Lexical sets

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Lexical sets

• It appears from research that learning items in lexical sets (e.g. names of colours, names of animals, parts of the body etc.) does not lead to good learning.
Research on learning semantic sets

• Tinkham (1993)
• Does it help learners to master a new set of lexical items if they are all members of a semantic set (same part of speech, same kind of meaning: e.g. clothes, animals)?
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• Does it help learners to master a new set of lexical items if they are all members of a semantic set (same part of speech, same kind of meaning: e.g. clothes, animals)?
Learners were presented with two sets of items from an artificial language, and told their ‘meanings’; one set all related to the same domain, the other did not.

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shirt = moshee rain = moshee
jacket = umau car = blaikel
sweater = blaikel frog = umau
rain = achen shirt = achen
car = nalo jacket = kawvas
frog = kawvas sweater = nalo
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The learners consistently learned the unrelated items better.

- The research was later replicated, with similar results.
- When asked, learners said that they found they were confused because words had similar meanings.
- i.e. if you learn two words with similar meanings (or forms?) the learning of one ‘interferes’ with learning the other.
• But words linked to each other syntagmatically and thematically are learnt well.

• e.g. blue + sky is better learnt than blue + red + yellow...

• mother + love + home .... better learnt than love, like ...

• So...

• The vocabulary presented in elementary textbooks should be based not on semantic sets or pairs, but on thematic and syntactic links.
Further implications 2

• The teaching of lexical sets leads to teaching relatively infrequent words (e.g toes, purple).

• We have an enormous amount of vocabulary to teach: why waste effort on infrequent items that will not be useful to learners?
Further implications 2

• Any pairs or groups of words that might get confused should probably not be taught simultaneously as new items.
• Antonyms: arrive / depart
• Synonyms: big / large
• Synforms of various kinds:
• Homophones: accept / except
• Homonyms, homographs: bear, entrance
• Semantic associations may be useful for

a) The teaching of a new item ‘hooked’ on one already known which is semantically linked to it (e.g. teaching *miserable* when they already know *sad*).

b) The design of practice exercises, e.g. ‘odd one out’ or ‘suggest an opposite’.