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Teaching English vocabulary to Albanian students and the importance of the semantic fields in the process of expanding it.

Abstract

Every language has its own semantic, phonologic, grammatical structure. When you try to make a comparison between the two languages, you know that they do not fully correspond in none of the structures mentioned above. Every language among the other things reflects the culture of a certain society, which the same as the language, is different in different countries. So it is the case with the English and the Albanian language. These two languages do not have any resemblance with each-other. The scholar Lyons would say that we have to deal with non isomorphic languages, due to the semantic structure, which is different. This phenomenon should be taken into account during the process of teaching, in our case of the English language. This paper aims at a comparison of the semantic fields of the two languages, based on the semantic field theory. It is more efficient if the comparison is made between fields and not between specific lexemes. Hence, this comparison can lead to a clear picture and a better understanding of the correlation, contrast of these two languages.

In this paper it is aimed a research which examines the basic concept of semantic fields, theoretical and practical foundations and implications of semantic fields as a method for creative foreign language teaching, especially in teaching English as a foreign language to

Albanian students at Tirana University and Beder University. Current research has found that having a knowledge in semantic fields makes it easier and helps students develop their conceptual understandings. It has been assessed that semantic fields constitute major lexical patterns in the vocabulary of a language and as such they are regarded as part of the native speaker's lexical competence. It has also been argued that learning a foreign language vocabulary entails learning, among other things, the meanings of lexical items in fields and the sense relations in terms of which these fields are structured. " Rudska et al. (1981a). Teaching new vocabulary through the use of semantic fields gives the learner the confidence and a native like competence in the language that they are learning. Learning outcomes and findings are often shown through descriptions of design interventions that have taken place in ordinary classrooms. In this research, attention has been paid if the use of semantic field analysis in the teaching of lexis in foreign language situations with respect to the language skills for which the EFL learners are learning English is effective. The use of new creative methods, diverse experiences of individual students within FL classes and what they take away from participation in such classes would make the circle complete and satisfactory.

Key words: semantic field, lexical pattern, expand and enrich the vocabulary

1-The introduction of the English language in the Albanian school system

English language has taken a great dimension worldwide; its influence is felt everywhere and it is spoken by a lot of people. The first contact that the Albanian language had with English was in 1866 when Kristoforidhi translated a poem from the English language titled ‘ The star up in the sky’ by R.L. Stevenson¹. Historical circumstances changed a lot the situation, the English language was introduced to Albanians in Elbasan in 1909 as an elective subject of the school curricula. An interesting fact was that in 1877 in order to get permission from the sultan, the ones who wanted to open it said that the girls’ school of Korca would be in English language, but in fact it was not. English was not even included as a school subject. Some of the teachers though had been studying in American colleges in Bulgaria. Thus, it can be claimed that the contact of the Albanians with the English language are ancient.

This contact has had its own benefits; firstly it exposed the Albanians to other cultures. One can hardly separate the culture from the language and it would be like giving priority to one language, which may be seen as a threat to freedom of speech and to the ideals of multiculturalism. Secondly, it paved the way for the coming generations to be encouraged to study this language. Some people would choose to advance their knowledge and major in the English language and literature. Thus, providing the Albanian society with highly qualified English teachers, lecturers, scholars, researchers.

2-English language is taught in every school and the exigencies which emerge need a special focus.

When it comes to learning the English language there certain skills, which the students must acquire in order to master it successful. Wilkins assesses, “Without grammar, little can be conveyed; without vocabulary, nothing can be conveyed” (1972: 111). Everyone would say that this is true, but when it comes to learning the vocabulary, still everyone would unanimously say that it is a boring task. On the other hand, we need to consider the other side of the coin. It is not only the students who find learning a vocabulary a daunting task, but even the teachers, lecturer, who have to perform this task in a very effective way, find it challenging. The difference

1 Xh. Lloshi, “ Raste ndërhyrjesh të huazimeve nga Anglishtja” Studime filologjike, nr 1-2, 2011, fq 10

between grammar and vocabulary is ultimately a matter of closed versus open sets:

“A closed set of items is one of fixed, and usually small, membership; e. g. the set of personal pronouns, tenses, genders, etc. An open set is one of unrestricted, indeterminately large, membership; e. g. the class of nouns or verbs in a language. In terms of this distinction we can say that grammatical items belong to closed sets, and lexical items to open sets.” (Lyons, 1968: 436).

