Exploring the Teaching of English Vocabulary in Junior High School based on the Prototype Category Theory

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Abstract: Vocabulary is a fundamental component of the language system and symbol system, and plays an important role in exploring the nature of language.Nonetheless, numerous studies have revealed that many Chinese students lack efficient vocabulary learning strategies, and many educators continue to teach vocabulary using conventional approaches that ignore the cognition of vocabulary learning.The Prototype Category Theory, the basis of cognitive linguistics, offers a new viewpoint for junior high school English vocabulary learning and teaching.

Keywords: Category theory; Basic-level vocabulary; Junior high school English

Introduction

As an important part of the English teaching system, learning vocabulary is a basic part of systematic mastery of English knowledge. Effective vocabulary teaching is not only conducive to students' systematic mastery of English knowledge, but also to the formation of students' comprehensive English application skills. The teaching of English vocabulary in China has made remarkable progress over the years, yet some problems still undeniably exist. Cognitive linguistics focuses on the special relationship between human cognitive level and metaphorical vocabulary acquisition. In this paper, we analyze the current problems of English vocabulary teaching in junior high schools and discuss its implications for English vocabulary teaching by combining, prototype category theory.

1. Theoretical Basis

1.1 Prototype Category Theory

As a branch of linguistics, cognitive linguistics starts from the interactive experience and cognitive processing of cognitive subjects and takes the real individuals in social life as the reference frame. Cognitive linguistics clearly points out that language is not a system independent of society, but is the result of the comprehensive effect of objective reality, human psychological function, social ideology and other factors.Therefore, language interpretation must refer to the general way of human cognition.The most fundamental concept in cognitive linguistics is category.The modern Prototype category theory evolved from the traditional Objectivism category.Rosch proposed it in the 1970s based on Wittgenstein's concept of family resemblance and Berlin and Kay's concept of focal color.According to Wittgenstein, although members of a category do not always share the same traits, they do have certain commonalities.Berlin and Kay believes that although people use different languages, they have the same understanding of basic colors.Psychologist E. Rosch developed their points of view; she firstly came up with the concept of "prototype", which is a great revolution of classical theory.Essentially, a prototype serves as a categorization process reference point. Prototype is the center member, which occupies a unique position within the category, and is the most typical and representative member.The attributes of different members in the same category are not exactly the same.The closer to the center, the more common attributes the members have.In Short, prototype is semantic in relation to other meanings.Therefore, prototype theory provides a new perspective for English learning, especially for vocabulary teaching and learning.

1.2 Vocabulary and Vocabulary Teaching

Vocabulary is the smallest linguistic unit capable of independently expressing meaning.The foundation of mastering English knowledge is the instruction of vocabulary, which is a significant component of the English educational system. Effective vocabulary instruction benefits students' methodical acquisition of English knowledge as well as the development of their comprehensive proficiency in the language.Without an adequate vocabulary base, students will have a tough time succeeding in learning a second language.The value of language teaching has drawn a lot of attention since the 1970s.The statement "Without grammar, the meaning of sentences cannot be adequately articulated; but without words, nothing can be expressed, " was made by D. A. Wilkins in 1972.According to Wilkins, learning English should be primarily focused on vocabulary. He also makes the point that when teaching a language, teachers should pay close attention to linguistic semantics. In essence, his hypothesis provided the framework for further research on vocabulary.After that, Teaching and Learning Vocabulary was released in 1990 by I. S. Karen Nation.Language theory, experimental research, and classroom vocabulary teaching scenarios make up the bulk of the book.According to Elfrieda, vocabulary is the understanding of word meanings. It implies that vocabulary is the understanding of word meaning.Vocabulary is more intricate than this description would seem, though.Receptive and productive word knowledge are both types of word knowledge.Words that we hear or read are included in our receptive vocabulary.Words we use when we speak and write are part of a productive vocabulary.The majority of Chinese students have excellent reading abilities, but they struggle to use them in communicative speaking, which is a sign of insufficient language integration abilities.

2. Current situation of vocabulary learning and vocabulary teaching

English has risen to prominence as a foreign language in Chinese.Most Chinese teenagers begin learning English at the elementary school level.The most recent English curriculum guidelines state that students must grasp 2000 words as well as 200–300 common terms or set collocations.The teaching of vocabulary in English is fundamental. Although Chinese teachers have acknowledged the significance of vocabulary, the results of teaching vocabulary have not been satisfactory.Between the aim of curriculum requirements and the real condition of vocabulary teaching, there is a gap.A common complaint among students is that there are too many words to learn and retain, and that it is difficult to comprehend and apply them in new contexts.

Research and studies show that students rely on textbooks to learn vocabulary and have few extracurricular activities to output vocabulary, and that language acquisition strategies are neglected.Additionally, they were uninformed of additional vocabulary-learning strategies like in-depth reading or semantic association.On the other hand, certain teachers teach vocabulary only at the level of pronunciation and meaning.They focus only on teaching phonology, grammar and sentence structure. Additionally, some teachers don't place a high priority on helping their students memorize words, and they don't provide them useful advice on how to accomplish it.This leads to time-consuming, ineffective, and fragmentary learning.In the long run, students will have an aversion to learning words, which will affect the input of language.Wallace's research suggests that in order to learn English effectively, students must not only be familiar with the vocabulary but also understand how to read, write, and utilize it appropriately.

