

"A New Approach to the Study of Meaning"

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Abstract: *This paper tries to shed light on an initiative taken by the researcher to author an introductory textbook for the study of meaning (Semantics and Pragmatics) for students majoring in English. The approach adopted in writing the book is communicatively and interactively oriented. It is an approach which heavily depends on interactive teaching by employing a variety of teaching strategies and activities, such as video and picture watching (as brainstorming and edutainment facilitators), discussion groups, pair work, PowerPoint presentations, opinion-sharing, in addition to extra exercises which aim at extending and reinforcing the students' knowledge and understanding of meaning in language .*

The main objective behind this initiative is to transfer the study of Semantics and Pragmatics from the traditional setting which mainly depends on lecturing, as one-sided process, to a more effective one, a multi-sided process, that depends on interaction, between the teacher and students, among students themselves and between students and the material included in the textbook. This kind of interaction breaks the monotony and introduces new mechanisms instead of the stereotyped and traditional practices. This makes the study of meaning a dynamic process and an interesting experience through the balanced combination of knowledge and entertainment (edutainment).

Keywords: *approach, brainstorming, communicative, edutainment, interactive, hint, pragmatics, semantics, starter, video*

1. Introduction

In this paper, I am trying to shed light on my experience with writing a textbook for fourth year students of English at Cihan University. Since I have started my career as a lecturer five years ago or so, I have noticed that students face a serious difficulty in studying Semantics and Pragmatics. Apart from their general weakness in English language, a logical reason seems to be attributed to the nature of sources they use as references, most of which are traditional and lack the sense of entertainment and interaction. This was an incentive for me to start the project; the implementation of which came true when I finished writing the textbook entitled: " Semantics and Pragmatics: A Practical Course for the Study of Meaning"¹.

In writing this book, many things have been taken into consideration. The students' needs were given a top priority. Students need a textbook which briefly and directly tackles the material; one which is written in an easy straightforward style and diction. Other important considerations are related to the recent trends and developments in methodology, English language teaching/learning and informatization, all of which highly emphasize the role of interaction, brainstorming and edutainment (through the inclusion of pictures, videos and PowerPoint presentations).

2. Interaction

Second/foreign language learning is facilitated when learners are engaged in interaction and meaningful communicative situations. Interaction has an important role in language teaching as it promotes active engagement with ideas and interpretation. Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) emphasizes interaction

¹ Adopting the same approach, the author had published his first book in "Linguistics" for third year students. This has been depended as a textbook since 2014, and with much success).

and considers it as the key to second language teaching/learning (Richards, 2006). Thus, the main objective of CLT has always been to develop communicative competence in personally meaningful ways and situations. According to the interactionist view of language teaching, language acquisition is the result of interaction between the learner's mental abilities and the linguistic environment (Long 1990, cited in Ellis 1994).

Interaction, as a planned classroom practice or activity, works at different levels; between teacher and student, student and student, student and text and teacher and text. Such levels of interaction provide learning experiences that focus learners' attention on the language material and encourage processes of noticing, comparison and reflection (Scarino and Liddicoat, 2009: 39) between learners and the language (input) provided by their teacher or textbook, which will result in production (output) (Ellis, 1994). The more effective the input, the more effective the output will be. This highly depends on the nature of the material, the feedback, linguistic environment and the manner in which this input (language material) is delivered to the learners.

In addition to the teacher's role as an initiator of a comprehensible and effective input (Krashen, 1987), the subject matter contained in the textbook should be highly effective in the sense that it offers ample space for interactive skills through the students' participation in class activity. In this textbook, I have tried to provide learners with different sources of interactive skills through the inclusion of videos, pictures, in addition to a variety of exercises which include discussion questions, group and pair work, critical thinking and interpretation, self-expression and opinion-sharing. Such a variety of tasks and activities helps students progress in language acquisition and understand real language to a great extent through their interaction with the subject matter, the teacher and other learners. This will ultimately enable them to discuss their reaction and contribution to a certain matter or query or solve a problem or a dilemma in a given exercise or task activity.

Creating an interactive environment in the classroom can also be achieved through questioning. In an interactive classroom, questions need to be distributed among participants in a way which allows for collaborative exploration of ideas. Teachers and the subject matter should allocate significant teaching time to asking different types of questions to elicit a meaningful communication from the student (Scarino and Liddicoat, 2009:42). Questions of interactive nature aim at forming opinions, investigating connections, promoting reflection and eliciting interpretations and assumptions (ibid, 44).

3. Brainstorming

The Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary (OALD) defines brainstorming as a way of making a group of people think about something at the same time in order to solve a problem or create new ideas. Brainstorming is a group or an individual creativity technique by which efforts are made to find a conclusion for a specific problem by gathering a list of ideas spontaneously contributed by its members (Osborn, 1963 cited in Wikipedia, 2015). The term was popularized by Osborn in 1953. Brainstorming is a useful tool to develop creative solutions to a problem. It is a thinking process by which students are asked to develop ideas or thoughts about a particular issue or topic which they can define or diagnose. It is a process that contributes to the generation of creative solutions to a problem. It teaches students to break away from old patterns of reasoning to new unexplored paths of thinking that foster interactive thinking (by working together in small groups).

Brainstorming can play a significant role to improve students' content understanding, thematic integration with real life while enhancing the confidence and communication skills in the students. Brainstorming does not only stimulate students' attention, but also encourages them to participate in the class activity in an interactive and fun-active manner while motivating them towards the topic in focus (Abdul Mateen, 2013). It is an activity that aims at creating a list of ideas that can be used as clues that guide students to make their contributions as regards the problem, while giving every student the possibility to articulate his/her ideas and share those with others and support new ideas (Al-blwi, 2006).

Brainstorming helps the teacher to conclude ideas that are broader than students' thinking solutions. It makes the teacher more democratic and respectful of views regardless of the different points of view (Humaidan,

2005 cited in Abdul Mateen, 2013). Many studies have shown the advantages of brainstorming in foreign language teaching. Richards (1990) found out that students who were trained in brainstorming techniques were more efficient at generating and organizing ideas than students in a control group. Rao (2007) pointed out that students, who had been trained in brainstorming techniques and used them regularly over a twelve-month period, produced measurably higher results in writing tasks. Furthermore, an attitudinal survey showed that students who participated in a research project felt positive about the effectiveness of the brainstorming techniques (Sayed, 2009 cited in Abdul Mateen, 2013).

Brainstorming helps student-student and student-teacher relationships to get stronger as they solve problems in a positive, stress-free environment². To activate brainstorming in classroom situations, the class is to be divided into two or three groups and one student is appointed as note-taker or a leader for each group. Students are given about ten minutes to do the brainstorming activity. They are told that all ideas are accepted, and feedback is welcome. Group leaders read out their ideas written on slips of paper. Students guess which group was brainstorming the right way. When they finish, each group choose their three best ideas and write them up on the board. At last ideas are to be unified and a final version is adopted by the help and guidance of the teacher.

4. Edutainment

According to the Merriam-Webster dictionary (2012), educational entertainment or edutainment is defined as any content that is designed to educate as well as to entertain. There also exists content that is primarily educational but has incidental entertainment value, as well as content that is mostly entertaining but has some educational value. It can be argued that educational entertainment has existed from antiquity in the form of parables, represented by short stories that teach a moral or a spiritual lesson like those told by Jesus Christ, and fables specially with animals as characters.

Edutainment is metaphorically described as the marriage of education and entertainment. As a term it was used as early as 1948 by the Walt Disney Company to describe the *True Life Adventures* series. The noun 'edutainment' was used by Robert Heyman in 1973 while producing documentaries for the National Geographic Society (Rey-López et al, 2006). Generally, edutainment refers to entertaining TV programs, videos and computer software, which are primarily meant for educational purposes. The educational purpose can be related to formal education in different schools and institutes or to informal learning in different daily life contexts without systematically organized education (Walldén and Soronen, 2004: 4).

