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An Analysis of Vocabulary Instruction in Contemporary College English Textbooks for Chinese English Majors

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Abstract: Vocabulary acquisition is a vital aspect of English language learning, playing a crucial role in effective communication and overall language proficiency. Due to its significance, evaluating teaching materials—particularly textbooks—is key to improving the quality of vocabulary instruction. This study examines the vocabulary teaching strategies employed in Contemporary College English (First Volume); a textbook developed for first-year English majors in China. The analysis excludes the exam-focused units (Units 7 and 14) and focuses on Text A from each unit, which serves as the primary instructional content. The vocabulary section is analyzed in three main areas: word formation, formulaic expressions, and synonyms and antonyms. Additionally, the textbook is assessed based on its alignment with the Principled Communicative Approach, identifying strengths and areas for enhancement in its vocabulary teaching methodology. The results reveal that, while the textbook's vocabulary design aligns with the core principles of the approach to a considerable extent, several aspects require further improvement.

Keywords: principled communicative approach; textbook; vocabulary instruction

1. Introduction

Vocabulary acquisition, as a fundamental and essential aspect of English learning, has garnered significant attention from educators. Schmitt highlights its importance, stating, "No amount of grammatical or other type of linguistic knowledge can be employed in communication or discourse without the mediation of vocabulary (425)" [1]. Consequently, for English learners, acquiring vocabulary knowledge is crucial. As Moghadam, Zainal, and Ghaderpour observe, "Vocabulary learning is dominant in language acquisition, whether the language is a second or a foreign language, and crucial to learners' overall acquisition (55)" [2]. Vocabulary knowledge holds an importance comparable to that of reading and writing in English learning.

Given the pivotal role of vocabulary in English learning, effective vocabulary teaching has become increasingly significant. English textbooks, as key teaching resources, play a vital role in vocabulary instruction. Shahid, Qasim, and Iqbal assert that "Textbook is one of the most substantial elements of classroom learning (283)" [3]. Selecting an effective English textbook can greatly support students' language development, enabling them not only to acquire knowledge but also to enrich their intellectual and emotional growth.

In regions where textbooks serve as primary educational tools, textbook evaluation is considered an essential process [4]. Evaluating teaching materials is crucial for enhancing classroom teaching quality and optimizing the learning environment [3]. Thus, analyzing English textbooks is vital for improving English instruction. This study focuses on evaluating the vocabulary teaching methods in the first volume of *Contemporary College English*.

This research investigates vocabulary instruction in *Contemporary College English*, a textbook for first-year English majors in China. The book comprises sixteen units, excluding Unit 7 and Unit 14, which are exam-focused and not analyzed in this study. Each unit contains Text A and Text B, but teaching primarily emphasizes Text A, with Text B reserved for extracurricular reading. Consequently, this analysis focuses on Text A, which is divided into six sections: reading text, preview, speaking, vocabulary, grammar, and writing.

The study specifically examines the vocabulary section. Based on the teaching objectives outlined by the editors, the analysis evaluates vocabulary instruction in three aspects: word formation, formulaic expressions, and synonyms and antonyms. By analyzing the textbook, this research aims to assess the extent to which it adheres to the Principled Communicative Approach and proposes strategies to address its shortcomings.

2. Main Body

This chapter provides an in-depth analysis of vocabulary instruction in Contemporary College English. Based on the textbook's content, the analysis is organized into three sections: word formation instruction, collocation teaching, and the teaching of synonyms and antonyms.

2.1. Word Formation Instruction

English word formation serves as an efficient method for students to learn vocabulary and an essential approach to expanding their word knowledge. As *Contemporary College English* targets first-year English majors, the editors have placed significant emphasis on derivation and compound words to help students better understand word meanings. This chapter analyzes word formation instruction, focusing on these two aspects.

2.1.1. Teaching of Derivation

Derivation is an essential method for acquiring English vocabulary. Bauer defines derivation as "a recurrent word-part which always has the same meaning, and which can be added transparently to other words or word-parts to make new words (44)" [5]. In derivation, the root serves as the foundation of the word, conveying its core meaning, while affixes—letters added before or after the root—modify the word's meaning or part of speech. Affixes are categorized into prefixes and suffixes, each serving distinct functions. Prefixes primarily carry semantic significance, altering or limiting the root's meaning to express concepts like quantity, attitude, degree, location, or negation, while typically not changing the word's part of speech. Conversely, suffixes primarily have grammatical functions, determining a word's grammatical category, such as nouns, adjectives, or adverbs, although their semantic contribution is less pronounced than that of prefixes [5].

In *Contemporary College English*, the editors emphasize teaching derivation. In Unit 1, the textbook introduces the suffixes of nouns and adverbs to help students grasp their meanings. For instance, the textbook explains noun suffixes such as -action, -tion, and -sion, followed by examples like *action* and *discussion*. Similarly, for adverb suffixes, -ly is provided as an example, with illustrative words to help students better understand word formation.

