



Research Paper

Etymology – an effective approach to Vocabulary acquisition

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ABSTRACT: Vocabulary is a crucial aspect to academic and professional success. Of the many strategies concerning vocabulary acquisition, it seems that etymology is an effective and efficient approach that helps in retaining words in a more permanent way. Root word analysis, relation with other languages and word origins are central to etymological approach. This article gives information on the importance of vocabulary, examples of studies that prove effectiveness of etymological approach to learning vocabulary and the need for etymological research in India. Further it suggests inclusion of etymology as a subject at High School level.

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I. INTRODUCTION:

Words are expressions of ideas and experiences. Wilkins (1972) mentioned that “without grammar very little can be conveyed, while without vocabulary nothing can be conveyed”. Compared with grammar learning, the vocabulary acquisition of second language has been a hot issue which attracts a number of scholars’ attention all over the world. They are crucial to speaking skills because they act as tools for a smooth communication. Since our capability to cope with such complex social, political, and economical complex world can be accelerated through possessing a fair command of language skills, learners need to be armed by such greatest tools as rich, vast vocabulary size in order to be successful either in their education or generally in their lives (Pikulski and Templeton, 2004).

In the present age, superior academic opportunities require aspirants to have knowledge of the academic vocabulary that includes the high frequency words that they would come across during their course. Morimoto and Loewen (2007) stated that in order to have successful language learning, knowing 3000 words is needed, while Schmitt (2008) believe that a mastery of 5000 to 7000 words for oral discourse is required to function in English successfully.

Etymology as a teaching strategy

Tests such as the GRE, GMAT and SAT and English proficiency tests such as the IELTS, TOEFL and PTE all assign a great importance to vocabulary. Aside grammar, pronunciation, fluency, coherence, cohesion and task relevance, vocabulary forms one of the main assessment criteria in these tests. According to McCarty (1990) understanding how much learner knows the grammar and the sound of language is not important, without vocabulary learners cannot understand others and state their own expression in that language, because an essential building block of language is vocabulary and thus it is central to language learning process. According to Chastain (1988), without useful vocabulary nobody is able to understand other's ideas. 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).

Despite having studied English since primary school, foreign language students usually find it extremely difficult to learn, memorise and retain the set of academic vocabulary and wordlists when preparing for exams. They turn to rote learning, tips and tricks and short cuts that would help them just till the exam is over and then they part ways with vocabulary learning forever. They consider it as a beast that needs to be killed.

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

Even though cognitive learning gives results to some extent, the other two strategies appear to be not-so-effective as the whole purpose of entrance tests is to assess our level of suitability and the intellectual ability to be eligible for the chosen course. However test preparation programs alter the whole purpose to win the rat race by hook or crook. Learning vocabulary must be an intellectually enriching experience, especially in English, because of the new perspectives they offer to even the most routine of the words that we encounter every day. 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.

English is a heavily derived language. Owing to its colonial history, English expanded with new terms and expressions due to enhanced perceptions, new places and new people. English is an all-accommodating, all-enhancing, all-inclusive, dynamic, mutable and evolving language – the lingua franca. Being a lingua franca meant trading of words to and from other languages.

When ESL learners learn the language especially, vocabulary, they look at English as a pure or original language or dead language – as a result apart from a few standard set of terms, they can never go anywhere near to mastering the language. To understand English better, one must look at each word in terms of its origin. As much tedious, mind-consuming and laborious as it appears, learning through etymology is one of the most effective and smart ways of acquiring vocabulary. Like many other English words the word In Greek ‘etumon’ means ‘real or true sense’ and ‘logia’ is its study. An English word may sound unfamiliar in the beginning but when we go to its roots, it sounds related to words in other languages at a deeper level. Etymology is briefly defined as the scientific study of the origins and history of the changing meanings and forms of the words (Ross 1969)

Etymology helps us appreciate the world from a much higher level. With a plethora of information at our disposal, it is a better idea to embark on a long-lasting learning process that is enriching. Etymology is not merely trying to memorise the lists of roots, prefixes and suffixes but to look at how the word has transformed in its structure and the meaning it conveys. According to Masoud Hashemi and Masoud Aziznezhad (2011) Etymology is not only useful, effective and interesting, but it also is a fast word attack strategy.

According to the explanation in Oxford Advanced Learner’s English-Chinese Dictionary (2002), etymology provides a diachronic point of view to study English words, which can help learners improve vocabulary in-depth acquisition

With numerous connotations and each writer exploring his creative faculties assigning vocabulary to his perceptions, from an entirely detached context a writer may use a word or give birth to a new word. For instance, Shakespeare coined around 1600 new words such as countless, critical, excellent, lonely, majestic, obscene (Masoud 2011).

