

The importance of teaching paradigmatic lexical relations to EFL students: How to teach homonymy

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Abstract

Developing vocabulary knowledge is crucially important for second language learners because vocabulary is the key determinant of all skills, and these are, in turn, of vital importance for academic success, both in children and adults. Vocabulary is essential for expressing thoughts, ideas, and emotions clearly and accurately. A strong vocabulary enables students to articulate their viewpoints more effectively in both written and spoken forms, facilitating better interactions in academic and social contexts. English vocabulary is rich in pairs of words, identical in sound and spelling but different on meaning. One of the problems teachers are usually concerned is how to explain to the students the difference between two words of identical form but completely separated meanings and two words of the same form whose meanings are different but still related. The problem of teaching the sameness of name combined with the difference of meaning might seem to present teachers with an extremely daunting task. Understanding homonyms is crucial for students because it enhances their linguistic skills and improves reading comprehension. It also aids in developing critical thinking when faced with language ambiguities. This paper aims at providing a carefully and necessary analysis on the methods, activities and tools teachers should use as to encourage ELF students to explore the meanings of new homonymous words they encounter, to empower their linguistic and communicative skills and create an effective and inspiring learning environment.

Keywords— *vocabulary, homonymy, paradigmatic relations, teaching, language skills, strategies*

I. INTRODUCTION

Without grammar very little can be conveyed, without vocabulary nothing can be conveyed (David Wilkins)

“The human spirit thinks with words,” wrote the 18th-century German thinker Johann Gottfried Herder, and although Herder’s words have often been disputed, they reflect a deep-seated human intuition that words matter. “Words matter a great deal. They matter in human relations (which are often shaped by names, titles, terms of address and kin terms), in the edifice of human knowledge (to mention only number words, the names of biological species, and the role of terminology in science), and in systems of religion, belief, and values” [Goddard & Wierzbicka 2014:2]

It almost goes without saying that vocabulary is an essential, non-negotiable building block of literacy. Given the importance of words in social life, in interpersonal communication, and in people’s interpretation of the world, most language teachers state that the single, biggest component of any language course is vocabulary. Teachers know how communication stops when learners lack the necessary words. Building a lexicon is an important language learning goal. Whether in the first (L1) or second (L2) language, a lexicon is the pressure point of comprehension developing vocabulary knowledge is crucially important for second language learners because vocabulary is the key determinant of all skills, and these are, in turn, of vital importance for academic success, both in children and adults.

II. THE IMPORTANCE OF TEACHING VOCABULARY

No matter how well the students learn the grammar, without words to express a wide range of meanings, communication just cannot happen in any meaningful way. The learning of word meanings requires more than the use of a dictionary, and vocabulary acquisition is a complex process. Nevertheless, in recent years vocabulary has not received the recognition it deserves in the classroom. Gairns and Redman emphasize the fact that “a vast amount of teaching time is consumed by giving definition, explanations, classrooms blackboards are often littered with masses of new lexical items and students compile page upon page of word lists they will rarely have the opportunity to practice” [Gairns & Redman 1998:1] Increasing vocabulary size is not the only goal of lexical development; building an L2 lexicon is also about improving the quality of lexical knowledge. Poor lexical quality is an impediment to L2 processing and use, and it slows down further lexical development.

Vocabulary is essential for expressing thoughts, ideas, and emotions clearly and accurately. A strong vocabulary enables students to articulate their viewpoints more effectively in both written and spoken forms, facilitating better interactions in academic and social contexts.

Something else also accounts for today's concern with the learning of vocabulary. That is the fact that scholars are taking a new interest in the study of word meanings. A few of research studies have recently dealt with lexical problems. Through research the scholars are finding the lexical problems frequently interfere with communication; communication breaks down when people do not use the right words. [Allen, 1983: 5]

As Gairns and Redman have pointed out “Some of the most amusing errors a learner can make in a foreign language arise from the lack of awareness of appropriacy of items” [Gairns & Redman 1998: 5]. Teaching vocabulary is a critical component of language education, as it plays a foundational role in effective communication and overall literacy development.

As the acquisition of the vocabulary is a branching process, what is crucial to be emphasized at this point is that words are not learned mechanically but associatively, especially in terms of paradigmatic lexical relations. Expanding our students' understanding of words meanings would engage them in social interactions and interchanges associated with a desire

to experience new areas of human cognition and as Morgan and Rinvoluceri state “learning words is a relational process. You could describe it as making friends with the words of a target language” [Morgan&Rinvoluceri, 2004: 6] whereas Lindsay and Knight put forth that “since the language system is complex, learners need to be guided through it. Learners need to know what a word means, what form it takes and how to use it” [Lindsay & Knight, 2006: 44]. Schmitt reminds us that “vocabulary and lexical units are at the core of learning and communication.

