

## STRATEGIES ON ENGLISH SYNONYM TEACHING IN SENIOR HIGH SCHOOL IN THE LIGHT OF SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIVISM



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### ABSTRACT

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Synonym teaching is one of the important and difficult tasks of English vocabulary teaching in senior high schools. Teachers in senior high schools face various difficulties during the synonym teaching process. This paper aims to present some effective teaching strategies to promote the synonym teaching to achieve fruitful results. The paper introduces the definition and classification of synonym so that teachers could have a thorough and comprehensive understanding of synonym. The teaching of synonym requires a pedagogic theory as a guide. The authors adopt social constructivism, advanced by Martin Williams and Robert L. Burden in 1997, to guide synonym teaching. Further, in the light of social constructivism, the authors propose teaching principles and strategies for classroom synonym teaching, which will be of great help for senior high school synonym teaching.

**Contribution/ Originality:** This study contributes in the existing literature of English teaching. The present study is one of very few studies which have investigated synonym teaching strategies in the light of social constructivism.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Synonym teaching is an important part of the vocabulary teaching in senior high schools. English word stock is extremely rich in synonyms. The large number of synonyms in the textbooks indicates that the teaching of vocabulary would be incomplete without the teaching of English synonyms. Many scholars (Wang and Sui, 1999) also point out the significance of grasping synonyms in English learning. Zhao (2002) even says that one's English level can be judged by his ability to discriminate and use synonyms. However, there are some problems of synonym teaching in senior high schools. Firstly, it is often found that some teachers, especially those recently graduates from colleges and universities, seldom touch upon the synonyms in the texts, because it is difficult to make a clear distinction between them. Sometimes when asked by their students, they do offer some explanations. After that most students only know certain words are synonymous, but they are still unclear to other synonyms. Secondly, it is found that the only way to discriminate synonyms is giving Chinese equivalents. This method may be workable with some synonyms, but with others, it doesn't work, or even misleading.

The reasons for these problems are obvious. On one hand, some teachers do not have a very clear understanding of synonym's definition, classification and discrimination. On the other hand, they do not get proper and effective theories or methods in teaching synonyms. For the first problem, the authors will offer a detailed introduction to the definition and classification of synonyms. For the second problem, the authors adopt social constructivism, advanced by M. Williams and R. L. Burden in 1997, to guide synonym teaching. Based on the social constructivism, the authors attempt to propose principles and strategies of synonym teaching in senior high schools.

## 2. DEFINITION AND CLASSIFICATION OF SYNONYMS

What is a synonym? There are several definitions in different dictionaries and reference books. *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English* defines the word "synonym" as "a word with the same or nearly the same meaning as another word in the same language" (Mayer, 2009). The definition given by *Webster's New Dictionary of Synonyms* is "A synonym, in this dictionary, will always mean one of two or more words in the English language which have the same or very nearly the same essential meaning" (Merriam, 1978). *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary* defines synonym as "word or phrase with the same meaning as another in the same language, though perhaps with a different style, grammar or technical use" (Hornby, 2005). Saeed (1997) says "synonyms are different phonological words which have the same or very similar meanings". Synonyms can be divided into two categories: absolute synonyms and relative synonyms.

### 2.1. Absolute Synonyms

Absolute synonyms, which are also known as complete synonyms, are words that are identical in meaning in all its aspects. A pair of complete synonyms should not only be identical in conceptual meaning, but also be interchangeable in all contexts without the slightest change in connotative meaning. Therefore, complete synonyms are easy to teach and learn. Complete or absolute synonymy has been declared an impossibility by numerous authors (Bloomfield, 1933; Chafe, 1970). Ullmann (1977) says "it is almost a truism that total synonymy is an extremely rare occurrence, a luxury which language can ill afford". This type of synonyms belongs to highly restricted specialized vocabulary. For example, *word-formation* and *word-building*.

### 2.2. Relative Synonyms

Relative synonyms refer to two or more words or phrases that express the same semantic meaning and can be interchangeable in a certain context. If the context changes, they often can not be interchangeable. The number of relative synonyms in English is numerous.

## 3. A PEDAGOGIC THEORY—SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIVISM

Teaching and learning are processes of imparting and acquiring knowledge. In recent years, quality-oriented education and foreign language teaching reform are developing rapidly all over China. From this aspect, social constructivism is very crucial to language teaching. Based on the theories of humanism, cognitive psychology, constructivism and social interactionism, M. Williams and R. L. Burden provided a coherent theoretical framework — the social constructivist model in 1997. It has aroused widespread attention in the field of educational psychology and linguistics. The viewpoints and contents of social constructivism theory provide a new perspective for English teaching, and have a positive influence on improving English teaching in China. The essence of social constructivism is about the true nature of knowledge acquisition. According to Williams and Burden (2003) knowledge is constructed by individuals rather than transmitted from one person to another, but such constructions always occur within specific contexts, where learners have contact with other people, mainly as a result of social interactions. This model focuses on the development of the "whole person", which is the essence of humanism. That

is to say, attention is also paid to the development of learning abilities, positive self-concept and personal characters (Williams and Burden, 2003). This model has four key factors— teachers, learners, tasks and contexts. They all act as part of a dynamic process and the main body of knowledge construction.

