Linguistics and EFL Teaching: Exploring Linguistic Theory Behind Vocabulary Teaching

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The teaching of vocabulary, the basic unit of language studies, is not an easy task; it requires an understanding of linguistic theory, both micro and macro linguistics. This article is an attempt to explore the theoretical basis behind vocabulary teaching through pictures and discusses the position of linguistic theory in language teaching. While vocabulary has been considered as one aspect of language and it is basic to language study, the teaching of vocabulary includes some of the following characteristics. They are, among other things, sound production, spelling, grammar, classes, and semantics. The discussion is limited to the semantic aspect of vocabulary, especially the theory of semantics the teacher relies on. Within the study of meaning, a great many theories are recognized; these include Triangle-Semantics Theory, Componential Analysis Theory, and Theory of Language Use, e.g., Speech Acts, Sociolinguistics, Pragmatics, and Psycholinguistics. The focus in this article, however, is on the Triangle-Semantics Theory. This article is supported with some sense data gained from teachers of English. The information is gathered by means of interview and observation in the classroom. Data analysis and interpretation of findings indicate that most teachers do not realize that they are relying on semantic theory when teaching vocabulary, the Triangle-Semantics Theory.

Keywords: vocabulary teaching, linguistic theory, semantics, pictures

Introduction

The use of media, such as pictures, in teaching English as a Foreign Language (EFL) is not unfamiliar among teachers. EFL teachers are incredibly skillful in applying pictures to teaching. Very often, a teacher brings with her pictures of various kinds into the classroom activities and is able to create a pleasant process of learning. But whether or not she is aware of the reason why pictures are chosen is still doubtful. This article is primarily concerned with linguistics and teaching. It is a research into teaching. The purpose has been to explore the theory of meaning behind teaching vocabulary through pictures; to describe whether teachers of language teaching realize the role of linguistic theory in their vocabulary teaching. Teaching vocabulary through pictures has been familiar among teachers, but whether they are aware of the idea behind the use of pictures in vocabulary teaching is still a question. EFL teachers in senior and junior high schools are not able to explain why pictures have been their choice rather than others used in understanding the meaning of word. Meaning has been one aspect considered in vocabulary mastery. To know a word implies some of the followings: be able to categorize its classes, meanings, use, and usage in a syntactic structure. Some scholars, in the sphere of EFL teaching, make a clear distinction between use and usage. However, in this paper the author

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is not making the two terms his concern, but rather a distinction between use as a theory of semantics, social semantics, and theory of meaning. Triangle Theory of Meaning, applied in this paper, is worth considering and has been our main concern.

Triangle Theory of Meaning in this paper is used to understand the meaning, one aspect of micro-linguistics, the study of various levels of internal structures of language. Under the study of semantics, meaning may start from morpheme or even from distinctive sound and phonemes. Hence, meaning, as most linguists believe, may range from minimal meaningful unit up to discourse and it is a complex task. The complexity of meaning is due to some factors. These include the varieties of meaning, the concept of meaning, and personal objective. In addition, it is a big job to work on meaning; unless we focus our discussion on particular kind of meaning, the discussion on this aspect of language will never come to an end. Triangle Theory of Meaning, therefore, in this paper is used only to comprehend and explain the meaning of word. Word meaning can be understood from dictionary, linguistic context, social context, and non-linguistic context. All these ways of comprehending meaning is beyond the scope of the paper. Our aim is to explain word or vocabulary meaning by means of Triangle Theory proposed by Odgen and Richards (1989) (see Figure 1). The theory hinders itself only on the word meaning regardless of the context in which a word is used. The claim that meaning is use is beyond the concern of study; it is rather dealing with the relation between abstract concept and the real word, between the ideal and the real, or more precisely, the relation between the symbol and its referent (Mustansyir, 1988).
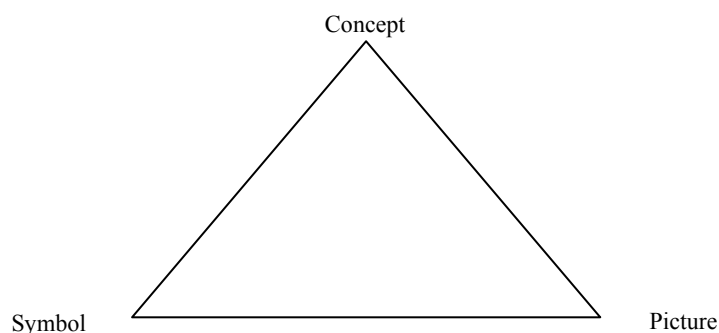
Figure 1. Triangle theory of meaning.

