

5. Lexical Learning: What Do Teachers and Students Need to Know about a Word or Lexical Expression?

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Abstract

While teachers are generally trained to analyse and explain the grammar of a language, their awareness of lexis is much less developed. This article presents an activity designed to sensitise teachers to the various aspects involved in 'knowing' a word; it also discusses how the activity could be adapted for use with students. It then provides an analysis of the different dimensions of lexical 'knowledge' including semantics, pragmatics, syntactic features, phonology and discourse phenomena. This is followed by a presentation of the various strategies which teachers and students can adopt when encountering unfamiliar lexical items. The article concludes with a selection of books which will encourage teachers to further explore the vast field of lexical studies and lexical learning.

Introduction

It used to be traditional to begin articles about vocabulary and vocabulary teaching with a lament on the dearth of relevant books and articles. Fortunately, this is no longer the case and there is a vast selection of vocabulary-related books on the market. Textbooks usually incorporate a lexical syllabus, learner dictionaries and dictionary workbooks have improved immensely and huge amounts of research have been carried out on the processes of first and second language lexical acquisition and the nature of the mental lexicon. However, students still complain that they do not have enough words at their disposal. Teachers too note how students constantly forget or misuse the words that they have encountered in class or watch with dismay as students are satisfied that they 'know' a word once they have found an L1 translation equivalent.

Working over the years with both native and non-native English language teachers, who have had different amounts of formal training and teaching experience, has brought home that more time should be spent on lexis in teacher training courses. Both teacher trainees and experienced teachers seem to develop a detailed understanding of a language's grammatical (and to lesser extent, phonological)

systems and can use the appropriate metalanguage in their classes when necessary. In the case of lexis, however, many teachers either avoid teaching (or feel insecure when explaining) the lexical systems of English. There is thus an urgent need to raise teachers' awareness of English lexical systems and to encourage them to raise their students' awareness of the different kinds of information about words which are required for optimal lexical learning.

Raising Teachers' Lexical Awareness

The following activity can be done individually but is much more productive (and fun) when conducted in pairs and groups. Teachers in training (or even experienced teachers) look at the words grouped together and decide what they have in common and which of their lexical characteristics a person would need to know in order to understand the word fully and use it correctly and appropriately. They can also try to find other words which are similar to those given.

Lexical Awareness-Raising Activity

- 1) an advert, a sitcom, the flu, a zine
- 2) mean, house, surface, flat, dust, out, like
- 3) comfortable, Arabic, to determine
- 4) a lollipop lady/man, a zebra crossing, bloody-minded, a feeding frenzy, a spin doctor, the sink suburbs, a sink tidy, a mindset, a car-boot sale, a dress-down day
- 5) a preparatory school, a public school, a grade school, a college, a normal school
- 6) a cynosure, a sophomore, an ampersand
- 7) a key word, a keyboard, a childline, a lunchbox, an antiques dealer
- 8) to rise, to raise, to arise
- 9) furniture, luggage, advice
- 10) progress, intimate, use, record, practice/practise
- 11) to put up with, to break out, to stand up, to cone off, to crash out
- 12) mutton / sheep, deer / venison
- 13) safe and _____, rancid _____, first and fo _____, all and su _____
- 14) the UN, the EU, IT, PC, BSE, Y2K, OTT, a DVD

- 15) NATO, AIDS, scuba, radar, SOWETO, SoHo, DWEM, a telex, a modem
- 16) sidewalk, rubber, diaper, center, leisure, glamor, furor, crib, pacifier, baby carriage, stroller, a missile, worshipping
- 17) terrorist/freedom fighter
- 18) to prevent, to suggest, to propose
- 19) eventually, actually, normally, hopefully
- 20) to lie, to lay
- 21) wicked, gay, awesome, mad, sad
- 22) mad, smart, dumb, to dumb down
- 23) garage, jungle, house
- 24) chef, coup, bon mot, manoeuvre/maneuver, blasé
- 25) parking, standing, pressing, forcing, brushing, lifting
- 26) cervical, controversy, Caribbean, advertisement
- 27) bard, galore, loch, brogue, smithereens
- 28) argy-bargy, happy-clappy, a no-no, tip-top, a nitwit, an Aga saga, to name and shame
- 29) hair, heir, house, hour, honour, hotel, history, herb
- 30) carpenter, joiner, cabinet maker, sauce, gravy, juice

Such activities are excellent (and highly enjoyable) ways for teachers to become more aware of the different types of information which are necessary for complete understanding (receptive and productive) of lexical items. These particular words were deliberately selected to be challenging for language teachers and also to reinforce the point that native speakers vary enormously in the nature and extent of their personal lexicon and that everyone's vocabulary is developing all the time.

