

Exploring the Effectiveness and Specific Teaching Methods of English Etymology in Expanding Mental Lexicon for College Students

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Abstract: *English etymology, as a discipline that studies the origin and development of words, reveals the intrinsic connection and meaning of vocabulary by tracing the historical background, etymology and semantic evolution of words, which not only helps learners to understand the deeper meaning of vocabulary, but also expands and builds their English mental lexicon effectively, thus helping students achieve effective vocabulary enhancement in a short time. The purpose of this paper is to discuss the role of English etymology in the construction and expansion of mental lexicon, analyze its actual teaching methods, and demonstrate its application and effect in educational practice.*

Keywords: Etymology, Mental lexicon, Vocabulary learning.

1. The Importance of Vocabulary Learning

Vocabulary is the basic building block of language and the foundation of language expression and comprehension. One of the main tasks for students to learn English after entering university is to expand their vocabulary, and the vocabulary required by the college English Test CET-4 and CET-6 is 4200 and 5500 respectively. However, many students fail to meet this standard because of a paucity of vocabulary and limited English learning time. Most learners use traditional methods to memorize vocabulary mechanically, and they do not master the methods and skills of word memorization, and even fewer learners understand the origin and derivation of vocabulary from the etymological point of view, which, to some extent, has seriously shackled the process of their English learning and affected the efficiency of their vocabulary learning. Against this background, it is undoubtedly a useful exploration to utilize etymology in college English vocabulary teaching to assist students in vocabulary memorization.

2. English Etymology and the Accretion of Mental Lexicon

Etymology, from the Greek word “etymologia”, belongs to the branch of lexicography, which analyzes the essential meanings and abstract meanings of words by tracing them back to their origins. Masood Hashemi, in his book entitled “Word Origin: A Key Strategy for Learning English Lexical Numbers”, explained that word origin is a key lexical teaching strategy for mother tongue learners, and used the analogy of the Chinese book “Origin of Chinese Characters” to illustrate the inevitability of the use of word origin in lexical teaching. Etymology not only refers to the study of the original etymology of words, but also includes the study of the historical sources of the sound and meaning of words [Dong].

Mental lexicon, also called internal lexicon, refers to words stored in long term memory i.e. mental representations of words. It contains not only linguistic knowledge such as word meaning, spelling, pronunciation, collocation relations, but also non-linguistic systems such as encyclopedic knowledge

and personal experience (Carroll, 2000). Depending on the frequency of use of words, i.e. word frequency, the mental vocabulary can be broadly categorized into high-frequency words and low-frequency words. High-frequency words have the characteristics of high distribution rate, wide coverage, easy to understand and so on. They are the most basic and frequently vocabulary, which is the key to learning English vocabulary. Through the application of English Etymology, unexpected results can be obtained when learners' high frequency English words are used to explain new vocabulary.

3. The Application of Etymology in Teaching

3.1 Etymology and Allusions

As a world-circulating language, English is constantly absorbing cultural elements from other languages, thus gradually developing and expanding. Historical records show that most of the English vocabulary is derived from literary masterpieces, myths and legends of the ancient Greek culture, Biblical stories and fables, but also from religion, place names, people's names, agriculture, hunting, administration and law. So when teaching words from other languages, the teacher can refer to allusions associated with the words which will become vivid with the story told. For instance, the word “tantalyze” comes from a character in Geek mythology, Tantalos, the son of Zeus. He was punished in the afterlife by being made to stand in a river up to his chin, under branches laden with fruit, all of which withdrew from his reach whenever he tried to eat or drink. Thus the word “tantalyze” means “to tease or torment by presenting something desirable to the view and frustrating expectation by keeping it out of reach”. In this sense, the study of etymology is to combine vocabulary with history, culture, legend and so on to explore the cultural origin and meanings of words, hence making it become a cultural carrier in the real sense.

3.2 Etymology and English Affixes and Roots

Etymology starts from the structure and morphology of words, analyzes the origin and evolution history of word affixes and roots, and explores their historical and cultural origins

(Zhuang). English roots and affixes are a very convenient way to expand students mental lexicon, linking old and new words together. English Roots and affix teaching have been adopted by many English teachers in China and has proven to be more than useful, achieving twice the effect with half the effort for students with more than moderate vocabulary level. Many words, once a lexical shift occurs, become unfamiliar to students. The use of English etymology in teaching affixes can quickly make the unfamiliar familiar, greatly improve the effect of students' word memorization, and at the same time free students of the burden of mechanic memorization. Take the word "heal" as an example, many college students are completely unfamiliar with the word and its meaning when they see it for the first time. However, if the teacher juxtapose "health" (a word of high frequency) and "heal", almost all the students will be able to identify the relationship between the two words, and the link will be easily established. Take the word "reign" (a word that almost all college students do not recognize) as another example. If the teacher juxtaposes the word "foreign" (a word of high frequency) with it, many students can find the similarity between the two words. The only job left for the teacher to do here is to remind students of the word "forbid" to familiarize them with the meaning of "for" (meaning outside) as a prefix, whereby foreign can be interpreted as "outside" plus "reign". The English word "space" as a noun is known to almost all college students while its adjective spatial is not. When students recognize the derivation phenomenon taking place, they can easily accept palatial as the adjective for palace. Similarly, if students can identify the connection between "receive" and "reception", they will have little difficulty identifying the connection between "perceive" and "perception", "deceive" and "deception". With the teacher's guidance, students can improve their understanding of word formation, improve the efficiency of word memorization, and gradually realize independent learning and effective memorization of words.

