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DEVELOPING ACADEMIK VOCABULARY THROUGH SNONYMS AND ANTONYMS

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ABSTRACT

Learners with a limited academic vocabulary tend to recycle a narrow stock of general words when they write about abstract topics. This article examines how synonyms and antonyms can be used to deepen academic word knowledge, drawing on twenty scholarly sources concerned with academic vocabulary, semantic relations, memory, task design and the presentation of related words. A narrative review was carried out, and its findings were organised thematically. The evidence shows that relations between words form part of what it means to know a word, that tasks demanding meaning-based processing and written production support retention, and that presenting closely related words together can slow initial learning. From these strands a staged approach is proposed: each word is met alone first and set against its synonym or antonym only afterwards, synonyms are compared for fit, and antonyms are practised in contrast frames. The limits of the present evidence base, which comes largely from other age groups and from artificial or list-based tasks are discussed.

Keywords

academic vocabulary, synonyms, antonyms, semantic clustering, vocabulary instruction, EFL writing

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Introduction

Success in schooling and later study rests on a layer of vocabulary that lies between everyday talk and specialist terminology. Words such as *factor*, *significant* or *require* seldom surface in casual conversation, yet they carry the reasoning of textbooks, examinations and essays. Coxhead (2000) compiled 570 word families that fall outside the 2,000 most frequent words of English but recur across disciplines, and together they make up roughly one running word in ten of academic prose. Learners who command only a small share of this layer lean on a few all-purpose terms. Asked to argue for or against a proposition, such a student typically falls back on *good*, *bad* and *many* until a paragraph reads like a chain of identical links. Two relations between words offer a route toward a richer repertoire. Synonymy and antonymy are the best-known paradigmatic relations, tying words together through similarity or contrast of meaning (Lyons, 1977; Murphy, 2003). A learner who knows that *advantage* can replace *benefit*, and that *drawback* stands opposed to both, holds a small network from which to choose while writing, not merely three separate entries. Classroom practice, however, meets a complication. Coursebooks often group related words, and the research literature has repeatedly questioned that habit, which leaves a teacher unsure about when in a lesson sequence synonyms and antonyms should appear. The relevant findings are scattered across work on academic word lists, memory, task design and word clustering, and they are seldom drawn together for a practitioner whose aim is to build academic vocabulary through semantic relations.

This article attempts such a synthesis through a narrative review. Three questions guide it:

1. How do synonymy and antonymy contribute to depth of knowledge of academic words?

2. What does the research say about the risks of presenting related words together?
3. Which instructional principles follow from the answers to the first two questions?

Methodology

Selection of sources. Sources were identified through publisher platforms, university repositories and the reference lists of recent vocabulary studies, using combinations of the terms *academic vocabulary*, *academic word list*, *synonym*, *antonym*, *semantic relations*, *semantic clustering*, *lexical sets*, *depth of word knowledge* and *involvement load*. A source was kept when it met three conditions: it dealt with second-language or academic vocabulary, or with the semantic relations on which the review rests; it offered empirical evidence, a meta-analysis or a developed theoretical argument; and it appeared in a peer-reviewed journal or with an established academic press. Twenty sources satisfied these conditions, with publication dates from 1972 to 2019.

Analysis. Each source was read for its position on four matters: what counts as academic vocabulary, how relations between words figure in word knowledge, how task type affects learning, and what happens when related words are taught together. The claims were then grouped into the four themes reported in the next section. Where studies disagreed, the disagreement was recorded and left standing. Statistical pooling was not attempted, because the studies differ in participants, materials and outcome measures.

Results

The sources fall into four themes: the scope of academic vocabulary, the place of word relations in word knowledge, the effects of processing depth and task type, and the consequences of presenting related words together.

1.The scope of academic vocabulary. Coxhead's (2000) list was built from a corpus of academic texts drawn from 28 subject areas, and it leaves out the 2,000 most frequent words of English; its 570 families were chosen for occurring widely and often across that corpus. Hyland and Tse (2007) tested the premise of a single shared core by examining the list in a 3.3-million-word corpus covering several disciplines and genres. The list accounted for 10.6% of the corpus, yet individual items differed from one discipline to another in range, frequency, collocation and meaning, and the authors recommended that teachers help students build a more restricted, discipline-based repertoire. Nagy and Townsend (2012) approach the matter from the side of acquisition. In their review, effective interventions select words worth teaching, present them in authentic contexts and give students many opportunities to meet and use them meaningfully, which builds depth of knowledge.

2. Word relations as part of word knowledge. Nation (2001) counts associations among the components of knowing a word: the other words that a word brings to mind and the words that could replace it. Wolter (2001) formalised a related idea in a depth-of-individual-word-knowledge model, in which the organisation of a second-language lexicon reflects how well each word is known; poorly known items stay loosely attached, while well-known items link up with their neighbours. Descriptions of the relations themselves come from lexical semantics. Lyons (1977) separates antonyms into gradable pairs such as *cheap–expensive*, complementaries such as *possible–impossible* and converses such as *buy–sell*. Cruse (1986) and Murphy (2003) stress that such pairs agree in most properties and differ along a single dimension. Near-synonyms accordingly tend to diverge in strength, formality, collocation or connotation, so that substituting one for another calls for a judgement about context.