The rationale behind the existence and use of edutainment in teaching/learning situations is related to the need and desire to make the best of the advantages of information technology to fulfil relaxing teaching and learning and to achieve good results through lively activities. In accordance with the ideas and theories of modern education, the informatization (computerization) of curriculum gives full play to the advantages of information technology to complete the instructional design, develop teaching resources, create teaching situations, and transform abstract teaching contents into visual and vivid symbolic forms to facilitate learners' understanding and perception (Li Hongke, 2014: 28). But all this cannot be achieved without thoughtful planning and preparation, taking into consideration the students' needs, their level and interests. A basic assumption is that instructional designs when combined with fun elements enhance learning (Lepper and Cordova, 1992). But fun for its own purpose should be avoided. What is needed is a combination of fun and seriousness which may co-exist in a negotiated balance (Rea, 1998).

Familiarization with technology provides a whole range of pedagogical options (Forsyth *et al*, 1995; Maier *et al*, 1998) that can be incorporated in the curriculum to promote learning. It can, if integrated and used properly, encourage and support more professional delivery of teaching and learning materials, and thus facilitate student learning. Due to the latest developments in science and technology, a huge amount of media

² See Center for Excellence in Learning and Teaching, Copyright © 1995-2015, Iowa State University of Science and Technology.

with an edutaining nature is accessible via the internet at websites such as YouTube. Modern forms include computer software, which uses entertainment to attract and maintain an audience, while incorporating deliberate educational contents or messages. This is conveyed through movies, audios, videos, pictures, games, television programs and other forms of computer software. To make their teaching effective and productive, teachers have to exploit such facilities into their teaching. This can be done by engaging students, who are more visual learners, in a variety of activities and tasks. We know from experience that students respond well to the use of images to stimulate their interest in a subject. Postman (1985) addresses the efforts to make classrooms more entertaining. To him, learning can take the form of entertainment, and learning and enjoyment mutually support each other and that effective teaching should make use of mentally stimulating enjoyable materials.

In this paper special attention is paid to pictures, figures, videos and PowerPoint presentations as valuable sources of edutainment which have been depended and used throughout the ten chapters of the book under investigation.

4.1. Figures and Pictures

According to Beakes, (2003), a picture can be worth a thousand words, so use graphics to enhance your presentation and teaching. Figures and pictures can be used as effective tools of brainstorming if well and deliberately chosen and delivered to serve their own purposes. They can initiate students to be indirectly involved in the subject matter. Thus, pictures can be employed in lessons to reach conclusions that contribute to the topic being presented. Pictures bring images of reality into the unnatural world of the language classroom (Hill, 1990: 1). They create a relaxed and pleasant atmosphere through their entertaining and informative educational nature and content. Figures containing pictures can be used as stimuli for answering certain questions or conducting a discussion, as an illustration of something being read or talked about and as a background to a topic which can be used in different language areas and teaching different skills (ibid, 2; Wright, 1990).

Pictures are used in language teaching because they are motivating and draw learners' attention, make boring activities more enjoyable, highlight learners' interest and motivation. Furthermore, they provide a sense of the context of language and give a specific reference point or stimulus (ibid: 2). In addition to their basic role as a brainstorming initiator with an edutaining nature, they are excellent tools whereby students are interactively involved in the class activities. In fact, this is the real reason behind the inclusion of figures and pictures in the book "Semantics and Pragmatics: A Practical Course for the Study of Meaning".³

4.2. Videos

Due to its vital role in modern life, software technology has become a necessity in many fields of knowledge, information and entertainment, and language teaching is not an exception. The video, as a practical application of this technology, is being tremendously and effectively used in classroom situations, and with positive and encouraging results. Teachers, who use instructional videos, report that their students retain more information, understand concepts more rapidly and are more enthusiastic about what they are learning. With the video as one component in a thoughtful lesson plan, students often make new connections between curriculum topics, and discover links between these topics and the world outside the classroom (www.thirteen.org/edonline/ntti/resources/video1.html).

