The Application of the Semantic Field Theory in College English Vocabulary Instruction

Guo Changhong
Jiangxi University of Science & Technology

Abstract

This study explores the application of the semantic field theory in college English vocabulary instruction. It first investigates ways of constructing various semantic relations, including paradigmatic relations of synonymy, antonymy, polysemy and hyponymy and syntagmatic relations of collocation and metaphorical meaning. Then, it presents a synthetically pedagogical procedure of vocabulary instruction with the application of the semantic field theory. The study is of pedagogical significance in that it helps to enlarge learners’ vocabulary by constructing paradigmatic relations of new items and to deepen learners’ mastery of vocabulary, mainly connotation and collocation, by constructing syntagmatic relations of the new items.

Key words: the semantic field theory; vocabulary instruction; paradigmatic and syntagmatic relations; lexicon

Introduction

The learning of vocabulary is the core of second language acquisition (SLA). British linguist Wilkins once said, “Without grammar, little can be conveyed; without vocabulary, nothing can be conveyed” (1972: 111). Unlike learning grammar and phonetics, vocabulary learning is an incremental and unending task for any language learner.

Chen (2001) found that 66% of the college students think that learning vocabulary is a dull and fruitless job, based on a questionnaire survey on vocabulary learning. After analyzing the traditional vocabulary teaching approaches in his survey, Chen (2003: 8-9) summarized that “vocabulary instruction remains the major headache for English teachers and researchers in China”.

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This paper tries to explore vocabulary instruction on the basis of an important theory in semantics, the semantic field theory. The theory suggests that the lexical content of a language is best treated not as an aggregation of independent words or an unstructured list of words but as a collection of interrelating networks of relations between words. It is argued that the meaning of a word can only be adequately described through its semantic relations and contrasts to other words. The specific research questions explored in the present study are listed below:

1) How can words be taught with related meanings and in collocations?
2) How effective could vocabulary instruction be by applying the semantic field theory? How can it contribute to vocabulary acquisition and retention?

1. The semantic field theory

1.1 Trier’s paradigmatic semantic field
The semantic field theory was brought into its puberty by German scholar J. Trier in the 1930s, whose version is seen as a new phase in the history of semantics. Wu (1988: 94-95) summarized Trier’s semantic field theory as follows:

a. The vocabulary in a language system is semantically related and builds up a complete lexical system. This system is unsteady and changing constantly.
b. Since the vocabulary of a language is semantically related, we are not supposed to study the semantic change of individual words in isolation, but to study vocabulary as an integrated system.
c. Since lexemes are interrelated in sense, we can only determine the connotation of a word by analyzing and comparing its semantic relationship with other words. A word is meaningful only in its own semantic field.

Trier’s semantic field is generally considered paradigmatic. It deals with paradigmatic relations between words such as hyponymy, synonymy and antonymy.

1.2 Porzig’s syntagmatic semantic field
In contrast with Trier’s theory, another German linguist Porzig developed a notion of semantic field which is called syntactic field by some scholars. Porzig’s study was based on the analysis of the internal relation of the co-occurrence between words. It studied the probability for a lexical item to co-occur with others in the same context, e.g., bite and teeth, lick and tongue, bark and dog, etc. They are bound together by what Porzig called essential meaning-relations. The general nature of these relations is like this: What does one bite with? With the teeth, of course. What does one lick with? With the tongue, obviously. What is it that barks? A dog. This is illustrated by a few examples which are so banal that one may be inclined to overlook it and above all to underestimate its importance. However, because the appearance of one word in a syntagmatically-related lexical system always predicts the occurrence of the other and because there is a kind of expectancy and prediction between them, this syntagmatic relationship is essential to the acquisition of the depth of word knowledge.
The core point of syntagmatic semantic field is that the components in a phrase are not only grammatically related, but also semantically related. For example, in the phrases “open the door” (to make open or become open), “open an envelope” (to unfold or spread out), “open a shop” (to begin business), “open a road” (to make it possible to use a passage by removing the things that are blocking it), and “open a conference” (to start), open has different meanings in different contexts, and these meanings are determined by its collocation. A word has one of its meanings only when it collocates with a certain word or words, and in this way specific collocations are constituted, which constrains the appearance and existence of a certain meaning of one word. The syntagmatic semantic field is always used to analyze collocation, polysemy and metaphorical meanings.

