

THE LEXICAL FIELD, A KEY TO SEMANTICS

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RESUMEN

El presente artículo tiene como objetivo describir una actividad realizada por los alumnos del Curso de Especialización en Lengua Extranjera (Inglés), correspondiente a la disciplina Semántica del Inglés. En ella, no sólo se practican conocimientos específicos de esta materia, sino que se incorporan otros relacionados con otros campos lingüísticos, al tiempo que adiestra a los alumnos en el uso de técnicas y estrategias de estudio y consulta. Esta actividad, dada la especificidad del curso y de los alumnos a los que iba dirigida –maestros en ejercicio–, se ha diseñado además dotándola de claras implicaciones didácticas. Éste es, desde nuestro punto de vista, su aspecto más relevante.

PALABRAS CLAVE

Semántica, campos léxicos, didáctica, estrategias de estudio.

ABSTRACT

The aim of this paper is describing an activity designed for the students attending a “Curso de Especialización en Lengua Extranjera” for Primary School Teachers of other specialities. It was part of the practical work done in semantics. On doing it our students not only practised theoretical aspects of this subject, but had to use their knowledge in other linguistics fields. It also aimed at developing certain study techniques and strategies, basically the correct use of dictionaries and grammar reference books. Taking into account the course and the students it was to be used with –inservice teachers–, it was designed with clear methodological implications. This is, from our point of view, its main asset.

KEY WORDS

Semantics, lexical fields, methodology, study strategies.

RÉSUMÉ

Le présent article a comme but de décrire une activité faite par les élèves du Cours de Spécialisation en Langue Etrangère (Anglais), correspondant à la matière Sémantique de l'Anglais. On n'y pratique pas que des connaissances spécifiques de cette matière, mais on y incorpore d'autres en rapport avec d'autres champs linguistiques. En même temps qu'on entraîne les élèves dans l'emploi de techniques et stratégies d'étude et de consultation. Cette activité, étant donné la spécificité de l'année et des élèves auxquels elle s'adresse –des instituteurs en pratiques– a été dessinée en plus, en la dotant d'implications didactiques évidentes. Celui-ci est, à notre avis, son aspect le plus relevant.

MOTS-CLÉ

Sémantique, champ lexical, didactique, stratégies d'étude.

INTRODUCTION

Morphosyntax and semantics are included, as compulsory subjects, in the syllabus designed by University Authorities for the degree in Foreign Language (English) for Primary School Teachers. The brief description of the contents of semantics is just: "Semantics. Vocabulary". Traditionally, most studies of semantics deal with theoretical aspects, and the main aim of the research made on this field has been answering the question: "What is 'meaning'?" A question that has been debated and answered in many different ways, each of them depending on the linguistic trend of the moment: semasiology, diachronic semantics, structural semantics, generative semantics, lexical semantics, sentence semantics, pragmatics semantics... but that no one has come up with a satisfactory answer yet.

During the school year 1998-1999, we had to teach this subject in an in-service course on TEFL. 40 teaching hours were assigned to it. Our main concern was to combine theory and practice, by assigning our students practical tasks that required a good knowledge of the theory to be completed successfully. We thought this way we could contribute basically to enlarge and enrich the knowledge, specially lexical, of our students and thus provide them with a better command of the English language. We designed different activities which implied using

knowledge acquired from other linguistics and methodological fields included in the course –Phonetics, Morphosyntax and Methodology– and which contributed to the development of basic techniques and strategies that helped the student achieve autonomy in their future learning process.

Among the different activities done during this course, the elaboration of semantic fields was considered, both by our students and ourselves, the most interesting and effective. It was particularly productive due to the methodological insights its elaboration offered, and the possibility of being used by them when teaching vocabulary to their own students.

We intended to show them a process which involved gathering information from different kinds of sources, classifying words and interpreting meanings, and which we thought could be useful for them when planning their future lessons, and specially when having to adapt content to their students' levels of proficiency.

ELABORATION OF LEXICAL FIELDS

Nowadays it's commonly accepted that grouping vocabulary into lexical fields makes its learning easier, since it definitely helps to recover stored words, and consequently, it enriches the learner's lexical competence and accurate use of words and concepts in any foreign language.

On the other hand, from a semantic point of view, the meaning of a word is clarified when it is analyzed within the lexical fields to which the different lexical entries of that word belong.