Video watching has many advantages for both students and teachers. It takes students around the globe to meet new people and hear their ideas, illustrates complex abstract concepts through animated images, engages students in problem-solving and investigative activities, helps students practice critical viewing skills and

³ Figures and pictures are generally presented in the Hint section in each chapter, but sometimes elsewhere, where necessity arises.

provides a common experience for students to discuss matters. A recent large-scale survey by Canning-Wilson 2000 (cited in Çakir, 2006: 67) reveals that students like learning language through the use of video, which is often used to mean quite different things in language teaching. Selinger (1994, 248) has also found that the use of video can “enhance student understanding of teaching”. Being a rich and valuable resource, the video is well-liked by both students and teachers (Hemei, 1997: 45). Students like it because video presentations are interesting, enjoyable, challenging and stimulating to watch. Videos show them how people behave in the culture whose language they are learning, by bringing into the classroom a wide range of communicative situations. As for teachers, it serves as an entertaining tool that saves both time and effort. A few minutes of video watching can spare a lot of classroom work time, or it can be used to introduce a wide range of activity. In addition, it is an important factor for teachers in that it helps to promote comprehension and create an atmosphere of interaction with what is being watched (Çakir, 2006:68).

Before watching the video, students are told that the purpose behind this activity is edutainment; a mixture of both knowledge and fun. While watching the video, students are asked to take notes of what is being watched, to be ready to answer certain questions raised by the teacher during watching or when the video is over. They may be asked to reproduce either what is being displayed, to describe what is happening, or to write or retell what has happened (either as answers to certain questions or write a report about it). Last but not least, the role of the student is not to be a passive viewer but an active participator in the activity which calls for interaction with the video content, the teacher and other students. This strategy has been strictly and effectively applied in the classroom when watching the videos attached to the textbook subject to investigation.

4.3. PowerPoint Presentations

PowerPoint can be an effective tool to present material in the classroom and promote student learning. It is a valuable aid to teaching provided that its use has been carefully considered in terms of technology and pedagogy. Using PowerPoint is a very positive and helpful activity. According to Jones (2003), it becomes simply an alternative form of presenting largely text-based material used to be delivered by, what he calls, ‘old technology’ meaning traditional teaching methods (chalk and talk).

PowerPoint Presentations (PPPs) can be used in many ways in the classroom environment. They can be used for initial teaching, for practice and drilling, for games, for reviews and for tests. The teacher must anticipate areas of misunderstanding and difficulty. Once the teacher knows the troubles which the students will face, he or she can create or adapt a suitable presentation for them (Fisher, 2003). Appropriate use of PowerPoint can enhance the teaching and learning experiences for both staff and students (Jones, 2003). In my textbook "Semantics and Pragmatics", PPPs are used for two main purposes; as a tool to teach and present new material (initial teaching) and for reviewing ideas and topics which have already been presented. After the students have learned and practiced something, it is a good idea to see a presentation as a reinforcement activity.

Teachers and instructors need to know how to prepare, design and deliver their PPPs. There are two types of requirements which they have to be aware of; technical and pedagogical. Technically, they should have good knowledge of designing and displaying their PPPs; how to use the proper and suitable font, letter size, colour, bullet points, the slides, the background, and how to act if a technical failure or defect happens while displaying. The background should be clear, and the slides should also be clear to read and see and without spelling mistakes. The slides should not be dense (overcrowded) with material and not to be delivered quickly. Excessive use of colour effects, transition effects and sound effects should be avoided. Also displaying too many slides on the same topic should be avoided (ibid).

Pedagogically, teachers have to prepare the slides of their PPPs in a way that meets the requirements of the course, the needs and level of their students. They have to know the 'what-how-when-why' strategy: what material to include in the slide, how to deliver it (the manner), when to deliver it and for what purpose (as initial teaching, for practice and drilling, or for reviewing). To activate the use of PPPs students should also be given

the chance to make their own presentations as part of class activity. The use of PPPs by students undoubtedly offers an opportunity for the development of a valuable transferable skill. It is vitally important to train students to be an element of peer-assessment (Prescott & Oduyemi, 2003). This can be done by encouraging students to be active participators and assessors in PPPs through their questions, discussions and comments that follow the presentations.

5. Textbook Description

5.1. Vertical Axis

Vertically, each chapter begins with the Starter section, followed by the Hint section, the basic material to be delivered in the chapter, then the Reminder section and ends with the Study Section. The Starter introduces the basic topics and terms to be presented in the chapter as headlines. The purpose behind this section is to direct the students' attention to what is to be dealt with in the chapter.