One word can diverge in many different directions. If we have knowledge of one root word then it is equal to having a large number of words in our mental lexicon. Reading is one of the natural ways to acquire vocabulary. However academic and professional situations require us to have a definite knowledge of vocabulary to meet the required standards. Vocabulary learning in English can be particularly tricky owing to the large number of connotations and implications. Therefore a thorough understanding of root word will help us understand and appreciate the new words that formed from it and the direction in which they diverged. As a result, the word connections, the background information, the context all help us retain the word in our mental lexicon forever. Research suggests that etymology also helps learners correctly guess the meaning of unknown words from their root words and contextual analysis. This shows that etymology can enhance the intellectual capabilities of learners.

According to the chief editor Ilson (1983) of Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English, Etymology is the information on the formation of words, phrases, and terms. He had classified the etymological information in a broad way, covering four parts: (1) original words and cognates; (2) morphological analysis of word structure; (3) morphological analysis of word formation; and (4) cognitive analysis of word formation and evolution.

One root word can help us remember several different words. For instance, tract/trahere is a Latin root word which means draw off. From tract we have abstract – taken/drawn out from the main points of a theory. Extract means to take out, contract – draw together, attract – drawn near, distract – drawn away. Different words can have same root word and show how things were perceived in the past. For instance, calcis in Latin means pebble. From this we have renal calculus in Biochemistry and calculus in Mathematics (counting using pebbles as in Abacus). From the same word we have calculator, calculated etc.

Research Studies on Etymology

In a study conducted by Fatemeh Soleimani and Fatemeh Azizmohammadi on the impact of etymology instruction on vocabulary retention of Iranian EFL learners majoring in Arabic Literature at Arak University, data collection and analysis of the participants’ response showed that etymology of English unknown words

results in better retention of Iranian EFL learners and suggestions were also made for further research and application.

Similarly Effat Hosseini and team at Arak University, Iran aimed at exploring the very effect of teaching vocabulary to 59 participants who belonged to experimental and control group. Although several studies demonstrate that vocabulary can be acquired indirectly through reading, the main concern specifically in the present study is how vocabulary instruction through Latin or Greek roots makes a difference (Zimmerman, 1997).

The results indicated that there was a significant difference between the experimental and control groups in terms of their posttest scores. It means that learning vocabulary through the etymological analysis was more effective than the traditional way of dictionary learning.

In another study conducted by Hassan Soleimani and Hadiseh Fallahpour at Payame Noor University in Iran it was concluded that by increasing students' creativity, their ability to guess the meaning of unknown words by etymology will be increased as well.

Foreign language learners must follow a vocabulary learning which is cognitive in nature. This kind of learning should help them relate new learning to what they already know. There is a variety of techniques reinforcing vocabulary, that making learners aware of etymology of words has been deemed as an interesting and effective technique in enhancing vocabulary size(

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Some researchers (e.g., Schmitt, 2000; Nation, 2001) concluded that learning strategies has been deemed as one means for facilitating vocabulary learning and retention, that these strategies can be used consciously or unconsciously in order to process the information. At an advanced level of communication, etymology is a strategy through which the learners can gain control over their vocabulary and display sophistication in expressing profound ideas. Etymology is one of the most systematic and effective ways of enhancing word power which can enhance learners' ability to understand words without referring to dictionaries.

According to Ruutmet (2005, as cited in Zolfagharkhani & Ghorbani, 2011), students equipped with different vocabulary strategies can be more successful in how to deal with unknown words and also their ability to apply these different vocabulary strategies in different situation might make the learning process of new vocabulary easy for them. Different vocabulary learning strategies can enhance learner's autonomy and self involvement in improving learning process.

Nation (1990; 2001), stated that the most useful way for learning vocabulary is learners' using of strategies independently of their teacher. In his recent publication, he proposed strategy training to be part of a vocabulary development program.

According to Roger (1980), a successful teacher has two features: question of what to teach and question of How to teach. What to teach refers to the knowledge to be taught, and How to teach refers to teacher's strategy to transfer his/her knowledge. According to humanism (confluent education), learning is defined as a whole person process (holistic learning), and emotion or how to learn has priority to cognition or what to learn. It should be understood that to teach vocabulary to students through etymology, the teacher should be motivated and acquainted enough with etymological concepts. Fateh Sulemani and Fatehme Azizmohammadi further suggested that teachers of English use this technique in teaching new vocabulary and motivate students to use this helpful strategy rather than asking them to memorize the vocabulary in a rote manner. They also indicated that some groups with different additional languages would probably increase the validity and help researchers make stronger claims regarding their findings... but it is hoped that further research will study the role of etymology in different groups knowing different additional languages (i.e., Fr, Ger and Turk.) in learning English language as Foreign language.