The textbook also incorporates exercises to reinforce derivation learning. The first exercise requires students to identify the parts of speech of given words and list their suffixes, dividing them into categories such as noun, adjective, and adverb suffixes. By including adjective suffixes, students are encouraged to discover their characteristics independently, enhancing retention through recognition [6]. The second exercise asks students to write the corresponding adverbs, adjectives, nouns, or verbs of given words. Examples include converting *hurried*, *terrible*, *possible*, *miserable*, *polite*, *fortunate*, *practical*, *physical*, *favorable*, *rough*, and *serious* into their respective adverbs. This activity helps students consolidate prior knowledge by applying various suffixes to alter the part of speech of the given words. The third exercise focuses on translating phrases while considering the use of suffixes "-ful" and "-less." Examples include phrases like *a useful word, a helpful suggestion, a harmless animal*, and *a shameless liar*, enabling students to observe and practice the contrasting use of these suffixes.

In Unit 3, the textbook provides exercises to help students familiarize themselves with the principles of word formation. For example, one exercise involves analyzing the parts of speech of words such as *unhappy, ungrateful, unwell, unimportant, unnecessary, unable, uncommon, unmarried, unknown, unsatisfied, unwilling*, and *unfortunate*. Students are required to deduce the meaning of the prefix "un-." Additionally, the editors introduce other affixes like the suffix "-able," the prefix "fore-," the suffix "-en," and the prefix "re-" [6]. Units 4, 5, 6, 8, 9, and 10 continue with similar exercises, reinforcing students' understanding of affixes while introducing new ones. When presenting new affixes, students are often tasked with translating expressions and focusing on the nuanced uses of these affixes.

From Unit 11 onward, the editors shift the focus toward teaching tips for effective word formation. For instance, Unit 11 explains that the prefix "un-," which conveys the opposite meaning, can be added not only to adjectives or adverbs but also to verbs, as in *happy–unhappy* (adjective). Similarly, it is explained that the suffix "-en" can transform some nouns into adjectives and many adjectives and some nouns into verbs, such as *wood–wooden* (adjective) and *wool–woolen* (adjective) [6].

In subsequent units, the editors further guide students in accurately applying word formation techniques and deepening their understanding of word structure. Following the introduction of such tips, the textbook provides corresponding exercises to solidify students' knowledge. For example, after learning about the suffix "-en," students may be asked to determine whether the adjectives in parentheses can be used directly as verbs or need the addition of the verb-forming suffix "-en" [6].

2.1.2. Teaching of Compound Words

In the vocabulary explanation section of Contemporary College English, the editors primarily introduce two types of word formation. After addressing derivation, they explain compound words. Compound words are created by combining two or more independent words. As defined, "when two or more independent words are combined according to certain rules, they may form a compound word or a freely combined phrase" [5]. Learning compound words is crucial in English vocabulary acquisition since the meanings of many compound words can often be deduced by analyzing the semantics of their constituent parts. Although the individual meanings of the base words are preserved, the overall meaning of the compound word becomes more specific, helping students infer its meaning [5].

The concept of compound words is introduced in Unit 2 and gradually integrated into the intensive reading exercises throughout the book. In Unit 2, the editors present the concept and follow it with exercises such as guessing the meanings of compound words like headache, heartbroken, and banknote [6]. Students are encouraged to infer meanings based on their existing vocabulary knowledge and verify their answers by consulting a dictionary. In Unit 5, the vocabulary exercises include translating compound words into

Chinese, with examples such as a well-planned move, broken home, dried fruit, and a preserved egg.

After Unit 10, the editors introduce word formation tips. Regarding compound words, they provide guidelines such as "many compound adjectives are formed by adding past participles to nouns, e.g., snow-covered, state-owned, hand-written," and "some compound adjectives consist of a noun plus an adjective, e.g., waist-high, oil-rich." To reinforce these tips, the book includes exercises requiring students to explain and translate compound adjectives such as skin-deep, pitch-dark, and labor-intensive [6].

In this section on word formation, the editors mainly define derivation and compound words and use examples to aid students in grasping their meanings. Following the definitions, they connect the knowledge to a variety of exercises to help students consolidate their understanding through practice. However, the treatment of word formation in this textbook is not comprehensive. The definitions provided in the exercises are somewhat superficial, and there is no systematic framework for presenting word formation. The explanations across units are inconsistent and lack logical structure. Furthermore, the exercises lack novelty and coherence, with insufficient correlation between the questions.

