

Using Sense Relations (Synonymy, Antonymy and Hyponymy) in Teaching Vocabulary

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ABSTRACT: Vocabulary plays a fundamental role in second language acquisition because it directly influences learners' ability to comprehend and produce language effectively. Nevertheless, many English language learners continue to experience difficulties in acquiring and retaining vocabulary, often due to ineffective learning strategies and insufficient understanding of semantic relationships among lexical items. Since words are systematically connected through various semantic relations, understanding these relationships can facilitate vocabulary acquisition and improve long-term retention. This paper reviews the theoretical foundations of three major sense relations - synonymy, antonymy, and hyponymy and discusses their pedagogical value in English vocabulary instruction. Drawing upon previous studies in semantics and vocabulary acquisition, the paper highlights how these semantic relationships can promote deeper lexical processing, strengthen learners' semantic networks, and enhance vocabulary retention and language use. In addition, several practical implications are proposed to help English language teachers integrate sense relations into classroom activities more effectively. The study concludes that incorporating semantic relationships into vocabulary instruction provides meaningful learning opportunities that foster learners' lexical competence and communicative ability.

KEYWORDS: vocabulary teaching; sense relations; synonymy; antonymy; hyponymy; semantic networks; vocabulary acquisition

I. INTRODUCTION

Vocabulary is widely recognized as one of the most essential components of second language acquisition because it provides the foundation for effective communication and supports the development of the four language skills: listening, speaking, reading, and writing. A substantial body of research has demonstrated that vocabulary knowledge is a strong predictor of learners' language proficiency, reading comprehension, and communicative competence (Nation, 2001; Schmitt, 2008; Webb & Nation, 2017). Without an adequate vocabulary, learners often struggle to understand texts, express ideas accurately, and participate confidently in communicative situations.

Despite the acknowledged importance of vocabulary, acquiring and retaining lexical knowledge remains one of the greatest challenges for many learners of English as a foreign language (EFL). Although students may spend considerable time memorizing individual words, they frequently forget newly learned vocabulary or fail to apply it appropriately in authentic communicative contexts. This problem is often attributed to traditional vocabulary learning approaches that emphasize isolated word memorization rather than meaningful semantic connections among lexical items (Nation, 2001; Schmitt, 2008). Consequently, learners may possess a large number of words receptively but experience difficulties retrieving and using them productively.

Recent studies in vocabulary acquisition suggest that words are not stored independently in the mental lexicon but are organized into interconnected semantic networks (Aitchison, 2012; Webb & Nation, 2017). These semantic relationships facilitate vocabulary learning by enabling learners to associate new lexical items with their existing knowledge, thereby promoting deeper cognitive processing and long-term retention. Among various semantic relationships, sense relations - including synonymy, antonymy, and hyponymy - represent fundamental mechanisms through which lexical meanings are organized. Understanding these relationships not only helps learners infer word meanings more efficiently but also improves their awareness of lexical choice, collocations, and contextual appropriateness.

Numerous scholars have emphasized the pedagogical benefits of semantic organization in vocabulary instruction. Teaching vocabulary through semantic relationships encourages learners to process lexical items more deeply, establish meaningful associations between words, and retrieve vocabulary more effectively during language use (Nation, 2001; Schmitt, 2008; Webb & Nation, 2017). Furthermore, classroom activities based on synonymy, antonymy, and hyponymy can enhance learners' engagement and contribute to the development of richer lexical knowledge.

Using Sense Relations (Synonymy, Antonymy and Hyponymy) in Teaching Vocabulary

Although previous studies have extensively discussed vocabulary teaching strategies and lexical semantics, relatively few review papers have specifically synthesized the pedagogical applications of the three major sense relations in English vocabulary instruction. Existing literature often focuses on individual semantic relationships or theoretical descriptions without providing comprehensive implications for classroom practice. Therefore, there remains a need for a concise review that integrates semantic theory with practical teaching recommendations.