Need for Etymological Research in India

In India etymological approach to vocabulary acquisition is quite embryonic and due to its linguistic diversity, more studies can be conducted in this area to further test the validity of these research claims.

Trench (1998) stated that just few linguists regarded etymology as the main body of the word studies. Among different vocabulary learning strategies, the etymological analysis strategy is just beginning to receive attention in the field.

Celce-Murcia and Rosensweig (1979) maintain that " 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 Bogaards (2001), words constitute a major part of a language. According to Pikulski and Templeton, (2004) for foreign language learners specifically, a fairly large and comprehensive vocabulary is predictive and reflective of high levels of reading achievement. From this follows that students' vocabulary relates strongly to their reading comprehension and overall academic success (Baumann and Ash, 2003).

The ability to guess the meaning of unfamiliar words in a text is an important skill as learning the words largely depends on information derived from texts and also their roots (Hassan, 2002). So, effective second language vocabulary learning, specifically through learning the Latin or Greek roots, is particularly important for English as foreign language (EFL) learners who frequently acquire lexicons despite years of formal study. Schmitt (2008), also believes that “overriding principle for maximizing vocabulary learning is to increase the amount of engagement learners have with etymological items, mainly the roots”(p.352).

A handful of studies have found that vocabulary increases as a result of instruction. While several scholars have stressed the significance of direct vocabulary instruction and the teaching of vocabulary strategies, little research has been carried out regarding the effectiveness of teaching specific vocabulary strategies (Brown and Perry, 1991).

Earlier references to Etymology

According to a much cited article by Herbert Pierson (1989) on Etymology, the study of word origins, has all the attributes of what educational psychologists term meaningful learning and that a meaningful approach to etymology in second-language learning, as opposed to rote memorization of words, prefixes, suffixes and roots, can offer intermediate/advanced second-language students both practical and theoretical linguistic knowledge congenial to a more permanent retention of words and concepts.

It can be understood that the second language instruction could benefit from an explorative perspective on the part of both teacher and student where they could find relationships with other words both from history and other languages. The knowledge of these word relationships could contribute to what educational psychologists call meaningful learning (Ausabel, 1968). Ausabel (1967) describes meaningful learning as a task which is ‘relatable on a nonarbitrary, substantive basis to a previously learned background of... ideas and information’, and emphatically differentiates it from rotelearning, which he describes as ‘discrete and relatively isolated . . . only relatable to cognitive structure in an arbitrary, verbatim fashion’ (p.209). Meaningful learning takes place when the learner connects new learning to what he or she already knows (Thelen, 1986).

Herbert Pierson further stated that his training in diachronic linguistic analysis in which ordinary English words were traced back to their Hellenic, Germanic, Italic, Sanskrit and hypothesizes European forebears enabled him to recall and capitalize on the experience of his earlier classical education, thereby giving him a scientific view of word development. He was aware of subtle and hidden word relations. To this effect he suggests the example of the word ‘genuine’ which has Latin roots. In Latin gennum means knee and in Roman times, an infant’s paternity was acknowledge when it was placed on its father’s knee.

This reminds me of the word ‘ostracise’ which is derived from a Greek root word ‘ostrakon’ meaning ‘shell’. In the 17th century, the names of the banished unpopular citizens were written on the shell.

Learning new words requires one to look at spelling because it affects the quality of writing, then follows meaning, pronunciation and usage. Etymology can help with spelling and pronunciation while greatly showing the direction towards right pronunciation. Etymology can help people understand why something is called what it is called and thus brings them closer to the native pronunciation. For example words like bourgeois and entrepreneur are often wrongly spelt as they have French origins and have not changed their pronunciation even after entering the English lexicon.

II. CONCLUSION:

Helping students acquire vocabulary should form a part of literacy skills and can be conveniently introduced from High School level as it is proven to be vital to success in schools, professional life and everyday activities. Techniques that help in converting passive vocabulary to active vocabulary emphasize on repetition and memory techniques. However etymology can establish stronger links in the brain and makes it hard to forget the word. Learning words through etymology may require persistence, inquisitiveness and planning but as research suggests this approach can be considered effective, efficient and the most natural way of learning a word. Further etymological research in India needs more extensive development and inclusion for etymology in curriculum can benefit students in long term.

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