

UNVEILING THE HEART OF LANGUAGE: HOW SEMANTICS EMPOWERS EFFECTIVE WRITING FOR ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNERS

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Abstract: *The exploration of Semantics is a crucial domain encompassing word meanings, references, senses, logic, perlocutions, and illocutions. Essentially, delving into Semantics enhances students' comprehension and awareness of word meanings, sentence connections, discourse, and context. It also empowers students to construct and refine their Semantics maps, which visually depict the meaning-based associations between a word or phrase and a cluster of related words or concepts. This paper represents my endeavor to implement theoretically-sound strategies in the planning and instruction of a Semantic course for English Foreign Language Learners (EFL). The objective of this paper is to underscore the importance of leveraging meaning mechanisms for effective human communication. Concurrently, fostering lexical development will deepen students' grasp of language meanings and semantic relationships. The course aims to focus on imparting key terms in Semantics, the Semantics Analysis of Writing (SAW) approach, and the 'agent-action-goal with real-life action' technique, utilizing these concepts to enhance students' vocabulary in the short term and their language proficiency in the long term. Integrating Semantics information with L2 vocabulary strategies is pivotal for language acquisition. By implementing semantics strategies, this paper seeks to elucidate the correlation between Semantics instruction and the enhancement of ELLs' language skills.*

Keywords: *English as a foreign language, semantic analysis of writing, semantic mapping*

The study of Semantics is really important because it helps us understand words better. When we understand words, we can understand how sentences work and what they mean in different situations. Semantics is like the key that helps us unlock language understanding. To communicate well in another language, we need to know not just the basic meanings of words, but also things like synonyms (words with similar meanings) and antonyms (words with opposite meanings). We also need to learn strategies to help us remember words when we're speaking or writing. Using the right words is super important, especially in written communication, because it can affect how others see us in social, professional, and academic situations.

Recent studies have started looking at how Semantics and sentence structure work together when we speak or write (for example, Cuza et al., 2013; Gil & Marsden, 2010; Han & Liu, 2013; Ko et al., 2008). Some researchers, like Beyersdorfer and Schauer (1989), have shown how teaching Semantics can improve writing skills. They use an approach called the Semantics Analysis of Writing (SAW), which helps students understand and use words better by looking at things like synonyms, antonyms, and other word relationships. They found that SAW helps students in a few key ways: it expands their vocabulary, helps them connect new words with what they already know, shows them how to use words in stories, and gives them a structure for writing.

Besides SAW, understanding Semantics can also help students learn vocabulary and use it correctly in different situations. Folse (2004) talks about how important it is for teachers to help students learn vocabulary that they'll actually use. He suggests that teachers should use vocabulary lists but not rely only on them. Instead, they should make learning vocabulary fun and interactive for students. Teachers in Saudi Arabia, especially, need to move away from the old method of passive learning where students just listen in class. Instead, they should find ways to get students more involved and active in their learning.

As English language teachers, we face a challenge in helping students connect their ideas with the sentences they use to express them. Can understanding Semantics theories, like Agent-Action-Goal with Real-Life Action or Old Information then New Information Techniques, help students write better? Semantics experts suggest so. They view sentences not just as strings of words but as reflections of the ideas we want to convey.

Holloway (1981) proposes a method to link sentence structure with real-world actions. For instance, if a student writes, "There was a misunderstanding on the part of the committee in regard to the basic problems that were involved in the investigation of the oil companies," the teacher can ask, "Who or what is the real-life agent in this sentence?" Identifying the agent and action helps students reconstruct the sentence more effectively, reducing errors like subject-verb agreement or unclear pronoun references.

My own teaching experience with this strategy, as explained in Unit 20 of the textbook "Semantics: A Coursebook," showed mixed results. Students who grasped the concept of agents and actions benefited from the technique, while those with lower English proficiency struggled to apply it, leading to misunderstandings of sentence meaning.

