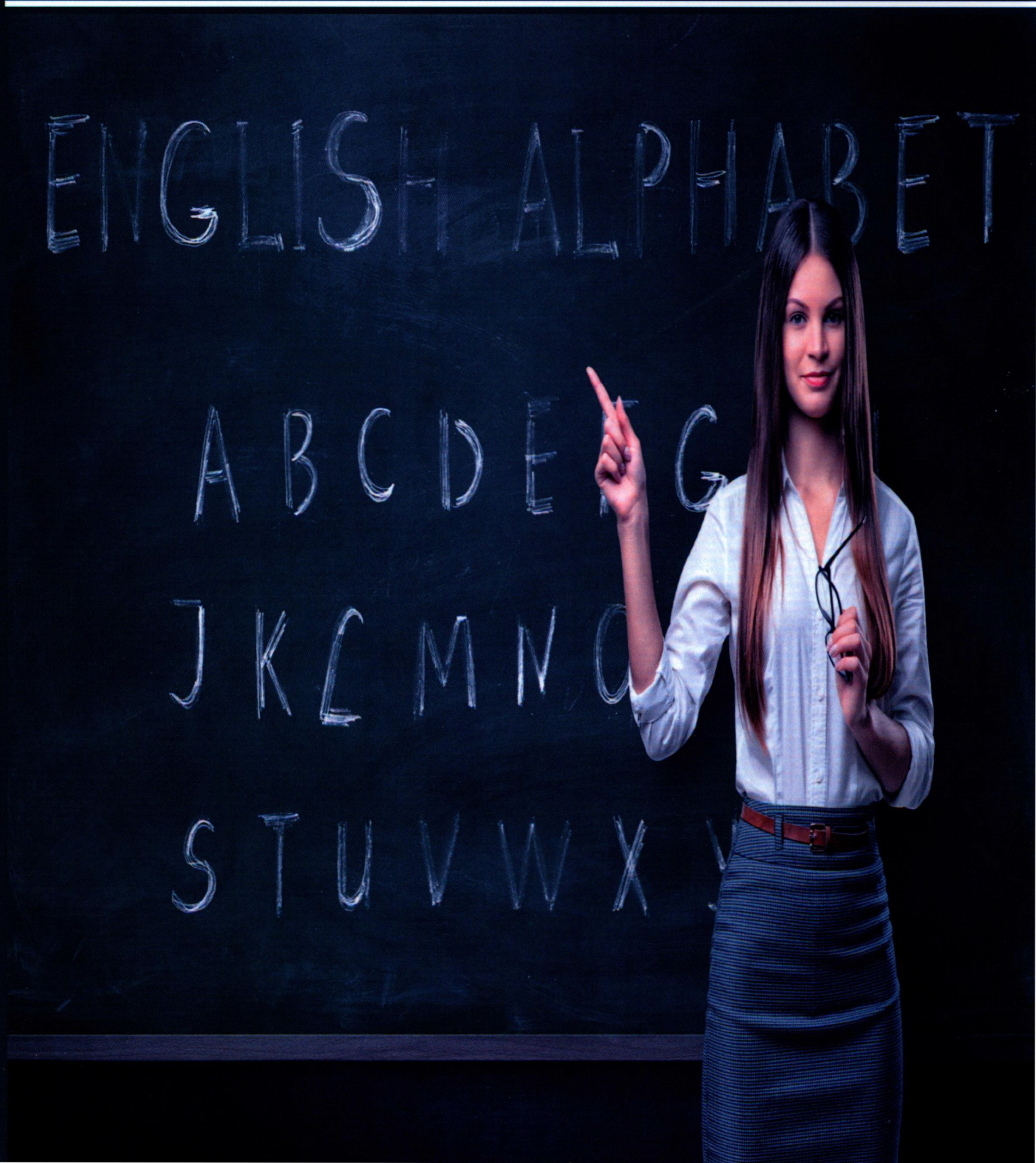
Applying Linguistics in the Classroom: A Sociocultural Approach

Contributors: Yanqing Chen , et al.