Though the aim of the above activity was to raise *teachers'* lexical awareness, there is no reason why the words should not be altered in order to make it suitable for *students* of English at intermediate and advanced levels. For beginners or elementary students, the activity could be adapted by using L1 words which would be discussed in the native language.

Different Aspects of Lexical Knowledge

Lexical knowledge is remarkably complex, and 'knowing' a word can be considered from at least five perspectives: semantics, pragmatics, grammar/morphology/syntax, phonological/orthographic form and discourse.

• *Semantic Aspects: What does a particular word mean?*

Referential or denotative meaning: which object, action, concept or state in the real world does the word correspond to?

Sense relations: the word's synonyms, antonyms, hyponyms and superordinates. 'Wide' and 'broad' are synonyms; 'narrow' is an antonym of both. 'Vegetable' is a superordinate word which covers 'carrots', 'potatoes' etc which are its 'hyponyms'.

Which **semantic or lexical field** (e.g. furniture, fruit, sports, colours) does the word belong to?

Can the word be analysed into **semantic components or features**?

The meaning of the word 'bachelor', for instance, can be considered to be the following:

- + human
- + male
- married.

Is the word '**transparent**' or '**opaque**'?

Can you 'see' the meaning of a compound word (e.g. *a toothbrush*) or of a derivationally complex word (e.g. *to deactivate*) by studying its component elements or has the word's meaning lost its transparency and taken on a meaning that is not just the 'sum of its parts'?

What is its **dictionary definition**?

Does the word have more than one meaning, i.e. is it '**polysemous**'? For example, 'a bank' (for money or of a river), 'a fine distinction' versus 'a fine day', etc. It is often difficult to say if we have one word with several related meanings or several different words, pronounced and spelled in the same way,

but which have different meanings (**homonyms**).

Does the word's meaning change in different varieties of the language (e.g. a 'rubber' or 'subway' in British and American English) or has its meaning shifted/drifted over time?

Are different words used in other parts of the English-speaking world to refer to the same thing, e.g. 'diaper' versus 'nappy'?

Is there a single **translation equivalent** in the learner's native language? Is the translation equivalent a word of similar frequency, scope and formality in the L1? Is it a '*faux ami*' or a '*vrai ami*'?

• *Pragmatic Aspects : How is the word used?*

The way the word is used, its **connotations** (negative or positive), whether it is perceived to be a **core** word in the vocabulary of a language or is **peripheral**, whether it is associated with a specific **dialect** or **formality level** or belongs to a particular **register**, '*genre*' or **user group**.

Frequency and 'disponibilité' (availability). For example, does the word occur in the first 1000 words of a frequency-based corpus of the language? Is it more common in **spoken** or **written** discourse? Is it a word which easily comes to the mind of a native speaker? (For example, if you ask English native speakers to give you 10 fruits, 10 vegetables and 10 flowers off the top of their heads, their lists will probably contain 'apple', 'orange', 'carrot', 'peas', 'rose' and 'tulip' but not 'persimmon', 'artichoke' or 'begonia'.)

Cultural content. Words linked to areas such as sport, religion, music, food, educational systems, and so forth, often contain significant amounts of cultural information which speakers of other languages have difficulty understanding.

• *Grammatical, Morphological and Syntactic Aspects*

What are the grammatical features of the word? Can it be analysed into sub-components? Which ending(s) can it take? How does it behave syntactically in sentences?

Part of speech or grammatical category. Is the word a noun, a verb, an adjective, etc.?

The **syntax** of the word. If it is a noun, is it plural or singular, countable or uncountable, common or proper? If it is a verb, is it transitive or intransitive, regular or irregular, a full (lexical) verb or a (modal) auxiliary verb? How does the verb 'colligate', i.e. is it followed by "to", "-ing" or the bare infinitive? Does it occur with a 'that' clause etc.?

Word analysis. Can you see the **word formation process** by which the word was formed?

Affixation: the addition of prefixes, suffixes or infixes to a base word

to undo, frustration, deforestation, abso-bloody-lutely

Compounding: the joining of two or more base words to form a new lexical item, which may be written as one word, hyphenated or with a space

a keyboard, air quotes, to baby-sit, user-friendly, millennium-compliant

Conversion or 'functional shift': For example, the conversion of a noun into a verb

access (noun)	-->	to access	a bin	-->	to bin
rubbish (noun)	-->	to rubbish	out (prep)	-->	to out
dumb (adj)	-->	to dumb down			

Clipping: Is the word a clipped form of another word?

a pub, an advert, a sitcom, a perk, a prop, a still (from a 'distillery')

Blending: Is the word a 'blend' of two other words?

smog, brunch, motel, synergy

Abbreviation: Is the word formed from the initial letters or syllables of other words?

