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EVALUATION OF VOCABULARY LEARNING APPS FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF LEXICAL APPROACH

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Abstract

With the rapid development of communication industry and the progress of multimedia technology, mobile learning has become a more and more popular way of learning, and a large number of learning apps has appeared. By providing comprehensive teaching services, these apps have created the efficient and convenient learning environment for learners, attracting a large number of learners' interest in a short period of time. According to lexical approach, lexis is the core of language learning. As the smallest language unit that can be used flexibly, it is an important part in language communication. Reciting words has always been regarded as the starting point of English learning for Chinese. Nowadays, vocabulary learning apps are very popular in EFL groups, many learners choose to use these apps to recite words rather than paper books, which is also the mainstream of foreign language learning. This paper studies lexical approach and the popular vocabulary learning apps, analyzes the advantages and disadvantages of these apps from the perspective of lexical approach, and finally gives some suggestions to improve vocabulary learning apps more pedagogically useful.

Keywords: vocabulary learning; vocabulary learning apps; lexical approach; advantages and disadvantages

1. Introduction

The fast pace of technology change brought us lots of possibilities, it also brought changes to English learning methods. Extensive use of electronic products, large courage of wireless, Internet and all types of vocabulary learning software make language learning more convenient than before. Vocabulary learning apps are one kind of learning apps that assist learners to memorize words. These apps are easy to use and give us the possibility of using fragmented time. What's more, its utility value and proper design make it impossible to be ignored.

Lexical approach was proposed by Michael Lewis in 1993, which is of pioneering significance. It holds that lexis is the core of language learning. The linguist Jeremy Harmer once said, 'Vocabulary provides very important organs and flesh for a language [1].' Therefore the importance of lexis in language learning definitely cannot be neglected.

The topic of vocabulary learning apps are constantly discussing by scholars in recent years.

According to CNKI database, domestic scholars have carried out research on vocabulary learning apps from about four aspects: the influence on vocabulary teaching of different grades, the influence on lexical strategies, functions and evaluations, the influence on vocabulary learning interest. Since lexical approach is of great importance in language teaching and learning, and vocabulary learning apps improve the efficiency of vocabulary learning. This paper studies vocabulary learning apps from the perspective of lexical approach, and makes an evaluation of these apps.

2. Background

In this Internet era, more and more people get to know about the Internet and mobile technology. With the development of society, network equipment has become more and more portable and convenient. Most people have experienced several generations of network equipment which kept developing continuously with the times. Nowadays, mobile technology has permeated every aspect of our life and nearly everyone owns smart phones which facilitate our recognition of the world and make our life much more colorful.

Usually there are many apps in our smart phone, which is used for communication, learning, entertainment and so on. The users' range is wide - from children to young people to old people, from students to workers to freelancers - these equipment can be applied to nearly all of us. Mobile technology and the Internet have not only changed people's way of communication and access to information knowledge, but also continue to influenced and innovated our way of learning.

One type of these apps are those that can be used to learn vocabulary by themselves on the smart phone. Students preparing for exams, workers in need of a job, and anyone interested in other languages can use it in anywhere at any time. The convenience of these apps makes more and more people use it or even depend on it in their learning process without honestly knowing whether it can help them to learn language effectively or not.

3. Lexical approach

3.1 Background

Since the ancient Greek and Roman times, the study of language is mainly on the grammatical rules of ancient Greek and Latin. Until the 18th and 19th centuries, the study of grammatical rules of modern languages has been the main stream of language research. In the middle of the 20th century, structural linguistics was born. Thus, the system of audio-lingual approach based on structural linguistics came into being. In the 1980s, the focus of linguistics gradually shifted from phonetics and sentence structure to lexis. And at the same time, corpus linguistics is developed on the basis of computer application.

3.2 Content

Lexical approach was proposed by Michael Lewis in 1993, which is a new teaching method and new thinking with pioneering significance. The core concept of this approach is that language is grammaticalized lexis rather than lexicalized grammar. Lexis is the core of language learning, and grammatical structure should be subordinate to lexis.

