Introducing Verbpathy in the English Language Classroom: Encouraging Students to Feel the Essence and Emotion of Words

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Abstract:

A key element in vocabulary instruction is to get the students to "feel" the vocabulary and make it a part of their new language identity; that is, helping the students to "own" the terms is a top priority of language instructors. Using verbpathy as a tool meets this goal. The idea of using verbpathy in vocabulary instruction is to encourage the students to develop a feel for how terms can and should be used in both spoken and written work. By asking the students if a term has a "positive feel," a "negative feel," or a "neutral feel," the students start to develop an intuitive command of the vocabulary. Moreover, while working on the verbpathy of words, students make their own unique associations and connections with the terms and relate them to their own lives. Research in neuroscience tells us that the more associations students make, the better they learn (Jensen, 2008; Medina, 2009; Willis, 2006).

Key terms: *verbpathy, neural pathways, reinforcement, student-ownership, long-term memory*

Introduction

Learning the vocabulary of a language is not just about memorizing words; it is about feeling the words, making them a part of the learner's own identity; it is about personalizing the words and ultimately owning them. This notion of ownership allows students to befriend the English language versus merely studying it as a means to attain a degree.

One simple way that I have found to help my students reach this goal is by using what I call "verbpathy." This is an element of a vocabulary acquisition technique I've developed called the Head-to-Toe Method of Associations for Vocabulary Acquisition. Verbpathy means "word" (verb) "feeling" (pathy), or feeling "word-essence." When students feel the positive, negative, neutral, or the multi-faceted aspects of a word, it is easier to make connections and learn the item in question. The following daily procedure explains one way in which verbpathy can be used to benefit students.

Procedure

First, I usually write three to four new vocabulary items on the whiteboard without any corresponding definitions.

These terms might be single vocabulary words, phrasal verbs (two- or three-part) or idioms. These lexical items are from the 80-100 items I teach each term. All the terms are new for the students. Some of these terms come from the articles the students are reading and some come from a list of "necessary" academic terms they will need for their respective programs of study.

Next, students receive a worksheet listing the same vocabulary items with corresponding example sentences, but no definitions. I almost always use the students' names in the examples, which evokes an immediate sense of interest and focused level of attention on the activity (Randolph, 2013a; Thornbury, 2002). These two attributes—interest and attention—are crucial for learning and reinforcing neural pathways for long-term memory (McPherron & Randolph, 2014; Medina, 2009; Sousa, 2011; Willis, 2006). The following is an example from the worksheet:

> *come up with = _____*
> *Example: Javier just **came up with** a*
> *great way to learn new vocabulary.*

I give the students about two to three minutes to read the example sentences and discuss, in pairs, what they think the words, phrasal verbs, or idioms mean. If they cannot guess a term's meaning, I give them extra example sentences until they are able to offer the definition. Encouraging the students to formulate the definitions adds to the whole notion of word ownership and language-confidence. In fact, it is very rare that I give the students the definition of a term. With respect to these student-generated definitions, I might add to, alter, or refine them, but I try to refrain from simply supplying them with the answers.

We, as instructors, must always keep in mind that the more our students contribute to the learning process, the more they will learn and be inspired to learn. This idea is reinforced in neuroscience; for research continues to show how excited neurons get and how fast they fire and make connections when positive emotions motivate learning (Jensen, 2008; Ratey, 2001).

After the students supply their definition for each term, I write it on the board as the example below shows:

> *come up with = **to create; to think up***
> *Example: Javier just **came up with** a*
> *great way to learn new vocabulary.*

Once the students have clearly understood the definitions, I go over the verbpathy of each term. Next to each vocabulary item I write a positive sign, a negative sign, and an N for neutral. I then write the word "Emotion" under these. Under "Emotion," I write both adjective or noun; meaning I want the students to supply an adjective or a noun that is directly associated with the vocabulary item in question. This gets them to think about the feelings and emotions they associate with the terms. Here is an example:

> *+ / − / N*
>
> *come up with = to create; to think up*
>
> *Emotion: _____*
>
>   *adjective / noun*
>
> **Javier just **came up with** a great way to*
> *learn new vocabulary.*

