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WORD ASSOCIATION: A RESOURCE TO RAISE AWARENESS ABOUT SEMANTIC RELATIONS

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BACKGROUND

Modern Psychology seems to have confirmed that no piece of information is stored in our minds in isolation. An important characteristic of significant learning is the relationship between elements in different domains. Cognitive studies have emphasised the idea that meaningful and lasting learning depends largely on the relations we make with our prior knowledge¹.

Lexical units neither stand nor work in isolation, but appear stranded in utterances or within contexts that contribute to provide their full meaning, and so, word knowledge is not that different from other kinds of knowledge. There is agreement among linguists that word meaning *does not exist* in isolation, but acquires its full significance with reference to other related terms (see, Levin & Pinker, 1991; Taylor, 1995: 83).

Psycholinguistic studies have shown that words are not stored in our mental lexicon as single items, but forming clusters with related concepts. Those lexical units which belong to the same field are arranged in complex and tangled networks, in which every single concept has numerous links attaching it to other connected notions (See Aitchison, 1994).

¹ The use of concept maps as a teaching theory was first developed by J.D. Novak (Cornell Univ.) in the early 80's. It was derived from Ausubel's learning theory which places central emphasis on the influence of the students prior knowledge and subsequent meaningful learning. For him, the most important single factor influencing learning is what the learner already knows. Thus meaningful learning results when a person consciously and explicitly ties new knowledge to relevant concepts they have.

Related words reinforce one another's meanings and so we *understand* words to the full in association with other related words. Psycholinguists say, that they tend to *keep close* to each other in the mental lexicon, and that we may get the most of their meaning and recall them more easily when placed within a context which illustrates their whole scope of their deepest meaning. For example (Moon: 1997) explains that we can hardly think or talk about *wind* without saying that it *blows*. Hatch & Brown have also illustrated such relations with *tree*, which is linked by extension to other instances of individual trees such as: elm, pine, willow, oak, etc. and by intention, *tree* is linked to attributes or features which characterise it such as; root, branches, leaves, trunk, (1994: 78). Linguists emphasise the former type of relations, as they are the foundations of concept formation.

Meaning association is a key aspect to Semantics. These mental connections may go from very basic facts and relations (synonyms - antonyms) to very advanced and sophisticated analogies which set the ground for figurative language and metaphors. This cross-reference meaning associations have been recorded by Relational Theories, which have been drawn after psycholinguistic studies such as slips of the tongue (*right for left, door for window*), closely related terms priming (*doctor-nurse*), the 'tip of the tongue phenomenon', and others (see Garman, 1991).

But in addition to these *linguistically-logical* connections, we all make our own matches, based on personal experience, which bring into play non-linguistic associations. They develop relational chains of totally unrelated items, which have no semantic relation but which are highly meaningful for the speaker. Even though such relations seem to have no apparent relation, they are rooted in a meaningful event for the speaker, and so deep down, they do follow a logical train of thought which does not show in the surface.

For instance an adult learner responded *stain* to the stimulus *butterfly*. Even though a response of this nature seemed quite odd, it did have an underlying logic. This was made evident when she worded out her reasons for the *butterfly* → *stain* association. She explained that she had recently killed a moth on her newly painted sitting-room and it had left a big stain on it. She was very upset about it. When she worded the sequence we noticed that the sequence was perfectly logic, but that they had skipped two steps between both ends in the relation chain.

butterfly	→ moth	→ ceiling	→ stain
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WORD KNOWLEDGE IN L2

Many attempts have been made to determine finely what knowing a word in a second language means. All proposals agree on the point that for a word to be understood and available for production, the speaker needs to know its relations to other words (Hatch & Brown, 1995; Ellis, 1997; Schmitt, 2000; Read, 2000).

Every new word the learner acquires, creates some links with other related terms; very few ones at the beginning, but more and more links develop as the speaker comes it across. In fact words keep on developing such links along one's life. The more links a word develops, the deeper and more long-lasting its learning and the easier their retrieval will be. Such variety of links in a way represents the depth of its knowledge and therefore its availability for actual production.

The Relational Theory based on word association backs up the mind mapping, semantic networking or word webbing activities. These are all names for the same rationale: a manner of making such veiled relations explicit, so that one may illustrate visually the inter-dependence of words or ideas within topic. The notion of mind mapping is used not only for the sake of evidencing lexical relations, but also for representing cognitive levels.

THE ACTIVITY

Based on this theory, I have been dealing with such lexical connections in a non mapping way. I have carried out some work on word association in ELT in order to help learners get the most out of its great potential. My work emerged as a very ambitious exploratory piece of research both theoretical and practical. Initially, I expected to explore into the learner's mental lexicon to find out the way they store and process L2 lexical information; to *see* the kind of meaning relations learners make in English (L2) and relate them to their associations in Spanish (L1), quite based on intuition as did not have any prior evidence.