2.2. *Teaching of Formulaic Language*

"Formulaic language is intrinsically connected with functional, fluent, communicative language use" [7]. For many English learners, despite having an extensive vocabulary, they may struggle to use words appropriately. This often results in their inability to convey ideas clearly and accurately. Consequently, mastering formulaic language is essential for students to learn and apply words correctly, enabling them to express themselves effectively and sound more like native speakers.

In *Contemporary College English*, the authors place significant emphasis on teaching collocations and phrasal verbs. For example, in Unit 1, the editors introduce verb + noun collocations. Instead of relying on descriptive explanations, they incorporate practical exercises to aid students in understanding the meanings. These exercises include tasks such as completing given verb + noun collocations or expressions [6]:

1._____steps   2. _____one's way
3._____one's tears   4. _____games

In this approach, students are required to select appropriate words to complete the blanks based on the provided collocations. Through this process of reflection, they can independently identify and summarize the patterns and characteristics of verb + noun collocations. Following this exercise, the editors present additional collocations for students to apply in relevant sentences. For instance, collocations like "on one's own" and "show off" are provided, and students are tasked with using these phrases to complete the given sentences [6]:

1. Unlike high school students who have many classes to go to, university students should spend most of their time studying _____.

2. Peter loves to _____ his new fancy car, for it is just about the only property he has.

Through this method, students first need to comprehend the meaning of each collocation and then complete the blanks based on the sentence's context. Learning vocabulary within context proves to be highly effective, as it enables students not only to grasp the meaning of words but also to develop a stronger sense of language. In the third exercise, the editors aim to help students master specific verb collocations by instructing them to complete the blanks with appropriate prepositions or adjectives, as demonstrated in the examples provided [6]:

1. Houses in that part of the country were mostly made_____ cheap material. They all collapsed in the earthquake.

2. The Great Wall wine is made_____ the best grapes in our country.

From these exercises, it is evident that the editors aim to familiarize readers with the collocations of "make." However, the editors do not provide a list of relevant collocations

for "make" within the questions, requiring students to consult dictionaries or use other resources to identify suitable collocations. This task can be challenging for freshmen, as it involves not only finding various collocations but also understanding their meanings and selecting the appropriate ones based on the sentence context.

From Unit 1 to Unit 8, the editors focus on teaching verb + noun collocations through similar exercises. In Unit 9, the focus shifts to adjective + noun collocations, introduced through exercises such as the following [6]:

Translate the following adjective+ noun expressions into Chinese.

1.watchful eye, unlighted cigar, odd number, opposite side, simultaneous, interpretation, peaceful co-existence, peaceful surroundings

Through translation exercises, students can reinforce their understanding of adjective + noun collocations, identifying their characteristics and developing independent learning strategies. Translating various examples helps students internalize these collocations more effectively.

Overall, the editors' approach to vocabulary collocations primarily emphasizes verb + noun collocations, adjective + noun collocations, and verb collocations. However, the approach lacks descriptive explanations, such as clear definitions of collocations or an outline of collocation rules. Instead, the editors rely on exercises, expecting students to deduce the rules independently. This method overlooks the fact that the book targets freshmen, whose English proficiency may not be sufficient to undertake this task without guidance. Additionally, the explanation of collocations lacks a cohesive and systematic structure, with uneven distribution across the units. This inconsistency creates confusion for students, often blurring the distinction between collocations and word formation.

2.3. Bauer Defined Synonyms

As words that mean exactly the same thing in a given context and denote the same entity (110). He also emphasized the importance of learning synonyms within specific contexts. Regarding antonyms, Bauer stated that "antonyms are opposites, but this requires a great deal of deconstruction" (112) [5]. Thus, synonyms and antonyms, as complementary opposites, are often studied together. In Contemporary College English, the teaching of synonyms and antonyms is introduced towards the end of the vocabulary section. Despite this, their study remains crucial for students.

The editors adopt a similar approach for teaching synonyms and antonyms as they do for collocations, encouraging students to deduce the rules on their own through exercises. The teaching method for synonyms and antonyms involves three types of exercises, the first of which requires students to fill in the blanks with the correct form of a word from the brackets, such as the examples provided in the text [6]:

1. I would like to____ (speak, say, talk) something about a book I read on Tibet three weeks_____ (ago, before).

2. Have we ever met____ (ago, before)? Ah, now I____ (remember, recall, memorize).

The editor provides synonyms such as "speak," "say," and "talk," as well as antonyms like "ago" and "before," where students are required to fill in the blanks with the appropriate word based on the context of the sentence. This approach helps students develop independent thinking skills and encourages them to use dictionaries or other resources to understand the specific meanings of words, ultimately helping them distinguish words based on context.