About the Book

Applied Linguistics is concerned with practical issues involving language in the life of the community. The most important of these is the learning of second or foreign languages. Others include language policy, multilingualism, language education, the preservation and revival of endangered languages, and the assessment and treatment of language difficulties. In recent years we have witnessed a considerable disunity in using the term applied linguistics for designating academic courses at universities or teacher training institutions. Over the last decade, applied linguists have paid increasing attention to questions such as these, as have scholars in such related fields as second language acquisition (SLA), language education, and sociolinguistics. Studies examining the links between learner identities and language-learning contexts have revealed that the ways learners define themselves, are defined by others, and are positioned in social interaction have an observable impact on their learning experiences. This monograph has contributed to advancing new theoretical insights on identity construction in language-learning situations. There is no doubt that early applied linguistics was largely associated with language teaching and learning, seeking to bridge the gap between the theoretical achievements of linguistics and the reality of classroom pedagogical practice. The pedagogical preoccupation of applied linguistics gradually gave way to a more extensive focus by including more aspects of the academic study of language. Since the 1980s, the term has begun to be used to refer to any area of study that is language-related, and the growing diversity of the field may be noted. With regard to these latest developments in applied linguistics, and considering major issues within its focus, it seems reasonable for educational institutions to reserve the term 'applied linguistics' for the large area of interdisciplinary language-related study, while all relevant issues related to its educational application and classroom work be reserved for language teaching methodology.

Applying Linguistics in the Classroom- A Sociocultural Approach looks at language issues in the classroom through an applied sociocultural perspective focused on how language functions in society and in schools-how it is used, for what purposes, and how teachers can understand their students' language practices. Making linguistics accessible and relevant to all teachers, this text looks at language issues in the classroom through an applied sociocultural perspective focused on how language functions in society and in schools-how it is used, for what purposes, and how teachers can understand their students' language practices.

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Preface

Applied Linguistics is concerned with practical issues involving language in the life of the community. The most important of these is the learning of second or foreign languages. Others include language policy, multilingualism, language education, the preservation and revival of endangered languages, and the assessment and treatment of language difficulties. In recent years we have witnessed a considerable disunity in using the term applied linguistics for designating academic courses at universities or teacher training institutions. Over the last decade, applied linguists have paid increasing attention to questions such as these, as have scholars in such related fields as second language acquisition (SLA), language education, and sociolinguistics. Studies examining the links between learner identities and language-learning contexts have revealed that the ways learners define themselves, are defined by others, and are positioned in social interaction have an observable impact on their learning experiences. This monograph has contributed to advancing new theoretical insights on identity construction in language-learning situations. There is no doubt that early applied linguistics was largely associated with language teaching and learning, seeking to bridge the gap between the theoretical achievements of linguistics and the reality of classroom pedagogical practice. The pedagogical preoccupation of applied linguistics gradually gave way to a more extensive focus by including more aspects of the academic study of language. Since the 1980s, the term has begun to be used to refer to any area of study that is language-related, and the growing diversity of the field may be noted. With regard to these latest developments in applied linguistics, and considering major issues within its focus, it seems reasonable for educational institutions to reserve the term 'applied linguistics' for the large area of interdisciplinary language-related study, while all relevant issues related to its educational application and classroom work be reserved for language teaching methodology.

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1

A COGNITIVE LINGUISTIC APPROACH TO CLASSROOM ENGLISH VOCABULARY INSTRUCTION FOR EFL LEARNERS IN MAINLAND CHINA

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Keywords: Cognitive linguistics, Prototype theory, Categorization, Metaphor, English vocabulary teaching **1.**

ABSTRACT

Vocabulary learning and teaching has been one of the main issues in ESL/EFL learning and teaching research. EFL teachers in China, in particular, are grappling with the effective vocabulary teaching methods. This paper is doing part of this job in a different way. It discusses three principles based on Cognitive Linguistics (CL), namely the study of categorization, prototype, and metaphor, and implications of these principles in formal vocabulary instruction in a Chinese context of English learning in South-western mainland China.

