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Some Approaches to Teaching Vocabulary Based on Cognitive Linguistics

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Abstract. Vocabulary learning and teaching has been one of the main issues in learning and teaching foreign languages. EFL teachers in Uzbekistan, in particular, are grappling with the effective vocabulary teaching methods. This article discusses three principles based on Cognitive Linguistics (CL), namely the study of categorization, prototype, and metaphor, and implications of these principles in formal vocabulary instruction in the context of English learning.

Key words: Teaching approaches, cognitive linguistics, prototype theory, extensive vocabulary, cognitive approach, metaphor, vocabulary acquisition.

Cognitive linguistics is one important interdisciplinary branch of cognitive science, and is closely related to cognitive psychology and linguistics. It is also an approach to language, which views language as a kind of cognitive action, and studies the formation, the meaning, and the rules of language with cognition as its departure. Cognition is part of mental process, the behavior and ability through which we human being perceive and acquire knowledge. It involves such mental activities as emotion, motivation, and power. In short, cognitive linguistics is an approach that is based on our experience of the world and the way we perceive and conceptualize it, an approach to the analysis of natural language that focuses on language as an instrument for organizing, processing, and conveying information and in the more restricted sense but one type of a cognitive science approach to language, to be distinguished from, for instance, generative grammar and many forms of linguistic research within the field of artificial intelligence. Although cognitive linguistics is a new marginal discipline which has a history of twenty years or so, it does not only broaden our belief about the word 'cognition', but also has striking influence on the study of the process of second and foreign language learning and teaching.

It has long been acknowledged in EFL teaching that vocabulary is essential, in Uzbekistan in particular, to English learning and teaching. It is also stressed by many foreign and local researchers point out that 'Without grammar very little can be conveyed, without vocabulary nothing can be conveyed.' This best saying about the importance of vocabulary learning has been welcomed by teachers and learners for many years. Most learners, also, acknowledge the importance of vocabulary acquisition. However, vocabulary teaching has not always been very responsive to such problems, and teachers have not fully recognized the tremendous communicative advantage in developing an extensive vocabulary. For a long time, teaching

approaches such as Direct Method, which insists that only the target language should be used in class and meanings should be communicated 'directly' by associating speech forms with actions, objects, mime, gestures, and situations. The advent of the communicative approach in the 1970s set the stage for a major re-think of the role of vocabulary. The communicative value of a core vocabulary has always been recognized, particularly by users. And vocabulary that comes into existence on the basis of the basic categories goes to basic level vocabulary. These vocabularies share a most distinctive attribute bundles that help to distinguish them from other vocabularies: less time to recognize, high frequency of use, and the most widely used items in everyday communication. Consequently, in our present teaching of English vocabulary, enough attention and great importance should be given to the acquisition and instruction of basic vocabularies. And we should put vocabulary teaching in a prominent place, because basic lexicon is the basis for teaching other vocabulary categories, and it is only through which can the teaching of others be extended and fulfilled. This is a cut-way we learn English, and also an important principle for modern language teaching. However, if we focus on basic level vocabularies, not only can we remember more effectively and more efficiently, but also can save more time to spend on some other learning activities. Linguistic categorization is the major focus of CL, because Cognitive linguistics is not a single theory of language, but rather a cluster of theoretically and methodologically compatible approaches. The general research strategy of cognitive linguistics, in fact, is characterized by two major features. First, the study of categorization processes in the lexicon is taken as a methodological point of departure for the study of categorization processes in the grammar at large. If linguistic categorization is the major focus of cognitive linguistics, then studying the lexicon first is a plausible step to take: the categorizing function of the lexicon has received much attention in the linguistics, as lexicon is conceived of as an inventory of meaningful units.

In teaching English vocabulary, the teacher should try to make her /his students aware that the meaning of a word is not fixed and unchanged, but that using human cognitive imagination, we can have some more correlated categories based on the prototypical meaning. Accordingly, core words are devised. And they are likely to be more useful than non-core words. Core words are typically those words used when defining other words. In doing so, students can benefit a lot. It can save them from memorizing each meaning listed in the dictionary blindly. Instead, they are encouraged to learn vocabulary in a more scientific way by making full use of prototypical sense of the given semantic meaning.

Metaphor and vocabulary teaching and learning Metaphor is not just a figure of speech, but a way we perceive the world. "Language is essentially metaphoric", because metaphor is widely used in our daily life, lives in our language, and above all, is in our thoughts and behavior. As Johnson and Lakoff note, the conceptual system that our thought and behavior rely on is metaphoric in nature. In the same sense, metaphor is an important way of language change and development. We can feel metaphor everywhere, at any time, since it is a way of thinking. So it will be a good try to teach English vocabulary by making use of metaphors. They are powerful cognitive tools for our conceptualization of abstract vocabulary categories. The most important feature of metaphor is that its relatedness between things and categories. For example, the word 'leg' can be used to refer to legs of human beings, legs of a chair, a bed, a table, and so on, which basically means 'the support of things'. In brief, the research findings of metaphor based on man's cognition can provide some motivations for our accounting for semantic change and development. Therefore, we should not only lay emphasis on basic vocabulary and interpret polysemy by means of metaphor but also pay special attention to the diversity and similarity of cultures and ideology. In vocabulary teaching and learning, we should try every possible means to develop metaphorical

awareness, make full use of the cognitive function of metaphor and reveal the metaphorical relationship between word meanings.

As a conclusion we can state that although most of the issues of cognitive linguistics addressed are not altogether new and most of what cognitive linguistics offers seem to be the essential questions that linguistics and people interested in language have always been asking, we still believe that it is a promising new perspective on vocabulary teaching and learning. In addition, the traditional methods of vocabulary teaching do and will still play an important part in teaching, but if we make an active use of this new perspective of vocabulary teaching, our efforts will be expectedly fruitful. Vocabulary teaching and learning is a cycle of semantization and internalization, which is closely linked to and to a large extent dependent on the way a word is presented. To reduce students' learning load and make sure that the students can enlarge vocabulary quickly and efficiently, a cognitive approach that is based on prototypes, family resemblance, or basic level categories is a worthwhile attempt for us to try out in all levels of English learning for EFL learners.

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