Teaching Conversion to Students of English as a Foreign Language
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Annotation

Conversion - zero - affixation is one of the most productive means of word-formation in English. Studying its models enriches significantly language learners' word stocks, facilitates expressing thoughts exactly and laconically.

In the present work ways and methods of presenting, drilling and acquiring conversion models in the process of ELT are suggested. Practical recommendations are presented for teachers of English which will enable them to teach this lingual phenomenon better.

Keywords:

Word formation; conversion; methodology; TEFL (teaching English as a foreign language); teaching word formation; teaching conversion; ELT.

Modern English is unique in many respects. One of the phenomena that makes this language distinguished is conversion: more and more words are formed without changing their "predecessors'" forms, but only word classes, e.g.,

lace (noun) → lace (verb); pale (adjective) → pale (verb)

Converted words are easy to use, they facilitate expressing thoughts and emotions clearly, freely and laconically.

Notwithstanding this fact methodologists and language teachers have not worked out rational methods of teaching conversion to students of English as a foreign language. Compared to different activities designed for studying word formation, conversion is either absolutely neglected or is not paid adequate attention to, at practical work only grammatical aspect is drilled and semantic derivation is ignored. In the exercises which different textbooks suggest for working at conversion only grammatical, formal aspect is stressed and less importance is attached to semantic changes. Consequently, students lack one important strategy of expanding their vocabulary, they have difficulties in decoding derived words when reading and auding, in expressing their thoughts, etc.

Hypothesis – teaching conversion in English, acquiring its models by students enriches language learners' word stocks, helps them perfect productive and receptive skills and habits, hence, makes it easier to achieve proficiency in English.

Students should know the main models of conversion and thus be aware of the basic semantic modifications and developments, these are:

1. verb → noun

experiencing some state or sensation, performing some action → state, sensation, action, e.g. go → go

2. verb → noun

performing some action → instrument or subject for performing this action, place of this action, result of it, person acting, etc.

e.g. tease → tease

3. noun → verb

object → action performed by means of this object, action typical for this object, etc., e.g. trap → trap

4. noun → verb

animate being, profession, etc. → action typical for this being, fulfilling one's professional duties, etc., e.g. minister → minister

5. adjective → verb

quality → acquiring this quality, etc., e.g. wet → wet.

Semantic modifications in conversion models differ and vary in many ways, resulting in transparent and opaque converted words, e.g., cartoon(n) → cartoon(v) – transparent, collar(n) → collar(v) – opaque. Hence, observing changes of meaning is the basis of acquiring the conversion mechanism.

Converted words will be presented, explained and exercised based on these models. It will enable teachers and students to disclose a variety of nuances in semantic changes. Every model needs an individual approach, not only every model, but even every word, as many converted words develop their semantic structures in utterly unpredictable ways, are used figuratively, choose one or more meanings from their polysemantic ancestors, etc.

Meanings of opaque converted words should be defined, paraphrased, explained by means of synonyms, antonyms, in contexts, situations, etc., e.g.

Prices on gas skyrocketed in the winter.

Skyrocket is a signal rocket, to skyrocket means to grow, rise fast.

Students should be asked to guess meanings of such words from contexts, in verbal surroundings, or without them – decontextualized, e.g. We should season this wine and it will be excellent.

Students can be given the following task: to make up situations or contexts using converted words, proving thus they understand what these lexical items mean. Teachers will choose the best and most appropriate variant, e.g.

push(v) → push(n)

student 1: Lazy students need a push and they'll study well.

student 2: One push was enough for the car to start.

student 3: Mr. Smith solves his problems with pushes and energy.

Initial and converted words have different verbal surroundings and it also causes modifications of meanings in conversion pairs. Hence, converted words must be drilled as phrasal verbs or collocations, e.g. fill in the gaps with the following phrases. rise(v) → rise(n)

be on the rise; the rise to the power; look from the rise;
take its rise in smth; give rise to.

Saddam's cruelty ———————— protests in Europe and America
Clinton's ———————— brought economic prosperity to the USA, etc.