1.3 Working definition
The different versions of the semantic field theory have one general feature in common: lexical items are grouped in certain fields under various criteria. According to Zhao (2001: 55), things in the objective world are in disorder, so in order to fully understand them, our human mind must deposit and memorize them through analyzing, judging and classifying. As far as vocabulary learning is concerned, learners remember words by sound clot or by semantic links. Adult college students have already had an existing schema about the world and language. When new second language (L2) words appear, what they should do is to find a suitable place for the words in this schema by certain links. It seems that a semantic interrelationship is an effective choice. Therefore, it seems feasible to enlarge vocabulary gradually and deepen the understanding of vocabulary items on the basis of the semantic field.

The discussion of semantic relations leads to semantic fields grouped under certain unifying features. In this paper, both paradigmatic relations of synonymy, antonymy, hyponymy and syntagmatic relations of collocation, polysemy and metaphorical meaning will be studied. It is predicted that constructing semantic fields by paradigmatic and syntagmatic relations can be a teaching approach that is effective in helping learners develop an interrelated system of vocabulary.

2. A pedagogical procedure of vocabulary instruction
When it comes to English vocabulary, learners usually go through the following five essential steps proposed by Brown & Payne (1994): encountering the new words; getting a clear image, either visual or auditory or both, for the forms of the new words; learning the meaning of the words; making a strong memory connection between the forms and meanings of the words; and using the words. It appears that each step represents something learners must do, at least at some basic level in order to achieve full productive knowledge of words.

This section discusses an application of the semantic field theory in vocabulary instruction following Brown and Payne’s five steps of vocabulary instruction. It presents a synthetically pedagogical procedure of teaching new words as: pre-reading brainstorming
of the words in the same field; getting the pronunciation, spelling and meaning of the new words; constructing semantic fields based on various semantic relations; consolidation during passage analysis; and revision of the word knowledge. This pedagogical procedure is illustrated with vocabulary instruction of words in Unit 5, Book I, New College English.

2.1 Pre-reading brainstorming of the words in the same field
The topic of this unit is Romance. In the first step of vocabulary instruction, learners are asked to do the brainstorming concerning romance. The result of this pre-reading activity is as follows.

![Brainstorming of “romance”](Guo, 2007)

Learners take an active part in this task and get a better understanding of the topic, thus becoming more interested in reading the passage. This helps to improve the reading efficiency. In this step, learners also form a basic semantic field related to romance. Meanwhile, the encounter with words in context helps increase learners’ knowledge about those words and their meanings. Learners may need various encounters with the same word in multiple contexts rather than in just one context, so this is just the beginning of vocabulary instruction of this unit. Learners first encounter words in this simple way before they learn them in the passage.

2.2 Getting the pronunciation, spelling and meaning of the new words
In this step, learners read the passage and guess the meaning of new words from the context in which they are used. Then they underline or copy the words that are new or difficult for them and mark out the pronunciation, spelling and meaning of the new words. Learners are asked to get familiar with the pronunciation and spelling of the new words because many errors seem to come from confusing words similar in pronunciation and form. For the meaning of the new words, in this step, learners largely learn these words respectively. They will study them in relation to other words in the next step.

2.3 Constructing semantic fields based on various semantic relations
The essential step of the application of the semantic field theory in vocabulary instruction is the construction of semantic fields. In order for learning to occur, new information must be integrated with and be built upon what learners already know. In other words, instruction should guide learners to use words and ideas they already know to help them associate meaning with words they do not know. Therefore, words in the same semantic field can be taught together. In this step, the teacher should find appropriate words to set
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up semantic fields of the new items, and at the same time make the presentation procedure an interesting learning process for the learners.