In the case of our present example, we would assign a positive feeling to the word because "to create" is a positive activity. Therefore, for this tri-part phrasal verb, we would circle the

positive sign. In addition, we might assign the emotional qualities of "joyful" and/or "excitement." The resulting work on the board would look like this:

$+$ / − / N
come up with = to create; to think up
Emotion: <u>Joyful / Excitement</u>
*   adjective / nounExample: Javier just **came up with** a great way to learn new vocabulary.*

As above, I try to get the students to think of one adjective or one noun that relates to the term in question. This serves four purposes: first, it helps them review or recycle word families and forms; second, it helps students review parts of speech; third, it helps to reinforce the connections between already learned words and the new words; and fourth, it deepens the emotive quality and connection to the words. The adjectives and nouns used to deepen the emotional link to the newly introduced terms will vary with the level of the class. The intermediate levels may overuse terms like "good," "bad," "happy" or "sad." The higher levels, however, usually produce a nice variety of synonyms. It is thus up to each instructor to elicit as many terms as he or she can to help all levels of learners connect to the new terms by reviewing already learned adjectives and nouns and by inspiring his or her students to learn a wide spectrum of related synonyms.

Possible Complications

It should be noted that exploring the verbpathy of lexical items can lead to certain challenges, but questioning the positive, negative, or neutral "feel" of words only deepens the students' relationship with them. For instance, one

could argue that a person could *come up with* a "bad" idea or plan, and, in such cases, we should label it as negative. However, it is important to look at the essential nature of the term, which is "to create," "to think," "to invent," and, as above, this is considered a positive activity. The argument, however, that it could be negative is an interesting one, and these types of discussions about such terms get the students to actually analyze, think through, and struggle with terms like the aforementioned example. Ultimately, this simple step may and can become a major learning breakthrough for English language learners (ELLs). It also pushes the instructor to be on his or her toes and continually evaluate the feeling of words. In many cases, I have had to refine and update my own verbpathy of English words, phrases, and idioms based on the insight and intriguing perceptions of my students.

A few examples can clarify how some words belong to obvious categories, while others are a bit more murky or controversial. Words like *blissful* or *generous* are clearly positive terms, whereas items like *come down with* or *hazardous* are negative. Neutral terms like *add up to* or *boil down to* are also relatively easy to categorize. However, words like *religion*, *politics*, *Buddhism* or *vegetarianism* are more difficult to assign a feeling to because they usher in personal, cultural, or philosophical biases. How do you tell, for example, a proud, 54 year-old, Vietnamese Buddhist monk that vegetarianism is not necessarily a positive concept, if that is what he believes? The answer is not easy.

This is where instructors need to consider both the *personal* and the *universal* "feeling" for words (Lightbrown & Spada, 2006). Let's take

my Vietnamese student as an example. For him, the term "vegetarianism" was very positive, so I let him label it as such. But the rest of the class labeled it as neutral. In my opinion, as long as my Vietnamese student was linking the word to certain personal feelings and emotions, thinking about the word, becoming engaged with the meaning, and ultimately learning it, then he was, as Willis (2006) puts it, "reinforcing the connections between neurons." This reinforcement helped him not just memorize the word, but transfer it to his long-term memory and actually "learn" the term. Therefore, for our student in question, I let him consider the universal feeling as neutral, but the personal feeling as positive. There may be, then, in some cases, two distinct "verbpathies" for an item. This, in itself, can only help reinforce the connection or associations with the term at a deeper and more inspiring level.

The main motivation for this method is to help the students own the lexical items as real, live, dynamic, and functioning tools, so the more excitement we can produce in the classroom, the more they will attend to learning the words. Such excitement and attention, the neuroscientists continually tell us, are two crucial keys in the learning process (Jensen, 2008; Medina, 2009; Willis, 2006). Emotion plays an important role in learning and in analyzing the verbpathy of each vocabulary item, for without eliciting the students' emotions, very little, if any, learning would go on (Davidson & Begley, 2013; Medina, 2009). In a survey I conducted in 2013 (n=42), all students concurred that the emotions of joy, surprise, fear, sadness, anger and

Without eliciting the students' emotions, very little, if any, learning would go on.

disgust were all important factors in their learning (Randolph, 2013b). Moreover, these students claimed that without the presence of emotional associations with lexical items, the terms are rarely remembered after vocabulary tests and quizzes.

