Etymology : a word attack strategy for learning the english vocabulary

Masoud Hashemi a*, Masoud Aziznezhad b

aFaculty Member, English Department, Toyserkan Branch, Islamic Azad University, Toyserkan, 6581685184, Iran
bFaculty Member, English Department, Toyserkan Branch, Islamic Azad University, Toyserkan, 6581685184, Iran

Abstract

Various researches shows that vocabulary acquisition is one of the most important needs of English language learners. Words, like facts, are difficult to remember out of context. There are many ways to build vocabulary - thru practicing them in conversations, reading good books, looking thru newspapers and magazines, watching TV and videos or radio stations, and listening to books and lectures on tape. There are also many resources for those who are actively trying to learn new words. Remembering is greatly facilitated when you have a body of information with which to associate either a word or a fact. Discovering the common roots of words, language learners soon understand of the meaning of many unknown words, they have never seen before, derived from the same root. Etymology is not only useful, effective and interesting, but it also is a fast word attack strategy.

Keywords: Etymology, English Vocabulary; Word Power;

1. Introduction

1.1 The importance of Vocabulary

For many years the programs that prepared English language learners offered little or no attention to the effective teaching and learning the relevant vocabulary by the instructors and ultimately guessing and learning the unknown words by the students. The ability to learn new words easily and effectively appears to have vanished. Many language learners find vocabulary a key element in the process of language learning. But, unfortunately, it seems that teaching and learning the vocabulary is confined only to long lists of words with their native language equivalents to be memorized by the learners. Students usually tend to make lists of new words so that one day they could look them up and learn them. As the students progress in their academic education they typically find that vocabulary building demands sustained efforts. Finocchiaro believes that “we may help students develop the skills they need in several basic ways, among them is: to help students enrich their vocabulary by giving them (or to help them discover) cognates, paraphrases, antonyms, synonyms, and words of the same family. (1973, p. 122)”.

According to Pulston (1976): “the study of vocabulary is the most neglected area of all language teaching”. The two major concerns in teaching vocabulary are what to teach and how to teach it (Bruder, 1976).

Etymology which is one of the most systematic, enjoyable and effective ways of enhancing word power will increase the learners’ ability to figure out unknown and difficult words with ease and without continual reference to unabridged sources. According to methodologists having word formation knowledge, student can increase the ability to read difficult tests without continue reference to unabridged sources.
1.2 Vocabulary Learning Strategies

Learning new words is of significant importance for students. On the practical level, studies have confirmed that a large vocabulary can lead individuals to better jobs, better pay and eventually a better life (Saif, 1995). It is out of question that without thorough knowledge of learning strategies, the teacher's efforts would be in vain. As Celce-Murcia and Rosensweig (1979) maintain: "there is a great need for research into the vocabulary learning strategies utilized by language learners of different proficiency levels, ages, etc. to guide the instructors toward the more effective teaching of vocabulary". According to Yoshida (1977), the learner uses three main strategies for the acquisition of words:

- Rote learning by imitation or repetition
- Cognitive learning by association and recalling
- Translation mode that utilized mixing or confirmation of meaning by translation from the modern tongue.

Oxford (1985) cites Cohen’s list of strategies used by a successful language learner. According to him, “teaching involves such items as making association, attending to the meaning of the part of the word, placing the word in a topical group with similar words, visualizing and contextualizing it, linking it to the situation in which it appears, creating a mental image of it, and associating some physical sensation to it.” Wilkins (1972) claims that, according to psychology of language, people learn and retain better words which have been presented to them with a range of visual and other associations (p.131). According to Saif (1995), the students need to find out the ways to set about words to their vocabulary and also know the meanings of words. The words students encounter are of different types. Some words are used everyday (active vocabulary) and some are used in specific situations (passive vocabulary). The easiest way to increase one’s vocabulary is to recognize new things, and about new experiences. The context and context clues often lead to the meaning of unfamiliar words. It would be helpful to refer to dictionary when the context clues do not provide clues to the meaning of words. She also emphasizes the importance of recognizing the word elements which include: prefixes, suffixes, roots synonyms and antonyms. One such strategy might include learning several prefixes, stems, and suffixes each week along with practice in attempting to decide what a word means using some knowledge of etymology.

