

Teaching Research on English Vocabulary of Middle School from Cognitive Linguistics

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Abstract: Vocabulary is the main content of English teaching, and also a difficult point in foreign language teaching. Therefore, improving the teaching quality of English vocabulary has become the focus of current teachers' attention. Due to the significant importance of cognitive linguistics in the learning and use of English vocabulary, this article provides a detailed discussion of the cognitive linguistics theory in English vocabulary teaching from the perspectives of basic category theory, prototype category theory, and cognitive metaphor theory, hoping to provide some reference for relevant educators.

Keywords: Cognitive Linguistics; Vocabulary Teaching; Basic Level Category Theory; Prototype Category Theory; Cognitive Metaphor Theory.

1. Introduction

Cognitive linguistics is a discipline that integrates cognitive psychology and linguistics. It gradually emerged in the 1970s and 1980s. It is generally believed that cognitive linguistics is based on opposition to the mainstream linguistic transformation generative grammar. In recent years, cognitive linguistics has been widely used in English teaching. However, currently, research on the application of cognitive linguistics in English teaching in China is mainly focused on college English teaching, and there is relatively little research in primary and secondary schools. Therefore, this study applies it to the teaching of English vocabulary in middle schools, intending to benefit the teaching of English vocabulary in middle schools in China.

2. Analyzing Vocabulary Teaching Based on Cognitive Linguistics

2.1. Main Viewpoints of Cognitive Linguistics

From the perspective of cognitive linguistics, words in the language are not groundless but rather have motivation. These words are a manifestation of cognitive categories formed based on people's experiences of the objective world. Cognitive categories are stored in the human brain, and words in a language are their external manifestations. That is to say, the process that people classify, name, and acquire words in the objective existence and language is a cognitive process of categorization of the objective world. [1] Cognitive linguistics was widely applied in the early 21st century and gradually formed a new discipline. This theory includes basic level category theory, prototype category theory, and cognitive metaphor theory. It not only enables students to better understand the learning and use of language but also provides a new teaching method for teachers, thereby improving teaching quality and effectiveness.

2.2. Analysis of the Application of Cognitive Linguistics in Vocabulary Teaching

2.2.1. The Application of Basic Level Category Theory to the Teaching of Core Vocabulary

When humans understand objective things, they spontaneously associate and organize similar things together,

assigning them certain language symbols based on their cognitive characteristics, and thus forming categories. The formation process of the category is simply categorization. It can also be understood as such a process. That is, to see the essential similarities in things with differentiation, and on this basis, to process and homogenize these things, so as to classify the things recognized by themselves, thus forming a new concept. [2] Based on relevant psychological experiments, the process of categorization is hierarchical in terms of the level of abstraction of categories. Among them, the concept that is first named by humans, is easy to remember, and most frequently used is the word of the basic level category. For example, *chair* is the basic level category word in *furniture-chair-armchair*.

Basic level category vocabulary has the following characteristics. Firstly, the basic level category vocabulary refers to things that have the function of gestalt. Due to the fact that basic level categories are well-known to the general public, the language audience can activate their experiences and associations in their minds through language, and associate them with relevant meanings and images. Secondly, basic level category vocabulary has representativeness. The specific level of this type of vocabulary is between abstract and concrete, and it does not make it difficult for the readers to associate it in their minds due to being too abstract, nor does it make it difficult for different people to have similar understandings due to differences in life experiences and other factors. Thirdly, basic level category vocabulary has a high frequency of usage. Because things in the basic level category are embedded in the vast majority of people's experiences, ordinary people generally do not encounter obstacles when using basic level category words for communication, they are more willing to use vocabulary in this category.

According to the general cognitive laws of humans, students first learn words that belong to the basic level category, and then learn words at higher level categories. Experts point out that basic level category words are the earliest words that children learn to refer to things. They are mostly common words with simple forms, fewer syllables, and more meanings, but have good collocation functions. In English, there are about 2000 types of core vocabulary, which are the most commonly used in daily communication and

writing. Related research shows that when students master the most common 1000 words in English, they can understand 80.5% of the content of a standardized article. And when they learn 2000 commonly used words, they can understand 90% of the content. From this point, it can be seen how important the application of the most commonly used basic vocabulary in English teaching is.

Based on the above discussion, the writer believes that teachers should shift their blind pursuit of vocabulary and attach importance to mastering basic level category vocabulary in the process of teaching English vocabulary in junior high school. In general, it has strong coinage because it is polysemous. After adding some modifiers, some basic level category words can form a compound word, such as *snowman*, *football*, and so on. Therefore, teachers should pay attention to the interpretation of basic level category vocabulary in English classroom teaching. They can conduct in-depth processing of basic level category words through word-formation knowledge, word meaning association, collocation, and other methods to help students develop their ability to learn and practice vocabulary.

2.2.2. The Application of Prototype Category Theory to the Teaching of Similar and Polysemous Vocabulary

The prototype is the psychological representation of a category and the most abstract and idealized representation of all paradigms. The essence of prototype category theory is to take a typical individual in a certain phenomenon as a prototype when recognizing it, and then analyze the shared features of all members in this phenomenon and the distinctive features of other individuals while keeping the characteristics of the typical individual unchanged. For example, when it comes to *cat*, we are all familiar with it and unconsciously come up with the appearance of a typical cat in our minds. The typical cat that comes to mind is called the prototype of the category. Usually, Chinese people believe that the prototype of cats is the *civet cat*. Correspondingly, the upper-level category of cat is animal, and there are many lower-level categories, which can be any specific category of cat, such as *Persian cat*, *Siamese cat*, *Short-haired cat*, etc.

