

Teaching Synonyms to Grade 5 Students in Vietnam through Mutually Exclusive Contexts

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ABSTRACT : In the context of globalization, preserving cultural identity through language education is essential. This article highlights the importance of teaching Vietnamese synonyms—words with similar meanings but differing in nuance, emotional tone, or usage. It introduces the method of teaching synonyms through "mutually exclusive contexts," where only one word in a synonym group fits a specific situation. This approach helps students distinguish subtle differences and use words accurately. Focusing on Grade 5 learners, the paper outlines how to guide students in classifying synonyms, analyzing meanings, and applying them contextually to improve semantic understanding and communicative competence.

KEYWORDS: Synonyms, Vietnamese, Grade 5, context, Vietnam

1. INTRODUCTION

In the context of globalization and international integration, preserving and promoting national cultural values has become a crucial task of the education sector. Language, as a vehicle of cultural transmission, holds a central role in educational programs. Among linguistic elements, synonyms constitute a significant part in Vietnamese vocabulary—not only enriching the language but also carrying deep cultural and historical values that have drawn the attention of many researchers.

Teaching synonyms through “mutually exclusive contexts” is an effective method to help Vietnamese students better understand differences in nuances of meaning, expressive value, or register among synonymous words. Although synonyms share the same semantic field or basic meaning, they cannot completely substitute for each other in all contexts. The “mutually exclusive contexts” method focuses on contexts where only one of the synonyms is appropriate, while the remaining words are “excluded” due to incompatibility.

2. RESEARCH CONTENT

2.1. Synonyms

2.1.1. The Concept of Synonyms

Author Huu Chau Do was the first to introduce a general definition of synonyms: “In the vocabulary of any language, there are usually words that, though phonologically different in form, share the same meaning (i.e., lexical meaning); therefore, in many specific linguistic contexts, they can substitute for one another. These words are considered synonyms.” [1, p.63].

Based on this definition, the author identified the basic characteristics of synonyms, including: different phonological forms, similar meanings, and the ability to substitute for one another in various contexts. However, the issue of the degree of synonymy between words was not clearly addressed.

It is important to note that later, Huu Chau Do adopted a more scientific view regarding the criterion of “substitutability” for synonyms. Thus, in his textbook *“Essentials of Vietnamese Lexicology and Semantics”*, he proposed a more concise definition of synonyms, stating: “Synonyms are words that share the same meaning—either referential meaning or conceptual meaning.” [2].

Authors Ngoc Chu Mai, Duc Nghieu Vu, and Trong Phien Hoang (1997), in their book *“Foundations of Linguistics and the Vietnamese Language,”* define synonyms as follows: “These are words that differ in sound but are similar in meaning, while also being distinguished by stylistic nuances, semantic shades, combinatory potential, and scope of usage.” They also emphasize: “Synonyms are not words that are completely identical in meaning; there are always differences alongside their similarities.” [3, p.346].

This viewpoint is widely regarded by both language users and researchers as convincing and most appropriate. The definition is both concise and comprehensive, as it not only generalizes the concept of synonyms but also clarifies the diversity and distinctions in semantic shades, stylistic features, and usage among synonymous words within the vocabulary system.

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These nuanced differences are precisely what justify the existence of synonym groups in a language. Similarly to definitions, the classification of synonyms also varies depending on perspectives and approaches.

2.1.2. Levels of Synonymy

Absolute Synonyms (Complete Synonyms): These are words that have entirely identical meanings, are used in the same way, and can be freely substituted for one another in speech.

Examples: country – homeland – fatherland; mom - mommy – mother.

- Partial Synonyms (Relative Synonyms / Synonyms with Different Nuances): These are words that share the same general meaning but differ to some extent regarding expressive nuances (emotions, attitudes) or modes of action. When using these words, one must carefully consider the context to choose the most appropriate option.

Examples:

Group from Vietnamese	Corresponding English	English Explanation
chết – mất – hy sinh	die – pass away – sacrifice one's life	- "die": neutral, daily use - "pass away": euphemistic, softer - "sacrifice one's life": solemn, for noble causes
cuồn cuộn – lăn tăn – nhấp nhô	surging – rippling – undulating	- "surging": strong, forceful waves in layers - "rippling": small, gentle waves - "undulating": rising and falling waves in rhythm

Note: For words with incomplete synonyms, although the words have the same meaning but different shades of representation, when creating text, students should be careful when choosing which words to match the context and object.

