Teaching Multiple Meaning Words

by <u>En Tzu, Lin</u>

Vocabulary learning has never been a simple task for second language learners. In order to gain complete knowledge of a word and its correct use, learners have to know its different aspects, including meanings, collocations, grammatical features, word parts, and register (Schmitt, 2000). Among these aspects, multiple meaning words are especially challenging for second language learners, as noted by Jacobson, Lapp, and Flood (2007) and Zimmerman (2009).

A student of mine once expressed her frustration with multiple meaning words because they made her struggle with understanding texts. One difficult word she encountered was "facility," which confused her a great deal when she tried to supply the definition "something that is built for a specific purpose" to the sentence "She has great facility with words." The student explained how she is easily confused by multiple meaning words and how challenging learning those words can be. Her case is anything but rare; in fact, many second language learners face the same problem. Why are these words particularly puzzling for second language learners? Here are two possible reasons from recent research, some suggestions for teaching multiple meaning words, and a classroom activity.

Multiple Meaning Words: Why They're Difficult

Failure to Recognize Additional Meanings

Because the written form of multiple meaning words remains unchanged when they refer to another meaning, chances are learners do not recognize them in the context. As Zimmerman (2009) mentioned, learners "encounter a word they think they know, and in fact it has a whole new meaning" (p.23). Under these circumstances, learners will simply link the word to the meaning they know without realizing that the word has a different meaning in the text. According to a study by Parent (2012), "for most of the homonyms, the most common meaning accounts for 90% or more of the total use of the form" (p. 69). For example, the percentage for using the word "hide" meaning "to conceal" is 98.6%, while the other meaning, "skin," is used only 1.4% of the time. Consequently, learners do not recognize that the word "hide" has a different meaning in addition to "to conceal" when they hear or read it in the text.

Failure to Acknowledge Context

Another reason words with multiple meanings are challenging is that learners tend to relate the words to the meanings they are familiar with, even though they sense that the meaning somehow does not really fit in the context. Laufer (1997) discussed this tendency in her research and suggested that learners "know one meaning of a polyseme or a homonym and are reluctant to abandon it even when in a particular context its meaning is different" (p.26). This tendency certainly increases the difficulty of understanding the context or the target word itself because the two meanings are so distinct from each other that "they are best considered as different words" (Parent, 2012, p. 69). In order to assist students in overcoming this tendency, teachers should offer explicit instruction about words with multiple meanings to establish the connection between the new meaning and the old. The establishment of new connections does not happen overnight because these new connections are not simply built on the word, but also the preexisting meaning and reference and the newly learned meaning and reference. As teachers,

we should be aware of the struggles learners encounter when they are building new connections in their lexicon and provide them guidance and repeated practice.

How to Teach Words With Multiple Meanings

Here are some ways to assist students in overcoming the challenging task of learning words of multiple meanings.

Offer Explicit Instruction and Increase Awareness

Explicit instruction from the teacher is helpful to learners when they are not aware of the existence of multiple meanings. Instead of leaving learners to discover the new meanings by themselves, Parent (2012) suggests that it is more effective when teachers provide direct instruction with the new meanings. Such instruction can be done by offering the direct definition along with example sentences to learners. The definition will help learners to establish the connection between the word and the new meaning, and the example sentences provide them the opportunities to compare and distinguish the differences between these meanings.

Introducing New Meanings: Context, Pace, and Review

It is more effective to introduce a new meaning of a word when learners encounter one in context because teachers can utilize the information supplied from the context. However, it is important to remember that two new meanings of a word should not be taught simultaneously because it causes confusion (Parent, 2012). Reviewing the word constantly throughout different learning points is also helpful for word retention (Zimmerman, 2009). In addition, teachers can help students increase their consciousness of multiple meaning words by encouraging them to highlight the words that pose confusion within context. By asking learners to reread the sentences, they should notice that the word may have another meaning if the meaning of the text is still ambiguous to them. In addition, when the previously understood meaning of the word makes understanding the text difficult, encourage students to consult the dictionary for the correct meaning. (Jacobson, Lapp, & Flood, 2007).

Activity: Multiple Identities (20 minutes)

The most effective way for learners to learn a word is to actually use it. Zimmerman (2009) suggested that "learners discover meaning through language and observation" (p.24). Therefore, activities can be a powerful tool with learning multiple meaning words.

Goal: Learners will be able to identify different meanings of a word. They will use dictionaries effectively to look up multiple meaning words.

Procedure

- 1. Teacher writes five words from previous classes on the board and has students discuss the most common meanings for them, then writes the meanings on the board. Then teacher picks one of the words and asks students to think about other less common meanings. (5 minutes)
- 2. Learners work in groups with the rest of the words and write down as many meanings as possible without using dictionaries. (5 minutes)
- 3. Learners use dictionaries to look up more meanings. (5 minutes)
- 4. Learners share their findings with the class. (5 minutes)

For follow up practice, learners can use the different meanings they found to make sentences, which can be done as class work or an assignment.

Example:

ſ	Leave	Common meanings: (1) to go away, (2) to not take
		(1) I will leave at noon.
		(2) I left my purse at home.
		Less common meanings: permission to do something
		You can't speak without my leave.

Conclusion

Learning words with multiple meanings is not an easy task because learners often do not recognize them and tend to relate them to the meanings they are familiar with. However, these difficulties can be overcome with instruction and use of dictionaries. Adequate practice provided by teachers is also helpful in learning these words. Teachers should repeat the practice from time to time in order to increase word retention.

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En Tzu, Lin is a graduate student at the TESOL program in California University Fullerton. She was an English teacher for both elementary and adult students in Taiwan for 6 years. Because of her passion for teaching, she came to the United States to pursue her master's degree. In the last 2 years, she participated in SHINE service learning at NOCCCD and completed her practicum at the same site.