

Use of the Thesaurus in the Creative Writing Classroom

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Abstract: It was my aim to establish that students often make mistakes in the appropriate use of words which have similar meanings because they have picked up these words from the thesaurus and not by reading them in context. Studies have shown that a learner can acquire the skills of appropriate use by practicing them in context and only if he reads enough will he learn the proper use of words. Student response to my questions showed that 40% of students are not in a habit of reading books other than their text books regularly. Based on that, the opinions of their teachers, and my own observations as a teacher I came to the conclusion that many students make such errors because they are not in a habit of reading.

Introduction

Students of English medium schools in our country learn English as their L1 in school with all the subjects being studied in English, and they learn their L1 as L2 in school. However, they hardly have any scope to use English outside the school unless they are bilingual at home. In a situation where most students come from a background where there is very little, or more often than not, no English at home, students face problems, not in the fundamentals of the English language but in the use of appropriate words in their creative writing.

In school, students are introduced to the thesaurus in class IV, to the dictionary even earlier. They learn vocabulary not only in the language class but also in the literature class. It is when they start using the thesaurus that they start acquiring synonyms, and not all of these new words are those they have ever read in context. They may not necessarily open the thesaurus in the creative writing class but they do try to use the words that they have acquired from it, in another class perhaps. It is my contention that because these students learn the words outside a contextual base, they are at times quite lost as to the correct or appropriate use of these words in context.

To illustrate my point I have mentioned some of the mistakes made by my students:

A student wrote 'credit cards can easily be *exploited*' instead of *misused*.

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Where a student meant a 'persistent disadvantage' he wrote a '*tenacious disadvantage*'.

In another work, a student meant to write he was '*prevented from*' doing something but instead wrote he was '*averted from*' doing something.

If a student looks up only the thesaurus he is not going to find any guidelines on how to use the synonyms, and so he has no way of knowing that he cannot use 'from' after 'avert' and the use of 'avert' and 'prevent' are rather different. Nor would the student know that 'exploited' and 'misused' are not exactly the same and that 'dislike' and 'despise' have different connotations.

We need to look into these kinds of errors to see why students who otherwise write quite good and correct English make such mistakes and we need to address this problem.

Literature Review

The methods used in teaching English as a L2 necessarily differs from the methodology used in English medium schools to teach language because students here do not learn English as their L2 but L1. One method of vocabulary teaching in the L2 classroom starts with giving students a list of words that are used in everyday conversation. This is also used to teach high frequency words to junior level students in English medium schools. A study of students learning English as their L2, to check their knowledge of vocabulary after they had learnt a given number of words showed that even though a learner could form a sentence with infrequently used words, he was not ready to do so unless asked to. It was found that even if students/learners gain a considerable knowledge of vocabulary, it is highly unlikely they will put this knowledge to productive use. So, when the focus is on the use of words in writing tasks a great amount of teaching is required to put that knowledge of words to use.

Ozmen's (2006) study revealed that most of the student errors were of wrong usage. The same could just as well apply to my students even if the vocabulary is different because in both cases words are learnt outside context. Here again, the knowledge of words does not ensure correct use or for that matter any productive use because there is an absence of content-based instruction. Krashen (1984) believes that a learner does not acquire a second language by merely memorizing vocabulary and doing grammar exercises. L2 acquisition takes place through 'comprehensible input' (cited in Celce-Murcia, 2001, 304). "Extensive reading, the practice of reading large amounts of text for extended periods of time, should be a central component of any course with a goal of building academic reading abilities" (Grabe & Stoller, 2001, in Celce-Murcia, 198). It is only natural that an improved understanding of the language will automatically lead to a greater understanding of the different nuances of words and expressions.

Decarrico (2001) in Celce-Murcia (2001) speaks of two kinds of vocabulary learning: explicit learning and implicit learning. Explicit learning refers to vocabulary learning where teachers focus on activities involving vocabulary that is deemed necessary for their learners. But even in explicit learning, the importance of context cannot be overlooked. As Decarrico (2001 cited in Celce-Murcia, 2001, p.288) says, "New words should not be presented in isolation." She further states that "It is important that new vocabulary items be presented in contexts rich enough to provide clues to meaning..." Implicit learning takes place on a sub-conscious level through repeated exposure to the language. Vocabulary studies show that a majority of the words that we learn is learnt incidentally.

