

Learning Vocabulary through Etymology: A Practical Lesson

Sasan Baleghizadeh and Mehrdad Yousefpoori Naeim, Shahid Beheshti University, G.C., Iran

Introduction

Failing to remember previously studied words serves as one of the most commonly reported difficulties in vocabulary learning. This article makes an attempt to resolve this issue through a practical lesson, which is based on the etymology of the word *hermetic*. The lesson also goes further to include more aspects of vocabulary learning, such as usage. This sample lesson is examined both theoretically (part by part) and practically through teaching it in an advanced class and gathering the students' opinions about it, using a short questionnaire. These opinions indicate a positive attitude toward the lesson on the part of the students. At the end, some suggestions offered by the students for the improvement of the lesson are included, which could help teachers/materials writers in adapting the proposed lesson as well as developing new teaching materials.

Learning vocabulary has always been a major concern for language learners (Nation, 2002), and it is considered by many to be one of the two main components of language teaching, the other one being grammar instruction. The importance of vocabulary learning can be perceived by looking at the body of research done in this regard (e.g. Singleton, 2008), the variety of teaching techniques and materials developed (e.g. Gairns & Redman, 1998), and also the number of word lists offered for different purposes (e.g., West, 1953; Nation, 1990; Laufer, 1992; or Cobb, 2002).

One of the main questions in the learning of vocabulary is whether one should go for receiving explicit instruction or try to set the basis for incidental (implicit) learning. Although many studies have investigated the benefits of implicit learning, there is now a relative consensus among researchers that explicit vocabulary instruction needs to be an essential part of second language learning. According to Hunt & Beglar (2002), explicit vocabulary instruction is essential for beginner and intermediate students.

Another important issue that we need to bear in mind is that words are more than a set of phonological/morphological forms associated with some entities, and, in the same line, learning words is more than just memorising them with their meanings. As Montrul maintains, "learning vocabulary in a second language is a complex task that involves much more than learning sound-meaning pairings; it also involves learning how lexical information is morphologically expressed and syntactically constrained." (2001:145)

Various kinds of techniques, strategies, and, of course, materials have been designed and developed for effective vocabulary teaching. Using word etymologies, however, remains as one of the least researched techniques for teaching vocabulary, and to the knowledge of the researchers, no serious materials have ever been developed on the basis of etymological accounts. There are two studies (Boers, 2001 and Boers et al., 2007) which closely examine the role of etymology, not concerning words but idioms, and they are experimental/statistical in nature and do not provide a practical framework for teaching etymologies. In this article we attempt to offer language teachers a sample lesson with theoretical and practical analyses to encourage development of similar lessons according to teachers' own specific classroom settings.

The Lesson

..... *hermetic*



In the old days, hospital equipment was made of glass and surgical stainless steel and, after use, was washed and sterilized in an autoclave. These days, it's all disposable, and to make sure people aren't reusing it, as well as to keep it from getting dirty and possibly introducing infection into a patient on the operating table, it mostly comes hermetically sealed in plastic. This sense of shrink wrapped surgical isolation is what comes to mind for me when I hear the phrase "hermetically sealed."

I had always supposed that the hermetic process was some special technology for vacuum packing. Looking in the dictionary however, I see that it's named after a Greek god. There was more than one Hermes in Greek antiquity. One of them

was the messenger of the gods who the Romans renamed Mercury. The other was Hermes Trismegistus who was also Greek, and whose last name means “thrice greatest” although I have been unable to learn why he was thrice greatest.

This Hermes was the god of mysterious sciences and alchemy. It is the alchemy part that allowed his name to be applied to everything from home canning to top secret security spy type treatment of information. By the mysteries of alchemy, people could melt closed glass or metal openings in containers, and thereby, seal them completely. Perhaps this kind of sealing by melting doesn't seem so mysterious today, but you don't tell a god that to his face, especially one thrice great.

Because this word has Greek roots, it is much older than the 400 years it has been in English. The playwright Ben Jonson was the first to use it in one of his plays. Ben Jonson was a contemporary of Shakespeare's and evidently a friend of his too.

What It Means

Match each sentence with the correct definition of hermetic.

1. Christendom had its own long tradition of interest in the occult, the **hermetic** philosophy, and the magical powers.

a. away from outside influences – solitary

2. The container has a **hermetic** seal, which helps keep its contents fresh.

b. airtight – completely closed

3. For the next 20 years, he lived a **hermetic** life in a far away desert.

c. relating to an ancient Greek god, Hermes Trismegistus – cryptic or beyond comprehension.

How to Use It

- *Hermetic* is an adjective, its adverb being, which comes from *hermetical* – the occasional variant of *hermetic*.
- Sometimes *hermetic* is written as *Hermetic*, when it refers to the occultism attributed to Hermes Trismegistus or to being cryptic and mysterious.
- *Hermetically* is very often collocated with *sealed*: *a hermetically sealed package*.