Prototype category theory has several typical characteristics. Firstly, words in the category have a family resemblance. All words have a common attribute. Except for the prototype meaning, all other meanings are metaphorically derived through similarity with the prototype meaning. Secondly, the status of members in the category is unequal. There is an important and unimportant distinction between prototype meaning and marginal meaning. Thirdly, the boundaries of categories are vague. Although the marginal meaning in a category shares common attributes with the prototype meaning, there is no exact difference.

The prototype category theory emphasizes the connection between core members and peripheral members. Therefore, teachers should pay attention to the induction of similar words, and build a hierarchical structure diagram and semantic network. In this case, students can better master vocabulary. When teaching vocabulary, the teacher can ask students to classify the learned nouns into categories such as animals, food, transportation, natural phenomena, stationery, etc. For example, students can classify *cat*, *dog*, *tiger*, *owl* and *turtle* as *animals*.

Linguists have proposed that the fundamental way to grasp a polysemous word is to grasp its core meaning. Such meaning corresponds to the prototype. Therefore, when

teaching polysemy, teachers can focus on explaining the prototype of the word. After ensuring that the prototype of this word is firmly grasped by students, let them understand the other meanings of these words. Then, by analyzing the deep correlations of different meanings, students can distinguish the meaning of words from the context. For example, when explaining the word *cook*, teachers should first help students grasp the most commonly used meaning of it, which means *to prepare food by heating it*. Afterward, the word *cook* can be substituted into the context to help learners understand other meanings of it, such as *I want to cook up a story*. This way, students can also guess other meanings of the word *cook* based on the prototype category theory and the context, that is *to invent something, especially in order to trick sb.* In general, it can be seen that prototype category theory can effectively expand learners' vocabulary and improve the quality of vocabulary teaching. [3]

2.2.3. The Application of Cognitive Metaphor Theory to the Teaching of Polysemous Vocabulary

Research in cognitive linguistics has shown that metaphor is a cognitive phenomenon in which people use specific experiences to recognize and understand experiences in other fields. It means moving from a more easily understood domain to another more difficult-to-understand domain, that is, from the source domain to the target domain. For example, in the sentence *life is a journal*, people use *journal* as the source category to understand the target category *life*. In this case, people understand the relatively abstract concept of *life* through the specific concept of *travel*. At the same time, people can understand that they should cherish the present and enjoy the beauty of life in the process of understanding this sentence.

The use of cognitive metaphor theory is of great significance in cultivating students' metaphorical thinking. Because adopting this theory has two advantages. On the one hand, it can help students understand the internal expansion mechanism of the learned vocabulary, thereby deepening their understanding of vocabulary; On the other hand, this can also cultivate students' logical thinking and enhance their understanding and application of English. For example, the original meaning of the word *face* is from the front part of the head between the forehead and the chin. If the original meaning of *face* is converted to other meanings, such as *face to face* or *lose face*, the meaning of the word will be completely different in these situations. Let us try to discuss the phrase *lose face*. The term *face* here means *the condition of being respected*. Because *face* has an impact on a person's level of beauty, which can affect their overall image and earn respect and respect from others. From this perspective, using metaphorical thinking can easily understand the potential relationships between different meanings in a polysemous word, making learning polysemous words easier to achieve.[4]

In vocabulary teaching, teachers can fully explore the profound connotations of some everyday expressions, popular sayings, idioms, and allusions in English. They should guide students to understand their metaphorical rhetoric and deepen their understanding of vocabulary, phrases, and sentences. The more important aspect of this approach is that it can improve students' ability to recognize English vocabulary through analyzing and understanding metaphorical rhetoric, promote students' effective use of sentences containing metaphorical rhetoric in oral and written expression, and cultivate students' language application and innovation abilities. Teachers can spend a few minutes at the

end of each class listing a few English idioms on the blackboard, asking students to guess their meanings, and if necessary, making appropriate deductions for students. Taking *A new broom sweeps clean* as an example. This is a typical English proverb that includes metaphorical rhetoric. Teachers can first ask students to guess their corresponding Chinese meanings and guide them to further use English analogies, such as *A new worker works hard*; *A new leader perform well*, etc. In this way, teachers not only broaden students' thinking, but also deepen their understanding of the listed proverbs, enabling students to truly understand the metaphorical meaning of the word *broom* and *sweep* in the sentence.

3. Summary

Vocabulary learning is very important for foreign language learners. It can be said to be the basis for mastering a language. Only by mastering a certain vocabulary can learners better engage in English learning and improve their English application skills. In recent years, foreign language scholars in China have put forward their views on the teaching of English vocabulary. However, in the current junior high

school stage, the teaching of English vocabulary has not achieved very good results, and vocabulary learning is still a big problem in English learning. Cognitive linguistics provides new methods and perspectives for people to understand language. The application of cognitive linguistics in English vocabulary teaching is a good method, which has a huge promoting effect on English teaching.

References

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