

Semantic Mapping in Language Teaching in term of Memorizing Vocabularies

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Abstract

When students learn English, they usually faced with many difficulties not only in specific language skills but also in vocabulary memorizing. Because of their learning habits and learning strategies, they failed to memorize words for a long time and to recall words when necessary. Based on literature review, it is found that semantic mapping has had good effects on vocabulary learning; especially it improves the retention and retrieval of word meanings.. The results indicated that the students in the experimental group outperformed those in the control condition in retaining word meanings. The results also proved that the students had positive attitudes towards semantic mapping. This leads to the implication that the semantic mapping can improve high school students' vocabulary retention and is promising to vocabulary teaching and learning.

Keywords: *Semantic Mapping, Language Teaching and Memorizing Vocabularies*

Introduction

The importance of vocabulary in English as a second language (ESL) or English as a foreign language (EFL) learning process has been widely recognized. Much of the research indicates that enlarging language vocabulary has been one of the objectives of many EFL learners. When learning English, students in teaching context, also try hard to improve their vocabulary knowledge.

One of the reasons for students' low vocabulary retention and retrieval can be addressed as their learning habits. Their learning habits such as writing down words on a piece of paper, learning words by heart, heavily depending on wordlists in textbook, passively waiting for teacher's explanation for new words seem to be ineffective and make them bored with learning vocabulary. In order to memorize new items, students often use rote memorization techniques.

The questions posed to teachers are how to help students memorize words effectively and how to motivate them in vocabulary lessons. Teachers can encourage their students to systematically record vocabulary that they taught in class. They also provide them with strategies transfer this record into their long-term memory so that each item is added to the repertoire of words and phrases that they can understand and use when necessary.

The English teachers seldom use semantic mapping in teaching vocabulary. Besides, there was not yet any empirical study on the use of semantic mapping in vocabulary teaching and learning at High School.

Vocabulary learning and Teaching

1. Vocabulary

So far there have been a lot of definitions of vocabulary. Vocabulary is defined as words in a specific language or freestanding items of language that have meaning (McCarthy, 1990). Penny Ur (1996) defined vocabulary roughly as “the words we teach in the foreign language”. She also suggested that “a new item of vocabulary may be more than a single word, a compound of two or three words (e.g., *post office, mother-in-law*),

The questions posed to teachers of English High School are how to help students memorize words effectively and how to motivate them in vocabulary lessons. Teachers can encourage their students to systematically record vocabulary that they taught in class. They also provide them with strategies transfer this record into their long-term memory so that each item is added to the repertoire of words and phrases that they can understand and use when necessary. There is a wide variety of previous research into the effects of semantic mapping on vocabulary memorizing: Ward and Annita (1998), Pikula (1987), DeCarrico (2001), Margosein, Pascarella and Pflaum (1982) and Vogt (1983). The above research indicated the positive effects of semantic mapping on students’ vocabulary memorizing.

2. Vocabulary teaching

In general, language learning and teaching are based on theories or beliefs about language. As far as vocabulary teaching is concerned, it is necessary to focus on the implementation of communicative and lexical approaches (Hasbún, 2005). The Lexical Approach introduced by Michael Lewis in 1993 puts a greater emphasis on the meaning and use of different language items with a set of principles based on a new understanding of language. Lewis (1997, cited in Hasbún, 2005) claims that most of the activities used in the Communicative Approach are compatible with the Lexical Approach, then what teachers need to do is adapt activities so that the tasks have a clear lexical focus.

Memorizing Word Meaning

1. Short term and long term memory

Cognitive psychologists divide memory into short-term and long-term memory according to duration of memory retention and capacity of recalling information after the original input. Long-term memory retains information for use in anything but the immediate future. Short-term memory is used to store or hold information while it is being processed. The object of vocabulary learning is to transfer the lexical information from the short-term memory to the more permanent long-term memory (Schmitt, 2000). According to Gairns and Redman (1986), long-term memory is seemingly inexhaustible and can accommodate any amount of information. It is generally acknowledged that we need to work much harder to commit information to long-term memory, and the type of repetition that is essential to short-term retention may not be adequate for long-term retention. However, the distinction between short-term retention and

long-term retention is not always clear-cut. Information entering short-term memory may pass quite effortlessly into long-term memory, and some learners may find repetition a very effective way of transferring information into long-term memory.

When learning vocabulary, learners often have problems with retention of words for a long time. They usually fail to put the words into long-term memory. In the present study, short-term memory is considered as the initial memory of the word meaning at the end of the lessons whereas the number of words can be recalled at the next lessons or at the end of the study is referred as ones from long-term memory because the participants in the study have only three forty-five-minute lessons per week.

2. Major factors affecting word memorization

There are various reasons why students remember some words better than others: nature of the words themselves, situations under which the words are learnt, how the words are taught to students and so on. Gairns and Redman (1986) showed that learning new items involves storing them first in the short-term memory and afterwards in the long-term memory, and the long-term memory can hold any amount of information. They stated that our “mental lexicon” is highly organized and efficient, and that semantic related items are stored together. Word frequency is another factor that affects storage, as the most frequently used items are easier to retrieve. We can use this information to facilitate the learning process by grouping items of vocabulary in semantic fields such as topics. The most effective associate bonds for production, therefore, connect the words with their meanings.

