APPLICATION OF ASSOCIATIVE METHOD IN THE ACQUISITION OF ENGLISH VOCABULARY

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Abstract

Vocabulary serves as the basis of any language learning. To many learners of non-English majors it is difficult to memorize English words. This paper defines associative method in presenting new terms to them. It is stated that associative method is receiving better outcomes both in short-term and long-term retention of English words.

Compared to the traditional way, associative method turns out to be more efficient in the retention and memorization of new words. In addition, the differences appeared to be very significant in revision of words through making associations . Therefore, teachers have to encourage learners to review what they cover in class frequently, and learners themselves should try to participate actively in associative learning process.

Keywords: English vocabulary teaching, associative method, traditional way, non-English majors

Introduction

Associative learning is the learning process that helps humans acquire the predictive relationship between signs in their environment. This process highlights simple forms of learning from assimilating language forms.Vocabulary learning builds up a major learning task in any language learning. So goes with the second language learning. McCarthy (1990) once said, "No matter how well the students learn grammar, no matter how successfully the sounds of L2 are mastered, without units to express a wider range of meanings, communication in an L2 just can not take part in any meaningful prospect." D. A. Wilkins also claimed, "Very little can be conveyed without grammar; without vocabulary, nothing can be conveyed" (cited in Sheng, 1996). Gass and Selinker (1994)also mentioned, "The lexicon may serve as the most important component for learners." Expressively vocabulary plays an important role in second language acquisition and it is the inseparable and key part in any language learning process.

Because of its importance, most non-English majors often spend no efforts to learn English words, but the result tend to be far from satisfactory. They complain that it is boring and difficult to learn new words, and it is easier to forget them, which affects their prospects and initiatives. Therefore, it is of great meaning to discover a new effective method to learn English words. Here two main ways of English words presentation will be compared: the traditional way and the associative method.

The traditional way is a distinctive way in the classroom, where teachers put emphasis on word meaning, and provide explanations of the words that have to be learnt, and then, they will give examples to illustrate its usage in the further perspective. However, teachers provide little assistance to learners on the way to memorize words, which leads to the widespread of associative learning (Wang, 2005, pp. 68-71). On the other hand, associative method highlights the connections between the new data that has been presented and the pre-existed knowledge, which encourages learners to make full use of their knowledge and imagination, initiative, etc. Penny

(2000) claimed: "you could get better result if items can be bounded with each other, or with one's already known, through meaning or sound association." You (2001, pp. 124-126) presented the functions and prospects of associative method: "Association in English teaching is found to fit the requirement of all times. With the help of relative, similar or contrastive association, it can awaken students' interest in English and foster their comprehension, recollection and application of their English knowledge, as well as organizing training for students' prospects and creative thinking."

Associative learning is one of the simplest and most unusual forms of learning. In associative learning, students learn to presume that one cue or behavior predicts the presence of another stimulus. For example, in the most famous example of associative learning, Pavlov taught dogs that a sound cue presumed the presence of a rewarding stimulus (food), thereby training them to react to the cue (Pavlov, 1927). Associative learning, however, is displayed in our lives, from the marketing campaigns that associate celebrities with famous brands to the gamified rewarding structures in many video games and apps (Bower & Landreth, 2001; Dean & Biswas, 2001; Deterding et al., 2011; Janiszewski & Warlop, 1993; Peter & Nord, 1982; Rothschild & Gaidis, 1981; Stuart, Shimp, & Engle, 1987; Walvis, 2008).

Memory and comprehension plays a crucial role in associative learning. The learning that students present is a function in which they learn about the learning situation. First, even for the predominant associations, learners form a comprehensive memory for the bond between a stimulus and an outcome. In addition, in more comprehensive situations with multitude of cues and rewards, memory defines which past terms learners remember for any given prompt. These cues are often context -dependent, presenting specific associations which are more likely to be recalled in the context in which they initially occurred (Bouton 1993; Bouton & Moody, 2004). The contrasting relationship also explains: Memory is influenced by associative learning, perhaps most clearly in cases where memory for paired items is usually tested or when the influence of rewards on memory is assessed.