Lewis divided lexis into four categories:

(1). Words (open; book), polywords (by the way; on the other hand; upside down)
(2). Collocations (make/ do a mistake; chase/ miss the bus; slump dramatically/ gracefully; a short-term strategy; look down; look upon)
(3). Fixed expressions (I will get it. We will see. That will do.)
(4). Sentence frames and heads (that is not as ... as you think; the fact/ suggestion was ... ; and even text frames)

The biggest difference between lexical approach and grammar-centered teaching approach lies in the perspective of 'lexis'. The grammar-centered teaching approach equates 'lexis' with 'vocabulary', and thinks that the formation of a sentence is the combination of words organized by grammar; however, lexical approach holds that the concept of 'lexis' should be extended to lexical

chunks and fixed combinations. Different types of lexical chunks are the basic units that make up sentences, that is, the lexis itself includes grammatical contents. Lexical approach holds that learners' language knowledge system is a repertoire composed of various lexical chunks, rather than grammatical rules plus a pile of words. But lexical approach does not deny the role of grammar in foreign language teaching, but opposes the dominant position of grammar and neglect of lexical teaching. As Lewis said, the independence of grammar and lexis will affect the status and development of the syllabus.

Lexical approach holds that lexis is a mental lexical repertoire of various chunks stored in students' brain. This mental lexical repertoire contains the sound, form, meaning and pragmatic of various lexis and chunks. When students acquire lexis, they can activate their own mental repertoire according to the specific situation of lexical use, and grasp the sound, form, meaning and pragmatic characteristics of lexis and chunks by virtue of the understanding of the connotation of their own mental repertoire. In the process of foreign language teaching, students could accumulate a certain amount of lexical chunks, which can not only accelerate their understanding and grasp of the new lexis, but also improve their language communicative ability in listening, speaking, reading and writing.

3.3 Advantages of lexical approach in teaching

3.3.1 Conducive to the development of fluent communicative competence.

Lexical approach puts forward a new view about the concept of lexis, it holds that lexis includes not only words, but also fixed and semi-fixed phrases which is made of multi-word chunks, which has the overall meaning, and also a strong language generation ability. Students' communicative competence will be promoted if they can make full use of these prefabricated chunks.

3.3.2 Make it more convenient to remember and use lexis.

As we all know, it's much easier and faster to remember a certain number of lexical chunks than to remember the same number of isolated words. Cognitive linguistics studies show that the process of language communication can usually be seen as extracting and using lexical chunks from memory. In short, lexical chunks are easy to store in chunks in the brain, and also easy to extract and use in chunks.

3.3.3 Contribute to learn real language materials.

Students not only develop the habit of rote memorization, but also find it difficult to recite the words in their mind because of their overemphasis on learning and memorizing isolated words. In the process of learning a foreign language, students pay too much attention on grammar rules. They always put words and grammar rules together when using foreign language, while ignoring the use of lexis and chunks, which often results in Chinese-style English. Lexical approach emphasizes learning, memorizing and using fixed or semi-fixed lexis and chunks. In that way, students can avoid confusing the use of foreign words and native words, so they can learn more authentic language materials.

4. Evaluation of vocabulary learning apps

4.1 Introduction of vocabulary learning apps

Nowadays different kinds of apps can be seen in our mobile equipment, and vocabulary learning app is a special kind which can help the users to memorize vocabulary. Users can learn on any mobile equipment anytime and anywhere after they have downloaded these apps. Based on the computer voice technology, multimedia technology and other integral technology, vocabulary learning apps make the sound, images and form of the words appear simultaneously. They also dedicate to improving their intelligent processing level, such as, dynamic estimation of vocabulary quantity, automatic upgrade of difficulty level, automatic learning and reviewing management, random test generation, etc. Through vocabulary selection, meaning conversion, time setting, dynamic testing, game training and other multiple functions, the vocabulary learning apps improve the flexibility, initiative, pertinence, effectiveness and enjoyment of vocabulary learning.[2]

