

# Advanced Vocabulary Instruction in EFL

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The prominent role of vocabulary knowledge in EFL learning has been increasingly recognized. Developments in 'lexical semantics' have prompted the development of the 'semantic field theory', 'semantic networks', or 'semantic grid' strategies, which organize words in terms of interrelated lexical meanings. The purpose of the present article is to discuss the pedagogic implications of 'semantic field theory' to EFL vocabulary instruction.

Vocabulary is central to language and of critical importance to the typical language learner (Zimmerman, 1997). The prominent role of vocabulary knowledge in foreign language learning has been increasingly recognized (Rodriguez & Sadoski, 2000). The last decade witnessed a growing interest in the 'lexical approach' to EFL teaching. Besides, developments in 'lexical semantics' and the 'mental lexicon' have prompted the development of the 'semantic field theory', 'semantic networks' or 'semantic grid' strategies, which present and organize words in terms of interrelated lexical meanings (Gu & Johnson, 1996, p. 645). The purpose of the present article is to discuss the pedagogic implications of 'Semantic Field Theory' for EFL vocabulary instruction.

The 'semantic field' theory suggests that the lexical content of a language is best treated not as a mere aggregation of independent words or an unstructured list of words but as a collection of interrelating networks of relations between words (Stubbs, 2001). The meaning of most words is governed, in part, by the presence in the language of other words whose semantic functions are related in one or more ways to the same area of situational environment or culture (Robins, 1980). A very simple example of a semantic field is the set of kinship terms: father, mother, brother, sister, son, daughter, uncle, aunt, etc. Clearly, all these words share some aspect of meaning that is not present in the word chair, for instance.

It is noteworthy that words may be grouped together (related to each other) according to different criteria. Animals, for example, may be grouped in terms of physical or perceptual features; they may be grouped in terms of nonphysical features, such as pet, wild, food, etc.

In a very practical situation, the grading of hotels, the word good has a very different meaning when it is used nontechnically (in the field of good, bad, indifferent, etc.) than when it is used 'technically' by some travel agents, in a strictly limited system of comparative grading as the lowest in the field of first-class, luxurious, superior, good (Robin, 1980).

From a stylistic point of view, the verbs steal, pilfer, lift, pinch, swipe, and snitch may be subgrouped in terms of being formal (steal, pilfer), colloquial (lift, pinch), and slang (swipe, snitch).

## Semantic Fields and the Psychological Relatedness of Words

To know the meaning of a set of words (like chair, table, apple) would seem to entail knowing that the first two are more closely related to each other than the third. That is, individual word meanings exist within systems of related meanings, and knowledge of the meaning relations among a set of words would seem to follow from knowledge of the constituent meanings. There is ample psychological evidence that supports this assumption (How, 1999). Adults are better at remembering words from lists that contain semantically related subsets than words from lists of unrelated words. In addition, if the semantically related words are separated in the list, adults tend to cluster them by meaning in output. On the other hand, speech errors made by native speakers (slip of the tongue) show that most wrong words used come from the same semantic field as the intended word (Fromkin, 1973).

## Semantic Fields and Advanced Vocabulary Instruction

Besides learning the basic sense of each new word, the EFL/ ESL learner should recognize its relation to other words with similar

meaning. It has been shown above that the human mind takes account of such similarity of meaning in organizing words. Hence, it is plausible to assume that a method of teaching that takes account of the psychological processes underlying semantic relatedness must be more effective pedagogically than one that does not. It is therefore logical to explicitly teach some foreign language vocabulary in semantic fields. Semantic interrelationships among words can not be acquired incidentally through reading. They need direct systematic instruction

From the pedagogic point of view, 'componential analysis' (CA) offers a systematic and easy way of describing similarity and difference in meaning. It consists of breaking down the meaning of a word into what are known as semantic components or features (Lyons, 1995).

Using CA to teach semantic sets enables the learner to recognize: first, the semantic relatedness between words (words belong to the same semantic set when they share some semantic features); second, the fact that hardly ever share all features. In practice, very few words in any language are interchangeable in all contexts. Thus the term 'synonym' used in foreign language teaching is often confusing and inaccurate. CA shows the learner that words similar in meaning are not synonymous. Therefore, it is pedagogically desirable to provide the learner with vocabulary richness activities that incorporate various semantic sets. I used some of these activities with my EFL advanced students. Students found them motivating and interesting. Some students indicated that these activities made learning vocabulary a cognitively challenging experience. The following activities are examples:

- 1. Using the information in the following table, fill in the blanks in the sentences below:

Word	Affect with wonder	Because Unexpected	Because difficult to believe	So as to cause confusion	Because shocking so as to leave speechless
Surprise	+	+			
Astonish	+		+		
Amaze	+			+	
Astound	+				+

(From: Rudska et al. 1982).

