

Appreciating Literature

A Focus on Lexis in Second Language Reading

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Abstract: The appreciation of literature depends on the reader's ability to understand the author's use of words — how they are used individually to express explicit and indirect meaning, how they are used in partnership with others to make up set phrases, and how meaning can be distorted for literary purposes by changing a phrase or the order of words in a phrase, all within a specific cultural context. The educated first language reader, familiar with the context, is equipped to read between the lines and achieve a fuller understanding of the text in question. However, for second language readers, lacking that lexical and cultural knowledge, the situation is different and they are at a disadvantage in terms of being able to understand a work of literature. Teachers of English can help their pupils by drawing their attention to words — *which* words are used and *how* they are used. Support for this assertion can be found in the research into second language vocabulary acquisition. This tells us that readers need to know at least 95% of words in a text in order to understand that text, and that words must be encountered many times if they are to be learnt. The point of actively working with words over a period of time is twofold: firstly, to increase the reader's lexical resource in terms of both number of words known and depth of knowledge about them, and secondly, by so doing, to increase the reader's ability to understand, and therefore appreciate, literary texts. With reference to *The Great Gatsby*, I will illustrate how teachers of English to university students can extend their learners' lexical knowledge and appreciation of literature.

Introduction

The question regarding what it means to 'know' a word has no simple answer. The journey from knowing nothing — recognising neither a word's orthography nor phonology — to possessing knowledge about its spelling, pronunciation, register, frequency, collocations and meanings in a range of contexts, which Schmitt refers to as “full collocational competence” (117), on the one hand, and being able to use the word accurately and appropriately oneself, is a long one.

The nature of this journey is described in the literature in various ways. Birgit Henriksen considers it to be a continuum, with word knowledge ranging from zero, to partial, to precise. Norbert Schmitt notes that frequency and register constraints tend to be acquired late, while spelling is one of the earliest features to be learnt about a word. What is agreed on is that many exposures to a word are required

(usual estimates range from 15 to 22) before receptive mastery of a word is acquired and before a word can be used actively. The number of exposures needed for acquisition to take place will inevitably vary from learner to learner and be dependent on a number of factors: individual aptitude, frequency of exposure and the nature of the word. A word met frequently, a cognate, or a word with a more transparent lexical patterning in a subject in which the learner is interested will involve less effort than words which are less common, have no cognate or hold little intrinsic interest for the learner.

Research by Alan D. Baddely has shown motivation to be a significant factor in a learner's ability to remember. This is recognised to some extent in English teaching in Swedish schools, where children are sometimes allowed to choose individually for themselves at least some of the words which they will learn for homework. Adult learners usually come with in-built motivation, provided they have chosen to take a particular course or have a specific reason for needing to do so. In the case of student teachers, in the context of which I am going to discuss a technique for lexical development through the reading of literature, motivation is generally strong. Their literature course provides opportunity for reading and discussing literature which they may not otherwise read. The desire to extend their vocabulary in order to become ever better readers is a powerful one, and the students do believe that by reading literature their lexical knowledge will increase.

This is where difficulties arise. All research, indeed common sense, tells us that extensive reading develops lexical knowledge. According to Krashen's Comprehensible Input Hypothesis, extensive reading is in itself sufficient for language acquisition to take place, provided the text is at an appropriate level, considered to be just one step above the learner's current level, enough to provide a challenge (expressed with the formula $i + 1$). At the same time, however, the process of acquiring vocabulary simply by reading is slow and prone to error (Nation and Waring), requiring much exposure to words in a variety of contexts in order to accumulate all the word knowledge which a reader who has the language as his or her first language is presumed to possess.

