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Linguistic and Contextual Meaning in TEFL

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By**

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بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ

﴿قَالُوا سُبْحَانَكَ لَا عِلْمَ لَنَا إِلَّا مَا عَلَّمْتَنَا إِنَّكَ أَنْتَ الْعَلِيمُ الْحَكِيمُ﴾

[سورة البقرة: ٣٢]

Abstract

Meaning is mainly a communicative activity. In every language use, speakers normally focus their attention on the meaning of what is said or heard rather than on its linguistic form (i.e. grammar). Meaning, therefore, is fundamental to human society. Linguistically, meaning may be achieved lexically and/ or grammatically under the heading of semantics. In relation to context, meaning is studied under the principles of pragmatics and language functions. In teaching English as a foreign language, concentration is usually laid upon the linguistic knowledge. Syllabuses are designed to encourage students to practice the forms of the language and to neglect the meaning/ purpose which must be associated with the forms. Accordingly, the thesis is an attempt to delineate the problems of teaching meaning, through a descriptive- analytic approach, using the Syrian preparatory English syllabus (English for starters 5) as its sample.

Dedication

To my dear parents and lovely husband

Acknowledgement

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Meaning is fundamental to human society and language
is one of the primary ways of conveying meaning.

Jeffries (1998: 3)

Language is mainly a communicative activity as Lyons (1981: 30) puts it: "all living languages ... are of their very nature efficient systems of communication"; and the choice of linguistic items varies according to their social function and personal intention in the relevant context. Therefore, language is communicatively functional. But language without meaning is not a language, human beings can neither comprehend one other, nor can they engage in any communicative activity, except in very limited situations.

Meaning is everywhere, we communicate with people from different states, beliefs, cultures, ages...etc through language . We speak and write because there is a meaning to be conveyed; we listen and read because there is something- i.e. meaning to catch in different speech situations. Many foreigners and learners of a new language do not completely abide by the grammatical rules of the language, yet you may hear expressions such as "*Yes, I have got what you mean, I understand you!*". Even when we do not use linguistic expressions, i.e. just gestures, hand movements, facial expressions, etc. the meaning is still there and can be well understood. Hence, meaning is the heart of the language and the core of verbal and non-verbal social behavior and personal communication.

Nevertheless, the question of how meaning should be taught and presented in the educational syllabus is still a matter of conflict among those who consider the role of meaning in language teaching most seriously. If communication intended to convey meaning, then:

1. Should semantic denotation and pragmatic implication be a main component of the English syllabus?

2. Should the various aspects of meaning be expressed along with the form, the grammar of the language?
3. Should meaning be presented and illustrated in real speech acts and contexts, or just via linguistic relations ?

The notion of meaning is broad and complex. Leech (1983: 6) claims that meaning in semantics is defined "purely as a property of expression in a given language, in abstraction from situations, speakers, or hearers". And may cluster around three major themes according to the kind of emphasis. Crystal (1997: 237-8) for instance reports that when emphasis is on the relationship between language and the entities, events, states of affairs, etc..., which are external to speakers and their language, terms such as: *referential*, *descriptive*, *denotative*, *extensional*, and *factual* meanings are used. When emphasis is on the relationship between language and the mental state of the speaker, also sets of terms are used: 1) the personal, emotional aspects are handled by terms such as: *attitudinal*, *affective*, *connotative*, *emotive*, *expressive* meanings and 2) the intellectual, factual aspects involve terms such as: *cognitive* and *ideational* meaning. But when the emphasis is on the way variations in the extra linguistic situation affect the comprehension and interpretation of language, terms such as: *contextual*, *functional*, *interpersonal*, and *social* meanings are used. See also Leech (1974: 10-27).

Further types that I would like to refer to here is the so-called *textual* and *discourse* meanings. According to Crystal (1980: 354) the *textual* meaning is:

... used as part of a classification of types of meaning, referring to those factors affecting the interpretation of a SENTENCE which derive from the rest of the text in which the sentence occurs – as when, at a particular point in a play or novel, a sentence or word appears whose significance can only be appreciated in the light of what has gone before. (Crystal 1980: 354)