Inclusive in the theory are some concepts, such as Experience, Concept, Language, Symbol, Presentation, and Picture. All these keywords are integrated parts of the theory and each of them plays an essential role in finding solution and explanation to the problem of word meaning. Being abstract, deductive, and a priori in nature, the theory requires evidence and empirical support that everyone can experience (Koroh, 2015, p. 42).

Conceptual Framework (see Figure 2), the discussion of idea and theory of meaning especially that of triangle theory of meaning, can be derived into a framework of concept. The overall ideas or way of thinking that guides the research can be put, through the process of synthesis, into the so-called conceptual framework. It is not merely the organization of concepts under study into a frame, but essentially this conceptual framework demonstrates the relationship between language and language function, language and reality, language and the world (Landau, Szudek, & Temsley, 2011). And partly, conceptual framework, if well understood, can be an answer of the question posed and objectives of the research (Kleinman, 2012).
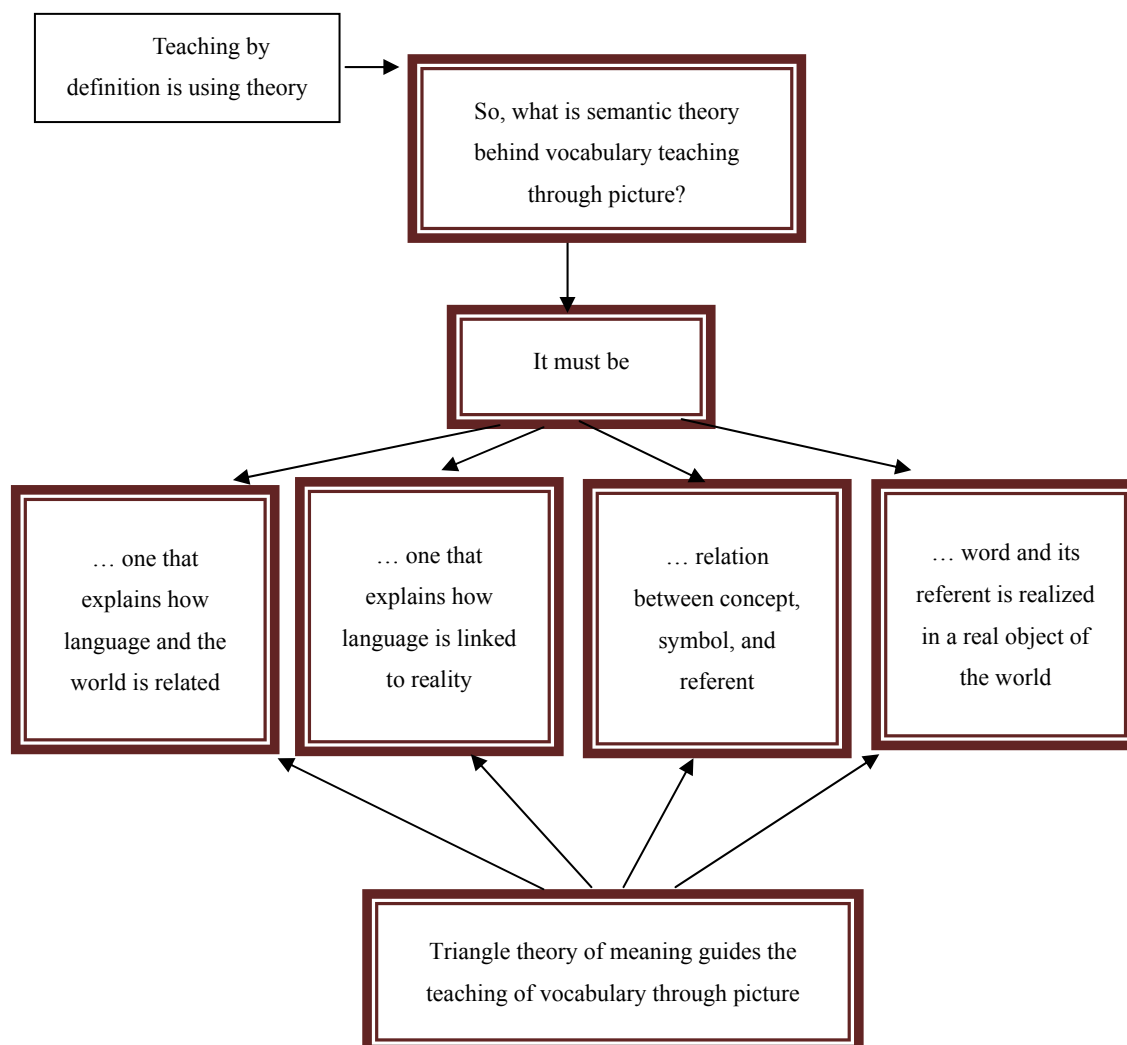
Figure 2. Conceptual framework.