Extensive reading in one's free time is beneficial, but not enough on its own. In a literature class the main aim is comprehension of the writer's message and this relies on the reader knowing a large number of words and being in possession of much information about them. For example, where words are used idiomatically or metaphorically the learners must be able to recognise to what extent and with what effect deviation has occurred (Low). For literature students therefore, the learning of vocabulary cannot be left to chance. The current view among researchers is that a combination of implicit learning and direct teaching best provides the means for students to acquire vocabulary (for example, Sökmen, Waring and Nation, Sonbul and Schmitt), with the caveat that recycling of the words is necessary if words are to remain in the long term memory from which they can be accessed.

This paper will consider an extract from *The Great Gatsby* and discuss how teachers might work with lexis in order to increase their students' lexical knowledge, at the same time as they provide these students with a useful technique for working

with lexis in their study time. If these students are also teachers in training, they will be able to make use of the technique to facilitate lexical development in their own future pupils. While teachers of literature may balk at the idea of a classic work of literature being used mechanically for such a purpose, I would argue that by developing learners' understanding of words in context, we facilitate a deeper understanding of the text in question, which must surely be the purpose of literary study. Thus, literature is used to expand lexis at the same time as possession of a wider, and deeper, lexical resource permits a greater depth of understanding, which will often otherwise be limited to the superficial and transparent, rather than what is subtle, cryptic, figurative and so on, and from which the text derives its greatness. As learners sometimes say in relation to texts such as *The Great Gatsby* and *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*, "I know I'm missing something but I don't know what it is."

Learning from context

According to Laufer, 95% of words in a text need to be known if the text is to be understood and to enable lexis to be acquired. If the text is a technical one, where the specialised lexis is used in greater density, the percentage is even higher (98%). It follows that learners *may* be able to ignore an unknown word which they consider unimportant; they may even fail to notice it entirely, provided they understand the great majority of words used. However, sometimes the understanding of a particular word is crucial to an understanding of the sentence in which it stands and sometimes the meaning of a word cannot be deduced from its context. In such cases, the reader must try to infer meaning using a combination of bottom up and top down reading skills. Thus, on the one hand, the reader might try to discover the meaning of the word by examining its constituent parts, such as a negative prefix, whether the suffix indicates a particular word class, or whether the word contains or resembles a word already known to the reader. This method is helpful, though not infallible. The word *invaluable*, for example, suggests through its prefix that something is lacking in value; *inflammable* is a word which invites danger for the same reason — its prefix suggests negation of *flammable*. On the other hand, the reader might use the immediate context of the sentence, and of the sentence within the paragraph to try to deduce the meaning of the word. Knowledge of syntax might assist the reader in determining to which word class the word belongs. For example, if preceded by a definite or indefinite article, the word is a noun. An *-ed* ending on a word would suggest the past tense of a regular verb, as in *infiltrated*, for instance. The presence of a noun phrase or pronoun immediately preceding this word would confirm the reader's supposition (as in *the undercover officer infiltrated the criminal gang*), but would only help with the meaning if both the subject and object noun phrases either side of the verb were understood by the reader. Even then, successful deduction remains a matter of chance. Factors affecting the reader's ability to infer include the richness of the context and also the reader's background knowledge in the subject.

An interesting point, and a logical one, is that the more effort required to decode a word, the greater the likelihood of its being remembered. Even so, the evidence is that learners rarely guess correctly, with between five and 10% of new words

correctly guessed and partially learnt, though even where a guess is correct, the word may not be learnt at all. Within either of these scenarios, the learner may recognise the word the next time they meet it — or possibly not — but at this stage the word will most likely not be in their active mental lexicon, available for use. For the teacher of literature, the message is clear: in order for students to achieve the same level of understanding as an educated reader who has the language as their first language, a focus on lexis is not only desirable, but essential for continued development in the second language, where this development includes the ability to read with greater understanding a range of literature, both modern and canonical. This is the situation on university courses of English and on higher level courses within upper secondary education.