- a) Initialism. The word is pronounced letter-by-letter: *a DVD, WHO, ECB, BSE*
- b) Acronym. The letters are pronounced as a word: *UNICEF, laser, scuba*
- c) Suffixed acronym. The initial syllables of two or more words are pronounced as a word: *a modem, a telex, Benelux*
- d) Initialism or acronym, e.g. *VAT, UFO, ASAP*

Reduplication: Is the lexical item formed by repeating a given word, with or without change of middle vowel or initial consonant?

'goody-goody', 'helter-skelter', 'tip-top'

Onomatopoeia and sound-symbolism: Was the word formed by some association with a sound or concept that it refers to or is linked to in the real world?

thump / clump / dump, glow / glimmer / gleam / glitter,
slime / sludge / slither / slop

Borrowing: What is the **etymology** or **history** of the word? Has the word been borrowed from another language? Have its spelling, pronunciation, meaning and syntax been fully assimilated or is it still perceived as somehow 'foreign'?

to flirt <-- *conter fleurette* (to tell little flower), *a cliché*
(but restricted to the meaning of a 'very common expression'
and not a 'photograph')

• **Phonological and orthographic aspects:** *How is the word pronounced and spelled?*

How is the word **pronounced** (including its **stress**)? Is the pronunciation similar/identical to other words in L1 or L2 (**homophones** or **near-homophones**)?

How is the word spelled/spelt (i.e. its **orthography**)? Does it show a regular grapheme-phoneme correspondence? Are there words spelled in an identical or similar manner in L1 or L2 (**homographs** or **near-homographs**)? Is it written with an initial capital letter? For a compound lexical item, is it written as one word, with a hyphen, or as two separate words? Are there any British and American spelling differences?

• *Discourse Aspects: How does the lexical item behave in extended writing and speech?*

How does the word behave in **discourse**? For example, 'the former', 'the latter', 'however', 'moreover', 'consequently', 'either'... 'or'.

Collocations. Which words does a particular lexical item habitually occur with? Which fixed expressions, phrasal verbs, idioms, set phrases, proverbs, metaphors etc. does it appear in? Can it be used with almost any word, are its collocations more limited or can it only occur with one other word, e.g. 'het' as in 'het up'?

The different things that learners need to know about words in the foreign language they are studying are illustrated visually in diagram one.

Strategies for Dealing with Unfamiliar Lexical Items in Class

Language teachers have a variety of strategies at their disposal when unfamiliar lexical items crop up in class. These pedagogical possibilities are illustrated visually in diagram two. Language learners, for their part, can be encouraged to adopt some of these strategies autonomously when they encounter new words outside the classroom, e.g. by guessing meaning from context, analysing the word's internal structure, relating the word to a similar form in another language, using a dictionary and, when necessary, ignoring the unfamiliar term. When students record new words in their vocabulary notebooks, they can also adopt some of the techniques used by their teachers when explaining words to them, for instance, by drawing a picture of the word, using a cline or grid, giving a synonym or antonym, providing an example, explanation or translation.

NB A 'cline' could be used to show the relationship between adjectives referring to heat and cold.