- o A) They were clearly \_\_\_\_\_ at our sudden arrival.
  - o B) I was \_\_\_\_\_ at the three\_year\_old boy's ability to swim.
  - o C) The tropical islanders were \_\_\_\_\_ to see snow for the first time in Europe.
  - o D) His parents were \_\_\_\_\_ to learn that their young son had robbed a bank.
  - o E) I was \_\_\_\_\_ to receive so many presents on my birthday.
- 2. Look at the following set of words: palace, villa, mansion, hut, bungalow. Which word means:
  - o a) A house, small, of one story?
  - o b) A house or cabin of the plainest or crudest kind?
  - o c) A house in the country, for the hunting or shooting season?
  - o d) A house, large and stately?
  - o e) A house on its own grounds or garden, on the outskirts of a town?
  - o f) A house, the official residence of a sovereign or an important figure?
- 3. Insert the following words in the sentences below: murdered, executed, assassinated, killed.
  - o a) The disease \_\_\_\_\_ the children.
  - o b) He was \_\_\_\_\_ by a falling stoned.
  - o c) President Kennedy was \_\_\_\_\_ in 1993.
  - o d) He was \_\_\_\_\_ for murder.
  - o e) Five people were \_\_\_\_\_ in the car accident.
  - o f) The man who \_\_\_\_\_ his wife was sentenced to death.
  - o g) The man who \_\_\_\_\_ the president was \_\_\_\_\_ after a fair trial.
- 4. Insert the following words in the sentences below: accused, impeached, incidental, blamed, criticized.
  - o a) The minister was \_\_\_\_\_ for taking bribes.
  - o b) She \_\_\_\_\_ her servant of stealing her diamond ring.
  - o c) The arrested people were \_\_\_\_\_ for the riot.
  - o d) The committee \_\_\_\_\_ the factory.
  - o e) Factories were \_\_\_\_\_ for polluting the river.

- 5. Use the following information to fill in the blanks in the sentences below:
  - Crumb: a small piece of dry food.
  - Rag: a small piece of cloth.
  - Drop: a small amount of liquid.
  - Dab: a small amount of something soft.
  - Chip: a small piece broken off something hard.
  - Splash: a small amount of liquid added to something.
  - Dash: a small amount of something added, liquid or solid.
  - a) The mouse ran off with a \_\_\_\_\_ of cheese.
  - b) Stick it down with a \_\_\_\_\_ of glue.
  - c) Milk in your coffee? Yes, pleas. Just a \_\_\_\_\_.
  - d) I' d like a \_\_\_\_\_ of pepper in my food.
  - e) I need a \_\_\_\_\_ to polish my shoes with.
  - f) There is a \_\_\_\_\_ of lipstick on your jacket.
  - g) A \_\_\_\_\_ of glass fell on the floor.

Learners should be encouraged to consult dictionaries to arrive at the correct answers. Group discussion is a fruitful technique through which the teacher can help the learners arrive at the correct answers. In activities 1, 2, and 5 the semantic features are given. In activity 3, the verbs are to be explained from a sociolinguistic point of view, i.e., we must understand the differences between the intentions underlying the actions in question and the social settings and roles of the persons involved. A person may be killed in an accident or by a falling stone or by a disease, but he can be murdered, executed, or assassinated only by another human being. Moreover, the difference between them lies in the character of the intension: murder, on purpose, and having the goal of revenge or personal gain; assassinate, having a political aim; and execute, being killed as a legal punishment for some criminal act.

As for the verbs in activity 4, learners should realize that indict applies to the 'formal' accusation of a person based on positive legal evidence; impeach is limited to the 'formal' accusation of a high political figure; accuse would have no effect at all if the judge were unable to prove the accused to be guilty; it also applies to the 'informal' accusation of a person. Moreover, these three verbs involve 'social morality,' and we attribute morality only to people, not to inanimate objects. Therefore, they are used only with human beings. On the other hand, we blame inanimate objects as well as people, but we usually criticize only those objects that are somehow connected with man's actions. We blame a factory and criticize a factory. While the accused, if he proves to be guilty, deserves punishment, the one who is criticized does not necessarily deserve punishment, and criticism is often understood as a sort of help (Markova, 1978).

At a more advanced level, learners should realize that semantic fields may differ from one culture to another (Allan, 2001). They may be asked to compare semantic sets in English with similar sets in their native language.

Learners should be encouraged to form semantic sets through their reading. They should recognize how the use of one word instead of another within the same semantic set may lead to misunderstanding. Therefore, it is important that they explicitly recognize the objective and rationale behind these vocabulary activities. An explicit understanding of the reason for an activity often improves motivation and facilitates learning. On the other hand, these activities may be considered awareness-raising activities. Conscious awareness of the interrelationships among words provides learners with a tool that enables them to process input more effectively (Lewis, 1997, p.260) as well as a tool for organizing mental lexicon (Singleton, 1999, p.273).

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