How to Remember It

The word *hermetic* is taken from the name of a Greek god, Hermes Trismegistus, who was famous for (1), which helped people pack things tightly by (2).

- (1) natural sciences alchemy medicine
- (2) melting metal or glass openings
 - having gods do that for them
 - a special technology for vacuum packing

More Examples

- The theory behind certain types of salt cooking is that heat and moisture are trapped under a **hermetic** crust, forcing seasoning to permeate the food rather than allowing them to escape ... (The New York Times, 1982)
- Some [works] are quite mundane and others **hermetic**. (The New York Times, 2001)
- Each Prada packet is **hermetically sealed** with argon gas, found in Mars's atmosphere. (Bazaar Magazine, 2001)

Theoretical Analysis of the Lesson

The main features of the lesson are discussed below:

- 1. A fun reading text with various topics:** The reading text chosen for this lesson is by no means monotonous or boring. The language of the text is rather informal with a few light-hearted interjections. Though it is not lengthy, the text covers four topics (hospital, Greek mythology, alchemy, and literature in paragraphs one, two, three, and four respectively).
- 2. Different meanings of a word:** The first exercise, coming right after the reading text, deals with all three contemporary meanings of hermetic. The reading text provides one of the meanings directly (meaning b) and another one indirectly (meaning c), and the third meaning could be realised through the context and a lit bit of logical processing (meaning a).
- 3. Grammatical and usage points:** The second exercise focuses on the grammatical aspects of hermetic and the way it is usually used. At first, the derivations of this word are introduced. Then, a distinction is made between the capitalised and uncapitalised hermetic, and finally, a collocation

(hermetically sealed) which was earlier used in the reading text, is restated to provide the learners with an enhanced input.

Usage issues aside, collocations are of interest in second language teaching from the point of aiding vocabulary retention. As Decaricco (2001, p.292) states, the meaning associations in collocations “assist the learner in committing these words to memory and also aid in defining the semantic area of a word.” This claim holds true for the collocation presented in this lesson, as *seal* is closely related to the idea of being airtight (hermetic) in meaning. This would add to the associations of hermetic in the mind of the learners, and thus, it would probably become an aid to later retention of the word.

Etymology aiding retention: The third exercise pursues the goal of helping learners store the meaning of hermetic in their minds more easily and for a longer period of time. This exercise appears in the form of two short reading comprehension check questions to make sure that the learners will find out the relations between the etymological account of the word and its current meaning.

This section will hopefully help students store the meaning of hermetic more efficiently by making more associations for this word in their minds, and thus, making it more meaningful for themselves. This process of meaningful learning occurs when students realize how hermetic etymologically comes to mean what it means now (i.e., airtight): Hermetic → comes from the name of the Greek god Hermes Trismegistus → who was the god of alchemy → and used his alchemy skills in melting to pack things tightly.

4. Examples from contemporary English

In this last section, three examples of hermetic used in contemporary English are given to further show how it is used in the real life language and also to conclude the lesson by once more reviewing the gist of the lesson. This section plays a motivational role as well; learners will probably notice that the word they have just learnt could be useful for them, as it is used by famous publishers. The lesson starts with a text talking about the intended word and ends with tangible instances of that word used in complete sentences.

Practical Analysis of the Lesson

The above lesson was taught to seven adult female students on the 6th of June, 2010. It was an upper-intermediate/advanced class held 5 days a week. The whole lesson took the teacher 20 minutes to teach, and 5 minutes was dedicated to the completion of the questionnaires after the lesson. The students did not have to write their names on either the lesson papers or on the questionnaires. The teacher asked the students if they knew the target word hermetic or if they had ever encountered it. None of the students could remember seeing the word before. The teacher told the students how much time they had to do the lesson, and she also asked them not to look up the

words they did not know and instead try to focus more on the gist and the overall meaning of the text.

The questionnaire was a very simple and straightforward one, consisting of 6 questions (4 multiple-choice and 2 open-ended ones). The four multiple-choice questions with the percentages of the choices are reported below:

1. Would you like to have similar lessons to this in future?
 Yes. **(100 %)** No difference. **(0 %)** No. **(0 %)**

2. Did you find the lesson interesting?
 Yes. **(85 %)** No idea. **(15 %)** No. **(0 %)**

3. Do you think lessons like this can help you learn and remember words better?
 Yes. **(85 %)** No difference. **(15 %)** No. **(0 %)**

4. Do you think the time set for this lesson was enough?
 It was not enough. **(57 %)** It was enough. **(43 %)** It was more than enough. **(0 %)**

