



A STUDY ON HOMONYMS AND DIFFICULTIES IN UNDERSTANDING AND USING THEM FACED BY THE SECOND ENGLISH MAJORS AT HUNG YEN UNIVERSITY OF TECHNOLOGY AND EDUCATION

Dang Thi Loan, