

Lexicon Retrieval in College English Writing

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Abstract. For many Chinese college English learners, the appropriateness and correctness use of vocabulary in English writing is a tough job. Many students attribute their failure of using right words in writing to poor vocabulary. Does this opinion make sense? This paper first lists common problems existing in college English writings then moves to analyze the causes of these problems with psycholinguistic theories. Finally it provides strategies suggestions for students to master the appropriate use of vocabulary in writing.

1. Introduction

According to China College English Curriculum Requirements (2007), students should acquire a total of 4,795 words and 700 phrases ((including those that are covered in high school English courses and the Basic Requirements), among which 2,000 are active words) Students should not only be able to comprehend the active words but also be proficient in using them both in speaking or writing [1]. However, many students fail to use appropriate and correct words in writing, they are unable to recall the words timely or retrieve the appropriate words, more often than not, they are prone to adopt plain and colorless words in writing.

2. Frequent-met Lexicon Problems in Writing

2.1 Recall Failure

In the process of writing, the writer means to use a word but fails to recall that word appropriately. When asked, students often say they can recognize the word if meet, but cannot recall it when wanting to use it, such as mascot, even if they have learned this word in reading class and practiced it in their listening class, they forget the spelling when using it in writing.

2.2 Synonyms, Part of Speech and Collocation Misuse

Some student say they can retrieve many similar meaning words but are confused to choose the most appropriate one while writing. These students believe that they have stored a lot of lexicon in their minds, but do not know which one is the best to match the sentence meaning. For example, when they want to use a word meaning grow less and smaller in a sentence, they are confused to choose one from diminish, decrease, decline, shrink, even though these words have stored in their minds already. Besides, another frequent issue is that students often misuse the part of speech in writing, such as nouns, verbs and adjectives. For example they have already stored the meaning of words vary, variety, various in mind which all mean change in Chinese, but in writing they often misuse these words, they write: I can take part in variety activities in university. Moreover, many students also find collocation is a tough to master, and are often confused in using the collocation: why should some words or group of words go together but not other words? Inappropriate collocations are very often found in college students' English writings. We can easily locate such collocations as receive the phone, go risk of.

2.3 Plain English

When students are required to write a piece of writing under time pressure such as half an hour, the vocabulary in these writings usually present simple, colorless and common words.

3. Causes Analysis

The lexical retrieval failure and inappropriateness can be explained with psycholinguistics theories. Based on psycholinguistics, the organization of word knowledge in permanent memory is called the internal lexicon. The process by which we activate our word knowledge is termed lexical access [2]. In the students' process of writing, they need to continuously retrieve the words, so the quality of their writings have much to do with both of their internal lexicons and their abilities of lexical access.

3.1 Causes of Recall Failure

In the case of students can recognize a word when meet but cannot recall it when they want to use, mainly it is because that the students do not store this words in their mind as a form of internal lexicon. Here take the word mascot again for an example, they met this word before or maybe have learned this word and practice it in listening and reading, but they did not consciously memorize and store this word in their minds. The word mascot exists in their minds only as the form of short memory but not permanent memory so cannot be considered as internal lexicon.

This phenomenon also can be explained by Andrew Spencer&Arnold N Zwicky's opinions who consider any word that is stored in a single speaker or hearer's mental lexicon is an existing word and the unlisted word is a potential word which is provided by morphology not by lexicon. "even if our ideal speaker/hearer spoke or heard(or read) a particular word before, if that word has not been stored in that person's internal lexicon for some reason, then the word is still a potential word rather than an existing word as far as the mental lexicon is concerned." [3]

Therefore, the store failure of word as a form of internal lexicon stops students from fully recalling the spelling of the word.

3.2 Causes of Synonyms, Part of Speech and Collocations Misuse

Students who can retrieve words in writing but fail to use the words appropriately and correctly are due to their methods in storing the lexicon. Generally speaking, students who do well in choosing words in writing adopt better methods in learning vocabulary. These students are very careful in storing words in mind. They distinguish the subtle differences between words such as diminish, decrease, decline, shrink when memorizing and clearly classifying the words gender when store words like vary, variety, various. When meet words with collocations they pay much attention to the usage and store the collocation rules in minds. Hence, when retrieving words they seldom mistake the synonyms or misuse the part of speech or collocations.

On the contrary, students who do poor in choosing the right words usually store the words in their mind in a different way. They only store the meanings of words in minds, pay little attention to its grammatical use and the use in contexts. That means they store isolated words in their minds, ignoring the grammatical forms and meanings used in different context. And when memorizing the words, they just memorize the meanings of the words, paying little or no attention to the collocation rules. (See the mind maps below) [4]

