Vocabulary Teaching in College English Based on the Wholeness Principle of Gestalt Theory

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Vocabulary teaching is always a difficulty to English teachers while learners have found the task of accumulating vocabulary time-consuming, boring, and ineffective. This paper intends to explain vocabulary teaching and learning based on the wholeness principle of Gestalt Theory, which emphasizes the wholeness of experience and behaviors. It points out that without an organic whole, the learning process will be incomplete and ineffective. The process of learning is not the accumulation of piecemeal examination of the isolated elements. It is anticipated that the efficiency of classroom teaching and learning can be improved.

Keywords: Gestalt Theory, wholeness principle, vocabulary, perception

Introduction

The English linguist D. A. Wilkins once had an incisive comment on the importance of vocabulary: “Without grammar, very little can be conveyed; without vocabulary, nothing can be conveyed” (Wilkins, 1972, p. 111), which plainly points out vocabulary is the most important component of a language, since it is vital in verbal communication and influences the proficiency of a language learner in his listening, speaking, reading, writing and translating. However, traditional ways of vocabulary teaching have not been very successful for they emphasize too much the isolated meaning of an individual word. At the same time, students do not have the autonomy in learning, believing that learning vocabulary is filled with confusion and boredom. They tend to have a misunderstanding that the accumulation of vocabulary equals memorizing mechanically or rote memorization without truly understanding. Hence, a large number of students seemingly have a large vocabulary with which they can fulfill most of their reading tasks. Nevertheless, it is very likely they fail to use the words and expressions that have been crammed into their brains in their speaking, writing or translation and even they may fail to remember them a few days later.

A Brief Introduction of Gestalt Theory and Its Application in Learning

The word “Gestalt” is from German, loosely translated as “configuration” or “pattern” or “an organized whole that is perceived more than the sum of its parts”. Gestalt Theory originated in Austria and Germany as a reaction against the associationist and structural schools’ atomistic orientation (an approach which fragmented experience into distinct and unrelated elements). It provides a rational explanation for why shifts in spacing, timing, and configuration can have a profound effect on the meaning of presented information.
Wetheimer, Kohler, and Koffka are believed to be the founders of Gestalt Psychology. Gestalt Psychology puts emphasis on the wholeness of experience and behaviors, holding that the whole could never be understood by piecemeal examination of the isolated elements (Zhao, 2018) and the whole is entirely different from the sum of its parts.

Gestalt psychologists maintain that psychological, physiological, and behavioral phenomena are irreducible experiential configurations not derivable from a simple summation of perceptual elements, such as sensation and response. The basic theory has found its wide application in science and technology, art, visual communication education, psychotherapy, architecture, and many other fields.

Gestalt psychologists tend to use some perceptual terminology to explain the phenomena in learning. They view learning in non-behavioristic ways. They have conducted experiments showing how solutions to problems happen in moments of insight, where all aspects of the problems organize themselves spontaneously into a meaningful and comprehensive action in the situation. According to them, learning means perceiving the key elements in certain contexts to know the correlations between them and identify the inherent logical structure. The learning process involves the assimilation and transferring in the brains based on the learners’ existing knowledge. Therefore, learning, perception, and cognition are almost synonyms.

The Wholeness Principle in Gestalt Theory and the Vocabulary Teaching in College English

Gestalt psychologists start with the study of perception and apply the principle of wholeness gained in their experiments into the practice of learning. They have provided unique insights into the nature of learning, creative thinking, transfer of learning and memorization. From their perspective, learning is an intellectual behavior and a process of comprehension, which requires the participation of cognitive activities, such as understanding, comprehension, and productive thinking. They also believe that the learners gain “an insight” into the solution to a problem after they have pondered the problem, i.e., they “come to see” the solution suddenly.

Gestalt Theory includes three core concepts: wholeness, insightfulness, and creativity, among which, the wholeness principle is the most important and plays a significant role in learning English vocabulary.

Gestalt psychologists believe that thoughts are holistic and conscious perception rather than simple collection of the associated presentations (Zhu & Liu, 2012). Learning will leave memory traces which are not isolated in the learners’ brains. These traces make up the organic whole, i.e., Gestalt. Hence, the course of learning is not adding new traces or subtracting existing traces. Instead, it is converted.

What a learner has acquired depends on how he understands the context of the problem. If the learner, when confronted with the problem, cannot perceive correlation between the elements, his perception is in disorder and not differentiated. Therefore, he is not learning. In the course of learning, the learner’s understanding of a problem, in most cases, is converted from a primal confusion into a meaningful and organized state. Thus, from the perspective of Gestalt, learning is the reconfiguration of perception or cognition.

The Wholeness of Vocabulary

The wholeness of vocabulary refers to the fact that a word is an organic whole composed of its sound,
form, meaning, and grammar, which includes at least the following five aspects—lexical form, lexical grammar, collocation, lexical function, and lexical meaning.