In response to this gap, the present paper reviews the theoretical foundations of synonymy, antonymy, and hyponymy and discusses their pedagogical significance in vocabulary teaching. By synthesizing previous studies in semantics and vocabulary acquisition, the paper aims to provide English language teachers with practical insights into how sense relations can be effectively incorporated into vocabulary instruction to enhance learners' vocabulary development and communicative competence.

2. REVIEW OF THEORY AND RELATED LITERATURE

2.1. Definition of Vocabulary

There are many different definitions of vocabulary mentioned as follows.

According to Neuman & Dwyer (2009), vocabulary can be defined as the word that "we must know to communicate effectively; spoken words (expressive vocabulary) and heard words (receptive vocabulary)".

Hornby (1995) recognized vocabulary as "the total number of words in a language; a list of words with their meanings". However, a new lexical entry can be more than a single word. For example, *post office* and *mother-in-law*, made up of two or three words but expressing a single idea. A useful convention is to cover all such cases by talking about the lexical "item" rather than the "word".

As Zimmerman cited in Coady and Huckin (1998) "vocabulary is central to language and has important importance for typical language learning."

From Murcia's observation (1991), vocabulary is just understood as the words we teach in foreign language. From these words, learners can step-by-step master this language. Besides, two other researchers also gave the definitions of vocabulary in the same year (2000) as follows. Read asserted that vocabulary has been defined in distinct meanings such as words, whereas Schmitt stated in another definition that we must analyze what we mean or think by vocabulary.

From the above definitions, it can be concluded that vocabulary is the total number of words needed to convey ideas and express the meaning of the speaker, that is why learning vocabulary is so important.

2.2. Vocabulary learning and teaching

The vocabulary of a language, according to Jackson and Amvela (2000), is fundamentally a dynamic and well-integrated system of lexemes organized by meaning correlations. When a vocabulary is isolated from its context and environment, learners often have a harder time remembering it. It becomes easier for learners to expand their vocabulary if they connect the terms with their topic or context. Then, grouping words helps in the acquisition of new vocabulary.

According to Sadoski (2005), there are two primary types of meaningful vocabulary learning including contextual learning and direct vocabulary instruction. Learning without the purpose to learn is referred to as "incidental learning from context". Otherwise, the term "direct vocabulary instruction" refers to a method of systematically demonstrating how to determine the meanings of unfamiliar words. Learners' knowledge may be determined and organized in a way that ties what they know to the new concepts and language they will be learning through semantic maps that connect a main concept with related events and ideas. When learners must do a higher degree of semantic processing, they will be able to learn more effectively. Learners have a strong potential for long-term memory when they have more opportunities to connect with new unfamiliar words, according to Schmitt (2008).

The development of linguistic competence is directly influenced by the learners' lexical resources. As a result, vocabulary instruction is given a high priority in the language-learning process, ensuring that language students have an adequate knowledge about vocabulary. Teaching vocabulary in a language class is a complicated process that includes semantic, lexical, syntactic, and phonological components. Students will use language in their jobs and studies once they have mastered vocabulary. The ability to comprehend words, acquire understanding into the assumption lexical and collocation relations of the words systems, improve their ability to build their own language structure, and develop their communication skills may all be enhanced by a thorough understanding of semantics theory.

3. SENSE RELATIONS

3.1. Definitions of sense relations

According to Mathew (1997), sense relations are defined as any correlations between lexical units and a language's semantic system. This emphasizes that lexical units of a language must have a meaning relation. It makes no difference whether this connection indicates identity or non-identity.

Using Sense Relations (Synonymy, Antonymy and Hyponymy) in Teaching Vocabulary

According to Kreidler (2013), sense relations are considered the relations of words' meanings which are illustrated in synonymy, hyponymy, and antonymy. It could be inferred that the resemblance of words' meaning in synonymy, the contrast of words' meaning in antonymy and the attachment of words' meaning in hyponymy are the expressions of sense relations.

3.2. Synonymy

Synonymy is the relationship among synonyms. Palmer (1976) mentioned that synonymy denotes the closeness of meaning, and so we can say for a group of terminology that have the same meaning are synonyms. For instance, we may state that "diminish/ decrease", "thankful/ grateful", and "belly/ stomach" are synonyms as they get the same denotation. However, he found out that "it can however, be maintained that there are no real synonyms, that no two words that have exactly the same meaning would both survive in a language". It can be understood that certain synonyms have various collocations and they cannot be used interchangeably in particular situations.

