Class notes on relationship of words english language essay

Linguistics, English

Meaning:. Meaning – first thing that comes to mind dictionary – expect the word to refer to a person, thing , action, condition or case Schmitt(2000). The relationship between the word and the referent can be exclusive, the " proper noun " such as Buckingham Palace only relates to one building. However in most cases this relationship is not so simple, the word Palace cannot describe all palaces. The word is a label we attach to our concept of what a palace is like and the concept itself relies on the degree of our personal experiences. It would be more precise to define meaning as the relationship between a word and its concept. It is possible then to describe the attributes of a concept and hence formulise the meaning of a word. So if a set of attributes match a certain concept, then a relevant word can be linked to that concept. But this is not an ideal approach as a majority of words do not have a one to one relationship with their referent Aitchison (1987). The attributes of the proper noun Mount Everest are clearly definable but it is more difficult to tabulate the attributes of a category word such as mountain. Two mountains may have very different attributes, so the word mountain can have flexible meaning. Most words to a certain extent have this flexibility something which Aitchison (1987) calls a " fuzzy meaning." The way people deal with this " fuzziness" is explained by the prototype theory, the most typical example of a concept category is selected to compare prospective members against. The match does not have to be perfect, which explains how words can sometimes be used with slightly different meanings Aithchison (1987). However, even with this approach problems may arise when people from different cultures disagree as to what constitutes a typical example Rosch (1975). The prototype theory explains how people relate

words to concept categories but not how they deal with the fuzziness in meaning between two words. A words meaning can only really be understood by comparing it to the meanings of related words (Gairns and Redman 1986). The study of these meaning relationships, called sense relations falls under the scrutiny of Semantics and the technical terms for them are: Synonymy – relationship between words having a similar meaning. Antonymy – relationship between words having opposite meaning. Hyponymy – relationship between words belonging to the same category (superordinates being the more general category and subordinates the more specific). Meronymy - relationship between a part and whole (trigger – gun). Teaching word meaning is clearly a challenging task for a teacher. Although words such as proper nouns can be taught by simple descriptions or pictures, category words on the other hand would require more input. These words could be presented by listing the semantic features of the category or by giving subordinates of a superordinate term. When teaching in a context where learners have no exposure to English outside the classroom it can be difficult to maintain motivation while teaching vocabulary, especially using sense relations. One way that I found effective to counter this was to use oral or written translation (from learners L1 to L2) with authentic contextualized material. Students would discuss and improve their translations to build vocabulary lists with the relationships highlighted. Using translation in a language classroom is generally regarded as anti-modern but it can have several advantages, including helping learners extend their vocabularies into new areas (Heltai 1989). Another important distinction is between conceptual or denotative meaning and affective meaning. Affective meaning

adds to or changes the meaning of a word depending on function or situation (Richards 1976). Two words may refer to the same object or action but the overtones attached to its use may be different (Palmer 1976). Gairns and Redman identify two important areas of affective meaning, connotation and socio-cultural associations (Gairns and Redman 1986). Words can have a positive or negative connotation, and their affective meaning can be influenced by the speaker's attitude or situation. People within a society or among different cultures often have different associations with certain words, which can result in different interpretations of the same word. The way we use this hidden meaning of a word is referred to as register, and can have several variations. One attempt to categorise these variations was by Chui (1972), he suggested the following areas where register plays a role: temporal Variation – words can be in or out of fashion. geographical variation – different words may be used for the same item depending on geographical location. social variation – social class can influence word selection. social role variation – level of formality depends on social relationship with the addressee. field of discourse variation – the topic of discussion influences language choice. mode of discourse variation – whether discourse is written or spoken affects word choice. Teaching word meaning in the complete sense is obviously a challenging task for any teacher. With all the intricacies involved, a teacher needs to plan carefully to include register in vocabulary teaching. Likewise, it is also difficult for a learner to absorb all aspects of word meaning in the first encounter. Starting with the most common conceptual meaning of a word, other aspects of meaning can be introduced with subsequent encounters (Schmitt 2000). Learners need to be exposed to