Semantic field construction uses features to identify the relationship of lexical items within a field, with the goal of discovering how terms within the field or domain are similar to each other. In semantic feature analysis, by contrast, the primary goal is to find those features that are distinctive, that have consequences for the grammar of the language, and that help to clarify the various meanings of a single word. Teachers may first check the glossary and pick out words belonging to the same semantic field, because the words or phrases of the same semantic field usually share part of the meaning or the same structure which will be easier to learn as a group than as separate items. Teaching vocabulary in this way saves time and energy and achieves better results at the same time.

When the phrase make one’s way is being taught, other phrases of the same semantic field can also be discussed, such as force one’s way, feel one’s way, shoulder one’s way, elbow one’s way, worm one’s way, which share the same component one’s way and same semantic feature go. This is a type of hyponymy, in which make one’s way is a co-hyponym of the other phrases mentioned above. While teaching them, teachers can point out the pattern of these phrases, that is, verb + one’s way. Thus, applying the semantic field theory to teaching can not only stimulate learners’ interest and creativity but also help them bridge the newly acquired knowledge with previously acquired knowledge.

Semantic feature analysis is used to analyze the pair of synonyms policeman and cop in this unit.

Policeman = [man] - [slang] + [member of a police force]
Cop = [man] + [slang] + [member of a police force]

The semantic feature [+ SLANG] distinguishes this pair of synonyms. Also when teachers are discussing the word slim, they may compare it with its synonyms such as thin, slender, slight, skinny and bony.

As for polysemy, teachers can start with the word’s core meaning or a best example. Take pursue as an example. The core meaning of pursue is to follow somebody, usually in order to catch them, and the prototypic pursue can be found in phrases like pursue a fox, or pursue a thief. Based on the core meaning or prototypic examples, teachers can continue with extended meanings and more examples of pursue, such as pursue one’s own interest, pursue economic reform and democracy, pursue a topic, etc. In this way, word meanings will be demonstrated and learners may find it comfortable to learn and understand these items one after another. Another polysemous word, delicate in this unit can be explained by finding out different synonyms or antonyms of its different meanings.

2.4 Consolidation during passage analysis
Words are basic units of a passage, and the formation of a passage is a process of putting words into sentences, sentences into paragraphs and paragraphs into a passage. However, this process is not a simple one of gathering words, but a process of semantic choice of paradigmatic and syntagmatic relations between different words. Through making this kind of choice, a coherent chain of words is established through the passage. By analyzing the paradigmatic and syntagmatic relations between words in the passage, the semantic
fields constructed previously can be consolidated. Consider the following example:

A young woman was coming toward me, her figure long and slim. Her golden hair lay back in curls from her delicate ears; her eyes were blue as flowers. Her lips and chin had a gentle firmness, and in her pale green suit she was like springtime come alive.

In this paragraph, words and expressions like *slim*, *golden*, *delicate*, as *flowers*, *gentle*, *like springtime* and *alive* belong to one semantic field. They are chosen to show readers the attractiveness of the hostess Hollis Maynell to the host John Blanchard. These words strengthen the coherence of the passage not by any systematic semantic relations but by their co-occurrence in the same passage. They shape a semantic chain in the passage. The following paragraph provide another example:

Suppose I’m beautiful. I’d always be haunted by the feeling that you had been taking a chance on just that, and that kind of love would disgust me. Suppose I’m plain. Then I’d fear that you were going on writing to me only because you were lonely and had no one else.

In this paragraph, *beautiful* and *plain* are a pair of direct antonyms that show a contrast, which gives a vivid description of the lady’s thought.

