority of them only have to remain rote learning for English vocabulary, to remember texts mechanically and repeatedly (Li, 2015). This sort of single and inefficient teaching approach of vocabulary is still, lopsided and dull, which cannot turn vocabulary learning into be dynamic, organized, knowledgeable and internalized. English vocabulary teaching and learning of traditional isolated input neither does well for students in acquiring meanings of words in various contexts nor does in the comprehensive grasp of meanings of words. On the contrary, it is likely for students to result in misunderstanding the information points, producing the negative effect of apprehending articles not thoroughly and imprecisely. Indeed, English vocabulary acquisition has something with dedicating a lot of time and energy by students themselves. However, for teachers, the directors of teaching activities, it appears extremely important to reflect the deficiency of English vocabulary teaching and learning and to provide specific suggestions (Li, 2013).

Applications of Prototype in English Vocabulary Teaching and Learning

Prototype Theory and Vocabulary Learning

It is clearer and more flexible for prototype theory to explain meanings of words, so be good for learners to comprehend and study meanings of words. Prototype theory can help learners put memory activities of meanings of words into real external world, human experience, cognition as well as language structure and sense by means

of notions of connection and development, thus prominently improving the acquisition effectiveness and memory efficiency of meanings of words. Prototype theory can efficaciously help learners analyze and catch on inter-lingual relations from the point of cognition, thus contributing to enhance memorization of meanings of words and to maintain them. A word is usually the polysemous category made up of a few discrete senses on surface, but as a matter of fact, there exists a common “core meaning”. Prototype theory can help learners learn how to analyze the original meaning and the extended meaning of one word. In this way memorizing words in isolation can be avoided. What’s more, through making students get to know the developmental rules of meanings of words, they would deepen the understanding of evolution mechanism, ultimately, upgrading the capability of memory for learning meanings of words. Meanwhile, due to family resemblance among members of prototype category, by the class division organizing the lexicon of the same conceptual category. Therefore, it is convenient for students to find the associated clues when remembering words, and they are able to remember and consolidate words according to hierarchical order. English vocabulary memorization is very vital at the same time very complex and difficult in the process of English acquisition. The role of prototype theory for English vocabulary memorization lies in benefiting learners from discovering the internal connection between words and then to strengthen the understanding and remembering English vocabulary.

Root is the basic and unchangeable part of a word. Perhaps one word is without other parts but there must be a root. Within one group sharing the same root, it represents the primary meaning of words. On the basis of understanding the meaning of the root, it is not difficult to know meanings of each deviation word in general. Though affix is not the main carriers of meanings of words, it is the fresh troops of building lexicon. Affix can be divided into prefix and suffix, after being familiar with meanings of roots and affixes, students are shortly capable of remembering words, judging the general scope of meanings of words, reasoning and predicting meanings of new words in articles is also included. Roots and affixes play a decisive role in constructing new words. For example, -spect as the root means look that can be connected with various prefixes and suffixes to compose plenty of vocabulary. In “expect”, its prefix “ex-” presents “outside” and its root “-spect” means “look”, altogether the word represents “look outside” referring to that people open the window and look at all directions, which means “look forward to”, like expecting a joyful life; as for the word “prospect”, its prefix “pro” means “ahead” and the same root “-spect” means “look”, so the collective one means “look ahead”, describing the beautiful scenery when looking ahead, as a consequence the connotation of noun form means “distant scenery”. Definitely its extended meaning can be “glorious future”, such as a student who has a great prospect. Another example is spectacle, -spect means “look” and its suffix -acle means “thing”, after combining the meaning is “the thing that can be seen”, especially refers to “special wonders and sight”, say Olympics opening ceremony is exactly a grand spectacle; as for the word inspect, its prefix expresses “inside” which plus the root “-spect” indicating “look”, so the collective one states “check carefully inside”, like US Boarder Inspection Station; as to the “suspect”, its prefix “sus” means “down” and also the same the root -spect represents “look”, thus the integrated meaning of the word is “look up and down”, referring to that people doubtfully look others up and down, like suspect one’s loyalty; so far as “introspect”, its prefix “intro” states “into the heart” and the root -spect indicates “look”, referring to look into the heart, namely, reflection and introspect oneself; in so far as “retrospect”, its prefix “retro” express “backwards” and the root -spect means “look”, after combining, the meaning is “look backwards”, like a retrospect of college life; with regard to “spectator”, the root -spect means

“look” that is added with the suffix -or indicating “ person”, referring to people who watch the competition, for instance, the spectators of a spectacle. Teachers can utilize the method of root and affix to carry on English vocabulary teaching and learning. Therefore, it is beneficial for students to get rid of the boring process of lexicon memory, to understand the inherent law of lexical construction, to effectively enlarge the quantity of vocabulary of EFL and to accomplish learning vocabulary by analogy.

