

The Application of Lexicology to English Teaching at Senior High School

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Abstract

Vocabulary is the foundation of English learning, and vocabulary teaching is an important part of English teaching in senior high school. However, the traditional vocabulary teaching method is too single and inefficient, which increases students' vocabulary memory burden. And under their Chinglish thinking, students often use vocabularies incorrectly. Through analyzing the problems of vocabulary learning and the disadvantages of traditional vocabulary teaching in senior high school, this paper focuses on the combination of semantic change, word formation and English idiom with high school English vocabulary teaching. Through this topic research, the content involved in lexicology can be tapped to combine with high school vocabulary teaching. As thus, in the process of learning vocabulary students can not only understand the evolution and formation of vocabulary, but they can understand the cultural meaning behind it.

Keywords

Vocabulary teaching; Senior high school; Lexicology.

1. Introduction

1.1. Lexicology

Lexicology is the branch of linguistics that analyzes the lexicon of a specific language, and it examines every feature of a word including formation, spelling, origin, usage, and definition (Wikipedia, 2020). As can be seen from its definition, lexicology studies words from both form and meaning. Therefore, lexicology relies on information obtained from morphology as well as semantics, and is inextricably linked with etymology. Although the term was coined by Noah Webster in 1828, English lexicology has long been a neglected discipline in western linguistics, especially in modern Western linguistics initiated by Saussure in the early 20th century. The "lexicon" denoting "signified" are directly excluded from the scope of linguistic study. Before the 1970s, only the former Soviet Union, Eastern Europe published English lexicology works. Luckily, this situation finally changed after the 1990s, especially in 2000 when Howard Jackson and Etienne Zé Amvela wrote *Words, Meaning and Vocabulary: An Introduction to Modern English Lexicology*, lexicology as a relatively independent interdisciplinary subject has been attached importance to in the West. The study of English lexicology in China began in the 1980s, and so far there have been many relevant works. *Modern English Lexicology* by Lu Guoqiang and *English Lexicology Course* as well as relevant books by Wang Rongpei have made outstanding contributions to English lexicology teaching.

1.2. Lexicology and Vocabulary Teaching

In recent years, with the deepening of China's teaching reform, English vocabulary teaching has attracted more and more attention from domestic scholars, who have conducted extensive and in-depth research and discussion, and achieved fruitful research results. In terms of English vocabulary teaching, there are some researches on vocabulary memory from the perspective of cognitive psychology, some researches on vocabulary relations from the perspective of

cognitive linguistics, and some researches on more efficient vocabulary teaching methods from the perspective of lexicology, stylistics and pragmatics. Professor Wang Rongpei has done a lot of valuable research on the relationship between lexicology and vocabulary teaching.

Vocabulary is the common object of lexicology and vocabulary teaching, so lexicology is closely related to vocabulary teaching (Liu, 2013: 9). As a pioneer of English lexicology in China, Professor Wang Rongpei attaches great importance to the relationship between English lexicology and English vocabulary teaching in both narrow and broad sense. He holds that lexicology in narrow sense should be an important part of English vocabulary teaching practice because it provides regular knowledge of vocabulary system. In a broad sense, due to the wide interdisciplinary nature of vocabulary, vocabulary teaching should jump out of vocabulary itself and pay attention to various fields associated with vocabulary. Professor Wang Rongpei has edited more than 10 textbooks for English vocabulary teaching, most of which regard lexicology as an important topic in the contents of vocabulary teaching so as to practice the thought of interaction between lexicology and vocabulary teaching.

2. Present Situation

2.1. Difficulty of Memorizing Vocabulary

In middle school, there is a saying among students: if you want to get high marks of reading comprehension or something, then you should master abundant vocabularies. In this way, the task of “memorizing words” runs through the whole English learning process. In primary school stage, when students just start to learn English, they are exposed to relatively simple and limited words, and teachers mention those words repeatedly in class. Even if they do not have to memorize them deliberately, those words will be imperceptibly printed in students’ minds. Even if they don’t need to know the culture background of those words, simple transcription can meet their vocabulary needs. In high school, students are required to master more and more vocabularies, but the vocabularies often involved various meanings and usages which often make students confused. Moreover, in high school English book or test, the vocabularies are more difficult and changeable, which makes students crazy when they encounter unfamiliar words and the words with different meaning in different contexts. However, high school students have a very limited time to memorize words due to their heavy curriculum tasks. Students still memorize words by mechanical copying, which can only last a few days, and can not form a long-term memory. Some students are used to write down all the new words they come across, some students even turn over the dictionary and recite it. These ways not only increases students’ memory burden, but also leads to mechanical-remembering.