### 2.5 Revision of word knowledge

Learners should be provided chances to sort out their learned vocabulary in their own ways, using semantic maps or categorizations. The exercise can be used to consolidate learners’ command of the newly learnt words. These words serve as stimulus words; below each stimulus word there is a box containing four words. Among the four words in the box on the left, one to three words can be a synonym, an antonym, a co-hyponym or a superordinate, whereas among the four words in the box on the right, there can be one to three words that collocate with the stimulus word.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>1. beneficial</th>
<th>2. intricate</th>
<th>3. irritated</th>
<th>4. joyful</th>
<th>5. observant</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>profitable, fruitless, favorable, slim</td>
<td>elaborate, simple, complicated, splendid</td>
<td>vexed, calm, outer, angry</td>
<td>glad, sorrowful, portable, happy</td>
<td>alert, slow, diligent, polish</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>result, book, hoop, emotion</td>
<td>plot, stove, jaw, jerk</td>
<td>thief, mower, hush, kneel</td>
<td>swim, lawn, concern, crash</td>
<td>porch, plug, precise, assistant</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Figure 2.** Exercises to consolidate the command of newly learnt words
In this consolidation step, the newly learnt words are consolidated and reviewed with various exercises at carefully spaced intervals.

3. An empirical study of vocabulary instruction

This researcher carried out an empirical study to examine the effect of vocabulary instruction by applying the semantic field theory. This section reports the study.

3.1 Participants

The study involved 104 second-year non-English majors from Jiangxi University of Science and Technology. They came from two classes. Of the 104 participants, 52 were from Class One or the control group, and the other 52 were from Class Two or the experimental group. Judging from their performance in the college entrance examination, the two groups were nearly at the same level of English proficiency (See Table 1).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1. The result of the independent samples t-test of the pre-treatment examination</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Levene’s Test for Equality of Variances</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>F</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Equal variances assumed</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Equal variances not assumed</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The results of the college entrance examination were analyzed by SPSS 14.0. As shown in Table 1, “Sig. (2-tailed)” in “t-test for Equality of Means” was .094, which was greater than 0.05. Moreover, the average mark of the experimental group was 41.32 and the standard deviation was 9.26. In comparison, the average mark of the control group was 38.96 and the standard deviation was 7.80. There was no significant difference between the two groups.

3.2 Data collection and analysis

The two groups were both taught by this researcher, in the same classroom, with the same teaching facilities and instruction time. The only difference lay in the way of vocabulary instruction. The control group was instructed in the traditional method, while the experimental group was instructed in the semantic field strategy.

The traditional lexical pedagogy was the Grammar Translation Method: “Lessons typically consisted of a reading selection, two or three long columns of new vocabulary items with native-language equivalents, and a test” (Zimmerman, 1997/2001). This traditional method was summarized by Chen as follows (2003: 62):
1. The teacher reads aloud the new words, and students repeat after the teacher.
2. The teacher explains some key words chosen from the material, usually by offering meanings and sentence examples.
3. The teacher interprets vocabulary exercises.
4. The teacher gives dictations to check whether students have mastered the new words.

With the semantic field strategy (SFS), new words were taught by constructing semantic fields of words following Brown and Payne’s five steps of lexical teaching.

Each group met twice every week for two hours. The experiment lasted 15 weeks. During this period, 8 units of the *New College English*, Book I, were covered. In the study of each unit, both groups studied the new words in the word list.

At the end of this one-semester treatment, a questionnaire survey was conducted that helped obtain the views of the participants in the experimental group. In January 2007, the researcher conducted the survey. Because the questionnaire was about English learning, it was all in English. The 52 participants in the experimental group answered the questionnaire.

Also at the end of the treatment, a writing task of 120-150 words was given to the participants in both groups. The task was to write a short argumentative passage on the topic of *Information and life*, within 30 minutes. No dictionaries were allowed to be used. All the compositions were collected immediately and then analyzed in terms of lexical errors.

At last, all the students in the experimental and controlled groups took the final exam, and the results of the parts in the exam related to the direct use of vocabulary (including multiple choice, Chinese to English Translation and Writing) were analyzed to examine the teaching effects of the two vocabulary teaching strategies.