1.3 Etymology as a word attack strategy for learning the vocabulary

Etymology is the scientific study of the origin or history and derivation of words. When you know the meaning of a Latin or Greek root, prefix, or suffix; you can better understand, and more easily remember, all the vocabulary words built on these element that exists in English words. Learning etymology of English words you will feel comfortable with words—you will use new words with self-assurance, you will be able to figure out the meanings of the English vocabulary words you hear or read even if you have never heard or seen these words before. That is why the best approach to learning new vocabulary words is through their etymologies.

1.5 The Origin Of English Words

The English language has developed from an Anglo-Saxon base of common words: household words, parts of the body, common animals, natural elements, most pronouns, prepositions, conjunctions and auxiliary verbs. Other modern words in English have developed from various sources. These are discussed below.

1.5.1 Words Created From Nothing

Examples of words that have just appeared in the language out of nothing are byte, dog (replacing the earlier hund), donkey, jam, kick, log, googol, quasar and yuppie. The latter two are acronyms (words made from initials). Shakespere coined over 1600 words including countless, critical, excellent, lonely, majestic, obscene. From Ben Johnson we got damp, from Isaac Newton centrifugal and from Thomas More: explain and exact.

1.5.2 Words Created In Error

The vegetable pease was thought to be a plural so that the individual item in the pod was given the name pea. The verb laze was erroneously created from the adjective lazy. The word buttonhole was a mis-hearing of button-
hold. English words can be categorized as native and borrowed. A native word is a word which belongs to the original English word stock, as known from the earliest available manuscripts of the Old English period. A borrowed, or a loan word) is a word taken over from another language and modified in phonemic shape, spelling, paradigm or meaning according to the standards of the English language. The can be classified as follows:

a. Words of the Indo-European origin (IE), b) Words of common Germanic origin, c) English words proper

1.5.3 Words of the Indo-European origin

Family relations: father, mother, brother, son, daughter, Parts of the human body: foot, nose, lip, heart, tooth, Animals and plants: cow, swine, goose, tree, birch, corn, The most important objects and phenomena of nature: sun, moon, star, wind, water, wood, hill, stone, Adjectives: hard, quick, slow, red, white, new, Numerals from 1 to 100: one, two, twenty, eighty, Pronouns – personal, except they (Sc.): I, you, he; demonstrative: that; interrogative: who, Some of the most frequent verbs: bear, do, be, sit, stand

1.5.4 Words of common Germanic origin

Nouns denoting parts of the human body: head, arm, finger, Periods of time: summer, winter, time, week, Natural phenomena: storm, rain, flood, ice, ground, sea, earth, Artifacts and materials: bridge, house, shop, room, coal, iron, lead, cloth, Animals and plants: sheep, horse, fox, oak, grass, Adjectives denoting colours, size and other properties: broad, dead, deep, grey, blue, Verbs: see, hear, speak, tell, say, make, give

1.5.5 Borrowed and Adopted Words

English has borrowed words from a variety of sources, and other languages.

Celtic borrowings: Place names: Avon, Exe, Esk, Usk, Ux (Celtic “river”, “water”); London (Llyn “river”+ dun “a fortified hill”) - a fortress on the hill over the river, cradle, cross, iron, flannel, tweed, lake (C. loch), Place names: Avon, Exe, Esk, Usk, Ux (Celtic “river”, “water”); London (Llyn “river”+ dun “a fortified hill”) - a fortress on the hill over the river, cradle, cross, iron, flannel, tweed, lake (C. loch)

The earliest Latin borrowings (1st c. A.D.): words denoting things connected with war, trade, building and domestic life: pound, inch, cup, kitchen, pepper, butter, cheese, milk, wine, cherry.

Latin words borrowed into English through the Christianization of England (7th c. A.D.): persons, objects and ideas associated with church and religious rituals: priest, bishop, monk, nun, candle, temple, angel, words connected with learning: grammar, school, scholar, decline, master, magister

Latin borrowings of the Renaissance period (14th – 16th c. A.D.): abstract words: major, minor, filial, moderate, intelligent, permanent, to elect, to create.

Scandinavian borrowings (8th - 11th c. A.D.): Verbs: call, take, cast, die, want, Nouns: law, egg, husband (Sc. hús + bōndi “inhabitant of the house”), window (Sc. vindauga “the eye of the wind”), Adjectives: ill, loose, low, weak, Pronouns and pronominal forms: they, their, them, same, both, though.


