

Connotation: Building Vocabulary within a Cultural Context

When one of my students asked me what 'man' meant I was sure that I had heard him wrong, surely he knew such a simple and common word. I repeated it, "man? M-A-N? Man". Yes, I had heard right. I asked to hear it in a sentence. He replied, "You know, like, 'Hey man'". I did know. Man is commonly used as a slang term. I realized that he was well aware of the denotation, the dictionary definition, of the word but not the connotation, or implied meaning. Cultural knowledge is imperative to becoming a strong writer. Without it you cannot understand the feelings or imagery you may evoke in a reader through a particular word choice. Learning a new language is not independent from learning about the culture it is used in. Language and culture are so intertwined that neither maintains all its elements from one region to the next. Ask anyone born and raised in Northern California if they are like the people in Southern California. The answer will be no, because each region maintains a pride over what makes them culturally different from each other. You are also likely to find that the language as well as the culture has its differences. For example, the word 'hella' is only used in the Northern California region. Because of popular artist Gwen Stefani's album 'Hella Good' many people across the world now know of it, and 'hella' continues to be associated with this region. Similarly, many of my students were taught British English growing up and they often use the word 'rubbish' instead of garbage or trash. To Americans the word 'rubbish' likely reminds them of the English. This is another example of how much our language is part of our culture.

International students miss a great deal of this knowledge simply by growing up in a different culture. Most of my students are international and came from China, where they all grew up learning British English. This lack of domain-specific and culture-specific knowledge puts my students and many others with a similar background at a disadvantage. Domain-specific knowledge deals with "history, social science, natural science, art, music, and language" (Bernhardt 96). These are often taught in public schools and are used to socialize students. Without this knowledge connotation is difficult to learn, which can hinder a student's reading skills and ability to expand her or his vocabulary. This is especially a problem when an international student reads "fiction, because most of the words are connotative rather than denotative" (Turner 1). On the other hand, culture-specific knowledge deals

with rituals and history specific to the particular region where the information is being taught. This includes “weddings, funerals, national holidays as well as invited dinner parties or how one lines up at a bus stop” (Bernhardt 97). This knowledge can only be learned through experience or by being taught by someone who has been immersed in the culture her or his whole life. This becomes an issue when reading non-fiction or time-period stories. Reading pays a vital contribution to expanding vocabulary, which is why domain-specific and culture-specific knowledge are so important. Without an understanding of the historical context of a reading it is much more difficult to grasp the ideas of it. It would be very important for instance, in writing about a reading on Martin Luther King’s “I Have a Dream” speech. One of my students asked me who he was. I was amazed. I have not met many people who do not about the contributions of Mr. King, much less are unaware of the national holiday commemorating all he did for the Civil Rights Movement in this country. This student not only lacked knowledge of our cultural history but of a national holiday, both domain-specific and culture-specific knowledge. This is a major roadblock to building a strong vocabulary. It is estimated that “vocabularies of fluent readers range from 10,000 words to 100,000 words...vocabularies of second language readers are far lower, ranging from 5,000 to 7,000 words” (Boylan 234). Second language English students can hardly compete in the classroom. In fact, “ESL students identify the ability to quickly expand their vocabularies in the context of academic subjects as one of their most critical needs” (Boylan, 234). This need includes an understanding of not only the denotation, but also the connotation of new vocabulary. The language that these students require expands far beyond the classroom. There are very limited ways to obtain this kind of knowledge and ask for the student to put more work into her or his learning.

The thesaurus is a gateway to understanding the difference between connotation and denotation by comparing synonyms. Synonyms are words characterized by having the same or nearly the same denotation as each other. The Thesaurus would be a good place to look for different, or better word choices. It would be up to the tutor to explain the connotations of each one in order for the student to make the best choice. For example a student might have the word ‘closed’ as in ‘She closed the door’, here the Thesaurus would offer several options such as, ‘slammed’ or ‘shut’. Each of the alternatives has a connotation of aggression to varying degrees.

Depending on the feeling the writer intends to evoke, each word offers a different image to the reader. Sometimes the connotation is explained in the dictionary but often it is not, which is why it is so important for the tutor to have a cultural understanding.

I would like to see students rely less on their electronic dictionaries that translate from the student's first language into English. Often times these electronic dictionaries are very limited in their understanding of the English words, and they offer no understanding of cultural context. Although they can be very helpful in making any word choice the student should not be encourage to use them when asked to find a different word. The tutor should encourage using the thesaurus and dictionary instead. It is also very helpful to have a student write down their new words and possible synonyms listing the connotations that make each word different. It may help some students to add pictures, common phrases and an example sentence. This is a personal dictionary they can design to be more useful to their needs and that will expand throughout the quarter.

The role of tutor comes with many hats, a phrase that is heavy in cultural connotation, and I believe that the hat of cultural ambassador should be added to the list. There are very limited ways to gain decades of cultural experience in just a few years in a new country or region. That is why it is so important for the tutor to share that knowledge. It should be a tutor's pride and pleasure to educate an international student on their domain-specific and culture-specific knowledge. Along with a strong encouragement to read, tutors should interject cultural lessons into their sessions as a way to expand their student's understanding of the English language. Providing a student with a strong understanding of connotation will help them to build their vocabulary within a cultural context.

Sources

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