



Using the Strategy of Etymology to Learn Vocabulary for Engineering Students in Andhra Pradesh

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ESL learners, vocabulary

K. Eliah

Assistant Professor in English, DMS SVH College of Engineering, Machilipatnam

ABSTRACT *The present study focuses on the impact of etymology instruction on vocabulary building and explains meaningful linguistic information and principles to ESL learners. Etymology, the study of word origins, has all the attributes of what educational psychologists term meaningful learning. This is a type of learning connected to prior learning, more highly retainable and generalizable, making it superior to rote learning of vocabulary, which plays an important role in the development of the four skills: speaking, listening, reading and writing. The study concentrates more on how ESL learner gets extensive vocabulary using etymology in the engineering language classroom.*

INTRODUCTION

When contemplating the study of etymology, one can easily conjure up the image of philologists poring assiduously over texts, puzzling out the primitive origins of words. It is observed 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. Using English as a Second Language as springboard, the researchers argue that the study of English etymology, like the study of grammar and phonetics, could be considered an appropriate component in a balanced second-language curriculum.

IMPORTANCE OF LEARNING VOCABULARY

There is no doubt that vocabulary is a crucial component of language proficiency. It provides a base for how well learners speak, listen, read, and write. Without an extensive vocabulary and strategies for acquiring new words, learners often achieve less than their potential and may be discouraged from making use of learning opportunities around them such as listening to the radio, listening to native speakers, reading, or watching television (Richards & Renandya, 2002, p.256). Accurate and adequate vocabulary influences language comprehension more than grammatical correctness in effective communication. For example, Wilkins (1972) makes an assertion that "without grammar very little can be conveyed, without vocabulary nothing can be conveyed" (p.111), which clearly places vocabulary above grammar and highly values vocabulary learning and teaching. According to Nation (1993, as cited in Al-Farsi, 2008), knowledge of around 3,000 word families is the threshold needed for tapping other language skills. Without this threshold, learners encounter problems understanding the language they are exposed to. Vocabulary can play an important part in the development of the four skills: speaking, listening, reading, and writing.

WHAT IS ETYMOLOGY?

One potential vocabulary learning strategy is the use of etymology. Etymology deals with the origin or derivation of words. In etymological approach, roots, suffixes, and prefixes are the basic elements. In this approach, learner learns about Latin and Greek prefixes, roots, and suffixes and figures out unfamiliar English words by recognizing their etymological structure, the building block from which they are constructed. This kind of knowledge enables learner to construct many English words correctly by learning to put the building blocks (e.g., roots and affixes) together in the proper way and to determine the meanings of thousands of English words that have never seen or heard before (Fekri, 2011). This knowledge enables learners to remember new words much longer

than they can remember by just learning unrelated word lists. Etymology knowledge enables learners to both deepen their present word knowledge and to understand unknown words encountered in the future. Etymology approach teaches the students to identify the meanings of word parts, from which the students can then derive the meaning of the word. Since the majority of English words have been created through the combination of morphemic elements, that is, prefixes and suffixes, and word roots, if learners understand how combinatorial process of morphemic elements works, they will have one of the most powerful understandings essential for vocabulary growth. The purpose of the present study is to investigate the effect of etymology instruction on vocabulary learning of Engineering students.

EFFECT OF LATIN AND GREEK ETYMOLOGY

Etymology talks about the original meanings of root words. For instance, the word etymology" comes from the Greek word, *etymon*, which means "true sense." The ending, *ology*, comes from *logos* which means "word" and is used in the sense of "to study". Therefore etymology means the study of the true sense and refers to the original meaning of words. In other words "etymology is the study of the origin of words, history, and change in meaning" (Wikipedia, n.d.). In etymology "common factors" are involved in many words, and they help understanding of words and understanding helps remembering better. Some words consist of building blocks that are fit together. Suffix, prefix, and root of words are fundamental elements which are common to many English words. Suffixes and prefixes cannot stand on their own as words (Davoudi & Yousefi, 2009, p.17). Pierson (1989) claims that etymological training could benefit second language instruction. The teacher and student, by becoming serious amateur etymologists, would find themselves more sensitive to the meaning of words and their relationships with other words from both history and other languages. The knowledge of these word relationships could contribute to what educational psychologists call meaningful learning, a quality of learning which is related to prior leaning, and thus is more likely to be retained and generalized to other learning. According to Pierson, instruction in etymology could offer meaningful linguistic information. This information will be helpful for intermediate and advanced second language learners. Ilson (1983, as cited in Gu, 2003) identified four types of etymological information that can help the learner: (a) etyma and cognates; (b) morphological analysis of lexical units in terms of their constituent structure; (c) morphological analysis of lexical units in terms of processes of word formation; and (d) analysis of lexical units in terms of the cognitive procedures (e.g., metaphor) of their formation and development. Green (1996) asserts that study of Latin or Latin etymology by both native and non-native speakers can be justifi-