No amount of grammatical or other type of linguistic knowledge can be employed in communication or discourse without the mediation of vocabulary. Indeed, vocabulary and lexical expressions can sustain a great deal of rudimentary communication without -much support from other aspects of the language system” [Schmitt 2000:11]. A well-developed vocabulary instils confidence in students when they communicate. Understanding a wide range of words gives them the tools to participate actively in discussions, share their ideas, and express themselves more freely.

III. THE IMPORTANCE OF TEACHING HOMONYMY

English vocabulary is rich in pairs of words, identical in sound and spelling but different on meaning. Several word-forms seem to occur in different contexts with different meanings. Meaning is all pervasive in language. The other aspects of language - the sounds/letters, the morphology, the syntax - all serve the purpose of communicating meaningful messages between human beings. Gairns and Redman emphasize the importance of teaching homonymy as a means of recognising the boundaries between the lexical items [Gairns & Redman 1998:14] Vocabulary is essential for expressing thoughts, ideas, and emotions clearly and accurately

One of the problems teachers are usually concerned is how to explain to the students the difference between two words of identical form but completely separated meanings (homonymy) and two words of the same form whose meanings are different but still related (polysemy). The importance of recognizing the boundaries between the lexical items can be furtherly illustrated by having a brief look at both corresponding terms of polysemy and homonymy. As the concept itself denotes the term polysemy is used to describe “the existence of a single word form with two

different yet closely related lexical meanings” whereas the terms homonymy as “the existence of two or more words which are identical in sound form and spelling, or at least, in one of these aspects, but different in meaning”. [Antrushina, 1994, 45]. The problem of teaching the sameness of name combined with the difference of meaning might seem to present teachers with an extremely daunting task.

Teaching paradigmatic lexical relations of units whose significant (the phonological/graphemic form) is identical and signifié (the meaning) is different and etymologically distant can be fascinating but sometimes a confusing area of language study for students.

The complexity raised from the overwhelming number of homonymous words, the need to provide a clear and comprehensive understanding of specific lexical items, the need for embarking on a lengthy analysis as to achieve a satisfactory effective productive use of the words makes teachers doubtful on whether to dive deeply on the hidden aspects of words’ complicated semantic structure or on the other hand give cursory explanations and “decide” on whether the exploitation of these paradigmatic lexical relations is not that appropriate especially with beginners and elementary students. Teaching homonyms effectively requires a blend of creativity, practical exercises, and contextual understanding. Teachers should thoughtfully decide on how to provide specific vocabulary awareness strategies to help students grasp homonymy as a means of enhancing their vocabulary and comprehension skills.

Understanding homonyms is crucial for students because it enhances their linguistic skills and improves reading comprehension. It also aids in developing critical thinking when faced with language ambiguities. Teaching homonymy enriches vocabulary, encourages exploration of nuances in meaning, and promotes a deeper understanding of lexical system and language structure. Though struggling and challenging the process of introducing homonymic units might be, the whole experience might become enjoyable and enriching for both educators and students. The employment of a variety of methods and strategies will help students’ engagement in a learning environment that fosters vocabulary development and linguistic awareness.

Navigating at the complexities and the controversial nature of homonymy students will enhance their overall language skills and comprehension. As homonymy is particularly frequent

in English due to the monosyllabic character of English words and its analytic structure, introducing and explaining homonyms to EFL students would help them expand and enrich their vocabulary and express themselves creatively and accurately. Defining the concept of homonymy clearly and precisely will help students understand some basic characteristic features of English language structure such as the phonetic identity of words and stems or the predominance of free forms among the most frequent roots. Teaching homonymy might help students understand the complex nature of paradigmatic relations focusing on the way words or lexical units can substitute one another.

As homonymy can create ambiguity sometimes leading to confusion and misunderstanding, teachers should raise student awareness to an effective utilization of the contextual clues and the surrounding words. Students equipped with a good command of homonymy are often able to fully navigate on complex texts and communicative situations demonstrating full capacity of discerning multiple meanings, making accurate lexical choices, and proficiently succeeding in reading, speaking, and writing activities.