### 3.3 Findings and results

#### 3.3.1 From the questionnaire survey

Table 2 sums up the results of the questionnaire survey.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>questions</th>
<th>proportion</th>
<th>answers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Compared with the traditional method, do you think that the SFS is efficient?</td>
<td></td>
<td>is much more efficient</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>57.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do you think that words learnt with SFS stay longer and better in your memory?</td>
<td>yes, definitely</td>
<td>better</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>51.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Compared with the traditional method, do you think the SFS is easy for you?</td>
<td>very easy</td>
<td>easy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>0</td>
<td>23.1%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
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In addition to the items listed in Table 2, the questionnaire also included two open-ended questions, “What are your positive comments about the SFS?” and “What are your negative comments about the SFS?” Only 45 participants answered them. Some positive comments are as follows:

- What I like about this method is that the words move quickly into long-term memory.
- The words can be better memorized.
- The words can be better memorized and learned. It helps one to pronounce them.
- The vocabulary bank can be enlarged quicker.
- It makes learning easier and things are retained longer.

There were also some negative comments, e.g.

- It is difficult to find out the words in the related semantic fields.
- Sometimes it is confusing to have too many words appear at the same time.

The participants in the experimental group generally agreed that the SFS is more efficient than the traditional method and the words learnt with SFS could be retained longer in their memory. They preferred the SFS to the traditional method. They enjoyed the SFS more than the traditional method. The problem, according to the survey, was that the SFS may not be easy. These results show that while it is important not to overwhelm the students with too many words, the SFS is of much help to vocabulary learning and retention.

3.3.2 From the post-treatment written work

3.3.2.1 Description of errors

For the control group, 414 errors were collected, while for the experimental group, 331 errors were collected. This study just focused on lexical errors relevant to paradigmatic
and syntagmatic relations (see Table 3).

**Table 3. Errors in the post-experimental compositions**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Categories</th>
<th>Number of errors</th>
<th>Controlled Group</th>
<th>Experimental Group</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Assumed synonyms</td>
<td>136</td>
<td>32.9%</td>
<td>85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wrong collocations</td>
<td>82</td>
<td>19.8%</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Misuse of parts of speech</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>12.8%</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Verb tenses and voices</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>8.9%</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transitive or intransitive verbs</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>2.7%</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Omission of verbs or improper forms of verbs</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>9.4%</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Singular or plural nouns</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>4.6%</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Misuse of prepositions</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>4.1%</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ambiguous reference of pronouns</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>3.6%</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Misplaced modifiers</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1.2%</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL</td>
<td>414</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>331</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3 shows that lexical errors made up a large proportion of errors found in the post-treatment compositions, namely, assumed synonyms and wrong collocations. For the control group, errors in synonyms and collocations amounted to 218, making up 52.7% of the total errors of 414. In contrast, the errors in synonyms and collocations for the experimental group amounted to 136, making up 41.4% of the total errors of 331. These figures show that the experimental group had a reduced number of word choice errors, i.e., errors in assumed synonyms and wrong collocations. In other words, the semantic field strategy was more effective for the acquisition and retention of vocabulary than the traditional method.

### 3.3.2.2 Interpretation of errors

The word choice errors merit close examination.

1. **Assumed synonymy**

Some English words may have different semantic components, but once translated, they share similar Chinese meanings. This usually causes their misuse in Chinese students’ compositions. One learner wrote: *Surfing on the internet day and night consumes lots of strength*. The Chinese translation of this sentence, 日夜上网耗费很多精力, is acceptable. However, after considering the semantic components of *strength* and *energy*, one finds *energy* is the better choice. *Energy* refers to a person’s physical power, just like in the sentence *He is full of energy* (他精力充沛). *Strength* refers to a person’s moral character, just like in the sentence *He is full of strength* (他是个强有力的人). Yang (2005: 36) provides a comprehensive explanation of these two words as shown in Table 4.
Table 4. Different semantic components of “strength” and “energy”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Semantic components</th>
<th>Strength</th>
<th>Energy</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>force</td>
<td>+</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>relating to moral character</td>
<td>+</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>physical power</td>
<td></td>
<td>+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>reserved power</td>
<td></td>
<td>+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>might</td>
<td></td>
<td>+</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

One major cause of transfer errors is the fact that only one Chinese equivalent is available for the synonymous pair. Therefore, in dealing with these groups of words, compared with just providing a Chinese meaning, the semantic field strategy with a clear explanation of the differences in semantic components would be more effective in reducing errors in assumed synonyms.