2.2. Misuse of Words under the Chinglish Thinking

In China, Almost every Chinese students’ mother tongue is Chinese, and the Chinese way of thinking has deeply influenced their language structure, word-using habits, etc. In addition, the people that they can communicate with in English are their Chinese classmates and Chinese teachers who teach them English. Although the study of foreign language vocabulary has some similarities with the study of native language vocabulary, it still has many differences. When middle school students in China learn English vocabulary, they have mastered the Chinese vocabulary which is systematically enough to express their thoughts. Their learning of English vocabulary is always influenced by the vocabulary of their mother tongue, that is, the influence of mother tongue on second language acquisition. Due to the difference of language environment, second language learners will rely on the knowledge of vocabulary concepts of their mother tongue consciously or unintentionally in the process of second language vocabulary acquisition. They learn new linguistic symbols under the existing conceptual system, which is quite different from the conceptual system in English. English Curriculum Standards

for Senior High Schools in 2020 mentions that students should understand the functions of specific words, the connotations and denotations of word meanings, as well as the intentions and attitudes of users in the context. As the traditional vocabulary teaching only focuses on the meaning of words, middle school students are often influenced by Chinglish in English communication and writing, and use the superficial meaning of words to piece together sentences. A closer look will show that many words in the sentence are misused.

2.3. Disadvantages of Traditional Vocabulary Teaching Method

The problems mentioned above in students' memory and use of words are closely related to the disadvantages of traditional vocabulary teaching.

One of the main reasons for the low efficiency of students' English vocabulary mastery is that English teachers adopt a monotonous way to teach vocabulary, which makes students feel bored and lose interest over time. Teacher should allocate specific class time to vocabulary learning (Brown, 2001: 365). But in order to save time, some teachers simply let students learn a lot of words at one time on vocabulary list, and then through several dictation inspection, prompting students to remember words mechanically. Some teachers even spend little time on vocabulary teaching during class. In addition, the form of vocabulary review is simple. When students are learning or reviewing vocabulary, they only hold the word list and read the letters repeatedly from beginning to end. For example, when memorizing the word "information", students just read "I-N-F-O-R-M-A-T-I-O-N" along with its Chinese meaning.

3. Discussions and Suggestions of the Application of Lexicology

3.1. Application of Semantic Change

Semantic change refers to the change of meaning and the generation of new meaning. When a word comes into being, it has its primary meaning, which can also be called its original meaning. In the process of language development, it gradually forms its derivative meaning. With the progress of the society and the development of the meaning of words, there will be a phenomenon of differentiation, and some words may lose their original meaning and be replaced by their derivative meaning. Semantic change mainly has the following ways:

The first is the expansion of word meaning. Expansion means that the word expands from the original narrow concept to the broader concept, that is, the word expands from the individual meaning to the general meaning, with the result that the new meaning is greater than the old meaning (Lu Guoqiang, 2018: 93). For example, "place" changed from "square" to "any place" in general, "box" originally meant "boxwood", but as the meaning of the word expanded, it can be used to refer to any container now. And, there are some words which transfer from concrete to abstract, for example, "thing" used to specifically refer to "a problem discussed at a meeting", and now refers to "any thing."

The second is the specialization of meaning. Specialization and expansion of the meaning are opposite concepts. Specialization refers to the narrowing of a word from a concept, that is, from a general to a specific. For example, there's a line in Shakespeare's King Lear: "...mice and rats and such small deer." Here "deer" means a kind of animal. So the word deer has gone from referring to all wild animals in general to referring specifically to an animal with long legs, that eats grass, leaves, etc., and can run fast (The Commercial Press, 2008: 522).

Besides the two ways mentioned above, the elevation and degradation of word meaning are another two ways of semantic change. They refer to the process of word meaning developing towards positive and negative meanings. For example, the word "executive" was used to mean the general executive, and it was a neutral word in the past, but now it has been upgraded to a governor or senior head of state. "Sad" has been reduced from the ancient meaning "contented" to the modern meaning "sorrow."

With the understanding of the lexical meaning changes, when high school students read the works of some of the different period, they will be able to understand the different meaning of the same word in different periods, the status for the meaning and the change of the elevation or degeneration. And it can also help high school students choose more appropriate words in different occasions, in order to avoid misunderstanding due to word misuses. When explaining these words with semantic changes, teachers should try their best to show the change process of the meaning to students, which can not only enhance students' interest in learning vocabulary, but also deepen their impression and understand the evolution of culture in the process of learning vocabulary.

3.2. Application of Word Formation

Word formation mainly includes derivation, composition and conversion.

Affixation is one of derivation, that is, add affix to create new words, which is the most basic word formation method in English lexicology (Lu Guoqiang, 2018: 12). The affix method plays an important part in English vocabulary developing history. This kind of word formation mainly includes prefix and suffix. Some affixes are common. The typical prefixes like re- means reply and oppose, such as cycle-recycle, appear-reappear; Prefix pre- means before, for example, history-prehistory; Some prefixes express negate meaning like un-/in-/ir-/il-/im. The typical suffix -er/-or denounces someone who does something, e.g., accuse-accuser; Noun suffixes -ness in happiness; There are also very common adjective suffixes -able, for example, move-movable; Verb suffixes -ify, for example, simple-simplify, and so on. Since prefixes are more varied and less regular and therefore should not be presented until after suffixes have been mastered (Brown, 2001: 367). High school students have a certain vocabulary, so teachers should lead students to sort out the fragmented words in their minds in class, make them understand the meanings and functions of common affixes in English, and master the deformation rules of vocabulary. If students can grasp the nature and meaning of these affixes well, it will play an important role in their English learning, especially their vocabulary learning. They can also use the affixes skills to effectively guess the meaning of words, so as to improve their English reading comprehension ability.

Composition refers to the method of combining two or more words in sequence to form a new word (Lu Guoqiang, 2018: 34). The meaning of a compound word is not the simple addition of the meanings of its constituent words, but the introduction of new meanings from them. For example, "nightmare" means "unpleasant dream", not the literal meaning "a mare at night". "Dog days" means "hot weather", and if you take it literally, it's hilarious. Teachers should let the students know the rules of the formation of these compound words, so that the students can expand their vocabularies based on the existing vocabulary with the use of composition.

Conversion endows a word a new meaning and function via the change of part of speech but without changing the form of words. This method is also called zero derivation. The noun "book" can converse to verb, means "reserve"; Adjective "dry" is changed into a verb meaning "to make something dry"; The adjective "young" can be turned into a noun and when added "the", means "this kind of person". The application of conversion method in vocabulary teaching is helpful to cultivate students' idea of polysemy and help them to determine the part of speech according to the position of the word in a sentence, and then choose the correct meaning.

3.3. Application of English Idiom

Professor Sapir, a famous linguist, once said: "There is something behind language. Language cannot exist without culture." English idioms, as a kind of authentic expression, carry a large number of culture background of English-speaking countries. Idioms are fixed phrases or short sentences refined after a long time of use (He Renfang, 1989). The unity of semantics and the fixity of structure are two features of English idiom. Idiom is a fixed phrase which can not be

divided in semantic, and its overall meaning often can not be deduced from any single part from the composition. Therefore, English learners know that although they try their best to learn English and master English vocabulary, no matter how abundant vocabularies they own, they can not make up for their deficiency in idioms. It is difficult for non-native English speakers to learn and understand such phrases or short sentences in English. For example, when we see the English idiom “kick the bucket”, which is almost universally known in English-speaking countries, and if we understand it as “go and kick a bucket”, we will be “laughed one's head off”. English idioms can be divided into verbal idioms, nominal idioms, adjectival idioms, adverbial idioms and proverb in terms of grammatical functions and structural components. From these broad categories, they can be divided into various subcategories. For example, verbal idioms can be divided into verb + particle (eg. verb+preposition), verb + noun, verb + adjective, and so on. Idioms have special meanings that are different from the phrases we usually remember. For example, in the sentence “He is easily put out by trifles (Lu Guoqiang, 2018: 160).” Here, “put out” is quite different from the meaning students have remembered (put out the fire). Therefore, while explaining the basic meaning of phrases, teachers should introduce the meaning of idioms to students in combination with typical examples and cultural backgrounds.

Idioms can be found in the original English books, newspapers, or British and American TV series. However, high school students have little time to learn these idiomatic idioms due to the heavy curriculum and tight schedule. Therefore, it is necessary for teachers to use class time to explain common English idioms to students. With the development of globalization, English, as the world's common language, will be increasingly popular, and the country's standard for English talents will increase, too. High school students should abandon the idea that the ultimate goal of learning English is to deal with exams, they should realize that learning English is to learn another culture. The study of English idioms can not only enable students to make a deep understanding of different cultures, but also mobilize the learning enthusiasm of students. Therefore, the proper explanation of English idioms should be regarded as a necessary content and an important content and an important measure in foreign language teaching.

4. Conclusion

There is no denial that vocabulary teaching is of great importance in high school English teaching. Students' lexical volume is an important sign to measure the level of their English learning result. After analyzing the present problems that exist in high school vocabulary teaching, this paper has put forward the suggestion that applying semantic change, word formation and English idiom in lexicology to it. With the perfect combination of lexicology and vocabulary teaching, high school students' vocabulary learning and comprehensive English ability will surely be able to reach a new level. On the premise of following the cognitive rules of student, teacher should deeply understand the concept of vocabulary teaching in the new curriculum standard, and adopt appropriate teaching means and methods, and comprehensively improve the effect of English vocabulary teaching, so as to further improve the teaching quality.

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