Among all the vocabulary learning apps, '百词斩', '扇贝单词', '墨墨背单词', '流利说英语', '不背单词', '沪江开心词场' are the most popular ones. Take an example of '百词斩', this app is popular with its special idea of using pictures to facilitate memory. Their design form is like this: the user could see and hear the word simultaneously in the sentence, and then choose one correct picture which is most suitable for the meaning of the word from the four pictures below the sentence. After each word is recited once, regular review plans are arranged automatically. The main purpose of this form is to make the users master vocabulary with the help of visual stimulation. Although there are many controversial opinions about this design, a large number of learners still choose it in their learning process. Take another example of '墨墨背单词', this app is different from '百词斩', it doesn't focus on visual stimulation, but focuses on the roots, origins and the comparison between different forms or other similar words. They take the form like this: the user could see and hear the word simultaneously without any hint, so they can make a correct judgment whether they knew this word or not. After one click on the screen, the roots, origins, knowledge extensions, comparisons and other related things about the word will be displayed on it. According to the users' chooses among 'Know', 'Not Clear', 'Don't Know' of each word, the platform would make a specific review plan automatically.

The above examples are two typical kinds. Both have high download rates, usage rates and high reviews, but is different in design forms and learning strategies. Users could choose the one that best suits them. The analysis of the two kinds could help to study the advantages and disadvantages of vocabulary learning apps on the market.

4.2 Advantages of vocabulary learning apps

Vocabulary learning apps has many functions which are incomparable by the traditional paper vocabulary books, such as the mobility, portability, mass information, automatic information, high flexibility, etc. From the perspective of lexical approach, these apps still have many other advantages.

(1). Since lexical approach holds that language is grammaticalized lexis rather than lexicalized grammar. Lexis is the core of language learning, and grammatical structure should be subordinate to lexis. It's important to study lexis in language learning and is an absolutely indispensable part. Vocabulary learning apps make it more convenient and flexible, and it contains various directions for users of different ages or different learning needs. In most vocabulary learning apps, users must do a serious of special tests before learning in order to set their own study plans automatically. Most of them cover a wide range of content, from different grades, different certificates, to different personal interests or needs, so users don't need to worry about the choice of words, they just need to select one of them and learn. What's more, most vocabulary learning apps have a function of punch the clock, and this function can also play a supervisory role.

(2). Lexical approach holds that lexis is a mental lexical repertoire of various chunks stored in students' brain. Vocabulary learning apps provide the convenient platform for users to memorize words and related lexical chunks. For example, in '墨墨背单词', after listening and seeing one word, you can recite three different sentences with the same spelling of different forms or meanings in them, and can also learn some other forms associated with the word. Therefore, what users can learn from these apps not only include the meanings and pronunciations, but also different contexts and collocations. After learning some new words, these apps could help you review them according to the memory curve, which could make the users memorize them more solid.

(3). Lexical approach believes that learners can activate their own mental repertoire according to the specific situation of lexical use, and grasp the sound, form, meaning and pragmatic characteristics of lexis and chunks by virtue of the understanding of the connotation of their

own mental repertoire after they have acquired lexis. Vocabulary learning apps provide the sound, pictures, videos and other pragmatic functions of words, which make it much more effective in developing communicative ability than traditional paper vocabulary books. For example, in '百词斩', users could listen to both English pronunciation and American pronunciation, and every word has a matching picture which could play an auxiliary function in lexical memorization. Besides, some words even have their mnemonic videos which further enhance users' interests in learning language. The combination of vision, kinesthesia, hearing and many other multiple modes make learners master both denotations and connotations of lexis, and help them accumulate a certain amount of lexical chunks, which can not only accelerate their understanding and grasp of the new lexis, but also improve their ability of language use and language communication.

4.3 Shortcomings of vocabulary learning apps

Although there are many advantages in using vocabulary learning apps, some shortcomings presented also should not be ignored. Except for its impairment of eyesight, and easy to lead to addiction to mobile phones, this paper will pay more attention to the shortcomings based on lexical approach.