fied on three levels: (a) the great amount of Latin in English language, (b) the psycholinguistic process of storing words, and (c) recent research on learning strategies. Bellemo (1999) in his article titled "Etymology and Vocabulary Development for L2 College Students" demonstrates that etymology may be a viable word attack strategy useful for a college level, heterogeneous reading class, irrespective of the student's L1.

ETYMOLOGY AS MEANINGFUL LEARNING

Although etymology stands at the periphery of second-language teacher education programmes, etymological training could benefit second-language instruction. The teacher and student, by becoming serious amateur etymologists, would find themselves more sensitive to the meaning of words and their relationships with other words from both history and other languages. The knowledge of these word relationships could contribute to what educational psychologists call *meaningful learning* (Ausabel, 1968), a quality of learning which is related to prior learning, and thus is more likely to be retained and generalized to other learning. 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 rote learning, which he describes as 'discrete and relatively isolated ... only relatable to cognitive structure in an arbitrary, verbatim fashion' (p.209). Because it can be anchored to 'existing ideational systems in the learner's cognitive structure' (p.209), meaningful learning is less vulnerable than rote learning to forgetting. Meaningful learning takes place when the learner connects new learning to what he or she already knows (Thelen, 1986).

Meaningful learning does not occur capriciously or spontaneously, but rather deliberately under conditions in which the learner is cognitively prepared, and what is to be learned is systematically and rationally organized. For this reason psychologists of learning like Ausabel and Robinson (1969) generally subscribe to three necessary conditions for meaningful learning to take place:

- 1 What is learned can be linked to other areas of learning.
- 2 The learner must have already internalized ideas to which the new learning can be connected; and
- 3 The learner intends to make these connections.

Based on these criteria, etymology could be considered meaningful learning in the language classroom. In a properly structured ESL class in which an etymological approach is implemented, these conditions for meaningful learning can

be met. For example, the phrase *circuitous reasoning* might occur in an ESL class for electrical engineering students. Engineering students would most probably be familiar with the vocabulary item *circuit*, as in *circuit board*. It is a concrete entity which in a laboratory environment might be a well defined physical segment on an electric apparatus, knowledge of which is acquired by sight and touch. Since these students would presumably have internalized this prior sense knowledge, they might, with the aid of a good dictionary, etymologically analyse the word *circuit* into its constituent parts. This would reveal two distinct linguistic components of Latin origin, *circum* from a preposition meaning *around*, and *eo* from the verb meaning to go. Combined, the two segments convey the notion to *go around*. Such etymological information would make the meaning of phrases like *circuitous reasoning* and *racing circuit* recognizable and comprehensible to students. This etymological knowledge of *circuit* is specific linguistic information offering second-language learners, as Beck (1984) aptly says, an anchor to 'possess ownership of words' and the capability to generalize to other words.

STUDENT ETYMOLOGY PROJECTS

Each year my students are required to produce a list of discipline-specific vocabulary items. From these lists they choose twenty words which they examine in depth, using all the available library resources. The analysis consists of discussing the origin of the words, usually going back to Latin or Greek, which students are required to explain in detail, explaining how these word origins are connected to an academic speciality. This is presented in a written report to the teacher and an oral report to the class. This activity is favoured by undergraduates, who, while not being trained in philology, show a willingness to learn more about the history and origins of English words. What is remarkable about this training is that later these same students quite often use etymology to start off written reports or discussions in their own academic speciality by making reference to the origins of a key word and elaborating on it.

CONCLUSION

When undergraduates embark on the study of a particular discipline in engineering, they must absorb a core English vocabulary specific to an academic discipline. For this, it is imperative that they become literate in the jargon, the technical terms, and specialized vocabulary of the field. They must absorb a core English vocabulary specific to an academic discipline. Each day that students progress in a target discipline, they are encountering this core vocabulary which conveys the intellectual flow of discipline.

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