connotative meanings in real contexts, using relevant reading and listening activities is a useful way of doing this (Gairns and Redman 1986). Words are related to each other in various ways, sense relations which we looked at earlier are a good example of this. Our mind’s word bank, the mental lexicon uses these relationships to store and organise words in clusters with related concepts. Lexical units which have some type of association are linked to each other in a complex network and the complexity of a network is proportional to the depth of knowledge that a person has of those units (Aitchison, 1994). Associations fall into several categories, the most important three are given in Table 1. Type of associationDescriptionExamplesClangWords are related in sound rather than meaning. brain – trainstamp – clampSyntagmaticWords that occur together sequentially. commit – crimegaping – voidParadigmaticWords that are semantically related. stop – halthard – softTable 1 Word associations. Several studies such as Ervin (1961) have shown that, as a L1 speaker matures there is a shift from clang to syntagmatic and then to paradigmatic associations. Although most of this work has focused on native speakers, work done by Meara (1983) and subsequently by Greidanus et al (2001), has found that as L2 proficiency improves, association responses by L2 learners increases incrementally to resemble those of native speakers. Although there is still no clear idea what processes are involved in the development of a person’s mental lexicon organisation, what is clear is that syntagmatic associations are common and play an important role in helping a learner move up to more paradigmatic associations. Hence incorporating syntagmatic associations (commonly known as collocations) into vocabulary teaching can

be an effective way of strengthening word knowledge and making learners aware of the interconnection between words. This is something that I will look at in more detail when discussing collocations. A good way to practice paradigmatic features would be through word classification activities. Students classify a set of target vocabulary into categories using sense relations, they then justify, explain and discuss their decisions. This is probably more relevant for advanced students and it can help to visualise and stimulate the organisation of vocabulary in the mental lexicon. In a very similar approach presented by Dunbar (1992), he used classifications to integrate vocabulary knowledge with subject matter knowledge. He found that using this approach helped learners to visualise and better appreciate the interactive relationships between the words they were learning. Knowledge of word meaning is not very useful unless a person can recognize and produce a word. The non-meaning aspects of word knowledge, the written (orthographic), spoken and grammatical forms are equally important, if not more so. With regards to orthographical knowledge, there is growing evidence from research proving that it plays an important role in the word acquisition process (Schmitt, 2000). The receptive component of orthographic knowledge is word recognition. This is the visual identification of a word by its appearance (outline-shape) and an analysis of the letters that it contains. Scientific evidence suggests that the main input into the word recognition process comes from recognising a words individual components (Besner and Johnston, 1989). The positioning of the letters within a word are particularly important. In the results of an experiment by Rayner and Hagelberg (1975) kindergarten students focused on the first

letter to recognise a word , whereas adults used the first and second letters plus the shape of the word. Further evidence to support the importance of letter positioning is provided by eye movement literature. The eyes do not move smoothly while reading, but fixate on a word for a short period (200-250 milliseconds) before moving on to another word. These movements are called saccades and are normally 20-35ms. Fixations are usually in the first half of a word and not all words are fixated. Short words, especially function words are often ignored. The centre point of a person's vision, the fovea, can only see 3-4 letters to the left of and about 15 letters past the fixation point. Word recognition takes place closest to the fixation point and information further out is used to identify the length of the following word and the next fixation point. This nature of eye movement suggests that the beginning of a word is the most important in the visual recognition process. While reading, the eye fixates on most of the words in a text. To enhance reading fluency, it is important that these words are recognised and decoded instinctively. As proficiency in L2 improves this recognition process becomes faster (Meara, 1986). The productive side of writing is spelling. Studies have shown that there are 2 stages of spelling development amongst children, phonological processing and an orthographic stage. At the early stages of literacy, young learners depend primarily on phonological processing, and with maturity move towards the orthographic stage. At this stage spelling begins to depend more on the activation of lexical knowledge (Frith, 1985). Other research however, suggests that both these stages occur contiguously from the onset (Lennox and Seigel, 1994). With regards to L2 orthographic knowledge, a learners L1 orthographic system influences L2 processing. The