For the second type of exercise, students are tasked with providing synonyms and antonyms for the given words. For example, synonyms like "encounter," "mark," and "ancient" are provided, along with antonyms such as "complete," "steep," and "doubt." These exercises encourage students to refer to dictionaries or rely on their existing knowledge to fill in the blanks. However, the large number of words listed in the exercises can lead to student boredom, reducing their enthusiasm for learning. Additionally, the simplicity of

the questions and the lack of context means that even when students know the synonyms or antonyms, they may not know how to apply them properly.

In the third type of exercise, the editors ask students to fill in the blanks with the correct form of the given words, as illustrated in the text [6]:

Worth, worthy, worthwhile

1. This used car is not_____ buying.

2. It was____ getting the house repaired.

3. All his life he was trying to be a_____ son of his father.

This exercise can be thought of as a variant of the first exercise type, in which students are also given a set of synonyms and asked to fill in the corresponding spaces depending on the context. The first thing they need to do is to understand the meaning of the words, and then to understand the meaning of the sentences given, and finally fill in the blanks according to the context. As mentioned above that "learning synonyms in a certain context is important", it can be concluded that it is very meaningful to use context to help students understand vocabulary.

Overall, the editor's teaching of synonyms and antonyms is not comprehensive enough. First, the book lacks an explanation of the definitions of synonyms and antonyms and overestimates a student's ability to learn autonomously. As freshmen, they do not have enough ability to summarize what they have learned. Secondly, the teaching of synonyms and antonyms only stays in the practice process, and the setting of some topics is too sloppy and lacks certain context, which can lead students to have negative feelings about vocabulary learning.

3. Discussion

In this section, the Principled Communicative Approach (PCA) will serve as the primary theoretical framework for analyzing the second part. Arnold, Dörnyei, and Pugliese proposed seven maxims of the Principled Communicative Approach, which align with the latest developments in psycholinguistic research [8]:

The personal significance principle.

The declarative input principle.

The controlled practice principle.

The focus on form principle.

The formulaic language principle.

The language exposure principle.

The focused interaction principle.

Based on the analysis in the second section, it is clear that the vocabulary teaching in *Contemporary College English* adheres to the principle of personal significance. The process is student-centered, as the editors provide numerous exercises and encourage students to explore on their own using tools such as dictionaries. The teacher's role is less prominent in this approach; however, under this student-led teaching model, teacher explanations remain crucial for students at this stage.

In terms of the declarative input principle, while the editors do not provide explicit explanations of word formation or formulaic language concepts, they offer exercises hoping that students will identify the features of word formation and formulaic language through practice. However, the editors overestimate the freshmen's ability to learn independently, as they may not yet possess the skills necessary to summarize knowledge on their own. Therefore, more comprehensive explanations of fundamental concepts should be incorporated to support their understanding.

Analyzing the vocabulary teaching in *Contemporary College English* reveals alignment with the controlled practice principle, the focus on form principle, and the formulaic language principle. Firstly, the vocabulary section primarily uses practice exercises to help students deepen their understanding. Secondly, the editors emphasize the importance of sentence structure and form in the exercises, guiding students to complete sentences by

determining parts of speech. This helps students become familiar with sentence structure. Thirdly, the teaching of formulaic language, including collocations and phrasal verbs, is emphasized. However, the book does not fully recognize the significance and universality of formulaic language in practical communication. As Arnold, Dörnyei, & Pugliese state, "there should be sufficient awareness raising of the significance and the pervasiveness of formulaic language in real-life communication, and selected phrases should be practiced and recycled intensely" [8].

The design of *Contemporary College English* also reflects the language exposure principle. Before engaging with the vocabulary section, students are expected to read articles and understand their background knowledge, creating a rich language environment. However, editors could include more pre-class activities, such as videos or discussion tasks, to further immerse students in the language. The focused interaction principle is less evident in the vocabulary section, as the teaching mainly revolves around practice questions, with few interactive components. To address this, the editors could incorporate more interactive sessions, such as group discussions or vocabulary-related games.

Overall, the vocabulary design in this book mostly aligns with the Principled Communicative Approach, but there is considerable potential for improvement.

4. Conclusion

This paper primarily examines the vocabulary instruction in the first volume of *Contemporary College English*, focusing on word formation, formulaic language, and synonyms and antonyms. The study then applies the Principled Communicative Approach to assess how well the textbook aligns with its principles. The findings show that while the textbook's vocabulary design largely follows the key principles of the Principled Communicative Approach, there is still considerable potential for enhancement in certain areas.

To summarize, the vocabulary teaching in this textbook is well-structured and encompasses various aspects, such as word formation, collocations, and synonyms and antonyms. These elements provide students with opportunities to explore different categories of vocabulary and develop a deeper understanding of words. However, revisions and improvements from the editors would further improve the textbook and enhance the learning experience for students.

Lastly, due to the limitations of my current knowledge, this paper lacks a more in-depth investigation and comprehensive analysis. I hope that with continued learning, future research will allow for a more thorough exploration of the textbook.

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