For a long time, the learning of vocabulary has been neglected in college English class and has become a bottleneck in English learning for many students. It is partially because students usually isolate the words from the contexts, merely focusing on the pronunciation, meaning and the collocation. A survey about the students learning vocabulary was conducted by the author of this paper, which reveals that the majority of students only refer to a glossary or a glossary manual without example sentences to memorize the words mechanically. They have accumulated a seemingly very large vocabulary. However, they can recognize a large number of words even without knowing their part of speech or the collocation. That means students only partially understand these words, but not well enough for active use. Some of them are even confused about the pronunciation of some words. This is viewed as ineffective learning by Gestalt Psychology. Vocabulary does not exist isolatedly in one’s brain. Rather, one word item exists as a core and correlates with other elements. If learners memorize words in an enclosed and mechanical way, they are bound to rely on rote memorization to remember some non-related meaning, use and sample sentences without digesting, assimilating and outputting. Hence, their ability to externalize the vocabulary is very weak, not to mention the actual application.

The Wholeness in Learning Vocabulary

Language teachers when teaching vocabulary should recognize the wholeness of every individual word, and give students directions to help them realize that words are not the linguistic units that exist isolatedly. They should be associated with the pronunciation, form, collocation, and contexts. On the other hand, they can be embodied in listening, speaking, reading, writing, and translating. Therefore, in learning vocabulary, students should make full use of various strategies to analyze, compare, deduce, and synthesize in order to motivate and improve their knowledge structure and achieve the transfer of knowledge.

Only when students make a proper allocation of time in learning vocabulary, analyzing, comparing and associating the words’ sound, form, meaning, and grammar and understanding them in certain contexts, can they really have a good command of them. Otherwise, it is only sketchy knowledge.

Let’s take two examples from *New Century College English Zooming in: An Integrated English Course* (Qin, 2014).

Example 1: temper

She displayed a tough, unyielding courage, tempered by remarkable self-control and self-discipline.
—Unit 7, Text A—Did You Have a Tough Childhood?

According to the explanation in the notes, here “temper” means—to make sth. less severe by adding sth. that has the opposite effect. However, it does not make any sense in this sentence. The word “temper” appears in the part about how the former U.S. First Lady Mrs. Roosevelt became one of the most loved and respected women of her entire generation despite her tough childhood. The former First Lady “had a very unpleasant childhood” and “after marrying Franklin Roosevelt, she ended up courageously nursing her husband through crippling polio”. Without any analysis or reference to the context, students may get confused or even have a misunderstanding that Mrs. Roosevelt became less aggressive and gave up struggling against the obstacles. Nonetheless, “temper” has an alternative meaning—to make metal as hard as is needed by heating it and then putting it in cold water. When the teacher leads the students to examine the second meaning of “temper” and
the context, they gain an “insight” that here the author of the passage is to compare courage to metal to indicate that Mrs. Roosevelt became tougher and more resilient after going through all those hardships in life.

Example 2: relentless

Life is never just being. It is a becoming, a relentless flowing on.

—Unit 6, Text A—Two Truths to Live by

Let’s take a look at how “relentless” is explained in the notes—refusing to be less strict or severe, which obviously successively confuses the students. Not until they reread and reexamine the context can they start to challenge the reference explanation. In the two consecutive sentences, “being” and “becoming” form a contrast between two states and “relentless” is used to modify “flowing on”. “Being” is static while “becoming” is dynamic. Therefore, it is more proper to understand “relentless” as “refusing to give up or to stop” with “flowing on”. The whole sentence vividly describes the ceaseless continuity of life.

In the above two examples, students can have a clear understanding of the meanings and the usages of the words with the reference to the contexts. The process of analysis, comparison, correlation, and challenge can make them have a deeper impression of the two words so that next time when they encounter these two words again, the insight they have gained in this experience will shed a light on how they can find the truly proper meaning.

The representative of Gestalt Psychologists Max Wertheime believes that the aim of school learning is to transfer the content acquired in school to the contexts outside the campus. The knowledge obtained by rote memorization can only be applied to very detailed and specific contexts, i.e., the context that learners are originally exposed to. Only by learning through insightful understanding, can learners truly convert the knowledge into an integral part of their own and transform it into their skills with which they can use to solve similar problems in any context at any time. Therefore, apart from the explanation and clarification, teachers need to design some tasks in listening, speaking, reading, writing, and translation for students to enhance their sensibility to the words so that the targeted vocabulary can be learned masterfully. For instance, after finishing the text, teachers can ask students to retell the text or give a comment either in a written paper or orally. In either of the tasks, students are required to use the newly-learned vocabulary. The genuine understanding of the vocabulary lies in the comprehension of the organic whole—the lexical form (the spelling), lexical grammar, collocation, lexical function, and lexical meaning.

**Conclusion**

The principle of wholeness or holistic principle in Gestalt Theory emphasizes the wholeness of perception. It believes that the solutions to a problem can emerge after the observation and examination of the whole physical environment. In other words, after they observe and examine the problem, they gain an insight into it. The process of finding the solution is a series of integral and associated processes in consonance with the context.

Vocabulary is an important component of college English learning and it is also a challenging task to both teachers and learners. To improve the efficiency of vocabulary learning, in the course of teaching, teachers should emphasize the textual form as well as the language content. The wholeness of the vocabulary and vocabulary learning should be paid due attention to from the presentation of the words to their application. It is necessary for teachers to stress the understanding in certain contexts. Only in this way, can the process of vocabulary teaching and learning become lively, interesting and effective.
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