The first question (“Would you like to have similar lessons to this in future?”), which was the most general of all, was answered positively by all the students, and this is clearly good support for the overall lesson. The second question (“Did you find the lesson interesting?”) specifically concerns the motivational value of the lesson, which always remains as one of the main elements of any teaching materials. Question number three (“Do you think lessons like this can help you learn and remember words better?”) deals with the didactic value of the lesson, which was, after all, the main purpose of developing this lesson. Finally, the fourth multiple-choice question (“Do you think the time set for this lesson was enough?”) elicits students’ opinions about the time dedicated to this lesson. This question, in the light of the students’ earlier reactions to earlier questions, could probably indicate that they enjoyed working on the lesson and wished they had had more time to spend on it. This idea was simply stated in the response of one of the students to question number 6 (an open-ended question – see below): “I think the time isn’t enough and at least 30 minutes is better to work on all parts of the lesson more carefully.” It is also worth mentioning that all the students managed to finish the lesson within 20 minutes, and this might further imply that their preference to have more time to do the lesson could be due to their enjoying the lesson or finding it useful.

Here are the two open-ended questions:

5. What part of the lesson did you like most? (1. The reading text 2. What It Means 3. How to Use It 4. How to Remember It 5. More Examples) Why?

6. Please write down your ideas and/or suggestions about this lesson.

Question number 5 was an attempt to find the section favoured by most students. The following table reports students' choices in this regard:

The Part of the Lesson	The Number of Students Liking It*
The reading text	3
What It Means	2
How to Use It	3
How to Remember It	2
More Examples	1

* The students were allowed to choose more than one part.

Two major reasons mentioned by the students for choosing the reading text as the best part were 1. "It was like a story." and 2. "It increases our reading speed in a short time." One of the eye-catching reasons mentioned for choosing What It Means section was "when I match words with their meanings, it helps me to memorise them." As for How to Use It section, one of the students said, "I like it because I know many words but I can't use them." No special reasons were brought by the students for choosing the last two parts (How to Remember It and More Examples).

Concluding Remarks

No lesson is ever perfect, and this lesson is no exception. Aside from the positive points discussed about this lesson so far, there are many ways that this could be improved or adapted to match different teaching settings. Students always serve as convenient resources for receiving suggestions for such improvements. In our specific case, the same strategy was utilised, and here are some of the suggestions gathered:

- "We can make our own sentences with the new word and share them in the class."
- "That would be better if the word was from our books. We already have many new words to learn there."

- “I wish we had a discussion about the lesson or the story of the reading in the class after the lesson finished.”

Acknowledgements

The authors would like to thank Ms. Maryam Jazayeri for teaching the lesson

References

- Boers, F. (2001). Remembering figurative idioms by hypothesising about their origins. *Prospect*, 16, 35 – 43.
- Boers, F., Eyckmans, J., & Stengers, H. (2007). Presenting figurative idioms with a touch of etymology: more than mere mnemonics? *Language Teaching Research*, 11, 43 – 62.
- Carter, R. (1998). Vocabulary: applied linguistic perspectives. London: Routledge.
- Cobb, T. (2002). ‘Why and how to use frequency lists to learn words’. The Complete Lexical Tutor for Data-driven Learning. Retrieved 21 April 2005, from <http://132.208.224.131>.
- Decarrico, J. S. (2001). Vocabulary learning and teaching. In M. Celce-Murcia (Eds.), Teaching English as a second or foreign language (3rd ed., pp. 285–299). US: Heinle and Heinle.
- Gairns, R. & Redman, S. (1998). Working with words: a guide to teaching and learning vocabulary. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Hunt, A. & Beglar, D. (2002). Current research and practice in teaching vocabulary in Richards J. C. & W. A. Renandya (eds.), Methodology in language teaching: An anthology of current practice (pp. 258-266). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Laufer, B. (1992). How much lexis is necessary for reading comprehension? in Bejoint H. & P. Arnaud (eds.), Vocabulary and Applied Linguistics (pp. 126-132). London: Macmillan.
- Montrul, S. (2001). Introduction. Studies in Second Language Acquisition, 23, 145 – 151.
- Morimoto, S., & Loewen, S. (2007). A comparison of the effects of image schema-based instruction and translation-based instruction on the acquisition of L2 polysemous words. *Language Teaching Research*, 11, 347 – 372.
- Nation, I. S. P. (1990). Teaching and Learning Vocabulary. New York: Newbury House.
- Nation, P. (2002). Best practice in vocabulary teaching and learning. In J. C. Richards & W. A. Renandya (Eds.), Methodology in language teaching: An anthology of current practice (pp. 267-272). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Singleton, D. (2008). Vocabulary learning strategies and foreign language acquisition. England: Multilingual Matters.

West, M. (1953). A General Service List of English Words. London: Longman.