Method

Source of Data and Data of Research, of this small scale research, are all primary. The research is designed to be more explorative rather than experimental and qualitative in nature using students as both subjects of the research and source research data. The author uses students from graduate program as subjects as well as source of data of the research. They are 10 in number. Apart from being students, they are also teachers of English at some schools in the city of Mataram. Their experiences of teaching are ranging between three and five years. As source data, they are (five students) interviewed to get needed information dealing with teaching vocabulary through picture. The process of interview was recorded. Observation on their teaching activities in the class-room was also observed in order for the researcher to gain detailed data relating to the use of semantic theory behind the teaching of vocabulary through picture. Table 1 that follows displays the subjects' profile: experience, semester, ethnicity, and years of study. The names are not their real names. The actual names of the subjects have been replaced. They are pseudonyms.

Table 1

Subjects Profile

No.	Name	Experience	Semester	Years of Study	Ethnicity
1	Alisa	3.5 years	3rd semester	2014	Sasaknese
2	Waras	5.0 years	3rd semester	2014	Sasaknese
3	Minum	3.0 years	3rd semester	2014	Sasaknese
4	Miras	3.0 years	2nd semester	2015	Bimanese
5	Nira	3.2 years	3rd semester	2014	Balinese
6	Anis	3.5 years	3rd semester	2014	Bimanese
7	Ilafah	3.5 years	2nd semester	2013	Javanese
8	Rano	3.5 years	2nd semester	2013	Javanese
9	Vivi	3.5 years	2nd semester	2014	Javanese
10	Denang	3.5 years	2nd semester	2013	Sumbawanese

Data and Data Display, collected through interview, are intended to present the sense data and at the same time to support the study empirically. The table below (see Table 2) presents the qualitative data result from interviewing subjects of the study. Only five out of ten students are performing the interview. For the sake of objectivity, cross-checked and empirical evidence on students' teaching activities is also observed. Observation on subjects' activities justifies the theory.

Table 2

Verbal Data Gained From Interview

Subject No.	Subjects Statement	Keywords
1	When teaching reading comprehension, I take difficult words and ask my students the meaning; to help them understand the meaning I use picture.	Picture, meaning, and word
2	I am teaching English at Mts. I always bring pictures with me into the class-room. Because, pictures help me teach the meaning of words. If the students do not know the meaning of the word I show them the picture.	Picture, word, and meaning
3	…I do not know the idea behind the use of picture; I just learn from my experience as student before. I understand the meaning after my lecturer show me the picture.	Experience, picture, and meaning
4	My students understand the meaning of the word easily after they see the picture. So, picture I think is very helpful media of teaching meaning.	Word, meaning, and media
5	…Yes, we use context in teaching and understanding the meaning of word; but when students still do not get the meaning we then use picture. And students understand the meaning.	Meaning, picture, and word

Findings and Discussion

As stated earlier, this research is research into teaching conducted in the classroom with students as subjects of the study. However, the research is not designed as an experiment; rather it is an explorative with qualitative approach. Qualitative data are analyzed by means of content analysis, in that the interpretation of verbal information is intended to understand the meaning or massage of the information or communication of the subjects. This research, as I stated earlier, seeks to explore the theory of meaning behind the teaching of vocabulary through picture and to know whether the subjects of the research are aware of the theory they rely on when teaching word meaning. Analysis on quantitative data (Table 2 Data Display) results the followings:

(1) It is found out that the teaching of vocabulary through picture is guided by semantic theory. As it is dealing with word meaning, triangle theory has been most appropriately applied in understanding lexical or denotative meaning of a lexeme. The application of such semantic theory, however, is not realized by the teachers. It might be due to their lack of linguistic knowledge. This is not difficult to justify as it is suggested

by the statement made by Subject No.1. It is claimed that: "When teaching reading comprehension, I take difficult words and ask my students the meaning; to help them understand the meaning, I use picture" (Subject No.1). This statement (by Subject No.1) is the response to question dealing with the process of knowing, "how do you teach your students the word meaning?". Crucial in this finding is the appearance of sensible world (picture, word) and intelligible world (meaning). These two essential points, "sensibility and understanding", are basic to understand the world (Landau et al., 2011; Kleinman, 2013);

(2) Analysis on sense data indicates that Triangle Theory of Meaning has guided vocabulary teaching. When interviewed, a teacher says, "I am teaching English at Mts. I always bring pictures with me into the classroom because such media of teaching assist me teach the word meaning; I show the students the pictures of the words if they do not understand what they mean to them". Such statement by Subject No.2 is the response to question: "How do know that your students understand the meaning of the word, say for example, dog?". The "imaginative dog" in the students' mind and the real or "experienced dog" the students see in reality support the claim that vocabulary teaching is relying on Triangle Theory of Meaning (Hurford, Heasley, & Smith, 2013; Mustansyir, 1988). This result is in line with the belief that what we know about the world is the combination of the abstract concept "dog" in our mind and "dog" as an animal with four legs we see in the real world (Griffiths, 2006; Kleinman, 2012);