The benefits of direct teaching

According to Peter Howarth, the greatest challenge for learners is understanding the restrictions on collocations and consequently being able to recognise when deviation occurs. For a student of literature this knowledge is particularly valuable since deviation, intentional or otherwise, adds to what is known about a character either as a result of what he says himself or narratorial comment. For instance, several years ago in the middle of an enquiry concerning possible theft by a royal butler, Prince Charles was quoted in the British press as saying that the royal family had “fallen over backwards to help the police.” The combination of two phrasal verbs, bend over backwards and fall over oneself, was probably unintentional, but it may possibly have been intentional, stressing the eagerness of the Windsors to assist police with their enquiries. Either way, the expression deviated from the norm and stood out for this reason. This is precisely the knowledge which a first, but not second, language speaker possesses, but which the second language learner must acquire if they are to read with the same depth of understanding.

The same point can be made about metaphor, which Low sees as playing “a central role in human linguistic behaviour” (125). Collocation, idiom and metaphor are components of a first language speaker’s linguistic repertoire in which cultural knowledge is embedded. They are the tools with which a writer or speaker creates a unique discourse. For example, to understand the depth of irritation conveyed by the description he is a garden of thorns in my side, the listener or reader must first be aware of the metaphor to be a thorn in someone’s side. The challenge for the teacher lies not just in helping learners to acquire this knowledge, but in knowing where to start. It therefore makes sense to focus attention on short passages where the writer has chosen lexis to convey a particular image, and where understanding of this use of lexis is necessary for a deeper appreciation of both the passage itself and its contribution to the text as whole. It makes further sense to focus on a passage in which the words under consideration are linked in some way and which add to the reader’s knowledge of setting or character, for instance. According to Baddeley, human memory functions best when language is organised. Therefore, the meanings of not more than 10 words which have a common feature and which cumula-

tively create a certain effect fulfils the need for order and provides a meaningful task.

Beginning with a short extract has two advantages. Firstly, learners can be introduced to a way of working which they can then use independently. As Schmitt points out, “Students will eventually need to effectively control their own vocabulary learning” (137). Taking a short extract and exploiting it themselves in a similar way to how they have worked in class is one way in which they can control their learning more effectively. Extracts for exploitation might be suggested by the teacher or chosen by the student, based on the intrinsic interest of a passage or because it allows focus on a particular grammatical or semantic category. The second advantage in choosing a short extract is that it reduces the risk of overloading the learner’s memory and also makes recycling easier to control for the teacher. This is important since each time a learner encounters a word, its interpretation may change in line with the learner’s current knowledge about the word, and as we have said, each new encounter reinforces retention. For both these reasons, a systematic recycling of words is desirable and therefore the number in focus must be manageable.

Finally, it is true to say that students do sometimes ignore words, even though they realise these words are important, hoping that the meaning will become clear later on. They may also intend to look the word up, and they may then forget to do this. But at least these words have been noticed. In second language acquisition research the noticing hypothesis (Schmidt and Frota) holds that in order to learn, we need to notice — to notice a structure in the target language and the gap between that and our own knowledge. Although there is discussion over the extent to which noticing has to be conscious, from the perspective of lexis acquisition, it makes sense to say that if we want our learners to acquire both a broad and deep understanding of words and their contribution to literary discourse, then a first step has to be noticing, followed closely by focusing on the word and by recycling it. This is another argument for restricting the number of words we work with at any one time.

Techniques for direct teaching

Good language learners use a variety of vocabulary learning techniques. In order that all learners can become good learners, they must first be aware of their own preferred learning styles: do they learn words best by hearing them, seeing them, writing the words down, or a combination of methods? Since language learners do not learn in the same way as each other, the message for the teacher who wishes to broaden and deepen her students’ lexical knowledge in order that they may become better readers, must be to vary ways of working with vocabulary. This might start with the advice, if not requirement, that all students keep vocabulary notebooks, adding to what they know of a word with each fresh encounter.