In this sense, the lexical field seemed a suitable start for a subsequent study and analysis of each word within it, as it is the relationship between all the words of the whole field what shows the distinctive features of them and lets us determine the identity and the exact meaning of each word.

The first step was therefore choosing a lexical field and selecting 10 or 15 words belonging to it. The second step was classifying those words according to their frequency of use, and analysing the items included in the group formed by the most frequently used terms (See Chart 1).

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1. Choosing the lexical field.

 2. Selection and classification of each word in the field.

 3. Analysis of selected words.
 - 3.1. Spelling.
 - 3.2. Pronunciation.
 - 3.3. Morphosyntactic information.
 - 3.4. Context.
 - 3.5. Meaning.
 - 3.6. Semantic analysis.
 - 3.7. Word associations and combinations.
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Chart 1

We will describe and comment those aspects we considered more relevant, grouping them according to the objectives we pursued when we designed this activity.

1. Integration and use of knowledge from other linguistic and methodological fields of the course.
2. Specific practice of the semantic theory.
3. Development of study techniques and strategies.
4. Methodological implications.

1. INTEGRATION AND USE OF KNOWLEDGE FROM OTHER LINGUISTIC AND METHODOLOGICAL FIELDS OF THE COURSE

We consciously included sections 3.1, 3.2, and 3.3. for the achievement of this specific objective. We also tried to help our students develop the ability to use books and printed material –mainly dictionaries and grammar reference books– in an intelligent and efficient way, so that, in that way, they would become familiar with the facilities that are available to them. It also aimed to teach and practise some of the skills which might enable them to use those facilities to the best advantage. Although it might seem difficult to believe, it is a common fact known by most teachers that very few students of English can use a dictionary adequately. As a general rule, they only read the information offered at the beginning of each lexical entry, ignoring the rest. And the same happens with grammar reference books, which are rarely consulted by the students.

For these sections, we asked the students to pay special attention and collect the following information:

1. Spelling:

1.1. Alternative geographical spelling (American-British: *centre/center*).

1.2. Morphological changes in the spelling:

1.2.1. Noun-verb differences (*practice/practise*).

1.2.2. Double final consonants (*run-runnig*).

2. Phonemics:

2.1. Basic British transcription.

2.2. Alternative geographical pronunciations.

2.3. Morphological variants affecting pronunciation.

2.4. Pronunciation of derivates, compounds and idioms.

When analysing phonemic variants we asked them to transcribe each of the alternatives separately, showing in each case if they were old-fashioned or present-day forms¹. In this sense, we recommended them to choose as basic pronunciation the most frequent and current ones, for example /'kitʃən/ rather than /'kitʃin/.

For geographical variants we opted for R.P. versions.

3. Morphosyntax and context:

Dealing with morphological information not only implied the development of strategies for the correct use of reference books, it was also an indispensable means for the subsequent analysis of meaning, since it is a known fact that the grammatical structure and morphology of sentences are relevant to the determination of the meaning of each word. Consequently, to complete this section, we asked them to gather all the information that might be useful for a correct use of each word. First of all, they had to classify each entry depending on their word-class, the part of the speech they belong. Once they had established it, in the case of nouns, to give an example, they had to indicate whether they were countable or uncountable, concrete or abstract, etc. In the case of verbs, if they were transitive or intransitive, their grammatical pattern, the particular preposition, if any, used after them, etcetera.

¹ See Bibliography.

2. SEMANTICS THEORY

Sections 3.5 and 3.6 were the core of the task and they provided our students with the basic practice in the subject. They also contributed to the development of study and reference strategies. Thus, the first step was to select several definitions for each word (using monolingual dictionaries) and write a new one which comprised, in a clear and accurate way, all the information collected. Dealing with the meaning of words was an important practice to develop our students' level of abstraction and to make them use specific theoretical knowledge of the subject. They were also asked, when relevant, to include information that might affect the use of each word: register, possible connotations etc. Then, they had to divide each sememe in its constituent semes and isolate and mark the seme or distinctive semes of each word, which would enable them to discover the real identity and particularity of them. Once they had acquired full knowledge about the words they had been working with, they were asked to associate and combine them with other ones, such as synonyms, related vocabulary, collocations, etc. This seemed to be the hardest work, but it was also the most rewarding. In fact, it was when these sections were completed that they began to understand and find sense in all the theoretical content explained to them at the beginning of the course.