2.2. The concept of "mutually exclusive context" in teaching synonyms

"Exclusive context" (or "discriminatory context") are specific language situations, in which a set of synonymous words is given, but only one word is best suited to use, based on factors such as:

- Subtle meaning: Words that mean almost the same but differ in degree, nature (e.g: look, watch, glance).
- Expression value: Words with different emotional nuances (e.g. death, sacrifice, ceiling).
- Register/Style: Words that belong to different registers (colloquial, formal, literary, oral, etc.) (example: ăn, chén, xơi).

Using "mutually exclusive context" to analyze synonym teaching is an effective method, which can help students better understand the differences in semantics, expressive value or context of synonyms. Although synonyms have the same semantic or basic meaning, they do not completely replace each other in all contexts. The "context exclusion" method focuses on the fact that only one synonym is an appropriate context, while other words are "excluded" because of incompatibility.

2.3. Teaching Synonyms through Mutually Exclusive Contexts

Synonyms are words that have similar or equivalent meanings in terms of concept, but they often differ in expressive nuances, stylistic tone, level of formality, and social register. Therefore, not all synonyms can be used interchangeably in every context. Understanding and distinguishing these subtle shades of meaning requires a careful and systematic learning process.

In actual classroom practice, teaching synonyms tends to be simplified, often limited to listing words, matching word pairs, or finding equivalent expressions. As a result, students may easily confuse near-synonyms and misuse them in speech or writing, which leads to unnatural or inappropriate expressions in given communicative situations.

Context plays a crucial role in determining the practical meaning and nuance of a word. It is through context that students come to understand that some words, although similar in meaning, are excluded from certain usage situations. The method of "teaching through mutually exclusive contexts" is based on this perspective. It helps students approach synonyms in a more systematic and logical manner.

This method is implemented through the following steps:

2.3.1. Guiding Students to Classify and Arrange Synonym Chains

a. Classifying Synonyms

Right in the first lesson on "Synonyms," students are introduced to the concept: "Synonyms are words that have the same or similar meanings." Based on this foundation, synonyms are categorized into two types: *absolute synonyms* and *partial synonyms*.

Absolute synonyms are words that have exactly the same meaning and can be interchanged in a sentence without altering its meaning.

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The purpose of classifying synonyms is to help students understand that absolute synonyms refer to the same object, phenomenon, or entity with no change in essence — the only differences lie in the way they are named, regional usage, style of communication, or the context in which they are used. In other words, absolute synonyms are different ways of referring to the same concept.

Example: Finding synonyms for the word “mẹ” (mother)

To help students understand and identify synonyms of the word “mẹ,” the teacher may guide them as follows: “Mẹ” refers to the woman who gave birth to you. Besides the word “mẹ” do you know any other words that carry the same meaning?”. Through guided questions and prompts, students will recognize that words like “má,” “u,” “bà,” “mợ,” etc., can all be used interchangeably in specific contexts, and they are all absolute synonyms of the word “mẹ” (mother).

Synonyms are not words that only have the same meaning in some senses, but are not identical in meaning, and they cannot be substituted for each other under any circumstances.

For example: big – giant – large – huge

Vocabulary	Interpret	Example
big	Of considerable size or extent.	<i>He has a big dog that barks all the time.</i>
giant	Extremely large, often unusually so.	<i>They built a giant statue in the middle of the city.</i>
large	Greater than average in size or amount.	<i>She ordered a large coffee instead of a small one.</i>
huge	Extremely big; immense.	<i>The concert attracted a huge crowd of fans.</i>

Notes: • Big and large can be used interchangeably in many situations, but large is often used in writing or more formal contexts.

• Giant and huge have an emphatic meaning, used to create a strong impression.

For incomplete synonym types, teachers need to instruct students to find synonyms with predefined words. At the same time, teachers also need to help students analyze the meaning of each word, so as to understand the differences in usage and know how to choose a suitable context.

For example, find a word that is synonymous with the word “biếu” (offer).