One consequence of this difference between closed and open sets is that: “the vocabulary is much less strictly organized and less stable than the patterns encountered in phonology and grammar. Words or meanings can be added or dropped far more freely than phonemes, inflexions or suffixes.” (Ullmann, 1972: 367)

The two above mentioned quotations give a clear picture that the vocabulary of a language is always dynamic and consistently expanding due to the necessity to have an elaborated dictionary. It is true that words or meanings can be added or dropped far more freely than phonemes, inflexions or suffixes, but on the other hand it makes it more difficult for a foreigner to learn easily these new words and meanings. Therefore, it is useful to know how to use the knowledge that teachers have of the semantic fields in relation to the vocabulary learning process. How to make the teaching and learning of the new vocabulary more effective, what strategies do the students need and which are some useful exercises, are some of the questions which will find an answer in this paper. It is aimed to help significantly in pedagogical aspect as well as to enlarge learners' vocabulary by building paradigmatic construction and patterns of new correlations and to expand learners' mastery of new vocabulary.

3- The semantic field theory

The field theory of semantics or lexical field theory is introduced by Jost Trier² in the 1930s. He states that:

a. The vocabulary in a language system is semantically related and builds up a complete lexical system. This system is unsteady and changing constantly.

b. Since the vocabulary of a language is semantically related, we are not supposed to study the semantic change of individual words in isolation, but to study vocabulary as an integrated system.

2 http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Semantic_field

c. Since lexemes are interrelated in sense, we can only determine the connotation of a word by analyzing and comparing its semantic relationship with other words. A word is meaningful only in its own semantic field.

Trier's semantic field is generally considered paradigmatic. It deals with paradigmatic relations between words such as hyponymy, synonymy and antonymy. This theory claims that each language has a unique semantic structure. The structure is a network of relations within which each lexical item derives its meaning from its relations with the other items. The meaning of a lexical item in a particular language, therefore, depends on the existence of other items within that language. This inevitably leads to the conclusion that it does not make sense to try to teach the meaning of a lexical item in complete isolation from the other items with which it forms a field or a subsystem.

For example, English words for snow are *snow, hail, sleet, ice, icicle, slush, and snowflake*. English also has the related word *glacier* and the four common skiing terms *pack, powder, crud, and crust*, so one can say that at least 12 distinct words for snow exist in English³. In Albanian we have only one word for snow " borë", however to explain different kinds of it there are some word collocations including the word snow. BOR/Ë,-A f. kryes. *Nj.sh. ~ ËRA, ËRAT. 1. Reshje me kristale të bardha, që bie flokë -flokë; shtresa e bardhë që krijohet nga kjo reshje; dëborë. Borë e dendur (e imët). Bora e parë, Borë e përhershme (shekullore). Flokë (fije, endë, pah, fjolla) bore. Top (ortek, shtresë) bore. Shtrat bore llohë. Ana e borës ana e veriut . Zog bore/zool. Borës, zborak. Mal me borë. Hodhi (zbardhi) bora. Çaj borën. Shkriu si bora në diell. i bardhë si bora. 2. Përd. mb. Shumë i ftohtë, akull; përd. Ndaj. Shumë (me mbiemrat " i bardhë" " i pastër")⁴.*

On the other hand the theory of the other German linguist Porzig places a great importance to the internal relation of the co-occurrence between words. His theory is called syntactic field. He claims that a lexical item co-occurs with others in the same context, e.g., bite and teeth, lick and tongue, bark and dog, etc. They are bound together by what Porzig called essential meaning-relations. However, as we can see that one word appears in the syntagmatically-related lexical system, this word predicts the occurrence of the other because they are related to each-other. This syntagmatic relationship helps in the acquisition of the word knowledge, as well as in expanding the vocabulary background.