Strategies for learning vocabulary are dealt with extensively in the literature (for example, Nation; Sökmen). Techniques range from learners identifying the odd word out in a small group, discussing the underlying meaning of polysemous words

in different contexts, active use of words in dialogues and role play, to componential analysis, a technique which is highly relevant to language teachers (Gairns and Redman).

An example of vocabulary development work based on componential analysis

The classroom task discussed here is based on componential analysis. The extract is taken from F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*. The literal meanings of the italicised verbs are assumed to be already partially known to the students. The aim is to explore the meanings of these verbs in context. The cumulative effect of the verbs is to create an impression of transience and superficiality fuelled by alcohol.

The lights grow brighter as the earth *lurches* away from the sun, and now the orchestra is playing yellow cocktail music, and the opera of voices pitches a key higher. Laughter is easier by the minute, *spilled* with prodigality, *tipped* out at a cheerful word. The groups change more swiftly, *swell* with new arrivals, *dissolve* and *form* in the same breath; already there are wanderers, confident girls who weave here and there among the stouter and more stable, become for a sharp, joyous moment the centre of a group and then, excited with triumph, *glide* on through the sea-change of faces and voices and colour under the constantly changing light. (Bodly Head edition 50)

This task is carried out in groups of four, facilitating deeper processing by means of a discussion which considers the various components of the verbs in question. The seven words are first provided out of context for the students to find a common feature. What should quickly become apparent is that while some are associated with liquid (spill, tip), the one feature which they share is that all involve movement of some kind. Moving on from this preliminary focus on the decontextualised words, the students then carry out a componential analysis of the following pairs, where in each case the teacher provides a word which shares some similarities with the target word but differs from it in other respects: tip/pour; lurch/stumble; spill/drop; swell/increase; dissolve/melt; form/make; glide/walk. Let us, for example, take tip and pour. While the second verb refers to liquid, the first may do, but also non-liquid items may be tipped. In both cases there is movement involved but the movement in pour is smoother than in tip, which implies a sudden action, the result of which may be less neat than in pour because less care may have been taken in performing the action. If students work in groups, they can discuss their initial ideas before checking in a range of dictionaries for the definitions. The *Oxford English Dictionary* offers the following definition of tip: to cause (the contents of a container) to be emptied by holding it at an angle; when we look up pour, we find to cause (a liquid) to flow from a container in a steady stream by holding it at an angle. In the next example, lurch/stumble, the first movement is sudden and unsteady, the second involves falling or tripping. When students go on to compare spill and drop,

they find that the first refers to liquid and involves accident; drop may or may not be accidental, but the movement is vertical rather than horizontal as in spill.

Having plotted the features of each word in each pair, discussed their results and checked the dictionary definitions, the students then take each of the target verbs and write a sentence in which its meaning is made clear, though this should not be a definition. Since this is collaborative work, there is likely to be useful discussion here in the groups as to which scenarios best illustrate each verb in order to capture the components of the verb as plotted in the componential analysis. For example, I spilled my coffee when I knocked the mug over/The contents of the dustbin were tipped into the dustbin lorry. The verb swell may provoke discussion, being associated with disease and pain for some, whereas others may think of crowds increasing in size. Similarly, dissolve may cause some to think of aspirin, chemicals or less obviously, the breaking up of a group or onset of laughter. The discussion is a fruitful one, for in attempting to agree on a representative meaning, the students will be led to the conclusion that whatever their personal associations with the words, the basic meaning of the verb under consideration is the same. Thus, by now the students have begun to explore the parameters of meaning for each word in their task and encountered the fact that words may have both literal and non-literal meanings. They have also worked with aspects of word knowledge other than meaning: the written form of the word, its pronunciation (as they discuss in their group), and colligation — that is to say how the word relates syntactically to other words. For example, they may have discussed which prepositions can follow the verbs dissolve, tip and pour.