(3) We have sufficient supports to the claim that semantic theory behind vocabulary teaching is that of triangle theory. This proves true as Subject No.3 informs us by saying: "…I do not know the idea behind the use of picture; I just learn from my experience as student before. I understand the meaning after my lecturer show me the picture". This finding has been the result of subject's response to question "What is", for example, what is meaning and some kind of theory of meaning? Basic to this finding are the concepts of experience, picture, and meaning. Our critical analysis on the subject's information leads us to the truth that there exists a theory in teaching. The presentation of concepts, such as experience, idea, picture, and meaning in the statement, warrants the role of linguistic theory in classroom practice. Regardless of its weakness, the ability to explain the world, the problem meaning, is of great significant (Fung & Hoon, 2013, pp. 41-52; Shahsavar, Hoon, Thai, & Samah, 2013, pp. 57-58). Examination picture in terms of its component parts becomes important; and picture as it is does not say anything. It is speechless. In order for a picture to be meaningful, we have to explain it. This is the role of linguistic knowledge. Triangle theory performs similar work;

(4) The utilization of semantic theory is also suggested by Subject No.4. Although it is not explicitly expressed, the application of some linguistic units, such as picture, meaning, and word, points out that Triangle Theory of Meaning has been in practice in the process of teaching and learning activities among teachers of English education in the classroom. The practice of such theory is without doubt implied in the statement proposed by the student, "My students understand the meaning of the word easily after they see the picture. So, picture I think is very helpful media of teaching meaning" (Subject No.4). This claim by the student has been the basis for the author to explore the role of theory in the realm of teaching. Careful examination of some elements in the theory of semantics, such as word, picture, and meaning, leads us to a strong belief that linguistics and teaching are related. Separation of linguistics from teaching is like "thought without content, empty; intuition without concept is blind" (Landau et al., 2011). The union of the two is the truth;

(5) And finally, it is found out that the assistance of theory helps teachers of English in their teaching activities. Data from Subject No.5 suggests that triangle theory has been, even though not directly mentioned, responsible for teaching word meaning in isolation. This sounds in contrast to other theories of meaning. While

the meaning of a word is use, triangle theory argues that the meaning of the word is its referent (Ogden & Richards, 1989). The abstract concept, e.g., "dog", exists in the mind and is symbolized by the units "/d/+/o/+/g/", referring to thing, the world, or precisely the so-called pet animal with different names in societies. The same animal in Indonesian is /anjing/, /basong/ in Sasaknese, and /cicing/ in Balinese. Different names are used to refer to a single similar animal.

Conclusion and Suggestion

The meaning of the word is how the abstract concept of such thing is related to its representation by a symbol to experience the sensible world. The fusion between the two, the sensible world, the world of idea and the rational world, the world of intelligibility constitutes what we call, the truth. And the use of picture to help students understand meaning is rooted in Triangle Theory of Meaning. While the world of teaching falls into the realm of practice, sensible or experienced world and theory is the world of idea, which is not recommended to do the teaching without the assistance of theory. Teachers need theory that may help to guide the activities. Linguistics and teaching are two in one.

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Appendix: Epistemological Question

To gain information on linguistic knowledge, in particular knowledge on semantics, five questions concerning enquiries are addressed to subjects of the research. These five epistemological questions are listed below. Answers to these questions become qualitative data and evidence from which the findings are based and supported.

(1) How do you teach your students the word meaning?

(2) How do you know that your students understand the meaning of the word, say for instance, dog?

(3) "What is", for example, what is meaning and some kind of theory of meaning?

(4) Language function, do you know, what is it?

(5) Meaning is to understand rather than to experience or meaning is in one's head not in one's eyes; but for some thought, meaning is both; kindly your comment, please.

The utilization of semantic theory is also suggested by subject No.4. ALTHOUGH IT IS NOT explicitly expressed, the application of some linguistic units SUCH AS PICTURE, meaning, AND WORD POINTS out that triangle theory of meaning has been in practice in the process of teaching and learning activities among teachers of English education in the classroom. The practice of such theory is without doubt implied in the statement proposed by the student, "My students understand the meaning of the word easily after they see the picture. So, picture I think is very helpful media of teaching meaning" (SUBJECT NO.4). This claim by the student has been the basis for the author to explore the role of theory in the realm of teaching. Careful examination of some elements in the theory of semantics, such as word, picture, and meaning, leads us to a strong belief that linguistics and teaching are related. Separation of linguistics from teaching is like "thought without content, empty; intuition without concept is blind" (Landau, et al., 2011). The union of the two is the truth.