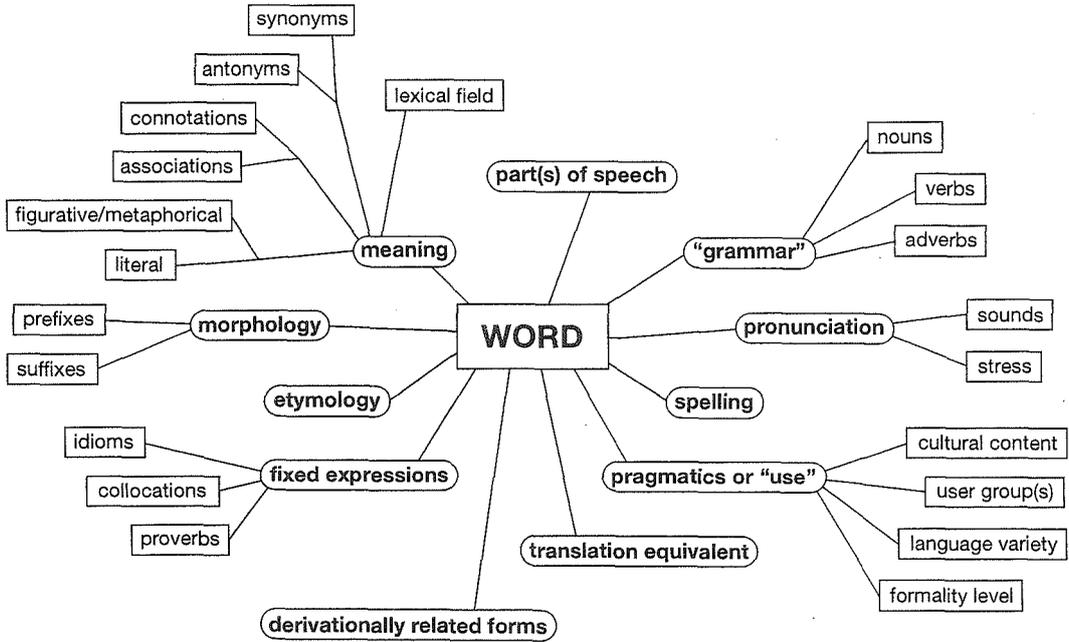


Diagram 1 - What you need to know/learn/teach about a word

freezing ----- cold ----- tepid ----- warm ----- hot ----- boiling.

A 'grid' (with ticks, crosses and question marks) can be useful to show which items particular words can occur with, for example the collocational behaviour of the adjectives 'broad' and 'wide' with nouns such as 'river', 'road', 'shoulders' and so forth.

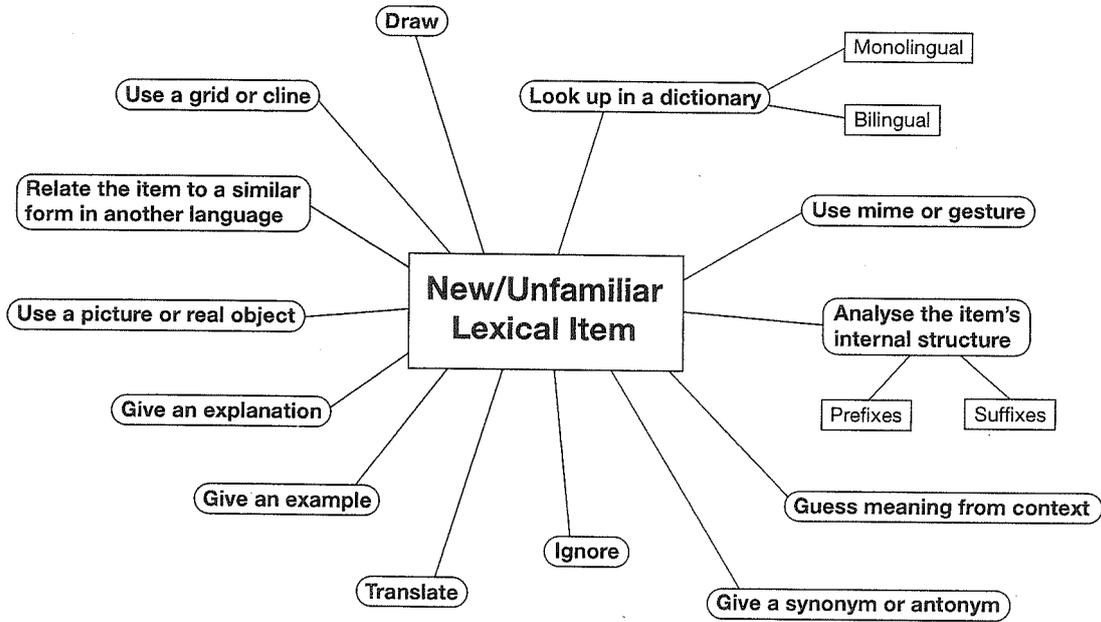


Diagram 2 - Strategies for dealing with new or unfamiliar lexical items in class

Useful Books and Articles about English Vocabulary and Strategies for Teaching and Learning it Effectively

There is now a vast array of books and articles, both practical and theoretical, about different aspects of vocabulary (semantics, lexicology, lexicography etc.) and how it is acquired and should be taught. What follows is an unashamedly eclectic list of works (mainly British, American and French) which should prove useful and interesting, and are strongly recommended to language teachers, applied linguists and researchers. Some of these books and articles are well-known while others deserve to reach a much larger audience. Some are very recent publications and have not yet found their way into standard bibliographies of lexis-related books. There are also some older and much rarer gems that are well worth tracking down.

Happy lexical learning (and teaching)!

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Biodata

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