Norman borrowings (11th – 13th c. A.D.): Government and administration: state, country, government, parliament, prince, baron, Legal terms: court, judge, justice, crime, prison, jury, Religious terms: saint, sermon (проповеди), prayer, parish (пярхоз), chapel, Military terms: army, war, soldier, officer, battle, enemy, Educational terms: pupil, lesson, library, science, pen, pencil, Artistic and literary terms: image, character, figure, volume, design, Terms of everyday life: chair, table, plate, saucer, dinner, supper, breakfast

Parisian borrowings: the Renaissance period and later: regime, routine, police, machine, ballet, matinée, scene, technique, bourgeois, etc.
The Renaissance period borrowings (14th – 16th c. A.D.): **Italian**: piano, violin, opera, alarm, colonel; **Spanish**: potato, tomato, cargo, banana, cocoa; **Greek**: direct (e.g. atom, cycle, ethics, esthete), or through Latin (datum, status, phenomenon, phenomenon, philosophy, method, music).

Other borrowings: **Japanese**: karate, judo, hara-kiri, kimono, tycoon; **Arabic**: algebra, algorithm, fakir, giraffe, sultan; **Turkish**: yogurt, kiosk, tulip; **Persian**: caravan, shawl, bazaar, sherbet; **Eskimo**: kayak, igloo, anorak; **Amerindian languages**: toboggan, wigwam, opossum; **Russian**: bistro, tsar, balalaika, tundra, sputnik

International words: Words denoting science and technological advances: sputnik, television, antenna, bionics, gene, cybernetics; Political terms: politics, democracy, communism, revolution; Fruits and foodstuffs imported from exotic countries: coffee, chocolate, grapefruit; Names of sciences: philosophy, mathematics, physics, chemistry; Terms of art: music, theatre, drama, tragedy; The sports terms: football, baseball, cricket, golf.

### 1. 6 The etymology of some English Surnames

English and British surnames (family names) have four main sources: the person's **occupation**, the **place** of origin, a **nickname** and **relations**. Examples of these can be seen in the tables below.

#### Occupations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Meaning</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Butcher</td>
<td>meat worker</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carpenter</td>
<td>wheel repairer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fletcher</td>
<td>arrow maker</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Miller</td>
<td>grain maker</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shepherd</td>
<td>herder of sheep</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Smith</td>
<td>metal worker</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

#### Places

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Origin</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lincoln</td>
<td>an English city</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kent</td>
<td>an English county</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preston</td>
<td>an English city</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

#### Nicknames

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Meaning</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Armstrong</td>
<td>strong armed</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Campbell crooked mouth
Kennedy Gaelic: ugly head
Morgan Welsh: white haired
Russell French: red haired

Relations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Meaning</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Johnson</td>
<td>son of John</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MacDonald</td>
<td>son of Donald (Scottish)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>O'Connor</td>
<td>son of Connor (Irish)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

2. Conclusion

Recently, there has been an increased awareness of the role of vocabulary acquisition with regard to the foreign learner (Zimmerman, 1997). Twaddell sees the expansion of vocabulary as indispensable at advanced levels of teaching (1973). The teachers of English may use various techniques and strategies in order to increase the students’ word power. Words, like facts, are difficult to remember out of context. Remembering is greatly facilitated when you have a body of information with which to associate either a word or a fact. Learning the lexicon systematically helps the language learner their knowledge of vocabulary and retain that amount of words for a longer period of time. Today, the time of long lists of words with their native language equivalents to be memorized by the poor students is over. Teachers as well as the students are looking for more effective, more interesting, and in one word, better ways of enhancing the vocabulary they need for their task. It is true that the systematic way of increasing one’s vocabulary is to assign some reading materials for him/her so that s/he learns and retains some words little by little and during a longer period of time. But it should also be remembered that language learners generally lack the sufficient time for acquiring and learning the new words. Etymology which is the most encouraging, effective and systematic way of enhancing vocabulary is the key element here. According to Hashemi (2004), teaching etymology and word formation knowledge is a very effective way of teaching vocabulary. Very many methodologists and teachers do believe that knowledge of etymology facilitates the guessing, recognizing, understanding, and remembering the meanings of words and that this approach is the very heart of word study.

References

Hashemi, M (2009) Teaching Word Formation Knowledge In increasing the Computer Students’ Vocabulary Knowledge. Islamic Azad University, Toyserkhan Branch, Iran