Basics of Associative Learning

Associative learning occurs when learners acquire the ability to define the connection between two elements in the linguistic context. There are two primary types of associative learning, which can be distinguished based on what is being associated while acquiring a language. In classical assimilating conditioning, students learn an association between two prompts: One of the prompts is typically a neutral prompt, such as a synonym or antonym and is known as the conditioned stimulus or CS. The other cue is typically a syntactically relevant or aversive cue, and is known as the unconditioned stimulus or US. After repeated pairings of the CS and the US, learners gradually learn to give an appropriate response (the conditioned response or CR) in advance of the linguistic stimulus, such as comparing or making syntactical bonds.

In clear conditioning, learners instead define an association between actions or behaviors and a reward, thereby altering the frequency of those behaviors. These prompts are not necessarily linked directly to the reward (as with a classical CR), but can be more obvious than a CR. More generally, however, any distinctive response or behavior can be assimilated or decreased by providing appropriate reinforcement in close association with the action (Ferster & Skinner, 1957), though there might be some limitations based on the natural behavioral repertoire of the creature (Breland & Breland, 1961; Staddon & Simmelhag, 1971)

These two types of associative learning share some key properties in terms of how they are learned and any corresponding response acquired. First, the learning is typically less time-consuming—that is, the process is less slow, and multiple pairings between the prompt/behavior and the word acquisition are usually linked before the association is acquired. Second, in both cases, the key feature that defines whether learning occurs is the linguistic context between the stimuli—the compared word to which one linguistic aspect is predictive of the rewarding outcome. A key difference is in the associations and comparisons that are used: in classical conditioning, a stimulus-outcome (S-O) association is formed between the predictive cue and the assimilated word. In the second part of conditioning, two types of associations may form: a stimulus-response (S-R) association, whereby the relationship between the available words and the associated response are strengthened by the person who produces the word, or a response-outcome (RO) association directly between the cue and the eventual learner. These three simple types of associations are the fundamental elements of what is learned and remembered in associative learning.

Discussions

Through this explanation it is assumed that compared with the traditional way, associative method is more effective in increasing learners' memorization of English words both in short-term memory and long-term memory. In the immediate prompt test, participants treated with the associative method recalled almost 94.13% words in comparison with 86.86% word implications of those with the conventional way. Obviously, the associative method turns out to be more effective than the traditional way of learning in helping students acquiring new words in the short-term memory. And when it comes to long retention test, students are exposed to the associative method memorized almost 65.97% words while students with the conventional method recalled just about 39.07% words. This significance was also prior. This brings strong evidences for the better effectiveness and informativeness of the associative method in increasing most non-English majors students` vocabulary learning in the long term.

Polysyllabic words are usually regarded as the most challenging part in vocabulary learning to most non-English majors in many parts of the world. Teachers are usually puzzled about how to teach them by heart. The associative method is an effective way to deal with this issue. In the immediate test(Gass, S. M., & Selinker, L. (1994). *Second Language Acquisition: An Introductory Course*. Amsterdam: John), students who were exposed to the associative method could recall 93.98% of the polysyllabic words, while students taught with the conventional method could recall 88.46% of all the new vocabulary. In the long - term test, learners in the Experimental Group recalled 68.59% of the polysyllabic words, while all those in the Controlling Group only recalled 47.96% words. These differences turn out to be very significant. So we could say that the associative method can significantly enhance learners` acquisition of polysyllabic words. In addition, the associative method turned out to be an informative way in helping learners' acquisition of monosyllabic and disyllabic words. It provides far better results than the conventional way. Therefore, teachers should definitely implement this method in English vocabulary teaching. However, some problems like forgetting might also appear. In this experimentation forgetting happened in both of the groups. In the

immediate test, both groups did a better job. Students in the controlling group memorized 87.86% words and students in the experimental group recalled 92.16%. However, when it comes to the long -term test, they recalled 38.07% and 65.97% respectively. For the control

group, it decreased by 48.79%, for the experiment group, it dropped down by 24.16% (Gass, S. M., & Selinker, L. (1994). *Second Language Acquisition: An Introductory Course*. Amsterdam: John). As to the reasons, the lack of consolidation is the most important one. No matter how effective the method is, without sufficient practice, satisfactory results are unachievable. Therefore, teachers should not only use this method in presenting new words, but also encourage students to apply this way to memorize new words in their free time. As practice makes perfect.