3. Strategies to improve vocabulary retention

Vocabulary learning strategies are one part of language learning strategies which in turn are part of general learning strategies (Nation, 2001). Some vocabulary learning strategies such as metacognitive, cognitive, memory and activation strategies are listed by Gu and Johnson (1996, cited in Ghazal, 2007, p.85-86): Metacognitive strategies consist of selective attention and self-initiation strategies. Cognitive strategies entail guessing strategies, skillful use of dictionaries and note-taking strategies. Memory strategies are classified into rehearsal and encoding categories. Word lists and repetition are instances of rehearsal strategies. Encoding strategies encompass such strategies as association, imagery, visual, auditory, semantic, and contextual encoding as well as word-structure.

Semantic Mapping for Vocabulary Teaching

1. Definitions of semantic mapping

Developments in “lexical semantics” have prompted the development of the “semantic field theory”, “semantic networks” or “semantic grids” strategies which organize words in terms of interrelated lexical meanings. The “semantic field” theory suggests that the lexical content of a language is best treated not as a “mere aggregation of independent words” but as a collection of interrelating networks or relations between words (Stubbs, cited in Amer, 2002). 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 features; they may be grouped in terms of nonphysical features such as pet, wild, food, etc.

Discussion

1. Discussions

The main objective of this study was to find out whether or not semantic mapping had positive effects on students' vocabulary memorizing. The original hypothesis of the study was that semantic mapping would help students memorize words effectively and result in students' positive attitudes. The results of the study revealed some important findings in the students' vocabulary retention and the students' attitudes towards using semantic mapping.

a. The students' vocabulary retention

It can be seen that semantic mapping had positive effects on student's vocabulary memorizing. The results from the pre-test indicated that the control group and the experimental group had the same initial level of vocabulary knowledge. The results obtained from the post-test illustrated a significant change in students' vocabulary achievement in the experimental group whereas the students' vocabulary achievement in the control group only slightly improved. This showed that there was improvement in the vocabulary test in both groups; however, the experimental group outperformed the control one. The results was consistent with the research conducted by Margosein, Pascarella and Pflaum (1982), Vogt (1983) and Pikula (1987) who found that semantic mapping had a greater impact on vocabulary acquisition. However, the studies carried out by the previous researchers compared the effectiveness of the semantic mapping and other techniques`

b. The students' attitudes towards using semantic mapping

The results from the questionnaire indicated that the students had positive attitudes towards the use of semantic mapping ($M = 3.69$, $t = -3.69$, $df = 29$, $p = .001$). Noticeably, the results obtained from the fourth and fifth questions in the interview showed that all of the students expressed their positive attitudes towards the use of semantic mapping.

However, one said that it required an available amount of vocabulary when using the semantic mapping. One agreed that it was critical for students who were not good at English. Two students admitted that it took them a long time to be acquainted with its usage. One explanation for the students' attitudes towards using semantic mapping might be that the semantic mapping brought the students a new trial in their learning vocabulary. Teaching and learning vocabulary by using word lists made them bored and tired. For the teacher, it was one of the ways to present words logically.

c. Pedagogical implications

In this section, based on the findings in the gain in the students' vocabulary retention and the students' positive attitudes towards using semantic mapping, some implications might be considered. First, the ultimate goal of vocabulary instructions is to help students become independent learners who have strategies for discovering, remembering, consolidating new words. This goal cannot be achieved without teachers' efforts. Teachers should motivate students in their vocabulary memorizing with different vocabulary tasks. Second, to be effective, explicit vocabulary instructions should be dynamic and include a variety of techniques. Specifically, vocabulary instructions should (1) use both definitional and contextual information about word meanings, (2) involve students' activity in word memorizing and (3) use discussion to teach the meanings of the new words to provide meaningful information about the words.

d. Limitations of the study

Although the research has reached its aims, there were some unavoidable limitations.

First, because of the shortage of time, it was difficult for the research to reinforce the semantic mapping through the whole book. In addition, the implementing semantic mapping was short because it was conducted in the vocabulary teaching stage during five weeks. The time limit also resulted in a small size of population involved in the study. Therefore, in order to generalize the results for larger groups, the research should be extended its time and the study should have been involved more participants at different levels.

Second, the high school students' overloaded study might be the factor that affected the results of the study because the students were usually under study pressure from studying a lot of subjects

e. Suggestion for the next research

This study achieved its goal to investigate the effects of semantic mapping on students' vocabulary retention. However, it is necessary for further study to consider the correlation between motivation and vocabulary retention as well as to explore whether the semantic mapping results in greater students' motivation to learn vocabulary. Besides, the present study suggests that future research should be conducted in ESP (English for Special Purposes) areas. It may examine the effects of ESP vocabulary instruction through the semantic mapping on students' vocabulary learning

Conclusion

In this study, it was found that the hypotheses were confirmed. Introducing and having students practice using the semantic mapping was an effective way of enabling the students to achieve greater progress in vocabulary learning. As a result, the students had positive attitudes towards this method. The findings were not only consistent with the literature review but also supportive of the research on using the semantic mapping conducted before. This leads to the implication that the semantic mapping can improve high school students' vocabulary retention and is promising to vocabulary teaching and learning

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