Lecturing etymology stories can inspire EFL to be interested in studying English vocabulary. The myths of old Greek and Roman are cultural treasures around the world for possessing the most complete and richest mythology and containing abundant words and expressions as well as their usages. Among English vocabulary there are quite a few lexicon directly originating from these myth stories. In this way teachers can expound lexical stories in Greek and Roman myths and demonstrate the importance of myths to the word derivation. For example, the Muses was the general term of nine goddesses in charge of music, art, painting, astronomy, geography and science in ancient Greek myths. They lived with their master Apollo at the foot of one of south mountains and in the spring of Helicon, whose living place was named by names of the Muses, merely, the word museum. It represents that the old Greeks highly respected the Muse as building fanes and put the precious artwork and the related stuff of natural science in them; the Muses also created another word music, referring to that the Muses were able to play the music, festively singing and dancing. Once there was a famous painting all over the world depicting the delightful scene that the nine goddesses danced lightly and gracefully around Apollo. Later the word invented by the Muses is amuse, meaning “to entertain or to please somebody”. Its prefix a- expresses “now”, indicating that the Muses are coming to the mortal world and bringing happiness by singing and dancing for the mortals, like amuse someone by telling jokes; the word mutual means “reciprocal”, stemming from the Muses as well. It is the adjective transform of Muse, referring to that the nine goddesses are inseparable, support and help each other, jointly creating splendid culture and art in the history of human being, such as mutual support and mutual understanding.

Another example is Pan. He was the god of forest in Greek myths with the body of human and hooves of sheep. Above head were a pair of great bugles, it was said that he was the son of Apollo. As a result of monstrous and queer appearance, passers-by in the forest were frightened screamingly to fled by him. Pan was satisfied with the dread of the mortals. From then on he always liked fearing people by means of his look. He often hid behind the tree and abruptly jumped out when passers-by went through, which made people feel much more thrilled. Hence Pan is the symbol of fear in our mind. It is said that in the battle of marathons Pan shown up and blew his magic flute, which made Persian army frightened and lost their combat effectiveness, the Greek army realizing this historical heroic undertaking of defeating with a force inferior in number. This sort of horror caused by Pan brings up this word panic, as it were somebody be in panic. It is certain that although Pan looked striking, he also owned love himself. In fairy tales, he fell in love with Syrinx goddess. However, his ugly face freaked out Syrinx, making her keep running to a river bank and plunge into it, ultimately shaping a reed. Pan bitterly cut this reed into a flute and named it Syrinx. Thereafter, in English Syrinx refers to flute or pan flute Pan used. The lexical explanatory of myths and allusions can make teaching method of vocabulary more interesting and vivid for teachers, enrich the students’ comprehensions of cultural connotations in English vocabulary, be acquainted with language and culture custom in European countries and learn the philosophy of social communication.

Prototype Theory and Polysemy

As for polysemy, very often the traditional teaching method is to lecture every sense of a word in certain context or just list other meanings altogether by the way at the beginning of lecturing one word. This kind of teaching method is unscientific and proved of little avail. In reality, instead of the relationship between multiple senses of one word is isolated, there exists some internal combinations. If students are able to figure out and take good advantage of these combinations, then it must yield twice the result with half the effort for remembering multiple senses of one word. In addition, the input of prototype theory in semantic category exactly solves this problem. According to prototype theory, categorical members central category prototype and are related by family resemblance. So it is enlightened that multiple senses of a word are not casual and random but center on the meaning of the prototype, and meanings correlates with each other through family resemblance. Therefore, with regard to polysemy, in the practice of English vocabulary teaching and learning and when teachers lay emphasis on introducing sense items of prototype, they also should consciously search for family resemblance of sense items or meaning chain to explain themselves in reason in hope of helping students better master rich connotations of polysemy.

English vocabulary learning is not just simple memory of meanings of words. It refers to various levels of meanings of words, so teachers should explain lexicon specifically and multi-faceted and should be good at analyzing multiple senses of the word, the specific contexts of using vocabulary, their collocations and so on. Polysemy is the difficulty in pedagogy owing to the same word may possess greatly different connotations in various contexts. For example, for the word gear, its original meaning is “wheel”. Due to the occluding of gear can make the machinery operate coordinately, the meaning of gear is extended as “adjust”, like gear the policy to the international situation; and because the gear-box of the car achieves speed shift through monitoring rotational speed of wheels, gear still can have the derived meaning of “tap position”, as shift the gear. In addition, the gear is necessary accessory for all weapons, so it can be derived the meaning of “equipment”. In movies the commander of troops usually would say “gear up!”. The phenomenon of polysemy is the universal and representative characteristic in English vocabulary. We should put the stress of English vocabulary teaching and learning on correctly understanding words and multiple categorical meanings of words in given context for EFL.

Conclusion

The unsatisfactory effect of English vocabulary teaching and learning in the class frequently derives from improper teaching method (Huang, & Jing, 2013). In the course of English vocabulary teaching and learning, we are able to apply prototype to put the root into the most familiar word to be memorized, turning the acquisition and memorization of lexicon into the dynamic process of logic reasoning. Prototype benefit not only the understanding and memory of English vocabulary, but also autonomic learning for EFL. Combined prototype with English vocabulary teaching and learning would solve polysemy as the bottleneck problem in lexical pedagogy to some degree, hence improving the effectiveness of education issue.

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