(1). The core concept of lexical approach is that language is grammaticalized lexis rather than lexicalized grammar. Lexical approach opposes the dominant position of grammar and neglect of lexical teaching. It clearly emphasizes the importance of learning lexis, but it does not deny the role of grammar in foreign language teaching and learning. However, most vocabulary learning apps just have the function of learning lexis, but neglect the function of learning grammar. Sentences are made by combining various lexical chunks, and the rule of combination is what we called grammar. Lexis is the building material of language, and grammar is the structural rule of language. There is an inseparable relationship between them. language without grammatical rules does not exist. Therefore, when learning a language, both lexis and grammar should be paid attention to. Language without lexis is meaningless, while lexis without grammar is also meaningless. As Lewis said, the independence of grammar and lexis will affect the status and development of the syllabus.

(2). Lexical approach holds that lexis is a mental lexical repertoire of various chunks stored in students' brain. Although vocabulary learning apps provide the convenient platform for users, the main focus of these apps is on isolated words rather than lexical chunks. This results in such situation that many users could remember enough words after learning but they still could not use them directly and properly. However, lexical approach holds that the concept of 'lexis' should be extended to lexical chunks and fixed combinations. Both lexis and grammar are essential in combining sentences, and different types of lexical chunks are the basic units that make up sentences, that is, the lexis itself includes grammatical contents. Therefore, these vocabulary learning apps should not neglect the importance of lexical chunks and fixed combinations.

(3). In modern society, due to the rapid development of economy, the communication between people is more and more frequent, especially the communication between different cultures. Hence the importance of language expression ability is also increasing. Lexical approach contribute to learn real language materials, that is, learners must know how to appropriately express themselves in various occasions. However, the focus of vocabulary learning apps on lexis and grammar leads to the result that many learners neglect their ability to use foreign language properly in real life. They always simply put words and grammar rules together when using foreign language, which often results in Chinese-style English. Therefore, learning on these apps may make the users only know the pronunciations, forms and meanings of the words, but don't know how to combine sentences correctly in proper situations.

4.4 Suggestions

As we all know, vocabulary learning is the basis in language learning. Vocabulary Learning is a special system that requires both breadth and depth, the breadth of vocabulary learning is the learner's vocabulary size, the depth of vocabulary learning is the learner's correct understanding of the meaning of vocabulary, and vocabulary size is proportional to all aspects of language application[3]. So how to carry out effective vocabulary learning is one of the appeals of many language learners. Followings are several suggestions to improve vocabulary learning apps more pedagogically useful.

(1). According to lexical approach, although vocabulary learning apps provide the convenient platform for users, they still need to add their emphasis to other aspects, such as lexical chunks, polywords, collocations and fixed combinations. Therefore, it could be better if they added lexical chunks, fixed combinations and other forms to the list of words, then it would be easier for the learners to make up sentences and know how to use them properly.

(2). Lexical approach clearly emphasizes the importance of learning lexis, but it does not deny the role of grammar in foreign language teaching and learning. Lexis is the building material of language, and grammar is the structural rule of language. Learners need to master not only the knowledge of components, but also constituent rules. Therefore, it's necessary for these apps to add something about grammar rules. For example, it could let the users chose whether they want to learn the part of grammar or not, and if they want it, there will be some grammatical vocabulary in their list, so they can learn both lexis and grammar at the same time.

(3). As communicative ability is of greater and greater importance in our daily life, these apps should also pay attention to more authentic language materials while make the part of lexis and grammar well. Therefore, it would be better for these apps to develop some situation-teachings, so as to make the learners avoid confusing the use of foreign words and native words, and at the same time, enhance their communicative ability in listening, speaking, reading and writing.

5. Conclusion

This paper introduces the theory of lexical approach and the popular vocabulary learning apps among language learners, analyzes the advantages and disadvantages of vocabulary learning apps from the perspective of lexical approach, and finally give some suggestions for improvement.

In this competitive modern society, not progress simply means regression, foreign language teaching and learning should keep pace with the times. Many vocabulary learning apps appeared on the market have different styles and multiple functions, which make vocabulary learning more interesting and diverse. It also motivates vocabulary learning interest of language learners, and help them find suitable learning method, essentially improve the efficiency of vocabulary learning and performance. Anyhow, the upgrading of vocabulary learning apps should not only adapt to the learning needs of language learners in all aspects, but also devote itself to serving learners better and better. At last, all of us should always stand at the forefront of the times to continuously study and explore.

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