The students' next step is to take each of their sentences and below each now write the verb as it is used in the text, with adaptations to the syntax where necessary to keep the sentence simple and thereby highlight the relationship between subject and verb: for example, laughter is spilled at the party. The students' own sentence was I spilled my coffee when I knocked the mug over. By comparing the pairs of sentences — their own, and the example from the text, the students are now able to identify the underlying meaning of the verb common to both sentences. They will realise, if they have not before, that spill (also lurch and tip) are used metaphorically in the text. This poses the question as to what the author means by this. Spill is a careless action and involves liquid, so how can laughter be spilled? By comparing their own sentences written to illustrate these verbs, it will become clear that alcohol is flowing freely. The quick, sudden, perhaps careless movement implied in spill, and in tip but not pour, as established in the second stage, underlines this. The remaining verbs are seen to convey transience, motion and by association, superficiality. To round off the task the students might be asked to consider the word weave, for which we did not provide a partner: in what ways does this word fit into the group of words they have been working with, and what does Fitzgerald's choice of this specific word bring to the passage in question? Is it possible to replace the word with another and retain the same effect?

Discussion of the technique

In this section we will discuss the benefits of componential analysis to students of literature. Firstly, it can be said that they have explored features of the target verbs which distinguish these verbs from other words with which they are semantically linked. The students have written sentences demonstrating their understanding of these words, using a dictionary to confirm, adjust and expand on what they know. At this stage it will become clear to the students whether or not they are in full active control of the words: do they know, for instance, which prepositions colligate with *spill*, *tip* and *lurch*? Using a dictionary to check a word's collocational behaviour will also reveal further meaning of the word. It can be said that the verb *lurch* is a good example of a word students tend to know partially. They have read it or heard it and may understand that it has something to do with walking, but cannot define or exemplify it, while for a first language reader there may be associations with too much drink, anger or the unsteadiness caused by attempting to walk while travelling on a rough sea. In fact, the *Oxford English Dictionary* makes no reference to alcohol or anger.

Since many dictionaries include examples of target words in sentences, it may be advisable to let the students not only plot the features of their words but even write a sentence to illustrate the meaning of the words before they check in their dictionaries. In this way they will not be distracted by the examples in the dictionaries. Another reason for letting the students get to this stage before they check their ideas in the dictionaries is that more discussion will be required, both in writing their own illustrative sentences and in comparing these to the examples in the dictionaries. The more the students work with the words, the more the words will become fixed in their mental lexicon, which is one of the aims of the task. Once the meaning of each target word is established, the students will be in a better position to consider the words in context and the author's aim: to convey the impression of a large number of people who barely know one another, being affected to varying degrees by alcohol, coming together and moving apart again, each encounter easily forgotten as the individuals concerned are carried away into the next brief encounter.

Conclusion

Vocabulary work of the kind outlined here serves several purposes. It presents a limited number of words, in this case eight, which have a common feature. They are explored by comparison with words semantically linked with them, and a sentence is written to illustrate the meaning of each of the target words. These are then compared with the verbs as used in the passage and the common meanings discussed and related to the author's intentions. Though the task can be done on an individual basis (and notebook work should be, partly because it provides a follow up to classroom work and the opportunity for reflection and assimilation), much is learnt by doing the work in groups. Suggestions are given and discussed, accepted, modified or discarded. All of this allows the knowledge which students are acquiring to be processed more thoroughly and it assists retention, which is also facilitated by re-

cycling. For instance, at the next meeting, the students could write a description of an imaginary event at which they were present, using the target words, literally or non-literally.

Componential analysis is a technique particularly suited to the literature class. The differences between words are discussed not just from general interest, but because these differences are vital in the text. The task has transparent validity: by focusing explicitly on vocabulary, students expand their word knowledge, which in turn facilitates reading with understanding. The ability to read with greater understanding allows the students to become better students of literature: possession of a broader and deeper lexical base permits access to a writer's message which is otherwise constrained by the limits of the student's mental lexicon.

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