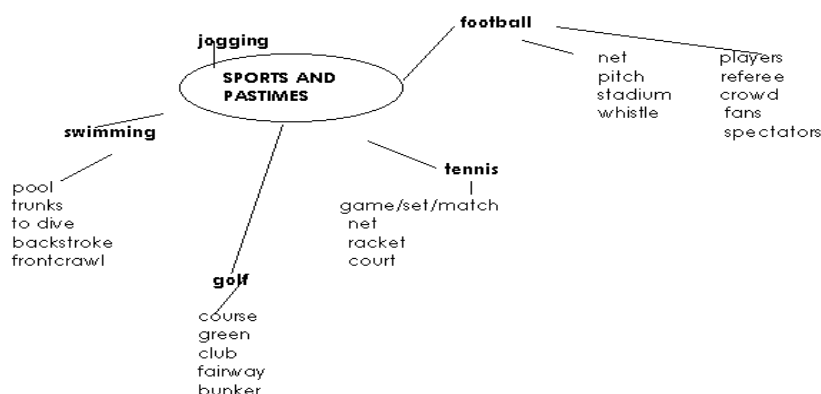


Figure 1. Mind Maps of Sports and Pastimes

The Figure 1 can explain the way that the students store vocabularies. These vocabularies are associated with each other and one can activate another. As Carroll says, the words organization is closer to a web or interconnecting nodes, with the distance between the nodes determined by both structural characteristics such as taxonomic relations and considerations such as typicality and degree of association between related concepts [1]. Students are quite familiar with the words *course*, *pitch*, and *court*. If students only store these isolated words in mind, they will fail to write the proper collocation of words *football pitch*, *golf course* and *tennis court*.

3.3 Causes of Plain and Colorless Words

In writing, some students can retrieve words but still fail to use the relatively complicated words they learned, which also can be explained in a psycholinguistics way. Based on the psycholinguistics, students tend to retrieve the high-frequency words, which are words they often use in speaking, reading and listening. Even though they have mastered a large amount of vocabulary, it is still hard for them or takes them much more time to retrieve the low-frequency words. "Motivated writers give themselves more time to access the right words, and it often takes more time if the words are low in frequency." "high-frequency words will be accessed faster than low-frequency words" [5], "The link between the frequency of exposure that people have to words, and their readiness to use them, seem very tight" [6].

4. Strategies Suggestions

Learning to store and retrieve vocabulary is of great importance for English learners for it affects the overall process of language acquisition. To completely memorize and learn to use the words not only demand the time but also need strategies.

Firstly, Interest is of the first importance. Without motivation, the process of memorizing vocabulary is quite boring. Students can do a lot of extensive reading to cultivate their interests.

Secondly, A good dictionary is essential. Objectively speaking, besides the memorizing methods, mastering the use of vocabulary has much to do with the dictionaries that a person uses. Most of non-English majors use the English-Chinese dictionary or electrical dictionaries rather than monolingual i.e. English-English dictionary. English-Chinese dictionary, to some extent, helps students understand the words meaning, also cause the difficulties in comprehending English lexicon since it just provides the meaning of the vocabulary which does not offer specific examples to show the specific use of the words. The Chinese meanings of many synonyms are the same, for example the meanings of diminish, decrease, decline, shrink hold the same meaning *jian shao*. While words like these are explained with some different meanings in English-English dictionaries--*diminish: decrease in size, extent, or range. Decrease: to grow or cause to grow gradually less or smaller, as in number, amount, or intensity. Decline: to slope downward; descend. Shrink: to become reduced in amount or value; dwindle*. It is not exaggerated to say that "any sets of operations, step, plans, routines used by the learner to facilitate the obtaining, storage, retrieval, and use of information" [7]. Thus, making sure a dictionary that gives examples of how the word is used in context is quite important for English learners. Dictionary like Cambridge International Dictionary of English; Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English, Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary are good dictionaries for students.

Last but not the least, T. Yu (2014) believes that there is an absolute necessity to improve college English writing from the perspective of mental lexicon since "College English Writing has close related to the mental lexicon of storage, retrieval and access as well as the internal association within words" [8]. She believes that one of the poor productive performance in writing because English learners are deficient in awareness of reorganization of L2 mental lexicon, the semantic information of L2 has not been stored in where it should be. Learning words from context but not just from word list. While students are learning lexicon, it is of great importance to adopt the way of combing contexts. "As a result of context effects and semantic priming, contextualized words are recognized more quickly than isolated words; thus, proper context can hasten the recognition of words and eliminate ambiguity." [9] There are many ways to practice using words in context such

as filling-in exercises, paraphrasing exercises or reading comprehension exercises. The more practice, the more accurate low-frequency words will be retrieved if students intentionally practice some useful, much more complicated words in the process of learning. Schmitt & McCarthy asserts that the more cognitive energy is expended in manipulating and thinking about a word, the more likely it is that the individual will be able to recall and use it [10].

5. Conclusion

The success of appropriateness and correctness vocabulary use in English writing can be achieved through constant practice. To avoid failing to recall the word students need to spend time practicing the spelling of words according to the sounds, features. To avoid misusing synonyms, part of speech and collocations, learners need to completely understand the meaning of words, consult dictionaries as often as possible, do some words comparison, distinguish the different forms of the words, intentionally learn words as a group and follow the collocation rules in the process of learning. To avoid plain lexicon in writing, students also should be encouraged to practice using new words they have learned, so as to transform the low-frequency words to high-frequency words.

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