



TEACHING VOCABULARY BASED ON ASSOCIATIVE APPROACH

Mirzakamolova Maftuna Rahimjon qizi

PhD student at Namangan State University

Annotation

This article explores the effectiveness of the associative approach in teaching vocabulary to language learners. The study highlights how associative learning techniques — including semantic, visual, and contextual associations — can enhance vocabulary retention, comprehension, and active use. The research emphasizes that by linking new words with prior knowledge and meaningful contexts, learners develop stronger mental connections that lead to better long-term memory and communicative competence.

Key words: vocabulary teaching, associative approach, language learning, semantic association, cognitive psychology, memory retention.

Introduction

Vocabulary is a fundamental component of language proficiency. Without sufficient vocabulary, communication becomes limited and ineffective. Therefore, one of the main objectives of language teaching is to expand learners' vocabulary in both receptive and productive skills. However, memorizing new words is often challenging for learners due to the absence of meaningful context and psychological connections.

The associative approach offers a psychologically grounded and learner-centered method for vocabulary instruction. It is based on the principle that human memory functions through associations — linking new information to existing knowledge or experiences. By activating associative networks, vocabulary learning becomes more natural, engaging, and durable.

Teaching vocabulary using an associative approach involves connecting new words to students' existing knowledge through relationships like meaning, context, and sound to improve memory and comprehension. This method uses strategies such as concept mapping, creating word associations, and contextual learning, which are



more effective than rote memorization. Key strategies include building connections between words, using visual aids like concept maps, and practicing words in various contexts through speaking, reading, and writing.

Literature Review and Methodology

The associative approach originates from cognitive psychology, which asserts that memory consists of interconnected networks. Each word or concept is a “node,” and learning occurs when new nodes are connected to existing ones through various associations such as:

- Semantic associations (meaning-based connections),
- Phonological associations (sound similarities),
- Visual associations (mental images or symbols),
- Contextual associations (situational relevance).

For example, when learners associate the word “forest” with “trees,” “green,” “animals,” or “nature,” they form multiple mental links, which strengthens recall and understanding.

Actually, the so-called association refers to the psychological activity process of associating with one subject from another one, belonging to a form of human thinking and understanding (Wei, 2010). Connection exists in all subjects. Although there may not be certain association between two subjects, human subjective initiative plays a very important role in it. Students’ divergent thinking ability can be improved through association ability, so that they can grasp the vocabulary features accurately and give full play to their imagination and associate with relevant roots or images, thus the profound impression can be formed in students’ mind, which is beneficial to improve their vocabulary memory ability. Associative teaching in vocabulary teaching includes many contents such as pronunciation, meaning and morphology, requiring students to master not only the correct way of pronunciation and spelling, but also to grasp the nature of vocabulary and ways of vocabulary application, etc., which has enhanced the application efficiency of vocabulary. In the process of vocabulary learning, pronunciation is a very complicated problem, even a stress can directly affect the lexical meaning, and thus the pronunciation is required to be valued. For example, give play to students’



imagination after reading a word, to make them think of some associated letters, and then conduct sufficient imagination and summary, so that the association mode combining pronunciation and spelling can be formed. Meaning plays an important role in vocabulary learning. In the process of memorizing meaning, mechanical memory shall be avoided by all means, to encourage students use their imagination to make lexical meaning concrete. For instance, when memorizing the word “happy”, the expression must be happy (Shi, 2012). And in the process of pronunciation explanation, students’ impression can be deepened by combining with meaning and image, to guide students to form the association learning mode of pronunciation and meaning. Associative teaching mode is helpful to deepen students’ vocabulary learning impression. Grasp the vocabulary in terms of whether pronunciation or meaning, to improve students’ imagination and association ability, and cultivate students’ independent training ability of vocabulary and the practical application ability.

Teaching vocabulary using the associative approach involves several practical steps:

1. **Activating Prior Knowledge.** Before introducing new vocabulary, teachers engage learners in discussions or brainstorming activities related to the topic. This helps activate relevant mental schemas.
2. **Presenting Words in Meaningful Contexts.** Words are not presented in isolation but through sentences, short stories, or thematic clusters. For instance, teaching the words “rain,” “umbrella,” “wet,” and “storm” together creates a network of related meanings.
3. **Using Visual and Semantic Maps.** Teachers can use concept maps or mind maps where learners link new words with known ones. This visual representation enhances associative memory.
4. **Encouraging Learner-Generated Associations.** Students are asked to create their own associations — through synonyms, antonyms, personal experiences, or cultural references. For example, associating “apple” with “health,” “teacher,” or “red.”
5. **Reinforcement through Practice.** Regular repetition, quizzes, and communicative exercises (like dialogues or role-plays) help strengthen these associations and facilitate long-term retention.
- 6.



Discussion and Results

Despite its advantages, the associative approach also presents challenges. Teachers must ensure that associations are meaningful and relevant to learners' experiences. Irrelevant or forced associations may confuse learners or lead to incorrect usage. Moreover, the method requires time, creativity, and careful lesson planning. In the actual teaching process, many students have the learning-weariness, especially in English vocabulary learning. The efforts students have paid for vocabulary is not proportional to the specific performance. Students cannot remember the words although they have spent a lot of time, and they are at a loss in writing or reading. And although students remember the words temporarily, they will forget them quickly, so the students are affected greatly in terms of their confidence. Most of the students just memorize the words mechanically without mastering the memory law, and fall into the recite cycle, so the actual effect is not very ideal. In traditional learning process, teachers have always adopted the simplified explanation way, namely, teachers lead students to read the words, and then list the meanings of the words as well as the specific using methods. Students have always been in a passive position in the classroom, as they just take notes and then recite. Over time, the students lose interest in vocabulary learning, and practical learning efficiency is not very ideal. In the process of vocabulary learning, due to the restrictions of language learning environment and their own learning style, students tend to only remember the word meaning, but ignore the particular collocation of words. Therefore, their quantity of vocabulary hasn't been improved after reciting and the word memory efficiency is so good.

In the process of college English vocabulary teaching, students' associative thinking ability and divergent thinking ability have very important influence on students' vocabulary memory. Students can quickly grasp the word pronunciation and application methods through vertical, horizontal and comprehensive association to improve vocabulary memory efficiency, so that students can better understand the meaning of the words, and improve students' sensitivity of English vocabulary learning as well as learning motivation. At the same time, associative teaching is conducive to create a more relaxed and pleasant learning atmosphere for students, enabling students to better feel the English vocabulary (Zhang, 2013). As an



important part of human consciousness, association ability and imagination ability are of the advanced consciousness, having strong expression in the aspect of image, and in the specific teaching activities, teachers can extend students' words using the words that have been mastered, which is helpful to improve vocabulary learning efficiency. In vocabulary teaching process, the reasonable imagination can be expanded through the combination of sound, form and meaning, and they can be expressed more vividly, thus students can learn better in a relaxed environment.

Conclusion

The associative approach provides an effective and scientifically supported method for vocabulary teaching. By linking new words to existing mental frameworks, learners achieve deeper comprehension, better recall, and improved communicative ability. In modern language education, integrating associative techniques with digital tools, visual aids, and interactive activities can make vocabulary learning both efficient and enjoyable. Thus, teachers should adopt this approach to promote meaningful and lasting language acquisition.

References

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