Bright and McGregor (1987) identify the need for foreign students to learn to distinguish between different collocations of words. The different nuances of words are after all determined by the other words in the context. Among the different objections to direct vocabulary teaching, they mention that students must not focus only on learning the facts about words but also on acquiring the skills of appropriate use and that can be practiced only in context. They further say that vocabulary lessons by themselves can be quite unnecessary if students have access to the right reading material. No mention is made of the use of thesaurus by them but they underline the fact that beyond the basic knowledge of words that a learner acquires for functional purposes it becomes difficult to know what item he needs to learn. Hence it is obvious from this that appropriacy is not something that can be memorized.

Cross-cultural difficulties and the lack of background knowledge further contribute to confuse the language learners. A form of mistake made by students is one that stems from the influence of their L1. Bahns (1993) reporting on a contrastive study of collocations said that, "learners seem to rely on a 'hypothesis of transferability', whereby the majority of collocational errors found in learner English can be traced to L1 influence" (cited in Celce-Murcia, 2001, p. 293). L1 can have a different kind of influence as well where a direct translation of a figure of speech in the L1 can lead to an incorrect expression in English. Hence, one of my students wrote in reference to not knowing what fate held for him, "I don't know what's written on my forehead."

Another important component of the meaning of a certain word is "its connotation: the association, or positive or negative feelings it evokes, which may or may not be indicated in a dictionary definition" (Ur, 2003, p.61). Ur (2003) gives the example of the word 'dog' which has positive associations for the British but entirely negative connotations for Arabs.

L2 students are usually taught words for communicative purposes while my students learn them to write better compositions; the objectives may be different but the principles working behind appropriate use remains the same. So, for

whatever purpose one may be learning vocabulary the argument remains the same that the best way to do this is by reading extensively. But reading alone is not the answer. Studies have shown that unless a learner reads a very large amount so that there is sufficient repetition of the words in context he is not going to learn them. So as Urquhart and Weir (1998, p.195) say, "Extensive reading may not be the panacea for vocabulary acquisition that it is often thought to be. For acquiring vocabulary we have to rely also on instruction in intensive mode." Decarrico (2001) says the same thing that, "Just as having multiple exposures to a word is important in explicit learning so is it important for incidental learning." The best way for teachers to do it is to expose their students to what is referred to as 'book flood' where students are made to do extensive reading over a particular span of time.

One of the assumptions made by Richards (1985) regarding vocabulary is that knowing a word means knowing its semantic value. One dimension of such semantic values is seen in words like 'famous'. Churchill can be called famous but not Hitler. Another assumption made by him is that knowing a word means knowing all the different meanings associated with that word. Teaching vocabulary entails showing a learner how in a particular context a word can acquire emotional connotations. It is classroom discussions of different words, which allow learners to learn words in relation to other words and in context.

Methodology

Research Questions

I hoped to find answers to the following questions:

- Do students depend solely on the dictionary and thesaurus for a varied use of vocabulary in their creative work?
- Why do students sometimes pick out an inappropriate synonym for a word even if in theory they know that there can be, in most cases, no appropriate synonym for a given word?

Data Collection

I collected my data by giving out a questionnaire to students of grades 8 and 9. These students were between 14 and 15 years of age and their medium of education was English. I asked them simple multiple-choice questions. I wanted to find out what their reading habits were and how much use of the thesaurus they made in the creative writing class. I also asked two of their language teachers a few questions to find out whether they encouraged the students to use the thesaurus or not, and whether they gave any additional instruction to them regarding the new words students used.

Data

The first four questions in the questionnaire (Appendix one) were designed to find out the answer to the first research question and at the same time reveal whether students were in a habit of reading books other than their textbooks. The last two questions aimed at finding out what the teacher's role was in vocabulary acquisition by students with the help of a thesaurus. The role of the teachers and the kind of help sought by the students in matters of vocabulary were also shown by the responses made by the teachers (Appendix two).

Findings

Of the 42 students to whom I gave the questionnaire, 32 of them said that they sometimes used the thesaurus to look for alternative words for known words, three of them said that they often used it and seven of them said they never used it. Only 24 students said that they read story books regularly, 17 of them said that they sometimes read story books while one student admitted to never reading anything outside the textbooks. 34 students said that they tried to recall reading a word in a text before using it while eight of them said they did not. All the students said that they knew that all the synonyms shown for a given word in a thesaurus may not be used in the same context.

To the question whether their teachers encouraged them to use the thesaurus 30 students said yes while 12 of them thought they did not. 35 students said that they sometimes asked their teachers whether using a particular word would be appropriate or not, two of them said they always did that while five of them admitted that they never asked their teachers for help in this matter.

Both teachers said that they encouraged students to use the thesaurus in the creative writing class, that students often make errors in the use of appropriate words, and the students also often ask them whether or not a particular synonym of a given word would be appropriate in a certain context.