However, I had some more applied objectives as well, which proved more successful than I really expected:

- 1) to make use of these lexical associations in ELT for the sake of recalling, vocabulary expansion, and
- 2) to raise awareness among the students of the way we store lexical items; the kind of relations words keep with each other, and the grounds for such associations.

I devised an activity which would help make such relations explicit and would also contribute to their lexical expansion. The activity described below was carried out with 54 first and second year university BA. students from 2 different classes, with an intermediate level, and better receptive than productive skills.

The activity was carried out in ordinary English sessions without warning the learners of its objectives. I wanted to prevent them from being prejudiced and so, avoid their responses from being biased by what the theory says. I expected to draw some evidence coming from the participants themselves of the way they organise verbal and experiential information.

The task consisted in a guided elicitation of terms, ideas, concepts etc. related to a 'key word'. They were asked to write down as many words related to **SEA** as they could think of. Such elicitation was done gradually, (shown on a transparency), working in pairs or threes and in a very relaxed atmosphere. Even though the stimuli were in English, most of the talking and recalling was done in Spanish. Learners were strongly encouraged to ask for any ideas or associations that came to their minds in Spanish. The word provision was done in the following order:

- 1) Closest related terms to **SEA**.
- 2) Further related terms
- 3) Opposite related terms
- 4) Adjectives for **SEA**
- 5) Verbs related to **SEA**
- 6) Adverbs and adverbial phrases for these verbs
- 7) Universal associations
- 8) Personal associations
- 9) Expressions related to **SEA**
- 10) Literary devices (metaphors, personifications etc)
- 11) Other (that I may have not included but you would like to add)

In a relatively short session they counted on a pool of words, meaningful to themselves, belonging to the same lexical field. They discussed their relation with sea and evoked some personal experiences. With this preparation and when they were in a '**SEA** mood', they were asked to compose a short poem using some of these terms and ideas. To facilitate the task they were encouraged to compose short pieces, as short as four lines long.

The first attempts to write poems sounded very poor; there was something odd about their beat, which made them sound very non-musical and lacking on harmony. They seemed to lack grammatical balance. For example:

- ★ The sea is where all kinds of people join;
the poets friends, lovers, and family.
It brings different feelings
I feel that the sea it's a miracle.
The sea is a probe of the God exists
When the wind blow you feel God talk to you.

- ★ The sea is more than summer, baywatch or holidays.
The sea hids a forbidden life, that no diver could discover.
There is a strange kind of energy that fills us with peace,
and all my sadness goes away.
The sea is like a freedom.

- ★ There is salty water.
Come and see the sunset,
the immensity of the our sea,
the pure charmer,
my mind is clear again.

I reminded them about parallelism and balanced structures, which we had seen earlier in the course, and their poems improved notoriously. They acquired the musical beat which the first versions seemed to lack. These compositions gave them a great sense of achievement.

By the end of the activity, on the first occasion, I asked them what they thought I wanted to test. Most of them guessed the scope of the investigation, but none accurately. Only then I went into the theory. We discussed the results, and they asked for new sessions suggesting some modifications.

We have repeated the activity on several occasions with very positive results, with words like **NIGHT, MONEY, TIME, JOY**. Their awareness and 'expertise' in this activity has grown, what has helped them improve the quality of their creations.

DISCUSSION

As predictable, there was a high percentage of repetition in the output of the elicitation, and in fact most of the non-repeated ones were

very closely related to our focus words. As they grew more confident, the more experiential relations started to come out. The 'explanation activity' which followed the word elicitation, generated a lot of interesting talk among the learners, mostly in Spanish.

The activity has been very rewarding for learners, as they have managed to produce very high quality pieces of writing, with great lexical variety and more forceful than their usual written passages. It has certainly proved positive but it has also revealed some mistakes on my part which have been corrected in the subsequent sessions.

Apart from great fun, among its strengths I may mention that it helped learners to:

- become aware of the potential of word relation,
- ask for words associated to significant personal situations, and therefore which are more likely to be acquired because of their meaningfulness, and
- use vocabulary in context.

Among the problems I should mention that:

- the word elicitation may get too long and tedious for less inspired the learners; this tiredness makes their responses less and less meaningful as they go along,
- the same applies for less literary students,
- there is a heavy overlapping, as learners move faster than me and incorporate, much earlier than expected, what I was holding for a later stage,
- some of the categories I included initially were somewhat unnecessary and difficult for their perception; e.g. not all of them could tell the difference between adjectives and adverbs/adverbial phrases. These have been deleted in the latest sessions.

PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

This activity which was in the first place conceived as a vocabulary expansion instance, proved more useful to create a good atmosphere for creative writing. The 'contextualised' words, expressions, chunks which they list helped produce a motivating environment for the production of a richer and more original discourse. In a few minutes they have the *raw material* to produce a much more elaborated creative piece of writing than their usual ones.

I assume that sometimes we ask our learners to write about a particular topic without a proper warm up. This activity helps them immerse (both linguistically and emotionally) into the topic before writing. By the time they are asked to write, they are quite taken by the topic, what puts them in a better position to produce a better poem. In fact this makes me think that if our learners do not produce better written passages is because of their lack of mental preparation to face the task. This activity helps learners to focus on a topic, evoke memories, discuss about them, etc. and only then start writing with a better preparation, and its consequent results.

Given that the objective of the activity was to raise awareness about the closeness words keep, rather than about grammatical correctness, little attention was paid to grammatical mistakes. Most were left unattended, unless they interfered with the clarity of the message.

Even though the activity has been carried out with university intermediate level students, I think it may be carried out with learners of any age and level from intermediate upwards, with the necessary modifications, depending on their interests.

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APPENDIX 1

Some of the student's poems as result of the activity

SEA POEMS

- ★ The sea swings the sunshine,
and splashes its anger.
It keeps it secret
and sways its peace
It swallows our sorrows
and whispers its mystery
- ★ A sea of laughs
A sea of tears.
I love the sea because it is like your eyes.
I like the sea because it is so deep like your heart.
When I see the sea, I see you.
- ★ When I'm alone, I look at the sea,
'cause when I'm there I feel free.
It's like an consolation
I can express my desperation;
if I'm sad...I cry,
if I'm happy...I laugh,
if I'm angry...I scream,
it won't run away or get angry with me.
It always will be there,
with its waves, its birds, its peace
If someday I die in the sea,
all my secrets will die in thee.
- ★ Oh! You mysterious sea,
bring me back my lost peace
I'm so sad now, and I need your advice
Blue silk around my skin,
take my afraids and disappear them
Oh, you warm and deep friend
help me forget my preoccupation
and give me a new inspiration.
- ★ I am here, deep in my sea
quietly I see
my life in the dark
my storm in the night.
Singing a song

crashing my soul.
I wait, I hope.
I fell I vanish.

- ★ This is the sea,
crashing in a strong way
this is the beach
blowing in a soft way.
- ★ In the summer, the crowd
in the winter, the lonely.
But in all days of the year
the mighty and beauty.

NIGHT POEMS

- ★ Still sleepless hours
of darkness in my skin
of silence in my ears
of sorrow in my soul.
The new day comes
with new hopes and new life,
Yesterday is past
Tomorrow is here.
- ★ The silence of the night will show me
what the noise of the day will hide me.
Come quiet and embrace me
Stay to see what day does not allow me see.
- ★ Darkness.
No here, no there;
no up, no down;
no in, no out.
Everywhere black,
Only me, myself and my own.
- ★ The universe goes to rest
The life wants a break.
The nature needs to lay
to get tomorrow to work.
- ★ Night is not a time of the day
Night is a state of the soul
No night of the calendar will stay on
Many nights of the soul will keep on.

★ Awake by the light of the candle,
Washed by the light of the moon
Asleep in the arms of my mother
Safe in the hands of my God

★ I touch the mystery of the night
I mould the silence of the dark
She wraps my dreams of black
She shows the state of my soul.
I call you peaceful night
I feel the warmth of your cold.

MONEY POEMS

★ Never the money
has give me a kiss
Never the money
has hold me like this.

★ Uncle Sam follows me with dirty bills
In his selfish palms
He wants to buy my nature.
But he won't make it
I won't cover him
Paving a road towards hell.

★ The dirty money
Is easy money
Everything need
To get the power

★ Money does not give you time, it takes your time,
Money does not give you joy, it takes your joy
Money offers you dreams, but brings you worries.
You don't buy love, family and friends
Money takes your time, your joy, your dreams.

★ The two goods of the human being
Are opposites in the Earth
One have the value life
Other have the unvalue dead
One have blood
And the other have money.
Money is like chocolate, at least for me...
I like it –very much- and I eat it!!!,
Then I want more

I'm always in need.
It is like a passion
Is like a reason to live
To get up every morning
to step on the others.

- ★ Piece of corruption
a scream is listened
when it puts your hands
on the greedy people.
- ★ Its powerful can drive us crazy
Its charm can get us trapped
It is not the happiness
but pretends to be.
- ★ The schizophrenia of the system
The good look of fiction and lies.
Powerful gentlemen
looking fine in his way
but empty for the eternity.
- ★ For some it's the king of the world,
For others, only a help to live
Oh! unhappy piece of paper
You are just a piece of paper.