Implications

Vocabulary takes an important part in EFL. An effective learning experience in English words can make the process of learning English easier. Therefore, it is of big importance to explore a sufficient way to learn English words. In this study the associative method turned out to be the most effective one. In order to apply this method more successfully, he following aspects should be taken into consideration.

The role of the teacher

Teachers' role in the process of acquiring English words should be recognized from a new point. For a very long time it has been accepted that teachers' role in new vocabulary presentation is to guide learners how to pronounce the words in a correct way and how to use them appropriately. However, very few teachers put emphasis on how to help learners recall them. Why do teachers rarely mention the ways of word memorization? Honestly speaking, there are might be two reasons. First, few teachers consider the question: what contributes to learners' challenges in acquiring new vocabulary. Most of them assume that it is the learners' task to memorize the new words after class, and take it for granted considering as long as they work hard, they will definitely learn English words well. So they never realize that some changes have to be made in their teaching methods. Second, though some of them have understood the problem, they may think that it might appear a complicated and difficult task to make some changes in vocabulary teaching. As we know, most of the English teachers often have a heavy burden, not only from their teaching perspective, but also from their researching experience, from their personal issues, also from the whole society, in terms of kids upbringing. So at last they do not prioritize the innovation of English vocabulary teaching in their practice.

This study process might help us differentiate teaching methods do have altering learning results. In order to help learners make a significant progress in English vocabulary learning, English teachers should allocate more emphasis on their. Preparation processes, at the same time, teachers should maintain a life-long learning attitude, update their teaching methods and principles all the way.

The role of learners

As far as English learners are concerned, they do not have sufficient amount of time to study English outside the classroom because of their own studies and majors, so it is impossible for them to find the most appropriate method: how to memorize English words effectively. Though some of them realize that the existing learning method, which is quite popular among them, is dull and ineffective, and they are more willing for a new one, due to their less proficiency in English, they have no clues as how to improve the ways they acquire new words. So they can only go on using the existing method to learn English words. In the old-fashioned vocabulary learning process students usually act as the passive recipients. In class they just take notes of what the teachers say but rarely think about them. Findings from other experiments show us that it is important for students to apply their own ability to think and

build the network of knowledge associations. If learners just memorize the given information without assumptions, and do not try to connect them with each other, the newly acquired information will be forgotten easily. Indeed, only when learners are involved in the process of learning new vocabulary the new

information can make a deep impression on them and make long-lasting effect on the recalling process. Only when their interests are intrigued, can the learning process become much more engaging and effective. In one word, in the process of memorization, learners are not only the recipients but also the leaders. They should make full usage of their imagination, creativity and coordination. If learners take part in the process of learning actively, their interests will be displayed, they can engage in learning much better.

The Importance of Review

The biggest problem in vocabulary acquisition is forgetting. As time passes, it's definite that some of the newly acquired vocabulary will be forgotten. In order to decline the rate of forgetting to slowest degree, learners should recall all the time after acquiring has finished and also in the later time after some period passes. The contemporary experiment reveals that no matter how efficient the teaching method is, review is vital. Otherwise, the results are still unsatisfactory. The principle

of frequency and regularity also tells us more practice may lead to stronger and more efficient associations between linguistic units in mental lexicon (Gui, 2002). In addition, as Nation (1990) pointed, various studies create a variety of encounters

with a word unit in order for a student to truly learn it, teachers should provide students with more chances to use them; also learners individually should create more chances to memorize the newly learned words. Learners should be motivated to gain knowledge and experience both from the textbooks and out of textbooks, such as, listening to the audiobooks and radio, reading magazines and newspapers, watching English movies and podcasts, etc. Only by consistent review can we learn the new vocabulary by heart.

Conclusion

Through this experiment it is clear that associative method is really an effective way to present English words to non-native majors. It can motivate learners' interests and support them with effective methods. Therefore, teachers should often assist students make up every kind of association with some new vocabulary, and encourage them to apply this method in their after-class studies. On the other hand, forgetting is unavoidable thus, learners should review new words in the process of acquisition. Only by this way, can they get more improvements in vocabulary acquisition.

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