Schenck and Choi (2015) argue that EFL contexts, like in South Korea, need educational reforms to improve writing skills for Semantics and pragmatic purposes. Outdated teaching methods, such as Grammar-Translation or Audio-Lingual approaches, focus too much on grammar and vocabulary memorization, hindering comprehension of discourse and pragmatics. They highlight an example where Korean EFL learners misunderstand American English due to a lack of emphasis on meaning over syntax.

Understanding Semantics can enhance writing skills, but it requires effective teaching methods and a focus on meaning rather than just language structures.

In educational settings where grammar is prioritized over pragmatic and Semantics concepts, misunderstandings like these are common. Other studies, such as those by Zheng & Huang (2010), highlight extensive failures in Semantics and pragmatics among EFL students due to insufficient practice. These shortcomings can pose significant barriers to effective

communication, both verbally and in writing, calling for more innovative teaching approaches in EFL contexts.

During my course, while explaining Unit 10 "Sense Relations (1) Identity and Similarity of Sense," I introduced another semantic strategy known as 'Semantics Mapping'. This technique, as described by Barcroft (2004), involves evaluating vocabulary items based on their meaning, fostering conceptual connections between them. Semantics elaboration, according to Shostak (2003), enhances word learning and retention through integration, leading to deeper understanding and longer memory retention. This approach, supported by scholars like Holloway, Barcroft, and Shostak, aids students in improving language proficiency by guiding them in assessing and refining their sentences according to English language norms and discourse conventions, aiming for effective communication rather than just correctness.

Semantics course during the Summer of 2019 at University, I taught 14 students majoring in English, all juniors with their native language and English as a foreign language. Their English proficiency, assessed throughout the course, ranged from 4 to 5.5 IELTS score, indicating limited to modest usage. Employing Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) pedagogy, which is prevalent in English-Medium Instruction (EMI) contexts, I aimed to prepare them for careers as English language teachers, writers, or translators, as mandated by their degree requirements.

My approach in was centered on teaching essential Semantics terms and then utilizing this knowledge to enhance students' vocabulary in the short term and their overall language proficiency in the long term. Integrating Semantics information with strategies for learning L2 vocabulary was a major factor. Additionally, this course contributed to improving students' English proficiency through Semantics study. Specifically, students were introduced to various Semantic concepts for the first time, including reference and sense, referring expression, universe of discourse, deixis and definiteness, prototypes and stereotypes, meaning postulates, properties of predicates, derivation, and participant roles.

Throughout semantics, we explored interpersonal and non-literal meanings, allowing students to grasp how speech acts function through perlocutions and illocutions. Understanding these concepts enhances students' linguistic cognition, aligning with Barcroft's (2004) argument that Semantic elaboration improves memory retention, enabling students to produce more impactful texts and speech.

Moreover, the course delved into the cognitive abilities necessary for interpreting and using language appropriately in various contexts. This involved closely examining the study of meanings and their contextual roles, as well as exploring the structure of Semantic representations, including logical aspects and how meanings evolve through metaphor and other rhetorical devices. We also discussed grammaticalization, which involves content words transitioning into function words, and how context shapes meaning.

In essence, the theories covered in the course can be divided into two broad categories: Semantics theories, which focus on word and construction categories, and pragmatic theories, which explore the relationship between linguistic form and conversational context. Given the course description requirements and the students' proficiency levels and academic needs, I prioritized Semantics theories to ensure alignment and resonance.

Course Planning and Implementation

The development of course: Semantics involved several iterative steps, particularly in determining the content for the condensed seven-week course. Initially, I curated the content from two books and various related articles. However, drawing from my own experience as a student at the same institution between 2009-2014, I realized that expecting students to purchase and engage with multiple texts, especially in a foreign language, could be challenging. After consulting with three professors in this field - I opted to use only one book titled "Semantics: A Coursebook" by Hurford, Heasley, and Smith (2007).

This book offers several advantages: it serves as an introductory coursebook on Semantics, aligning well with the students' needs and language proficiency levels. Additionally, each lesson is structured into clear sequences, including entry requirements, entry tests, introductions, definitions, examples, practices, feedback, comments, summaries, and study guides with exercises. Drawing from my experience both as a student and a teacher of this book, I found that the examples and feedback provided effectively demystify complex Semantic terminology, making it accessible to students and novice teachers.