INTRODUCTION

Cognition is part of mental process, the behavior and ability through which we human being perceive and acquire knowledge. It involves such mental activities as emotion, motivation, and power. Cognitive linguistics is one important interdisciplinary branch of cognitive science, and is closely related to cognitive psychology and linguistics. It iss also an approach to language, which views language as a kind of cognitive action, and studies the formation, the meaning, and the rules of language with cognition as its departure. In short, cognitive linguistics is an approach that is "based on our experience of the world and the way we perceive and conceptualize it" (Ungerer and Schmid, 2001, p. F36), an approach to the analysis of natural language that focuses on language as an instrument for organizing, processing, and conveying information and in the more restricted sense but one type of a cognitive science approach to language, to be distinguished from, for instance, generative grammar and many forms of linguistic research within

the field of artificial intelligence(Geeraerts,1997, pp.7-8). Although cognitive linguistics is a new marginal discipline which has a history of twenty years or so, it does not only broaden our belief about the word 'cognition', but also has striking influence on the study of the process of second and foreign language learning and teaching. It is on this sense that this paper addresses the classroom teaching of English vocabulary from the perspective of cognitive linguistics.

TEACHING ENGLISH VOCABULARY

Significance of vocabulary

It has long been acknowledged in EFL teaching that vocabulary is essential, in China in particular, to English learning and teaching. It is also stressed by the linguist David Wilkins, who points out that 'Without grammar very little can by conveyed, without vocabulary *nothing* can be conveyed (Wilkins, 1974).' This best saying about the importance of vocabulary learning has been welcomed by teachers and learners for many years.

Most learners, too, acknowledge the importance of vocabulary acquisition. Here are some statements made by some non-major college English learners from south-western China:

- First, vocabulary is very important. It measures a man's English level.
- My problem is that I forget the words soon after I have looked in the dictionary. And I cannot recognize them whenever I come across in reading English books.
- I want to enlarge my vocabulary. I have the feeling that I always use the same expressions to express different sort of things.

However, vocabulary teaching has not always been very responsive to such problems, and teachers have not fully recognized the tremendous communicative advantage in developing an extensive vocabulary. For a long time, teaching approaches such as Direct Method, which insists that only the target language should be used in class and meanings should be communicated 'directly' by associating speech forms with actions, objects, mime, gestures, and situations, but overemphasizes and distorts " the similarities between naturalistic first language learning and classroom foreign language learning and failed to consider the practical realities of the classroom" (Richards, 1986,p.10), and audiolingualism gave greater priority to the teaching of grammatical structures. In order not to distract from the learning of these structures, the number of words taught were often chosen either because they were easily demonstrated, or because they fitted neatly into the 'structure of the day.

The advent of the communicative approach in the 1970s set the stage for a major re-think of the role of vocabulary. The communicative value of a core vocabulary has always been recognized, particularly by tourists. A phrase book or dictionary provides more communicative mileage than a grammar-in the short term at least. Recognition of the meaning-making potential of words meant that vocabulary became a learning objective in its own right. In 1984, for example, in the introduction to their *Cambridge English Course*, Swan and Walter wrote that 'vocabulary acquisition is the largest and most important task facing the language learner; Course books began to include activities that specially targeted vocabulary'.

Nevertheless, most English language courses in China were (and still are) organized around grammar syllabuses. There are good grounds for retaining a grammatical organization. While vocabulary is largely a collection of items, grammar is a system of rules. Since one rule can generate a great many sentences, the teaching of grammar is considered to be more productive. Grammar multiplies, while vocabulary merely adds. However, two key developments were to challenge the hegemony of grammar. One was the lexical syllabus, that is, a syllabus based on those words that appear with a high degree of frequency in spoken and written English. The other was recognition of the role of lexical chunks in the acquisition of language and achieving fluency. Both these developments were fuelled by discoveries arising from the new science of corpus linguistics both at home and abroad, and of cognitive linguistic-based exploration of lexicography in China by Zhao Yanchun and Wangyan (Zhao, 2003; Li and Wang, 2005).