Actually the syntagmatic semantic field aims to prove that the components in a phrase are not only grammatically related, but also semantical-

3 http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Semantic_field

4 Fjalor I Shqipes Së Sotme, Botimet Toena, Tiranë, 2002

ly related. For example, in the phrases “*make a work of art*” (to make sth or to bring it to existence), “*make the bed*” (to fix), “*make dinner*” (to prepare) “*make a speech*” (to hold a speech). “*make sb happy*” (to render sb happy) the word “*make*” has different meanings in different contexts, and these meanings are determined by its collocation. Therefore, it is clear now why it can be admitted that the semantic field theory is an effective way of enlarging one’s vocabulary.

4- Teaching and learning new vocabulary as part of pedagogical perspective

The English language is considered to have the largest vocabulary in the world (Crystal, 2002). Educated native speakers of English are expected to know approximately 20,000 word families or 70,000 words (Nation, 2001); however, educated non-native speakers of English know less than one quarter of the native speakers’ vocabulary (Laufer & Yano, 2001).

Deficiency of vocabulary knowledge is a problem in all the four skills reading, listening, speaking, writing. Learners should be told that vocabulary plays a pivotal role in their L2 acquisition and development. Learners should make use of vocabulary learning strategies and resources in order to increase effectiveness in their vocabulary acquisition. A good idea is to be active in the learning vocabulary process because this helps in their fluency. Effective vocabulary acquisition training is integral for effective use of a language. The ability to read and write fluently requires learners to reach a “lexical threshold”.

Vocabulary learning strategies are useful in learning/reviewing new word or phrases (Schmitt, 2000). Otherwise students simply forget what they are learning and have learned. Try using word cards and word parts, guessing from context, and dictionary use (Nation & Meara, 2010).

Some exercises might be to draw images or create grids and sets to visualize semantic networks of words, which will lead to better retention. One kind of exercise is taken from the Cutting edge method in the copy-book that they accompany the students’ book with for extra exercises.

Wordspot

world, earth, ground, floor

1. Do you have exact equivalents for these four words in your language? Choose words or phrases from the box to complete the explanations.

floor ,floorboards, earth, think the world, worldwide, this world, the earth, floor, in the world, on the ground on earth, top of the world, grounded, off the ground

a)You have plenty of time, and so you don't have to hurry: you have all

..... the time .

b)Added for emphasis to a question, or to show you are very surprised or

..... annoyed: e.g. What.....is she wearing?

c)An idiom to say that something is very expensive: it costs.....

d)The land at the bottom of the sea is known as the ocean

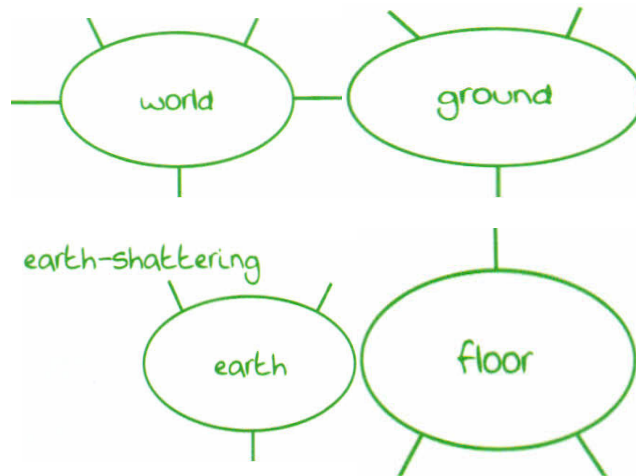
e) If you have great affection and respect for someone, you ..of them.

f) At a club/disco, the place where people dance: the dance .

g)If parents punish their child by not letting him/her go out, (s) he is

h)An informal way of saying that something is so good it's unbelievable:

Complete the diagrams below with words and phrases from ex 2



“The more a learner engages with a new word, the more likely he/she is to learn it” (Schmitt, 2010, p. 26) so being engaged is very important. As the semantic field is therefore a paradigmatically and syntagmatically structured subset of the lexicon. The lexical items of language can be classified into sets which are related semantically and divide up the semantic field in various ways. For example, Brown and Payne’s vocabulary instruction has to do with synthetically pedagogical procedure of teaching new words as: pre-reading brainstorming.