1) Concerning the learners, who are the central roles in teaching process, this model stresses that learners tend to learn what they think is worth learning, but this differs from one person to another. Learners learn in ways that are meaningful to them. This model also stresses that learners learn better if they feel in control of what they are learning. Learning is closely linked to how people feel about themselves, that is to say, an individual's self-concept has a great influence on the way in which he or she learns. And the reason they attribute to their perceived success or failure influence learners' behaviors.

2) In the social constructivist model, the teacher acts as a mediator in the language classroom. Teachers should help learners to find ways to improve their ability and move onto the next level of learning. Besides, the teacher needs to be aware of the importance of interactions that occur in the teaching process. They should play an important role in promoting effective learning, including creating the right atmosphere for students to develop confidence and providing appropriate learning strategies. And teachers should instruct students to develop their autonomous learning ability.

3) According to social constructivism, learning tasks present an interface in the interaction between teachers and learners. Teachers should not only transmit knowledge, but also set tasks that are at a level just beyond the learners' capability. Learners make their own sense of the tasks. Not only will the meanings the learners construct differ, but their emotional responses will also vary. Learners' responses can help the teacher identify what they need, which cognitive aspects need developing, and what forms of mediation are required. Tasks are crucial in the interaction between teachers and learners. Through learning tasks, teachers and learners convey attitudes and messages about the learning process to each other, and learning takes place within the tasks.

4) Learning is influenced by the situation in which it occurs. Learning always occurs within a particular context. The whole context refers not only to the immediate context of the classroom or home, but also to the broader social, educational and political context. In addition, the cultural background of learners will influence the sense they make of the learning situation.

#### **4. PRINCIPLES OF SYNONYM TEACHING**

Synonym teaching constitutes an important part of vocabulary teaching. For the teaching of synonyms, based on the social constructivism, the authors propose three principles for teachers to follow: student-centered mode, group-work, teacher's leading role.

##### **4.1. Student-Centered Mode**

Social constructivism emphasizes the principle that students should act as the center in teaching activities. Numbers of contemporary educationalists hold that teaching should be organized with students as the center. And the learner's internal factor plays an important role in foreign language learning.

Learners in senior high schools are aged between 15 and 18 years old. In learning English, they have finished learning the basic sentence patterns and grammatical structures, and acquired certain abilities to autonomous learning. So teachers should try to ask the students to distinguish by themselves the differences in connotations and applications among the synonyms they are learning. They can finish that task with what they have learned in class and by consulting dictionaries and reference books. So every student should possess a copy of a dictionary like *Oxford Advanced Learner's English-Chinese Dictionary* (Hornby, 2009). It is a necessary and indispensable instrument in vocabulary learning. Thus, students will solve their problems and develop a good learning habit at the same time.

#### **4.2. Group-Work**

Social constructivism holds that interaction plays an important role in classroom teaching. The interaction exists not only between the teacher and the students, but also among the students themselves. In classroom teaching the teacher is the organizer and director. In practical teaching, the teacher should divide the students into different groups. Since the students are at different levels, they should be divided according to their scores or abilities and the teacher should pay special attention to those who lag behind. The teacher should try to find or provide every possible chance for students to practice differentiating synonyms. The teacher needs leave the easier ones for those academically underdeveloped students to do.

When doing group-work, students can communicate and cooperate with others and they can also get new knowledge and learning strategies from others. So after some time of practice every student will have their own gains, which in turn creates greater interest and self-confidence in them.

#### **4.3. Teacher's Leading Role**

The individual-centered teaching model does not underestimate the importance of the teacher. Autonomy is more than acting on one's own. On the contrary, the function of the teacher is one of the decisive factors. Before directing their students, teachers should make sure that they have had a thorough grasp of the differences and similarities among the synonyms they are going to teach. They should play a dominant role and give instructions and offer useful information as a director and knowledge transmitter when students feel confused or need assistance. They should also evaluate students' work and give some advice, encouragement and guidance to help students improve their learning ability. Only the teachers adopt their roles appropriately in the teaching process, can the development of students' language skills be accomplished.

### **5. STRATEGIGES OF SYNONYM TEACHING**

Based on the social constructivism advanced by Marion William and Robert L. Burden, this section will discuss the strategies of synonym teaching. The authors propose a four-step procedure: finding pairs of synonyms and identifying their meanings by students, contrasting the synonyms through discussion, presenting and summarizing the results of discussion and consolidating the teaching of synonym through exercises.