The effect of these developments has been to raise awareness as to the key role that vocabulary development plays in language learning. Even if most course books still adopt a grammatical syllabus, especially those designed for distance learning and adult learning, vocabulary is no longer treated as an 'add-on'. Much more attention is given to the grammar of words, to collocation and to word frequency. This is reflected in the way course books are now promoted. For example, the explanations of some widely-used course books claim:

Well emphasis on cognitive vocabulary, with a particular focus on high frequency, useful words and phrases. (from *A Modern English Course*)

Some underlying causes for problems in vocabulary learning

Knowing a word is one thing—but how is that knowledge acquired? In learning their first language the first words that children learn are typically those used for labeling—that is, mapping words on to concepts—so that the concept, for example, of dog has a name, *dog*. Or *doggie.* But not all four-legged animals are dogs: some may be cats, so the child then has to learn how far to extend the concept of *dog*, so as not to include cats, but to include other people's dogs, toy dogs, and even pictures of dogs. In other words, acquiring a vocabulary requires not only labeling but categorizing skills.

Finally, the child needs to realize that common words like *apple* and *dog* can be replaced by superordinate terms like *fruit* and *animal.* And that *animal* can accommodate other lower order words such as *cats, horse* and *elephant.* This involves a process of network building—constructing a complex web of words, so that items like *black* and *white*, or *fingers* and *toes*, or *family* and *brother* are interconnected. Network building serves to link all the labels and packages, and lays the groundwork for a process that continues for as long as we are exposed to new words (and new meanings for old words)—that is, for the rest of our lives.

Consider the Chinese college English learners, the problems they face when learning English kinship terms such as grandparents, cousin, aunt, uncle, so few in English, but so many different terms in Chinese. For most language learners, however, there will be much more that is shared than is foreign in conceptual system. The fact that the adult learners' conceptual system is already installed and up-and-running, means that he or she is saved a lot of the over- and under-generalising associated with first language learning. An adult learner like college students is unlikely to confuse a dog with a cat, for example.

However, there is a downside to having a ready-made conceptual system with its associated lexicon. Faced with learning a new word, the second language learner is likely to short-cut the process of constructing a network of associations—and simply map the word directly onto the mother tongue equivalent. Thus, if a German-speaking learner learns the English word *table*, rather than creating a direct link from *table* to the concept of table, they are more likely to create a link to their L1 equivalent (T*isch*). The L1 word acts as a stepping stone to the target concept.

Many cross-language errors are due to what are known as false friends. False friends are words that may appear to be equivalent, but whose meanings do not in fact correspond. Examples of false English friends for speakers of Polish, for example, are: *actually* (*aktualnie* in Polish means 'at present', 'currently') *apartment* (*apartment* in Polish is a 'hotel suite') *chef* (*szef* is Polish for 'chief' or 'boss') *history* (*historia* in Polish means 'story') *lunatic* (*lunatyk* in Polish is a 'sleepwalker') *pupil* (*pupil* in Polish is a 'pet' or 'favourite') (Thorbury, 2003, p.19)

Over-reliance on transfer from L1 could, conceivably, result in a misplacement of some words and even misleading or misunderstanding.

Generally speaking, however, languages that share words with similar forms (called cognates) have many more real friends than false friends. A French learner of English, for instance, need not feel suspicious of the English word *table* (*table* in French), nor *restaurant* (the same in French except the pronunciation)—among thousands of others.

As well as false friends and real friends, there are strangers: words that have no equivalent in the L1 at all, since the very concept does not exist in the learner's lexicon. Supposedly, Chinese has no equivalent for the English words *privacy* or *community*. In this case, the Chinese learner of English is in a position not dissimilar to a child learning his or her L1; they are learning the concept and the word in tandem. The way colour terms are distributed in different cultures is also a possible source of conceptual strangeness.

By analogy with false friends, real friends, and strangers, it may be the case that, for a good many second language learners, most of the words in their L2 lexicon are simply acquaintances. They have met them, they know them by name, they even understand them, but they will never be quite as familiar to them as their mother tongue equivalents. This is because the associative links in the second language lexicon are usually less firmly established than mother tongue links. To extend the metaphor: learning a second language is like moving to a new town—it takes time to establish connections and turn acquaintances into friends.