First of all, the teacher helped students understand the meaning of the word "offer" - politely transferring his property to others without the purpose of exchange. Once students understand the meaning, they will be encouraged to identify words with similar semantic characteristics, such as: *tặng, dâng, hiến, cho, trao...* However, teachers should point out to students that although each word shares the general meaning of "giving," they vary in formality, emotional connotation, intended recipient, or communicative purpose. For example:

Specific meanings of the words:

- “tặng” – to give as a gesture of praise, encouragement, or affection.
- “dâng” – to offer something with reverence or respect.
- “hiến” – to voluntarily dedicate or offer something of great personal value.
- “cho” – to transfer ownership of something from oneself to another.

The purpose of identifying partial synonyms is to help students distinguish the specific nuances of each word so they can select and use them appropriately and accurately in different contexts. After instructing students to perform the above steps, they will be able to choose the appropriate words to fill in the blanks in order: *give, donate, voucher*. Distinguishing and understanding the different nuances in a group of incompletely synonymous words will help learn to use words more accurately, more flexibly in communication and writing.

b. Set up synonymous series

For the type of word search exercise synonymous with the given word, the teacher must first choose a given word as the basis for the children to find more words of the series. This word is often the central word of the group, not only is it taken as a basis for collecting other words, but also as a basis for comparing, analyzing and finding their general meaning, their own meaning.

For example: Find synonyms for each of the following words: *student, diligent, good*

Sample: Selfishness – hard work [6, p.11]

For this type of exercise, the teacher guides students to identify the central word in each group: “học trò” (student), “siêng năng” (diligent), and “giỏi” (good/skilled). From there, students find synonyms for each central word, specifically:

Central Word	Synonyms
student	pupil, learner, undergraduate, disciple, apprentice, follower
diligent	industrious, hard-working, studious
good/skilled	talent, talented, outstanding, good, excellent

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2.3.2. Establishing Mutually Exclusive Contexts

a. For a series of completely synonymous words

The use of completely synonymous words only differs in terms of scope of usage, nuances of meaning, stylistic nuances, etc., and the words in this synonym set can be used interchangeably.

- Regarding the scope of usage:

Example: Find in the passage below the synonyms of the bolded word [6,p. 15]

“We told stories about our mothers. Hung, who is from the South, calls his mother “má”. Hoa calls her “u”. Na and Thang call their mothers “bu”. Thanh, from Phu Tho, calls his mother “bầm”. Meanwhile, Phuoc, from Hue, calls his mother “mạ”.”

With this exercise, in order to identify the synonyms in the passage, students need to understand that the requirement is to find words with equivalent meaning to the given word “mẹ” (mother). They must recognize which group of synonymous words the words in the passage belong to. After establishing the chain of synonyms for “mẹ”, students will identify the words: “má, u, bu, bầm, mạ”. These are all completely synonymous in meaning. However, when used in specific contexts—particularly according to regional or dialectal variation—these words become mutually exclusive, meaning each word is only appropriate within a certain usage context. Specifically:

“mẹ, bầm, u, bu” belong to the Northern dialect

“má” belongs to the Southern dialect

“mạ” belongs to the Central dialect

From there, students know that these words all refer to the same person, mother, but because they are used in different regions, they are called differently.

- About the word nuance:

Example: Find synonyms for the word “chết” (to die) and use each in a sentence.

To complete this exercise, the teacher guides students to start by defining “chết” – meaning the cessation of life. From understanding this core meaning, students can identify synonyms such as: “mất” (lost/passed away), “tử trần” (passed away - formal), “qua đời” (passed away - gentle), “toi” (croak/kick the bucket - very informal/derogatory), “bỏ mạng” (perish/lose one's life - often implies a violent or ignoble end), “hy sinh” (sacrifice one's life). However, each of these words carries a different emotional nuance, reflecting the speaker's specific attitude and feelings towards the person being referred to. Therefore, when using these words in sentences, it's crucial to choose the appropriate context, as they are mutually exclusive in terms of usage. Here are some sentences students wrote:

- Mẹ tôi rất buồn khi nghe tin ông nội mất. (My mother was very sad to hear that my grandfather had passed away.) - This expresses a feeling of sorrow and mourning.