Compared with affixes, the teaching of English roots entails more knowledge about the origin of the roots beside their meanings. Take the root word tract as an example. If students know the meaning of "attract", with the teacher's introduction of "tract" as a root (meaning to draw or drag), supplemented with a basic understanding of prefixes, students can quickly grasp the meanings of words like "extract, protract, distract and detract", etc., whereby students' word literacy will be improved. However, for the students with a comparative small vocabulary, the word "attract" is unfamiliar to most of the students, and the explanation of root words and affixes is no less than adding insult to injury, which can only add to the burden of memorization and discourage students from memorizing the words. Thus the etymological understanding of the English root "tract" becomes necessary. From the perspective of etymology, the root "tract" comes from "to draw or drag" plus "act". To help understand the transformation happening between "tr" and "dr" and other changes in etymology as well, some specific changing rules between English letters will be elaborated on below, mainly two aspects, letter substitution in words and the appearance or disappearance of silent letters in word formation.

3.3 Substitution of Letters

As a widely spread language, the evolution of English

vocabulary has gone through the Old English period, the Middle English period and the Modern English period, with a large number of foreign words enriching the vocabulary in English in each period, especially in French, Latin and Greek (Dennis). Etymology not only focuses on the study of the origin of vocabulary, but also aiming at exploring borrowing, analogies, reconstruction, derivation and evolution of vocabulary on the basis of the study of phonological, semantic and pragmatic changes.

3.3.1 Replacement of Vowel Letters

In English etymology, the five vowels can be replaced in the evolution of words, such as the conversion from the vowel "o" to "e" between "food" and "feed", and similar examples are "follow" and "fellow", and the conversion from "part" to "portion". It is worth noting that in the process of vowel letter substitution, there is one consonant letter that can also be substituted with them, and that is the letter "y". In many English words, the letter "y" is pronounced the same as the vowel letter "i", so substitution between the letter takes place in many words such as "day" and "daily", "holy" and "holiday". Armed with knowledge like this, when students see the word "rejoice", they are able to establish the connection between rejoice and joy with the teacher's reminding.

3.3.2 Substitution of Consonant Letters

1) Shape Similarity

Shape-similarity in English is most prominently seen in the substitution among the letters "v", "u", and "w". Prior to 1630, the vowel letter "u" and the consonant letter "v" were interchangeable in many words due to their similarity in writing, and the letter "w" came about as the combination of two "u" pronounced as "double u". By tracing the three letters back in time, their substitution in words can be better understood and accepted by students, such as the noun of "solve" as "solution", the connection between "wine" and "vine". When students see this new word "invincible" (too strong to be defeated) for the first time, they are encouraged to find the connection between the English root "vin" (or "vince") and the word "win". Hence, the sentence "someone who is invincible is surely the winner" makes more sense with the application of etymology.

2) Phonetic Similarity

The second rule of consonant letter changes is the similarity of pronunciation. In other words, the consonant letters that are voiceless become voiced in the process of pronunciation (t-d, v-f, b-p, c-k-g-qu), therefore it is readily acceptable when these changes between words are encountered. Through the understanding of this law, the students will be able to expand their vocabulary based on existing mental lexicon. For example, "picture" is a high-frequency word for college students while "pigment" is not. From the pronunciation of the word, the new word "pigment" formed from the similarity of the pronunciation of "pic" and "pig" embodies the logical relationship of pigment used for painting. Taking the word "eloquent" as an example, the root "loqu" is not familiar to many college students, but they have been familiarized with the word "dialogue" since junior high school. After learning

the similarity and interchangeability of c-k and g-qu, students can quickly accept that the two roots “log” and “loqu” mean the same thing. Accordingly the meaning of the word “able to express your ideas and opinions well” can be readily comprehended.

3.3.3 The Appearance or Disappearance of Silent Letters

English, as a phonetic writing language, derives some of its spelling rules from pronunciation, so the appearance or disappearance of certain silent letters in spelling can make a simple word difficult and a familiar one unfamiliar. When this rule of word formation in etymology is understood, vocabulary learning becomes more scientific and effective. For instance, the word “align” is far beyond most students’ mental lexicon, but it includes a high-frequency word for English learners, which is “line”, so the word “align” can be understood as a combination of “a” and “line” from the aspect of pronunciation. The meaning of “align”—to arrange things so that they form a line—can be almost self-explanatory. The root “scis” of the word “scissors” (a high-frequency word for college students) turns out to be a total stranger to students when changed into “schis”. If judged from pronunciation, “schism” and “scissors” do not seem as similar as they appear to be. Once the connection is identified, it is difficult for the word “schism” to escape students’ memorization.

4. Conclusion

The discussion in this paper shows the important role of English etymology in building and expanding English mental vocabulary. Etymology not only helps learners gain a deeper understanding of the semantic and cultural context of mental vocabulary, but also improves learning through a variety of practical teaching methods and strategies. Future research can further explore more innovative etymology teaching to meet the needs of different learners and to promote the development of English mental vocabulary education.

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