(2) Wrong collocations

McCarthy tells us that “in vocabulary teaching there is a high importance of collocation” and he describes that “the relationship of collocation is fundamental in the study of vocabulary, and collocation is an important organizing principle in the vocabulary of any language” (McCarthy, 1990: 12). Learners may always make errors in collocations. For example, in the sentence *The number of people surfing on Internet has raised three folds over the last decades*. *Raise* should be changed into *increase*. Yang (2005: 22) provides the semantic differences of *increase* and *raise* as shown in Table 5.

Table 5. Different semantic components of “increase” and “raise”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Semantic components</th>
<th>Increase</th>
<th>Raise</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>moving to a higher place</td>
<td></td>
<td>+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>becoming larger in number</td>
<td>+</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>becoming greater in volume</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>becoming deeper in degree</td>
<td>+</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>adding gradually</td>
<td></td>
<td>+</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

From the table, it appears that the major difference between *increase* and *raise* is that the core semantic component of *increase* is “adding gradually”, while the core semantic component of *raise* is “moving to a higher place”. More examples are listed in the following (Yang, 2005: 22):

1) increase the wealth over the years
2) increase the knowledge through study
3) Your misery increases with your age.
4) raise the salary or tax
5) raise the man to his highest power
6) Prices have been raised twice since last year.

When teaching vocabulary, teachers should not just associate a word with its conceptual meaning. They should notice that “what a word occurs with, i.e. collocation, is just as important as any other statement about its meaning” (Carter & McCarthy, 1988: 33). In other words, they can explore an effective way in teaching vocabulary through focusing on collocation patterns. For example, when teachers teach *stale* to their students, they may teach *stale bread, stale beer, stale vegetables, stale news, stale jokes,* and *stale gossip* to the students. Through explaining the meanings of these collocations, teachers can show the various meanings of *stale*.

### 3.3.3 From the post-treatment exam

Table 6 reports the result of analyzing the parts in the final exam related to the direct use of vocabulary.

**Table 6.** The result of the independent samples t-test of the post-treatment examination

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Levene’s Test for Equality of Variances</th>
<th>t-test for Equality of Means</th>
<th>95% Confidence Interval of the Difference</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Sig.</td>
<td>t</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Post-test 1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Equal variances</td>
<td>1.247</td>
<td>.267</td>
<td>3.073</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>not assumed</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>3.073</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 6 shows that “Sig. (2-tailed)” in “t-test for Equality of Means” was .003, which was less than 0.05. There was a significant difference in the result of the post-test between the experimental and control groups. Once again, it shows that the semantic field strategy in vocabulary instruction is effective in improving students’ English proficiency.

### Conclusion

The size of one’s vocabulary directly affects the development of one’s linguistic competence. Therefore, the first task of vocabulary instruction is to enlarge learners’ vocabulary. In addition, reviewing errors in learners’ compositions can show that inadequate vocabulary knowledge causes many errors. Learners may only know the literal meanings of a word and lack the knowledge of its connotation and collocation in different contexts.

Allen (1983/2002: 2) held that some specialists in methodology seemed to believe that the meanings of words could not be adequately taught, so it was better not to try to teach them. Therefore there was only limited discussion in methodology courses about
teaching words and their meanings. This means that vocabulary was neglected and learners had to enlarge their vocabulary by themselves. This kind of learning is not very effective and is time-consuming. This study suggests a way out. That is, teachers should not only teach the pronunciation and meanings of a word, but also explain its semantic relations, connotation and collocations. They can help students construct semantic fields under various semantic relations.

In conclusion, teaching vocabulary by constructing the semantic fields of an under-discussed item is efficient as well as necessary. However, vocabulary is not an easy subject to deal with. The present study could not possibly embrace all the factors concerned. One limitation of the study was that writing compositions was not the best way to measure the efficiency of vocabulary instruction. At the same time, other aspects of vocabulary instruction remain to be investigated.

References


(Continued on p. 31…)

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