3. DEVELOPMENT OF STUDY TECHNIQUES AND STRATEGIES

The development of these techniques and strategies was one of the guidelines of this task, being this objective one of our main concerns when we designed the activity. Actually, we think this is one of the weakest aspects of present-day education, although it is crucial and invaluable for the training of future teachers, since it makes them not only efficient and resourceful learners, but also enables them to be self-dependent and stand on their own feet once they abandon the University classrooms.

As we have pointed out above, this aim would be achieved while our students gathered the information needed for the multiple analysis of each word.

4. METHODOLOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

The methodological implications of any work done by a future teacher seemed to us, as we have repeatedly stated, a necessary

requirement. In this sense, two aspects were particularly relevant: the development of our students' capacity for making decisions and the future use of the materials resulting from the completion of the tasks. The first would be achieved when choosing a lexical field and classifying all the words selected. The second would be the final result of the work done.

CHOOSING THE LEXICAL FIELD

This was a decision that was closely related to their future teaching. Therefore, they were expected to keep in mind and take into account their future students' characteristics (age, etc) and possible interests and preferences. They also had to consider the usefulness of the words chosen for their inclusion in the vocabulary to be taught at elementary levels.

SELECTION AND CLASSIFICATION OF EACH WORD FROM THE FIELD

When selecting words for each field, they would need first to consult primary school textbooks. This would allow them, from the beginning, to classify them according both to the educational levels and use of those words. Once they had chosen all the words, the field should be divided into three subgroups. The first would include vocabulary found in textbooks from 1st to 4th grades of primary school, and it would constitute the basic group within the field. We called it the "Basic field". This group should be expanded with other words belonging to the field, but found in textbooks for higher levels, 5th and 6th grades, and it would serve as a complementary vocabulary. It was called "Primary school field". Finally, a third group would complete the field with new items, which our students had to look up in dictionaries. It would be used as a reference and study vocabulary for them. We called it "Reference field" (See Figure 1 and Chart 2).

Each of these fields would include, in their corresponding groups or levels, derivatives, compound words and idioms containing words from the field.

Last, but not least, section 3.7. would complete our students' training, since dealing with associations, combinations, related vocabulary and collocations, is another important aspect when teaching a language to which teachers do rarely dedicate enough time or attention.

The advantage of designing this kind of subdivided field is that it will facilitate our students' work when having to select vocabulary accord-

ing to their students' needs, or when designing and planning activities to be done by them. It would also be an invaluable tool for the recycling and expansion of vocabulary during all the educational stages in primary education. It would become thus a useful device for the elaboration of methodological course materials.

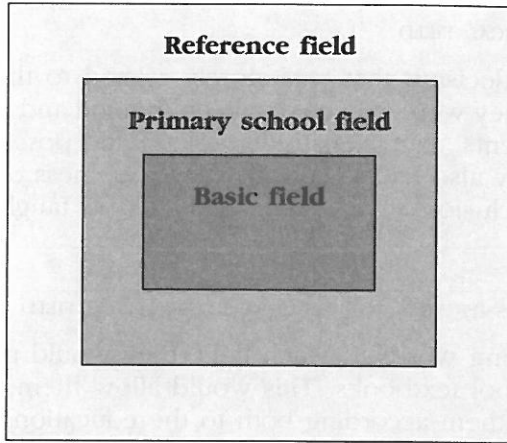


Figure 1.

A lexical field: Fruit

<i>Basic field</i>	<i>Primary school field + Basic field</i>	<i>Reference field + Primary school field</i>
apple	pineapple	tangerine
orange	grapes	grapefruit
banana	strawberries	currant
pear	lemons	sultana
peach	olives	raisin
	plum	apricot
		cherries
		pomegranate
		papaya
		dates
		mangoes
		figs
		greengage
		prune

Chart 2

CONCLUSIONS

The possibility of using the results of the task so far described in the future teaching of English and the development of specific teachers' techniques and abilities –mainly decision making– are, from our point of view, some of its most relevant features. We think that these are objectives that should be present in the approach to any subject taught to prospective teachers, since it is this sort of practical tasks which best justifies the efforts made in acquiring a theoretical understanding of the subject. They relate the work done in class, making sense of it, with the students' future as primary school teachers. On the other hand, this activity is a clear proof that, even in highly theoretical subjects, it is always possible to design tasks which not only imply making use of concepts and applying knowledge from other related linguistic fields, or that develop specific study skills and strategies, but also that have clear methodological implications. It is precisely this last aspect which gives unity to a curriculum specifically designed to train teachers.

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