IV. HOW TO TEACH HOMONYMOUS UNITS TO EFL STUDENTS

There are some basic techniques which will encourage ELF students to explore the meanings of new homonymous words they encounter games, activities, and discussions. This engagement can motivate students to explore lexical system complexities laying out new perspectives on how to foster a deep comprehension and a complete appreciation of language ample dynamic possibilities of linguistic tools. As to empower students’ language skills and strengthen understanding we will align a list of strategies for teaching homonyms which may help teachers create an effective and inspiring learning environment and enhance their linguistic and communicative skills.

Visual aids

As generally known, visual aids provide concrete representation of abstract concepts facilitating and strengthening students’ understanding. Incorporating visual aids in the process of teaching homonyms can help students clarify each homonymous unit corresponding meaning and absorb each word specific lexical and semantic information.

Teachers might create **charts** or **flashcards** of a list of homonyms including images representing each meaning. This technique benefits visual learners and reinforces the concept through imagery.

Mind maps can be also considered as an effective technique. The homonym can be showcased at the centre and different meanings, uses and example sentences can be branched out.

Flowcharts can be used to illustrate how one homonym can lead to different meanings based on context. The teacher might also include example sentences for clarity or ask students to make sentences of themselves.

Comparative Charts: The teacher will design a chart with a list of pairs of homonyms along with definitions and example sentences. Students will work in groups and add other examples of their own. They will compare the meanings, memorize them and learn how to work collaboratively.

Posters Students may create posters for homonyms proper, homophones and homographs including definitions, respective pictures, and example sentences. These can be displayed in the classroom for ongoing reference which might reinforce the information over time.

By using visual aids teachers can effectively support the learning of homonyms while keeping the process engaging and fun for students. These aids contribute into the enhancement comprehension and retention.

Sentences

Teachers may ask students use homonyms in sentences, encouraging them to demonstrate the different meanings. For example,

- ❖ A **tear** rolled down its cheek. Your coat has a **tear** in it.
- ❖ The fan asked the footballer for his autograph. Engines are fitted with a **fan** to keep them cool.
- ❖ He went over again to **sink**. He saw the sun **sink** beyond the horizon

The best way to clarify the meaning of homonyms is through context. When students recognize and comprehend words, they can grasp the meaning of sentences and paragraphs. This procedure can lead to improved reading comprehension and proficient academic performance.

Quizzes

Quizzes may provide an alternative way to absorb lexical information about homonyms. Teachers might apply some activities and create quizzes with **multiple-choice questions** where students must choose the correct homonym based on the context of a sentence.

They may also choose **fill-in-the-blank activities** where they may design fill-in-the-blank quizzes where students select the appropriate homonym to complete the sentence. Thinking about the context and analysing the sentence structure help students promote thinking skills

Matching Games can also be used as an activity during which teachers may create a matching quiz where students match homonyms with their meanings or contexts. This activity is ideal for repeated practice and review.

True or False: Teachers may introduce *true/false statements* based on homonyms' definitions and contexts. This activity as a self-assessment tool, allows students to monitor their own understanding of the material offering a quick way to test comprehension and reinforce memory.

Games and Competitions can be enjoyable and challenging activities. Teachers may make quizzes competitive by organizing students into teams. They can earn points for each correct answer about homonyms, which can encourage collaboration and enhance peer learning.

Exit Tickets: At the end of a lesson teachers may give a short quiz (3-5 questions) on homonyms to assess understanding and retention. In this way it can be provided immediate feedback and help assess and improve students' understanding in a fun and effective way.

V. CONCLUSIONS

Teaching homonymy can be an enjoyable and enriching experience for both teachers and students. By employing a variety of methods—including clear definitions, interactive games, contextual activities, teachers can create an engaging learning environment that fosters vocabulary development and linguistic awareness. By navigating the complexities of homonymy, students enhance their overall language skills and comprehension facilitating better interactions in academic and social contexts.

Achieving good commands of homonymy helps students make connections between concepts and

understand differences raised from the complexities of semantic structure. Learning homonyms helps students understand how context influences meaning ensuring clarity and precision and making them better communicators and listeners. The acquisition of homonymy helps students become familiar with a wider range of vocabulary.

Knowing that a single word can have different meanings in different contexts broadens linguistic knowledge, critical thinking, and reasoning, as students must pay close attention to the surrounding text or conversation to interpret the word correctly. In this way they learn how to choose the right word form depending on sentence structure, making their writing clearer and more precise. Knowing the different meanings of homonyms ensures that students can express themselves accurately and avoid ambiguity in their writing.

In summary, teaching homonymy is vital for developing students' literacy skills, enhancing communication, promoting academic success, and facilitating critical thinking. A well-rounded approach to vocabulary instruction not only supports language development but also prepares students for a lifetime of learning and effective engagement in various contexts.

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