Teaching Note

Creating Neural Connections: Personal Color Associations and Vocabulary Acquisition

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Abstract

Drawing from research in neuroscience, this procedural teaching note surveys the impact of color associations on learning vocabulary. Most language learners have a natural tendency to associate colors with lexical items in their first language. This association can also be employed to help English language learners (ELLs) acquire vocabulary and can be used with learners of all ages and at all levels of instruction. This article then gives an example of how to elicit the color associations of lexical terms, and concludes by offering a student’s personal reflections.

Key Words: color associations, lexical items, verbpathy

Introduction

Creating color associations for lexical items is both a powerful and natural language-learning device, for colors evoke a multitude of emotions and memories. When you hear the word “bicycle,” for example, perhaps the color red comes to mind, followed by the smell of autumn leaves and the motivating sound of your father’s voice, which helped you learn to ride that special bicycle. In our first language, a word and its color association naturally tend to create a web of connections that lock the word forever in our memory. In support of this, the neuroscience community has shown that the more associations there are in the brain, the more neural connections are reinforced, and the more we learn (Eagleman, 2015). The purpose of this teaching note, then, is to show how color associations can help English language learners (ELLs) develop a personal connection with vocabulary and create a web of associations based on the feeling of colors, the emotions they elicit, and the ELLs’ own personal histories.
The Target Audience

The process of using color associations in vocabulary pedagogy is fun, effective, and preparation free. Moreover, due to its accessible nature, color associations can be used from basic to advanced levels of instruction in all types of English language programs. The setting discussed below is a high-level university ESL credit class. However, this tool can also be used in both primary and secondary education.

The Procedure

My students and I have found that the impact of using color associations is most effective after setting the foundation with basic semantic and pragmatic elements. So first, as a class, we define each lexical item, categorize its part of speech, and identify its verbpathy (i.e., the positive or negative intuitive feeling of a term; for more on this, see Randolph, 2017).

I, then, ask the students what color they associate with the lexical item and why they chose that specific color. It is important to note that the color association might be different for each student, for their “color response” to a term will be based on their personal history and influenced by their unique personality. And, as we will see below, color associations also lead to other sensory associations that help encode lexical items. For detailed examples, let us turn to those of my student and co-author, who has firsthand insights into the use of color associations. She will discuss the terms “foreshadow” and “come up with.”

A Student’s Reflections

At the beginning, I was skeptical of this method; however, I quickly realized how important and useful this vocabulary learning approach is. It is so easy and effective. I simply let my senses and imagination work, and then the words and color associations flow. My favorite recent personal color association is with the word “foreshadow.” While imagining the word, I could immediately see the continual change from white to black—like a light, slowly fading around me, “foreshadowing” something as simple as the coming of night or as complex as a unique memory magically appearing on a small photo from a Polaroid.

The beauty of colors is that they can be associated with visual mental pictures as well as with feelings. For me, the three-part phrasal verb “come up with” is associated with “sparkling blue.” The lexical item’s color just flows from my soul like fireworks anytime an exciting idea crosses my mind; that is, for “come up with” is equivalent to “sparkling blue” and exciting creations.
Moreover, there are other possible associations that can be developed from a simple color association. These associations are able to create a “breathing picture” of a term (e.g., personal memories or particular emotions). The more connections I am able to visualize, the stronger and more familiar the words become. In addition to the “sparkling blue” associated with “come up with,” I smell a new book full of information and ideas. I see my mother’s face, a very special person for me. In my mind, I am telling her, as a small child, what I “came up with” during the day. I can feel the excitement emanating from both of us. The other senses help create a beautiful picture in my mind; they create a sensational story from a single word, phrase, or idiom, making it my own, and thus making it unforgettable.

Concluding Remarks

Colors are a powerful device and a great building block for creating lively personal associations with new words, idioms, and phrases, which can then be locked in the students’ long-term memories. This method helps forge stronger connections in the brain, making the process of learning vocabulary more effective. The importance of this approach thus lies in personalizing each term, and this is initiated by consciously making color associations with lexical items.

References


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