Natural, motivating and interesting situations which require usage of converted words are essential for acquiring conversion models. Teachers should prompt their students that working at conversion is one of the ways to avoid writing down new words for the purpose of remembering them, as initial words are mostly familiar to them, they will have no obstacle of remembering form of the converted word, partly of its meaning too.

Texts abound with converted words and students are not limited in time, thus working at conversion should begin with analysing texts. When reading such words should be highlighted, not only for defining from which part of speech which one is formed, but for comparing meanings of initial and derived words.

"Exposure" to converted words through the written discourse will enable students to use them in the spoken one. On the one hand, teachers should serve as a good example of speaking with such words, on the other hand, they should conduct conversation so that learners would have to talk changing endless streams of words with one converted word, e.g.

Teacher: Did the Titanic SOS after it had hit the iceberg?

Student 1: Yes, she did and the radiomen radioed about the danger.

Student 2: As I know only rich passengers were boated to the shore.

Student 3: And who knows how many people voyaged there?

For acquiring converted words it is indispensable to consult dictionaries, students can track the process of conversion independently, they will compare meanings of such words, make sure whether certain words have their pairs, etc.

Converted words can be grouped according to topics, if for instance, students have to describe the process of cooking, the following words would be useful: to knife, to pepper, to salt, to oil, to spoon, to heat, to warm, to salad, etc.

When writing compositions, letters, reproductions, etc., students are advised to use more and more converted words.

To acquire the conversion models in a proper way the whole system of oral and written exercises is required. Such exercises should include active logical work, which will help students perfect their guessing skills. Recognition, transformation, changing the whole combination of words with one word and v.v., paraphrasing the converted word, comparing meanings of initial and derived words, filling in gaps with derived words, multiple choice and some other types of exercises can be compiled for this purpose, e.g. express the same idea using the converted word:

1. Our goods were sent to Brazil by ship.
2. Levani serves as a soldier in the army.

or: Choose the correct explanation of the converted word:

A lot of shorts are shown on TV nowadays.

a) news in brief;

b) short films;

c) a sort of trousers.

Experimental teaching of conversion was conducted at the Sokhumi Branch of TSU, at the department of Philology (speciality – the English Language and Literature), I, II, III courses, in 1998-2000. The students were tested before and after the experiment, so were the control groups which practised word formation as other methodologists and textbooks "dictate" it. In experimental groups conversion was presented, consolidated and practised following our model. The results of testing indicated that in the experimental groups the students knowledge of conversion is twice better than before the experiment, they are by 20% ahead of the control groups students and in general their productive and receptive skills are by 10% better.

Conclusions and recommendations

1. To teach conversion effectively teachers should get acquainted with the linguistic literature about this language phenomenon, revise their knowledge concerning its models, semantic modifications, work at dictionaries, etc.

2. English teachers should plan working at converted words systematically and consecutively from the first stage, select the material essential for presenting and practicing words, exercises from different textbooks, compile exercises themselves, etc.

3. When working at conversion transparent and opaque converted words should be distinguished. A lot of attention should be paid to the converted words with complicated semantic structures.

4. When teaching conversion the most productive models should be emphasizes:

a) v → n;   b) n → v; c)adj → v; d) n → adj;   e) adj → n

Anomalous, less active models should be presented and observed too.

5. It is advisable to drill conversion with other productive ways of word formation: affixation, composition, back-formation, etc.

6. Students mostly at upper levels can be encouraged to form new converted words themselves based on the already acquired knowledge of word formation models of conversion.

Experimental checking of the results of the research indicated that presenting and practicing conversion by means of our method enriches language learners' word stocks significantly based on familiar words, their guessing skills are improved, possibilities of expressing thoughts in written and spoken forms are perfected, the speed of reading is increased, when communicating students based on analogy often create absolutely acceptable and normal converted words themselves, they

parse sentences better; conversion as one of the most productive means of forming words in English affects positively students' knowledge and it doesn't interfere with the principles of human being's mental lexicon organization.

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