The Hint section is a two-fold activity. It is either a figure or a short video. But the two have one purpose in common; they function as a brainstorming stimulus for students to be actively and indirectly involved in the topic to be presented later. Here students are required to watch the figure or the video and answer the relevant questions. The figures and videos intend to prepare students for active involvement in the subject, but in an entertaining and easy manner by means of the information displayed in them. They challenge the students' ability to recall, observe, analyse, synthesize and infer to get at the correct answer.

The Reminder section comes at the end of each chapter. It is a summary of the main points and basic terms introduced in the chapter. It has been devised to help students have a brief account of the subject through skimming. The Study Section, which comes after the Reminder, is divided into two main parts; questions and exercises. The questions aim at checking the students' knowledge and understanding of the information presented in the chapter. The exercises aim at developing and extending the students' knowledge of semantics and pragmatics.

5.2. Horizontal Axis

Horizontally, the book contains ten chapters that fall into two parts. Part One, which is supposed to be covered in the first semester, contains five chapters. A similar number of chapters that comprise Part Two is assigned to the second semester. The book ends with a glossary of the basic terms and concepts for easy reference in case of need.

6. Textbook Strategy

A variety of strategies have been employed throughout the book. These aim at making the book easy to follow and handle, especially for students, and other readers who want to use it on their own as part of self-study. These strategies include: simplicity of expression, straightforward style, clarity of presentation, comprehensive coverage of fundamental issues and concepts and splitting the main topics into smaller manageable subtopics. In addition to the videos and figures, which are used as brainstorming stimuli and edutainment facilitators, interactive task activities and PPPs are heavily used in the ten chapters of the book. The main objective behind all this is to provide both the teacher and students with a useful and entertaining tool to the study of meaning. All these strategies and activities aim at making the study of meaning an interesting task rather than boring.

7. How to Use the Book

7.1. For the Teacher

For easy and effective treatment of the subject matter, the teacher or instructor is advised to follow the same method of presentation and gradation adopted in the book. The teacher has to stick to the same sequence, and

proceed from the **Starter** to the **Hint** and to the rest of other topics and sections. The teacher's role here is an organizer, a facilitator and a guide rather than a controller or a performer. The figures and videos included in the Hint sections should be used as brainstorming stimuli to create an interactive atmosphere. As for the **PowerPoint Presentations**, the teacher has to effectively exploit this facility in a way that makes the teaching of semantics and pragmatics both knowledge and entertainment. The teacher has also to activate the **Exercices** sections through class discussions, pair and group work, report and essay writing.

7.2. For the Student

The approach adopted in this book gives a good chance for students to take the initiative and be actively engaged into a variety of activities. It helps students to deal with the study of meaning from a new perspective which makes their study both useful and interesting. This is achieved through the edutainment factor conveyed by video watching and image capturing, brainstorming, interactive discussion groups, group/pair work, report, essay writing and PPPs. By virtue of the PPPs facility, which is recorded on an attached CD, students and other learners can enjoy watching them independently, and at their leisure time, as a part of self-study.

8. Conclusion

When writing a textbook, an author has to put certain pedagogic considerations in mind, namely the students' needs, their linguistic background, the objectives of the course, the latest trends and developments in language teaching/learning and informatization. Having taken these things into consideration, the author sets out to decide on the suitable methodology. The approach adopted in authoring this book copes with all these pedagogic considerations. It is, in the first place, communicatively and interactively oriented with an edutaining flavour. This is quite obvious from the strategies and activities employed in the book. These include versatile use of video viewing and image capturing which are used as brainstorming stimuli and edutainment facilitators, interactive task activities, opinion-sharing, discussion groups, essay and report writing, and heavy use of PPPs that cover the ten chapters of the book. In addition, the use of simplicity of expression, straightforward style, clarity of presentation, comprehensive coverage, splitting the main topics into smaller manageable subtopics, have made the book easy to handle and follow. To end up with, the book has been an attempt to make the study of semantics and pragmatics an interesting task rather than boring through the marriage of information and entertainment (edutainment).

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