- Anh ấy đã hy sinh anh dũng trên chiến trường để bảo vệ tổ quốc. (He bravely sacrificed his life on the battlefield to protect the homeland.) - This conveys a great loss, a sacrifice of personal interest for something noble.

- Vì người anh quá tham lam nên anh ta đã bị bỏ mạng ngoài biển. (Because the older brother was too greedy, he lost his life at sea.)

- This implies contempt for the person's death.

b. For incomplete synonyms

As mentioned, synonyms are not entirely equivalent words but there are still certain differences in tone of expression or usage. Therefore, in order for students to use these words correctly, teachers need to guide you through the following steps:

Step 1: Guide students in analyzing the semantic features of each word in a synonym group. Although synonyms share a basic semantic feature, each word carries its own distinct meaning. Therefore, clearly explaining the meaning of each word will help students recognize similarities and differences, enabling them to select words appropriate for specific usage situations.

Step 2: Guide students on how to select words according to contexts. Since the specific meaning of words is only truly revealed through usage, it is necessary to place words in specific contexts. This helps students understand the precise usage of each word, avoiding incorrect or inappropriate use that does not match the intended nuance of expression.

Example: Find the appropriate word in parentheses to complete the following paragraph:

"In winter, during the harvest season, the countryside is filled with yellow – many different shades of yellow. [...] The color of ripe rice in the fields is [vàng xuộm (golden brown), vàng rực (radiant yellow)] again. The pale sunlight takes on a [vàng rực (radiant yellow), vàng hoe (light yellow)] hue. [...] In the courtyard, straw and rice are [vàng khè (pale yellow), vàng giòn (parched yellow)]. Around there, chickens and dogs are also [vàng ối (dull yellow), vàng mượt (silky yellow)]."

First of all, the teacher guides the student to find the general meaning, special meaning of the words “vàng xuộm, vàng rực, vàng hoe, vàng khè, vàng giòn, vàng ối, vàng mượt”.

General meaning of the words in the series: all yellow only

Each word in turn describes a distinct shade, degree, or characteristic of yellow when attached to different objects, creating richness and diversity in the description. They are synonymous but not completely, each word carrying a distinct meaning to accurately describe the yellow color of each thing.

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vàng xuộm (golden yellow): giving a sense of abundance and prosperity

vàng rực (radiant yellow): bright and glowing everywhere

vàng hoe (light yellow): but fresh and shining

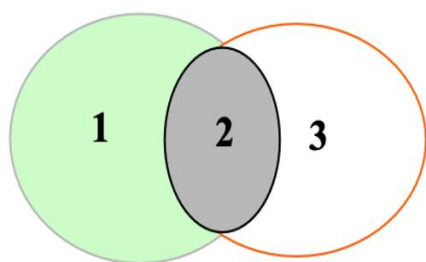
vàng khè (pale yellow): unappealing and murky

vàng giòn (parched yellow): the yellow of something sun-dried, giving a sense of brittleness

vàng ối (dull yellow): intense and evenly spread

vàng mượt (silky yellow): soft-looking, glossy.

After understanding the general meaning and specific nuances of each word in the synonym group, students will know how to accurately choose the appropriate word to fill in the blanks. (The correct order is: vàng rực, vàng hoe, vàng giòn, vàng mượt). The teacher can support students by using illustrations to show the relationship between these near-synonyms, making it easier for them to visualize, as shown in the illustration below:



Symbol

Number 1: general meaning.

Number 2: specific meaning.

Number 3: specific meaning.

For exercises that require students to find the most appropriate substitute word, they need to clearly identify the words within the synonym group and analyze the specific meaning of each word. From there, students will know how to choose a suitable replacement word that fits the specific context, ensuring accuracy and naturalness in expression.

3. CONCLUSION

Synonyms are an important component of the Vietnamese language curriculum at the primary level, especially in Grade 5 – a stage when students begin to expand their vocabulary and develop more precise and refined language expression skills. Teaching synonyms should not stop at identifying or listing word pairs with similar meanings, but should go further in helping students understand nuances, usage, and appropriate contexts. In this regard, teaching synonyms through mutually exclusive contexts stands out as a highly effective and in-depth method. It helps students develop semantic thinking and enhances their ability to use language flexibly in various situations.

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