To ensure that my students could achieve the course objectives, I carefully selected this textbook as the primary resource and organized its chapters into four distinct stages. Each stage built upon the previous one, with readings and activities designed to progressively enhance understanding and skills. In the following section, I will provide a brief overview of these stages.

Stage One

At the start of the semester, students were introduced to fundamental concepts in Semantics, focusing on sentences, utterances, propositions, reference, and sense. Alongside reading assigned texts, students were tasked with writing two responses before and after each class session. We delved into the meaning of Semantics theory and engaged in discussions on the roles of speakers and sentences in facilitating clear communication. Additionally, we explored the central concepts of sense and reference and their significance in the study of meaning.

Stage Two

Following the establishment of foundational Semantics knowledge, we shifted our focus to the importance of dictionaries and word meanings. Dictionaries play a crucial role in understanding any language, providing three types of information about words: phonological, grammatical, and Semantics. Students were guided in understanding the interconnectedness of word definitions within the English language. Through class discussions, termed as the "First Journal Activity," students shared their learning experiences, aimed at tracking progress, motivating further vocabulary acquisition, and fostering peer learning.

Stage Three

To ensure effective communication with my students, I introduced the first quiz via Google Classroom, encompassing two key components: reading responses and vocabulary journal entries. Scheduled before the midterm exam, the quiz aimed to familiarize students with question composition and test design. It comprised multiple-choice and short essay questions, providing valuable feedback to guide midterm exam preparation. Following the

quiz, I conducted a review session covering three units and provided guidelines to alleviate confusion and exam anxiety.

Stage Four

As students completed most of the required readings and tackled the midterm exam, they entered the final phase of the course fully prepared. This stage included presentations, submission of the second vocabulary journal, and the final exam. We explored additional units on "Reference and Sense" and "Interpersonal and Non-literal Meaning," followed by student presentations on themes related to lexical development in EFL contexts and implementing English Medium Instruction in Saudi schools. These activities fostered deeper engagement and application of Semantics concepts in real-world contexts.

Conclusion

This study underscores the paramount importance of Semantics in empowering English language learners (ELLs) to craft effective written communication. While grammatical proficiency is essential, true understanding transcends mere structure and delves into the heart of meaning. Unfortunately, prevalent teaching methodologies often prioritize rote memorization of grammatical rules, neglecting the crucial role of context and pragmatic meaning. This disconnect can hinder students' ability to grasp the nuances of language use in real-world situations.

This research presented a pilot course designed to bridge the gap by strategically integrating Semantics concepts with established L2 vocabulary learning strategies. The course curriculum utilized a core textbook as a foundation, supplemented by a variety of engaging activities. Students embarked on a journey of discovery, encountering fundamental Semantics theories such as reference, sense, and the multifaceted world of pragmatic meaning. The results were encouraging, with students demonstrating a marked improvement in their understanding of how word choice and meaning-making intertwine to create impactful communication.

These findings illuminate the necessity for a paradigm shift in EFL instructional approaches. Moving beyond a grammar-centric focus, educators should prioritize equipping students with the tools to navigate the complexities of meaning. This necessitates a move away from rote memorization and towards fostering a deeper comprehension of how language functions in diverse contexts. Further research is warranted to explore the long-term efficacy of Semantics instruction on the overall language proficiency of ELLs. Longitudinal studies could track the impact on not only writing skills but also on speaking abilities and overall fluency. Additionally, investigations could delve into the effectiveness of integrating Semantics instruction across different proficiency levels, from beginner to advanced learners.

In conclusion, this study serves as a springboard for further exploration. By prioritizing meaning over mere structure, educators can empower ELLs to become not just grammatically correct communicators, but truly masterful users of the English language. As Nelson Mandela eloquently stated, "If you talk to a man in a language, he understands that goes to his head. If you talk to him in his language that goes to his heart." Through a deeper understanding of Semantics, EFL educators can unlock the hearts and minds of their students, enabling them to express themselves with clarity, confidence, and cultural sensitivity.

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