Reinforcing Verbpathy with Examples

Once the students have gone through the verbpathy of each word, they give example sentences orally to the class. I have found that they sincerely enjoy giving examples, and this verbpathy activity usually helps them to give correct examples of the terms because they have looked at the terms' register and essential feeling at a relatively deep level. This practice session of giving examples also offers the students a chance to review each term multiple times. The more they hear and use these items in an isolated amount of time, the better chance they have of retaining the words or idioms in their long-term memory (Ebbinghaus, 1885/1913; Jensen, 2008; Randolph, 2014).

Finally, the students write out example sentences for the terms and fill in the verbpathy information for each word as homework. It should be noted that the positive, negative, or neutral feeling for the terms will usually, as discussed above, be the same, but the adjectives and nouns that they believe to correspond to the new vocabulary terms can and will be different. They should write the example sentences as homework a few hours after class so that they reinforce in the evening what they learned earlier during the day.

Below is a recap of the procedure:

(1) Write the vocabulary terms on the board with the verbpathy symbols:

+ / – / N;

(2) Provide a worksheet giving the same terms and an example sentence for each term;

(3) Elicit the definitions for each term;

(4) Evaluate the terms to see if they are positive, negative, neutral, or a combination thereof;

(5) Elicit the emotion of each term. Try to also elicit adjectives and nouns for each term;

(6) Discuss, if necessary, why you assigned that particular verbpathy;

(7) Request example sentences from the students; and

(8) Assign the homework as review tool.

Benefits

The benefits of using verbpathy to teach vocabulary are numerous. First, it personalizes the words for the students, and personalizing material is a great motivation to learn (Randolph, 2013b; Thornbury, 2002; Willis, 2006). Second, the words are no longer "owned" by the English language but rather by each student; that is, the student-ownership of the words becomes a distinct reality while using verbpathy. Third, it inspires students to "feel" the terms and use them as dynamic tools; verbpathy breaks down the commonly perceived "lifelessness" of words. Fourth, it creates associations with previous experiences and memories that will assist the students in learning the new terms (Sousa, 2011). Fifth, verbpathy requires both the students and the instructor to think deeply about the essence of the words or expressions in question. Lastly, this will ultimately help them create more neural connections as they master

the use, feeling, and function of each term.

Student Survey Results

At the end of the 2014 fall semester, I conducted a short survey asking ELLs from four different classes (n=32) what they thought about verbpathy as a vocabulary learning device. The three questions of the survey were as follows:

(1) Does the use of "verbpathy" help you remember and learn the lexical items?
Yes   Why?   No   Why Not?
(2) Please write down the specific things that deal with learning vocabulary that you think "verbpathy" has helped you with.
(3) Do you have any other comments?

The classes I surveyed consisted of two advanced writing courses, one advanced speaking class, and one credit-bearing high-level university writing course for non-native speakers of English. Question #1 yielded very positive results. In the first writing class, 88% of the learners answered that verbpathy did, in fact, help them remember the lexical items. In the second writing class, 100% of learners answered that verbpathy helped them. In the speaking class, 83% of learners claimed it helped them learn the items, and 81% of the high advanced writing class said that verbpathy was indeed a beneficial tool in helping the students remember the vocabulary they studied.

Below is a selection of comments from Question #2.

(Not edited from grammar.)

> *The words are no longer "owned" by the English language but rather by each student.*

(1) It helps me understand the words' meaning deeply.
(2) Verbpathy helps me use the words effectively and correctly.
(3) Helps me to remember how it feels when I say or read these words.
(4) Easy to memorize. Because you know the "verbpathy," you almost know how to use it. When you use it, you know it.
(5) Have a feeling with the words and link our wordship with the word.
(6) I feel I can communicate each word, and makes class more interesting during class.
(7) It helps me to feel the situation of words or idioms.
(8) It helped me to think more about the word.

(9) Make relationship with something in your mind.
(10) It makes me be interested in words.

Concluding Remarks

The most important aspect of teaching vocabulary is to make it engaging, exciting, memorable, and learner-centered yet instructor-guided. Verbpathy promotes these elements. However, the crucial underpinning is the relationship that develops between the words and the students' personalities. Words are no longer just words, but rather they become "language friends," which the students carry with them on the journey through their English language learning experience.

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