It was seen that out of 24 students who were in a habit of reading story books regularly 20 of them said that they tried to recall the use of that word in context, and out of 17 who read story books only sometimes 14 tried to do the same. This is an encouraging data that even among those students who did not read books outside their school textbooks regularly, a majority of them felt the need to recall the proper use of a word in its context before using it. Among those who read regularly or only sometimes, seven of them did not think it important to think about the appropriate use of a word before using it or recall the use of the word in any reading material that they may have read before.

Discussion

My research was conducted with the aim to prove that for language students, reading is an integral part of learning the correct and appropriate use of words with similar meanings. We can see from the findings of my study that students

who were not avid readers were also those who did not think before using a synonym. This was so because they failed to grasp that words with seemingly similar meanings can have different connotations even though theoretically they knew that all synonyms of a given word cannot be used in the same context. Moreover about half of the students who claimed that they sometimes read story books confessed when asked in detail about their reading habits that they actually read far less than they were wont to admit.

Of course my data did not establish whether the students who did not read extensively were the ones who made the kind of mistakes I mentioned earlier. But any language teacher can tell just by reading a student's work whether the student has a habit of reading or not. I have drawn my conclusions not only from my own observations but also from the opinions of two other language teachers that usually students who do not read enough are the ones who use words inappropriately in their creative writing. Our students did not face problems with frequently used words that they are required to speak fluently but when asked to use a varied vocabulary to improve the quality of their written composition they faced difficulties.

Another fact that became clear from my data is that out of those students who read extensively and tried to recall the use of a particular word in its context, only two students felt the need to ask their teacher for verification every time they used a new word. Most of the students said they sometimes asked their teachers for guidance regarding the use of a word. Their teachers also corroborated that students 'sometimes' asked them whether using a certain word would be appropriate in a certain context. This in itself is an indication as to why mistakes concerning the incorrect use of words continue to plague the students so much. Only a handful of students read so much as to have repeated exposures to new words and they were the ones who could afford to write or use those words confidently without asking their teacher. Those who read, but not enough, needed help before they could actually use new words. This brings us to the very important point of the role of the teacher in the teaching of vocabulary. While the importance of reading extensively cannot be minimized, it is also important for the teacher to guide the students regarding the proper use of the words students acquire through reading.

Conclusion

Bright and McGregor (1987) contend that the reason behind the learners' inability to associate certain words with particular situations is their lack of background knowledge and this knowledge can be gained only through reading. About 40.48% students whom I studied were in a habit of reading only 'sometimes'. As they did not have enough exposure to the language in any other form it became necessary for them to overcome their difficulties by reading as

much as possible. Apart from impressing upon them the importance of reading widely it is also the language teachers' responsibility to see to it that when a student uses a thesaurus in the class, the word chosen by him is explained to him in detail so that its use, collocation and connotations become clear to him. Just asking a learner to use the thesaurus is apparently not enough.

My findings indicated that teachers did explain the appropriacy of words to students but it was not clear whether students retained the knowledge because unless there was follow up reading done by them where they came across the words in a similar context, it is quite likely they did not retain it. Therefore, just as reading alone cannot help learners to acquire a correct knowledge of vocabulary, instruction, too, by itself will not help in acquisition. Vocabulary acquisition in the proper sense will only be possible when reading and instruction are productively combined.

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Appendix 1**Student Questionnaire**

- 1) While writing a composition or an essay, do you use the thesaurus to look up alternative words for known words?
Often _____ Never _____ Sometimes _____
- 2) Do you read English story books and magazines?
Regularly _____ Never _____ Sometimes _____
- 3) When using a synonym for the first time, do you try to recall ever reading that word in a text?
Yes _____ No _____
- 4) Do you know that all the synonyms for a given word in the thesaurus may not be used in the same context?
Yes _____ No _____
- 5) Do your teachers encourage you to use the thesaurus in the class?
Yes _____ No _____
- 6) When substituting a new word for a known word do you ask your teacher whether the use is appropriate?
Sometimes _____ Always _____ Never _____

Appendix 2**Teacher Questionnaire**

- 1) Do you encourage your students to use the thesaurus in the creative writing class?
Yes _____ No _____ Sometimes _____ Often _____
- 2) Do you find students using synonyms inappropriately in the creative writing class?
Yes _____ No _____ Sometimes _____ Often _____
- 3) Do children ask you whether a particular synonym is appropriate before using it?
Yes _____ No _____ Sometimes _____ Often _____