According to the description above, the absence of cognitive theory is the fundamental cause of the ineffectiveness of vocabulary acquisition.Hence, English teachers in China should concentrate on the scientific orientation of their students' vocabulary growth and expand the use of prototype theory in their instruction of English vocabulary.

3. The application of Prototype Category theory in vocabulary teaching

3.1 Attach importance to the teaching of basic category words

In junior high school English vocabulary teaching, high-frequency vocabulary is generally selected as the vocabulary range that students must master. Although students will make great progress in reading English texts after learning a certain amount of high-frequency vocabulary, this practice lacks foresight. With the rise of students' grades, the requirements for English vocabulary are gradually increasing.When students encounter some long or difficult words, their enthusiasm for learning English will gradually drop. Because students do not master effective vocabulary learning methods, complex tasks will bring them a burden. Even if students remember the words in a short time, they may forget them later. Learning basic category vo-

cabulary and cultivating students' categorization ability will help students expand their vocabulary, eliminate the fossilization phenomenon in vocabulary learning.The research shows that learners can understand 80.5% of a standard text if they have mastered 1, 000 commonly used words, and about 93% if they have mastered 3, 000 commonly used words.Hence, in English vocabulary teaching, educators should pay more attention to students' understanding and application of basic vocabulary, rather than blindly pursuing the accumulation of vocabulary.Basic category words have fewer syllables and simple forms.These words are the most commonly used and have the strongest word-forming ability, and can produce many derivative words or phrases.

For instance, if students can learn the word "inspire", they can learn the derived words based on it: inspiring, inspiration, inspired.In addition, some compound words in English are formed on the basis of prototype words. For example, press belongs to the basic category vocabulary. Adding the corresponding prefix and suffix on the basis of the word will produce the corresponding other word forms, such as press, compress and suppress.After students understand the basic root meaning of compound words, they can easily infer the meaning of compound words, and their vocabulary learning will become simple and effective. Therefore, teachers should pay attention to guiding students to learn the basic category vocabulary and word interpretation, so that students can establish a vocabulary category centered on the basic category vocabulary, and constantly expand the category to achieve efficient vocabulary learning.

3.2 Use categories to expand vocabulary

In vocabulary teaching, teachers can summarize vocabulary into various categories to form a semantic web, so that students can better understand vocabulary. In this process, the content stored in the students' brains is no longer isolated English words, but a group of words or a group of vocabulary knowledge with certain internal relations.This coincides with the semantic field theory proposed by the German scholar T. Trier.For example, under the control of the keyword "animal", a semantic field can be formed by tigers, pandas, monkeys, elephants, etc.From the perspective of the topic of words, teachers can summarize different types of words and find out the closely connected words.his method can help students quickly remember words, and also deepen students' short-term memory of words through classification.For example, teachers can summarize the same kind of words for students.For example, words about job include teacher, engineer, postman, waiter, doctor.Through this way, students can deepen their impression and improve their ability to use words.The classification of words can be applied not only to these nouns, but also to verbs. For example, beam, grin, giggle, chuckle, laugh all have the meaning of smile so teachers can group these similar verb words together.

3.3 Strengthen the teaching of metaphor

According to cognitive linguistics, the relationship between various meanings of polysemous words is not arbitrary, but developed through a specific semantic extension mechanism. Generally speaking, these extended mechanisms include metaphor and metonymy.The understanding of metaphor involves two cognitive domains: source domain and target domain. Metaphor is to understand the experience of another cognitive domain by the experience of one cognitive domain.The study of cognitive linguistics shows that as a universal way of thinking, metaphorical cognition provides a theoretical basis for the emergence of polysemy. The production of polysemy originates from the metaphorical expression of words in essence.People first recognize the perceptible, intuitive and concrete things, and then associate the known things with some newly recognized, concrete or abstract concepts through association, and then find their relevant points, thus creating a mapping between the two cognitive domains, thus creating a new meaning. In junior high school English vocabulary teaching, polysemy is the focus and difficulty of teaching. Many words have expanded into several or more meanings around their core meaning, which is difficult to remember. Metaphor combines multiple meanings of words and establishes a clear semantic chain; While mastering the basic meaning of these words, students can easily grasp other meanings of words through semantic chain. Thus, cultivating metaphorical thinking can optimize vocabulary teaching and stimulate students' creative thinking in language.In classroom vocabulary teaching, teachers can help students intuitively understand metaphor and idiom expression by analyzing the semantic chain of words. For instance, the word "head" not only has a surface meaning of "part of the body, "but it has developed a deeper meaning through metaphor, including chief and leader.In the process of teaching vocabulary, teachers can explain the development of word meaning, and guide students to understand the similarity between the two items, for example, the head is the most important part at the top of a person's body, and the leader is also the most leading and important part of a group, the

two senses of"head"are not isolated from each other, but are related to each other cognitively.

4. Conclusion

Traditional vocabulary teaching usually directly presents words and corresponding Chinese meanings, explains some example sentences and fixed collocations, and ignores the internal logic of vocabulary and students' cognitive rules. In the face of various English tests, it is difficult for students to fully master vocabulary.Prototype category theory changes the mechanical way students learn vocabulary and trains students to understand English from internal logic and cognition. The application of prototype category theory in English vocabulary teaching can guide students from passive and mechanical learning to active and meaningful learning, and enhance students' ability to expand vocabulary semantic network. In a word, prototype category theory has important guiding significance for junior high school English teachers.

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