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Cultivating Lexical Sensitivity through Corpus-based Synonym Differentiation Exercises

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Introduction

Numerous SLA researchers have pointed out that L2 learners are more likely to face lexical difficulties than grammatical ones (Cornu 1979 in Rogers 1996), and difficulties of dealing with synonyms, in particular, have been a major concern for students (Granger 1998; Blum and Levenston 1978 in Laufer 1997).   Martin (1984) in Carter (1998) concludes, in her research on L2 learners' errors, that even "advanced students regularly set up false equivalence between items and that the practice of glossing new words in terms of synonyms can be a primary factor in establishing errors in second language production."   Although linguists recognize the tricky nature of synonymy, little attention has been paid to the importance of teaching lexical knowledge in a systematic manner, resulting in the proliferation of basic lexical mistakes among many students in Japan.   In applied linguistics research and pedagogy, only a handful of researchers have referred to the issue of synonym differentiation, and no definitive work yet exists.

Aim

The first and foremost aim of this investigation is to raise the students' awareness of lexical choices, particularly of synonyms, by having them undergo hands-on experiences intended to impart the understanding that the different usages of synonyms are best learned when presented in context.   I shall suggest that the Synonym Grid (see Table 1), or synonym-in-context approach, would present clearer distinctions of synonym usage.

Synonymous words	collocates in context	phrase/sentence/usage

Table 1   Synonym Grid for differentiating collocates of synonymous lexemes

Methodology

Synonymous lexemes have been extracted from a corpus of four million contemporary spoken and written English texts compiled by the author. Students were provided with sample concordance lines of synonymous lexeme groups. They entered their findings into the Synonym Grid so that the differences can be understood at a glance. Then, they were asked to find patterns emerging from their findings. The validity of the methodology was evaluated according to learner performance after experimentation with the proposed approach. As homework during the summer vacation, students were asked to show that they had acquired skills and competence in differentiating synonymous lexemes of their own choice, by utilizing open corpora such as COBUILD Direct demo services.

Evaluation

The entire process, from analysis of the raw data to reaching the conclusion, followed the procedures outlined in the classroom. The students' findings showed that they had gained a certain new perspective in dealing with synonymous words. The feedback from the students also indicated that this classroom application was valuable.

Conclusion

The classroom exercises with the given concordance lines provided them with an opportunity to raise their awareness of lexical choices. They filled the Synonym Grid with synonymous words together with their collocates and compared them in the contexts within which the combinations occurred. The completed grids presented an instantaneous view of the different collocational features of synonymous words. Furthermore, the students followed the same procedures in their independent work and generated the intended results. They demonstrated the ability to apply this newly acquired skill by visiting the publicly available corpora on the Internet and incorporating their own lexical insights. It is, therefore, safe to conclude that the Synonym Grid, a concordance-based synonym differentiation tool the author has proposed and experimented with, contributed to developing a sensitivity to lexical combinations, and a more efficient approach to autonomous vocabulary learning.