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Contents/Table des matières

Yuan Xingju, Chinese Director, Canada/China Language Centre:

Preface..... i

Bob Courchène, Academic Advisor, Canada/China Language Centre:

Preface..... iii

An Introduction to the Canada/China Language Centre..... 1

Pat Donnelly and Ken Keobke: *Editorial*..... 3

Kengsoon Soo and Yeokhwa Ngeow: *The Influence of*

Affective Factors in Learning A Second Language..... 4

Lian Xian: *Integration of Production Skills in an EFL Classroom*..... 9

Zhao Xiaodong: *The Communicative Approach and Classroom Practice*..... 13

He Zaojiang: *Problems of Chinese Students in Learning Pronunciation*..... 17

Tian Hailong: *Two Tasks of Sense-Relation Based Vocabulary Teaching*..... 21

Jin Youcheng: *Some Aspects in Vocabulary Teaching*..... 23

Xu Wei: *An Approach to Classroom Video*..... 27

Ann Smith: *Teaming Up: Team Teaching in English for Specific Purposes*..... 30

Bob Courchène: *Learning a Second Language: Beijing Diary*..... 36

Wu Mingming: *L'Influence de Confucius dans l'Enseignement en Chine et Réflexions*

Contributors/Personnelles..... 40

A Call For Papers/Un Article s'il-vous-plait..... 50

Two Tasks of Sense-Relation Based Vocabulary Teaching

Tian Hailong

English words are many but they do not appear in the English language at random. They are semantically associated and "...are arranged in a series of associative networks" (Gairns and Redman, 1986: 88). Linguists have already identified some types of these sense relationships; for example, the relationships of synonymy, antonymy, and hyponymy. The conceptual relation between synonyms may be seen in the following group of words: cup, mug, glass.

Though each of them represents a different type of drinking vessel, the three words are related to each other in that they all refer to drinking vessels. In other words, they are in the same semantic field, or, sense relationships exist between them.

The above can readily lead to the belief that "the meaning of a word can only be understood and learnt in terms of its relationship with other words in the language" (Gairns and Redman, 1986: 22). By saying this, Gairns and Redman are emphasizing the importance of learning vocabulary through sense relationships. This sense-relationship based vocabulary learning is more efficient than rote learning in terms of memorization. However, in my experience teaching English, to teach vocabulary through sense relations will be even more efficient if it is integrated into a communicative task, which is, according to Nunan, "...a piece of classroom work which involves learners in comprehending, manipulating, producing or interacting in the target language while their attention is principally focused on meaning rather than on form" (Nunan, 1989: 10).

Nunan's definition takes the learner's involvement in language activities as a major feature of the communicative task. It is in this sense that Gairns and Redman call a "meaningful task" (1986: 90) a kind of communicative task. However, a meaningful task can be more "meaningful" when it is associated with sense relationship based vocabulary teaching. This integration, which I label as a sense-relationship based task, provides the learners access to a deeper analysis of the language by involving them in predicting the meaning of new words through group or pair work with context as clues. It also makes the understanding of word meaning fun and helps learners commit information to long term memory. In participating in these tasks the learners, while reading, are trained to rely on their own efforts to deduce word meaning rather than frequently using the dictionary.

Two Sense-Relationship Based Tasks

I have designed two sense-relationship based tasks of teaching new words and have recently successfully used them in my class of twenty-five Chinese college English students whose English level had passed the intermediate stage. The two tasks are concerned with synonymy, but the principle is applicable to the teaching of new words in other types of sense relationships.

Task one

Photocopy or make an overhead projection of a paragraph or paragraphs from a passage of text. Cover some of the new words so that the students have a cloze text. Ask the students to discuss in groups or pairs what the missing words are. The students should be able to find the semantic field although they may not find the exact same word as the original one. The teacher then writes the new word or words on the board together with those suggested by the students. The words form a group(s); the teacher may then either explain their conceptual boundaries or ask the students to discuss the boundaries.

Task two

After the presentation of the paragraph, or the whole text, the teacher may give the students some words, and ask them to find their synonyms in the text. This may be done in groups. When each group works out a set of synonyms, the teacher organizes a classroom discussion, in which each group adds to the list of synonyms for each of the given words.

Conclusion

In the Chinese classroom, the teacher has traditionally taught new words by letting students read through a list. The students may read after the teacher in chorus, or they read aloud one after another in class, occasionally interrupted by the teacher's grammatical explanations.

Entirely different from this are the tasks of sense-relationship based teaching of new words. These tasks are communicative in nature; they turn the class from the monologue of the teacher to a student-centred seminar. Among many other advantages common to all communicative tasks, the following two are emphasized:

1. Since students are active participants whose interest is wholly engaged in the task, they are highly motivated in trying to find the meaning of the new words. Such an endeavour ensures them a deeper processing of the language and makes for long term memory of the new words.
2. Compared with the traditional way of teaching new words, which focuses on rote memorization, the sense-relationship based tasks are efficient for helping students overcome cue dependant forgetfulness. That is, tasks of this kind make it easier for students to recall the words when needed. The reason for this is that their access to the new words through sense relationships makes it possible for semantically related new words to be "stored together" in their minds.

References

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