3. Processing depth and task type. Craik and Lockhart (1972) argued that memory depends on the depth at which material is processed, with meaning-based analysis leaving more durable traces than analysis of surface form. Laufer and Hulstijn (2001) built on this idea in the involvement load hypothesis, which rates a task by three components: need, search and evaluation. Hulstijn and Laufer (2001) tested the hypothesis with EFL learners in two countries, using three tasks that carried different involvement loads: reading comprehension, reading with the filling in of target words, and composition with target words. Retention, measured in the short and the long term, was highest after composition, lower after reading with gap-filling and lowest after reading alone. Broader reviews point the same way. Stahl and Fairbanks (1986), in a meta-analysis of vocabulary instruction, found that methods combining definitional and contextual information outperformed

methods offering definitions alone. Schmitt (2008), surveying instructed second-language vocabulary learning, concluded that engagement with words is central to acquisition.

4. Presenting related words together. Tinkham (1993) taught artificial words in semantically related and unrelated sets and found the related sets harder to learn. Tinkham (1997) widened the comparison to thematic sets, whose words share a topic rather than a category, and again reported a disadvantage for semantic clustering, in line with interference theory, which holds that similar meanings compete in memory. Waring (1997) replicated the negative effect of semantic sets. Erten and Tekin (2008) taught 80 words to 60 fourth-grade learners, either in related or in unrelated sets: unrelated sets produced better recall, related sets slowed test completion, and the difference persisted over time. Nation (2000) condensed the case into cautions and guidelines for teachers who work with lexical sets. Later findings have been less uniform. Nakata and Suzuki (2019) describe recent results as inconsistent and investigate how massing and spacing of study interact with semantic relatedness. One feature of this literature deserves notice. Most of the studies summarised above relied on word lists or brief learning sessions, and none of the sources reviewed here examined synonym and antonym work embedded in writing tasks.

Discussion

Taken together, the four themes answer the first two research questions and supply the material for the third. Relations between words form part of what it means to know a word (Nation, 2001; Wolter, 2001), yet teaching related words side by side can hinder their first acquisition (Erten & Tekin, 2008; Tinkham, 1993; Waring, 1997). The two findings become compatible once the stage of learning is taken into account. The interference studies concern initial learning, when a word's form and meaning are still fragile and similar items are easily confused. The depth literature concerns later consolidation, when a word is secure enough to be linked with its neighbours. A sequence that lets each word settle in a context of its own and brings in its synonym or antonym only afterwards would therefore capture the benefits of both bodies of work. This is an inference from the reviewed evidence, not a result that any of the sources tested directly; Nakata and Suzuki's (2019) attention to scheduling points to the kind of study that could put it to the test.

Synonyms and antonyms serve different purposes in writing, and instruction can mirror the difference. For synonyms the central skill is judging fit. Because near-synonyms diverge in strength, formality and collocation (Cruse, 1986), substitution tests, ordering words on a scale of strength and checking typical partners in a learner's dictionary expose the dimension along which two words part company. A writer who turns *an adequate teacher* into *a sufficient teacher* shows what happens when that step is skipped. Antonyms, by contrast, offer a structure for argument. Opposed terms such as *advantage* and *drawback* readily fill contrast frames like *whereas*, *unlike* or *on the other hand*, and practising the frames converts a pair of words into a stretch of connected prose. Since antonym types differ (Lyons, 1977), pairs can be sorted into gradable, complementary and converse before use, which tells learners whether an in-between position exists. In addition, the task evidence gives written production a central place. Under the involvement load hypothesis, choosing among synonyms or building a contrast demands need, search and evaluation (Laufer & Hulstijn, 2001), and composition outperformed reading-based tasks in the experiments of Hulstijn and Laufer (2001). The principles that Beck, McKeown and Kucan (2013) call robust instruction, namely learner-friendly explanations, varied contexts and active use, fit this picture, as does Nagy and Townsend's (2012) call for authentic contexts and repeated meaningful use. Assessment can follow the same logic. A short essay on a topic that was not practised, scored for repeated words, appropriate substitutions and contrast sentences, would show whether relations are being deployed, which a test of isolated definitions is unlikely to reveal. Several limits temper these conclusions. A narrative review rests on the author's selection, and a different set of sources might shift the emphasis. The interference studies used artificial words, word lists or young learners (Erten & Tekin, 2008; Tinkham, 1993), so transfer to older school learners who meet academic words in context is uncertain. The involvement load findings come from a small number of experiments. Hyland and Tse (2007) add that academic words behave differently across disciplines, which limits how far any general-purpose set of pairs can travel. Above all, none of the reviewed work tests the staged approach described here. Classroom experiments with a comparison group,

writing-based outcome measures and a delayed post-test would supply the missing evidence.

Conclusion

The reviewed literature supports a measured position: synonyms and antonyms are worth teaching for academic vocabulary, provided that timing and purpose are chosen with care. Word relations belong to word knowledge, tasks that demand meaning-based processing and writing strengthen retention, and early joint presentation of closely related items carries a documented risk. For teachers, three principles emerge: let words settle before relating them, ask synonyms to improve choice and antonyms to organise argument, and judge progress through learners' own writing. These principles rest on converging but indirect evidence, so they are best treated as hypotheses to be tried and checked in one's own classroom. For researchers, the most pressing task is a controlled classroom comparison of staged and clustered presentation of the same academic words, using writing-based measures and a delayed post-test, followed by replications with other age groups and subject areas.

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