#### **5.1. Finding Pairs of Synonyms and Identifying Their Meanings by Students**

While teaching English synonyms, teachers should conduct the following activities. First of all, teachers should teach students the definition and classification of synonyms in detail, so that students could have a comprehensive understanding of synonyms. Second, the teacher set a task for students, that is, ask them to find out the synonyms in the material and classify the synonyms according to what they have learned. The synonyms selected by the teacher should be the most basic and practical words. The teacher should make it clear that two or more words identified as synonyms must be the same part of speech. Students would be encouraged if they fulfill the task. Third, after finding the synonyms, students should consult dictionaries to figure out the exact meaning of synonyms. And then they are required why one word is more appropriate than the other word in a certain context. They will have a specific objective and explore ways to solve the problem.

#### **5.2. Discriminating the Synonyms through Discussion by Students**

After the students get the exact meanings of the synonyms, they should be asked to have a discussion in their groups. The teacher should ask them to try to analyze the similarities and differences of the synonyms. According to the social constructivism, learning always occurs in a certain context. It is the teacher's main task to create a good environment in the classroom. Therefore, while discriminating the synonyms, students should be divided into several groups based on their scores and abilities. There are three types of groups: pair work, group work and team

work. In the groups, students can help and cooperate with each other. They can learn others' learning methods and strategies during their communication. In this way, students will participate in the learning process and obtain knowledge actively instead of passively. In addition, their self-confidence will be greatly enhanced.

When discriminating synonyms, the teacher should explain to the student how to distinguish the similarities and differences between the synonyms identified. And then students are required to compare and contrast the synonyms. Generally speaking, there is no difference between absolute synonyms, while relative synonyms differ in one way or another. The difference between synonyms boil down to three areas: denotation, connotation, and application (Zhang, 1997). Difference in denotation. Synonyms may differ in the range. Some words have a wider range of meaning than others, for example, the noun *work* is used in a much more extended sense than *job* and *profession*. Synonyms may also differ in the intensity of meaning. Some words are stronger in meaning than others. For example, *anger* and *rage*. They both express the angry feelings, but *rage* is stronger than *anger*. 2) Difference in connotation. Connotation is related to the stylistic and emotive coloring of words. Some words share the same denotation but belong to different stylistic layers: neutral, colloquial, literary, slang, vulgar, scientific and technical and so on. For example, *hard*, *difficult* and *laborious* are synonymous. *Hard* is an informal word. *Difficult* is a neutral word. *Laborious* is a formal word. Many synonyms have clear affective values. *Statesman* and *politician* are synonymous. *Statesman* is a commendatory word, while *politician* refers to someone with conspiracy, which is a derogatory word. 3) Difference in application. Many words are synonymous in meaning but different in usage. They form different collocations and fit into different sentence patterns. For example, *charge* and *accuse* are synonymous, they both express that someone has done something wrong, but they select different prepositions: *accuse...of*; *charge...with*.

### 5.3. Presenting and Summarizing the Results of Discussion

After students' discussion, the students are asked to do a presentation. One student in each group will present the results of their discussion in front of the classmates. Each group member should take turns to do the presentation every time. The whole class can have a discussion if there is any problem. Through this step students get the chance to express their thoughts and interact with others.

In the learning process, the learner is never really independent. A teacher should play a dominant role and give instructions and offer useful information as a director. After the students' presentation, the teacher should make a summary of the similarities and differences of the synonyms. If students still have trouble in discriminating them, the teacher should illustrate some examples for them.

### 5.4. Consolidating the Teaching of Synonyms through Exercises

The last step is consolidating the teaching of synonym through exercises. Doing various Exercises are the most important step in language teaching procedures. It is this step that new language learning habits are formed. Newly acquired knowledge should be practiced, consolidated and put to use immediately.

In order to achieve the best results in classroom teaching, the teacher should let the students have a good understanding and consolidation of what they have learned through exercises. Teachers could use blank-filling and Chinese-English translation exercise in synonym teaching. Exercises and application will help students make their knowledge more systematic and structuralized.

## 6. CONCLUSION

This paper has made an exploration of synonym teaching in senior high schools under the guidance of social constructivism. It is based on the situation that teachers and learners have not paid enough attention to the synonym teaching and learning. Meanwhile, teachers still lacks of practical teaching strategies. In this situation, this paper gives a comprehensive introduction to the definition and classification of synonym. Based on social

constructivism, we have proposed three principles and teaching strategies for the synonym teaching. It is hoped that these teaching strategies will be of great help to promote English synonym teaching in senior high schools.

Owing to the lack of time, energy, teaching experiences and so on, this paper has some limitations. The teaching strategies need to be further explored in teaching practice. Furthermore, researchers should explore more applicable theories, together with social constructivism, to guide the synonym teaching.

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