If the students are to read a text related to money, possession, economy, then it would be a good idea if the teacher draws on the board a semantic field diagram where in the center is “transfer of possession” and the other words (related to the topic) surrounding it.

Transfer of possession (trade, sell, borrow, lend, inherit, exchange, hire, rent, buy, give, receive, lease, give away, donate, transfer)

Learners take an active part in this task and get a better understanding of the topic, thus becoming more interested in reading the passage. This helps to improve the reading efficiency. In this step, learners also form a basic semantic field related to transfer possession.

By using some of the features of the Semantic field a teacher would make a good use of it by implementing them in class. Before going to class it would be a good idea to find words which belong to the same semantic field because they usually share part of the meaning or the same structure, which of course, will be easier to be learned as a group than as separate

items. Teaching vocabulary in this way saves time and energy and achieves better results at the same time.

Another way is using hyponymy (is a word or phrase whose semantic field is included within that of another word, its **hyperonym**)⁵ An example would be like writing the particle “off” with verbs of movement and the meaning of all of them is; to move from one place to the other “leave”. Walk off, drive off, run off, ride off, etc, or another table, chair, shelf, cupboards are hyponyms of furniture.

Using this strategy of the semantic field theory helps students to increase their creativity but also help them make a connection of the newly acquired knowledge with previously acquired knowledge.

Polysemy help students not only learn the core meaning, but extended meanings as well. For example the word book has three meanings 1. a bound collection of pages 2. a text reproduced and distributed (thus, someone who has read the same text on a computer has read the same book as someone who had the actual paper volume). 3. to make an action or event a matter of record (e.g. “Unable to book a hotel room, a man sneaked into a nearby private residence where police arrested him and later booked him for unlawful entry.”

These were some of the ways how to teach and learn vocabulary. Definitely the semantic field theory is one of the most useful, beneficial way for the students to advance and built their confidence when using a foreign language because as Celce-Murcia and Rosensweig (1979) argue that vocabulary is more important than syntax for communication even in the early stages: vocabulary should be recognized as a central element in language instruction from the beginning stages. From our own experience with non-native speakers of English we feel that a good amount of vocabulary with a minimum of structure often makes for better reading comprehension and more efficient survival communication than near-perfect structure with an impoverished vocabulary of 100 words or less. “ (p. 242)

It should be emphasized the great importance of lexis for a better communication. If one can come up with grammatically correct sentences, that does not mean that they have a fluency in that language. Adequate attention needs to be paid to the fact that even though someone is able to produce grammatical sentences if one has not got the vocabulary that is needed to encode one’s message then he is helpless to manage and build up a communication.

5 http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hyponymy_and_hypernymy

5-Conclusion

In Albania the English language is a priority for the education system as well as for the social status and the job market. In the education system it is included in the school curricula from the third grade of elementary school. Students have to take the English exam when they finish the high school. Even at the university level it is not an elective course, but a required one. Furthermore, it is quite hard to find a job and start a career without knowing English. Someone who knows English stands better chances and is viewed differently as being a well educated person. Hence enjoys a higher social status. This shows the real significance that this language has for the Albanian people. Therefore learning this language is the ultimate goal of every learner, especially to be able to communicate fluently and accurately. This can be achieved by mastering the four skills reading listening, speaking, writing. In the center of these four skills is the vocabulary. The size of one's vocabulary directly affects the development of one's linguistic competence. Therefore, the first task of vocabulary instruction is to enlarge learners' vocabulary.

In addition, learners may only know the literal meanings of a word and lack the knowledge of its connotation and collocation in different contexts. Teachers should not only teach the pronunciation and meanings of a word, but also explain its semantic relations, connotation and collocations. They can help students construct semantic fields under various semantic relations. In conclusion, teaching vocabulary by constructing the semantic fields of is efficient as well as necessary.

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