three main types of orthographic systems found in the world’s languages are logographic (Chinese), syllabic (Japanese) and alphabetic (English). The way L1 orthography influences L2 acquisition is still not clear. Some suggest that differences in L1 and L2 orthographic types can make the language learning process more difficult (Schmitt, 2000), while other studies have found that there is no affect (Akamatsu, 2002). If, as has been suggested that improved word recognition positively affects language proficiency, then it is a good idea to encourage automaticity of word recognition in the classroom. An example of an activity that can be used is given in figure 1.

Some of these are not really English words. Don't worry about their meaning. Find the words with the same spelling as the ones in darker print, and underline them.

Timed activity

Immediately

imediately immediatly immediately immediately

experience

experienced expereince exporience experience

automatic

automatic autematic atomatic automate

…

Figure 1 (Adapted from Morrow, 1980)Word recognition occurs dynamically and a way of making activities in this area more stimulating and real, is through the use of computers. Activities similar to figure 1 can be made

more interactive by having words appearing on screen for increasingly shorter periods to help increase the speed of recognition. A study by Tozcu and Coady (2004) looked at how interactive computer based texts affected vocabulary acquisition. The results supported the positive effect of using technology in the language classroom on vocabulary development. With respect to spelling, the irregularity in English creates difficulty for learners. One of the first things that needs attention are the sound-spelling correspondences. Teachers can encourage learners to practice creating mental images of words and use these during spelling. This can also help with spelling words that have phonological-visual disparities, such as those with redundant letters (Upward, 1988). A mental image of a similar known word can be used as a model to decide if the spelling of an unfamiliar word looks correct (Schmitt, 2000). Spelling by analogy, using common rimes (ity, ight, ent) can also help to tackle unfamiliar words. For example, by recalling current knowledge of the words: plan, acid and quantity, students can attempt to spell the word placidity (Nation, 2008). The orthographical similarities within the different types of word families can also be utilised for teaching spelling. When introducing protect, the relationship with its derivative forms protected, protecting, protective, protection, protector can also be highlighted. Polysemous (bank, bank) and compound words (bookshop) can be approached in a similar way. Knowing a word in its spoken form means being able to distinguish and understand a word when it is heard in continuous speech, as well as having the ability to produce the word and being understood. The sounds of the phonemes within the word need to be recognised, both individually and in combination. Equally

essential is being aware of how the word is split into syllables and the associated stress patterns. It is this last aspect that makes it difficult for learners of English to segment individual words and separate words within continuous speech. Listening is probably the most difficult aspect of the spoken form for learners as they have little control over the rate at which words are received. The listening process involves extracting the word (phonologically) from continuous speech and then using this phonological representation is mapped to related lexical knowledge (Schmitt, 2000). English is a stress language consisting of strong syllables containing full vowels, and weak syllables where the vowels are reduced. A knowledge of this distinction could help learners in segmentation. Cutler and Norris (1988) proposed that English listeners accept words to begin with strong syllables and separate continuous speech at the point a strong syllable is encountered. In an experiment they found listeners took longer to distinguish the word mint when embedded in mintayf (strong second vowel), but were quicker to detect it in mintef (reduced second vowel). Cutler and Norris further suggest that words can be recognised with maximum success if continuous speech is divided at strong syllables. This idea can be useful in identifying lexical words but it has to be noted most grammatical words contain weak monosyllables. Once the word has been extracted as speech segments, the mental lexicon is activated to retrieve the relevant lexical information. One of the ways that the brain deals with this process was proposed by Marslen-Wilson (1987) in the form of the Cohort model. According to this model the lexical retrieval starts as soon as the first speech segment reaches the ear, and all words beginning with this segment are

activated in the mind. The process continues with each input segment, mismatches are deleted until only the perfect matched word remains activated. Other factors such as context and coarticulation are also taken into account during lexical retrieval (Packard, 2000). Polysemy?