Synonymy is a semantic relationship among words. It happens when two or more linguistic forms are substituted for one another in any circumstances where their meaning is not changed denotatively or connotatively. Words like *peaceful* and *quiet*, *darling* and *honey*, *talk* and *speak*, and so on, can all be considered synonyms since they have most of the same features. (Shiyab, 2007)

Nguyễn Hoà (2004) noted that synonyms are "words of the same parts of speech which have similar meaning, but not identical meanings." Synonyms are phonetically and morphologically distinct words that possess the same part of speech and a similar denotation but differ in connotation and collocations. The examples are given as follows:

(1) *Peter would like to do something **different** for our festival next December.*

(2) *Peter would like to do something **unique** for our festival next December.*

In example (1) and (2), "different" and "unique" are synonyms. They are similar (not the same or unlike) in denotation. The connotative meanings of these two terms, on the other hand, are not the same. Different would imply something different from what you did the prior year or previous years. Something uncommon, such as an activity not generally connected with birthdays or something you (or most people) have never done before, would be considered unique. It is reasonable to assume that someone looking for a method to commemorate the festival next December will have a lot harder time coming up with a "unique" activity than one that is just "different".

Another example about synonyms is the group words including **group**, **club**, **gang** and **clique**. All four have essentially the same denotative meaning: a group of people. However, each of these nouns has a distinct connotative meaning. The word "group" has a neutral meaning. The term simply refers to a group of individuals. It elicits neither good nor negative emotions. "Club" also refers to a group of individuals, but it has a more positive meaning because a club is a group of people who gather together voluntarily for a common interest or goal. Although a "gang" is described as a well-organized organization, the word carries a negative connotation. It means this organization has violent behavior or criminal action. "Clique" also refers to a social group, however it has a bad meaning. This is because the term "clique" is usually applied to situations in which a group is recognized as isolating others. Members in this clique are known as the bad guys.

In summary, synonymy is a phenomenon which refers to a term used to describe a collection of words that have a common meaning and may be used interchangeably in a restricted number of situations.

3.3. Antonymy

Antonymy is known as the relationships of antonyms or the relations of senses between words can be seen from their oppositeness.

O'grady (1987) believed that "antonyms are words or phrases that are opposites with respect to some components of their meaning". For example: *hot – cold, live – die, happy – sad, etc.*

Based on the features of antonyms, Lyon (1995) classified antonyms into four types which are shown as follows.

The first type of antonyms is **proper antonyms**, which are normally gradable, using the gradation procedure. They are the diametric opposites of a continuous scale of value such as the ranging from "hot" to "cold" (hot – warm – cool – cold).

The second type of antonyms is **complementary antonyms**. The assertion of one thing is the negation of the other in this type of antonym. Binary antonyms exist in pairs and deplete all possible options between them. If one is true, the other cannot be true, and vice versa. Here are some illustrated examples: *entrance – exit, pass – fail, day – night, etc.*

The third type of antonyms is **conversive antonyms**. Conversive antonyms express the same scenario from various perspectives, with the individuals' roles and sequence reversed. For example: *teacher – student, doctor – patient, wife – husband, buy – sell.*

The last type of antonym is **directional antonyms**. Antonyms that are directional are those that have opposing motion directions. For example: *left – right, before – after, come – go.*

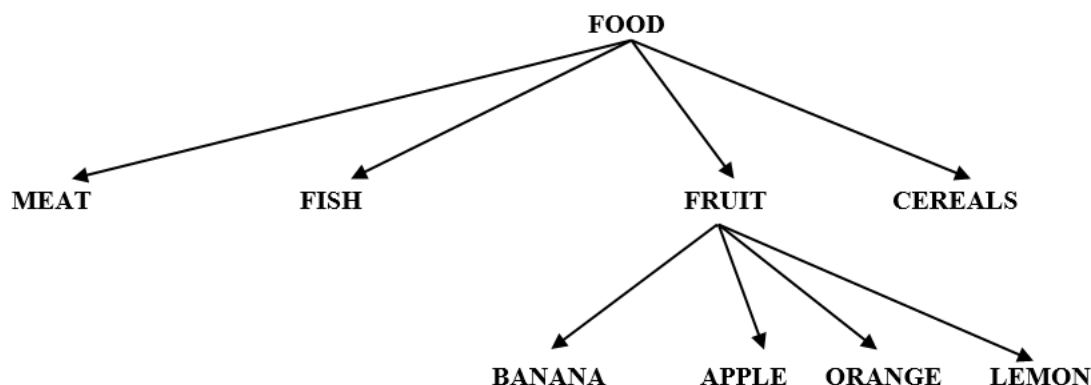
3.4. Hyponymy

A typical definition about hyponymy is from Richards and Schmidt's statement (2002). Hyponymy, according to these two researchers, is "a relationship between two words, in which the meaning of one of the words includes the meaning of the other

Using Sense Relations (Synonymy, Antonymy and Hyponymy) in Teaching Vocabulary

word". It can be presented in the relation between *cherry blossom* and *flower*, *hospital* and *place*, *chicken* and *food*. *Cherry blossom* is said to be a hyponym of *flower*, *hospital* is a hyponym of *place*, and *chicken* is a hyponym of *food*. Alternatively, *cherry blossom*, *hospital* and *chicken* are considered as the superordinate (or hypernym) of *flower*, *place* and *food* respectively.

The sense relations of hyponymy, according to Harmer (2002) can be presented in the following diagram:



Hyponyms and superordinates (adapted from The Practice of English Language Teaching by Harmer)

4. ADVANTAGES OF USING SENSE RELATIONS IN TEACHING VOCABULARY

Many researchers have commented on the benefits of using sense relations in teaching vocabulary for English Language Learners.

Nguyễn Hòa (2004) asserted that "there is no way we can speak about structure without relation". That means it is impossible to learn a language without generating our own vocabulary based on the interconnections between the words.

Mora (2001) explained using synonymy as a way that is extremely advantageous for teaching vocabulary with different meanings. To put it in another way, synonymy is helpful in conveying the meaning of words by using terms with similar meanings. Mora also claimed that antonymy is a strong approach for conveying word meanings by using words with opposite meanings.

For more detail, sense relations can assist learners in creating a general understanding of associated words, which helps them in lexical item acquisition and increase their fluency. Sense relations also provide a logical approach for learners to organize and memorize new language. Learners become more fluent when speaking about a certain topic when the vocabulary development process is effectively planned. If they have studied hyponyms of "food", for example, it will be convenient and easy for them to discuss this topic as they will have all or almost all of the necessary vocabulary to use. Under the instruction of sense relations, learners who experience some loss of words may have a greater long-term memorization. To summarize, using sense relations to increase vocabulary achievement is more effective than using traditional techniques.

Moreover, knowing sense connections improves learners' knowledge of words and helps them to choose better words in using English as spoken or written form. A word, according to Saussure's theory, is made up of two parts: form (written and spoken) and meaning. Knowing a word entails not only knowing where it came from and what it means, but also being able to connect with other words in suitable contexts. This helps to avoid the misuse of vocabulary. Obviously, the importance of sense relations was mentioned by Nation (2001) as a useful technique to convey the meanings of words and establish suitable activities to increase students' knowledge about a wide range of words in their foreign language learning.

5. IMPLICATIONS FOR TEACHERS IN USING SENSE RELATIONS TO TEACH VOCABULARY

From the aforementioned information, the researcher applies some following implications for the ways of using sense relations to help students get better understanding and memorization about vocabulary.

First of all, to design appropriate exercises and activities for students, teachers should understand their students' expectation or preference in learning vocabulary to avoid the fact that not all students can comprehend knowledge based on all sense relations. If younger students prefer to acquire vocabulary through hyponymy rather than other sense relations, teachers should present them with more hyponym-related interesting and meaningful activities or language games.

Secondly, teachers should focus on relevant vocabulary teaching activities or strategies to support students to acquire language effectively before each lesson. While it is clear that applying synonymy or other forms of semantic relations to teach vocabulary may be beneficial, teachers must employ them suitably to assist students enhance their vocabulary. Importantly, the ways teachers choose to utilize suitable sense relations also depend on the content or the topic of the lessons.

Thirdly, with low-level students, teachers might utilize visual aids to teach vocabulary which make them easier to understand. When teaching adjectives, for example, it is advisable for teachers to provide students a list of adjectives along with images to describe them if possible. After the students have matched the adjectives to the images, the teacher can give them the

Using Sense Relations (Synonymy, Antonymy and Hyponymy) in Teaching Vocabulary

antonyms or synonyms and ask them to match the words with equivalent antonyms or synonyms. This activity might help students to enhance the development of their long-term memory. Additionally, teachers can use hyponymy in their teaching by naming the pictures. For example, teachers might provide students an image of a family with other pictures about the members in a family. Then, teachers ask students to guess or name the characters to identify who they are (e.g. grandfather, grandmother, father, mother, brother, sister, ...). This method is often quite effective, and it helps learners in memorizing words by using visual images.

Furthermore, with more advanced-level-students, teachers can flexibly apply more challenging games or activities to raise students' aptitude. For example, teachers can ask students to recall any words related to one type of sense relations teachers wish to check in a chosen topic or ask them to guess the meaning of new words in some synonymy and antonymy exercises like requesting student to *mark the letter A, B, C, or D on their answer sheet to indicate the word(s) CLOSEST/ OPPOSITE in meaning to the underlined word(s) in each of the following questions (the questions would be given after the requirement).*

Last but not least, teachers need to give students some extra exercises which are related to the sense relations teachers introduce in class at the prior time and require them to do them outside class to strengthen their vocabulary. For example, a lot of vocabulary exercises, reading or listening exercises of sense relations should be provided to students to assist them not only enhance their vocabulary but also their skills in English.

6. CONCLUSION

Vocabulary knowledge constitutes a fundamental component of second language proficiency and serves as the foundation for effective communication across all language skills. As discussed throughout this paper, successful vocabulary acquisition involves more than simply memorizing individual words; it requires learners to develop meaningful semantic connections that facilitate comprehension, retention, and appropriate language use. Among the various approaches to vocabulary instruction, the use of sense relations—particularly synonymy, antonymy, and hyponymy—offers an effective means of helping learners organize lexical knowledge into interconnected semantic networks.

The review of theoretical perspectives and previous studies indicates that teaching vocabulary through sense relations promotes deeper cognitive processing, strengthens long-term memory, and enhances learners' ability to retrieve and apply vocabulary in authentic communicative contexts. Rather than learning words in isolation, students are encouraged to recognize semantic relationships among lexical items, enabling them to expand their vocabulary systematically and improve their lexical competence. In addition, classroom activities based on semantic relationships can increase learners' engagement, foster critical thinking, and support more meaningful vocabulary learning experiences.

From a pedagogical perspective, English language teachers should incorporate sense relations into vocabulary instruction through carefully designed learning activities that are appropriate for learners' proficiency levels and instructional objectives. Combining semantic relationship instruction with contextualized practice, visual support, collaborative learning, and communicative tasks may further enhance vocabulary retention and language performance.

Nevertheless, this paper is primarily a conceptual review that synthesizes existing literature rather than reporting empirical findings. Therefore, future research is recommended to investigate the effectiveness of sense relation-based vocabulary instruction in different educational contexts through experimental or quasi-experimental research designs. Further studies may also explore how technological tools, digital learning environments, and artificial intelligence-assisted vocabulary instruction can facilitate the teaching and learning of semantic relationships in English language education.

In conclusion, integrating sense relations into vocabulary teaching provides a theoretically grounded and pedagogically valuable approach to developing learners' lexical knowledge. By fostering deeper semantic understanding and stronger lexical organization, this approach has the potential to improve vocabulary retention, communicative competence, and overall language proficiency among English language learners.

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Using Sense Relations (Synonymy, Antonymy and Hyponymy) in Teaching Vocabulary

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