IMPLICATIONS OF COGNITIVE LINGUISTICS FOR CLASSROOM ENGLISH VOCABULARY INSTRUCTION

Zhao Yanfang (2003), a well-known scholar specialized in the study of Cognitive Linguistics (CL) in China, proposed that at least three principles based on CL can be used to direct our teaching of vocabulary, that is, the study of categorization, prototype, and metaphor.

Focusing on the teaching and learning of basic level categories of vocabulary

According to Zhao (2003), categorization is the classification of things in the cognitive process, which is essentially mental. Correspondingly, the process that the subject interacts with the object and classifies is a process of categorizing. And it is on this basis that we can conceptualize and make sense of the world around us. More important, 'categories and categorizations are existing everywhere, and are ways we perceive the world, otherwise we cannot know it in appropriate way' (Glass & Holyoak, 1986; cited in Zhao, 2003). Our experience tells us that one object can at the same time belong to some multi-categories. For example, a wolf-dog can be listed under the categories of animals, dogs, puppy dogs, etc., and constitute the different levels of categories. But how can we define it? Cognitive science takes the term 'basic level category' to answer this question scientifically. In CL, human mind gets to know things at the middle level, on which we know objects most easily, and the categories in this level is thus called basic level category. And vocabulary that comes into existence on the basis of the basic categories goes to basic level vocabulary. These vocabularies share a most distinctive attribute bundles that help to distinguish them from other vocabularies: less time to recognize, high frequency of use, and the most widely used items in everyday communication.

Consequently, in our present teaching of English vocabulary, enough attention and great importance should be given to the acquisition and instruction of basic vocabularies. And we should put vocabulary teaching in a prominent place, because basic lexicon is the basis for teaching other vocabulary categories, and it is only through which can the teaching of others be extended and fulfilled. This is a cut-way we learn English, and also an important principle for modern language teaching, course books compiling, and even dictionary compiling. It is well known that English words are extremely tremendous and large. For instance, in *Oxford Concise Dictionary*, 140,000 words are collected. It is, obviously, very difficult to remember them one by one in sequence. However, if we focus on basic level vocabularies, not only can we remember more effectively and more efficiently, but also can save more time to spend on some other learning activities.

Linguistic categorization is the major focus of CL, because 'Cognitive linguistics is not a single theory of language, but rather a cluster of theoretically and methodologically compatible approaches' (Zhao, 2000). The general research strategy of cognitive linguistics, in fact, is characterized by two major features. First, the study of categorization processes in the lexicon is taken as a methodological point of departure for the study of categorization processes in the grammar at large. If linguistic categorization is the major focus of cognitive linguistics, then studying the lexicon first is a plausible step to take: the categorizing function of the lexicon has received much attention in the linguistics, as lexicon is conceived of as an inventory of meaningful units.

Prototypes and polysemies

Prototype theory

In 1970s, Rosch made experiments of the category BIRD, thereby she identified that, to be a bird, it should share 13 common attributes, which involve a) laying eggs, b) having a beak, c) having two wings and two legs, d) having feathers, e) being able to fly, f) being small and lightweight, g) chirps/sings, h) legs are thin/short, j) kept in a cage, k) has long neck, l) has decorative feathers, and m) has exotic colours (Ungerer &Schmid, 2001, p.27). She found that ROBIN shares the most attributes resemble to the other family members, which she classified as the prototype of the category BIRD. All the family members have similar features with the prototype. So when we think of BIRD, we will first think of robin, but not OSTRICH or PENGUIN, just because ROBIN have the largest number of attributes of BIRRDS, and as a prototypical member of BIRD, robin is maximally distinct from the prototypical members of other categories.

Basically, there are two ways to understand the notion of prototype. It can be deduced from categorization experiments. For instance, some members of a category first come to mind in association experiments and are recognized more quickly as category members in verification tasks. If one takes these members as prototypes of the respective categories, this leads to definitions like 'best example of a category', 'salient examples', 'clearest cases of category membership', 'most representative of things included in a class' of 'central and typical members' (see Rosch 1978; Lakoff 1986; Brown 1990; Tversky 1990).

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However, if one takes the cognitive view of categories seriously, one is justified in defining the prototype as a mental representation, as some sort of cognitive reference point. From this perspective, four characteristics that are frequently mentioned as typical of prototypicality are: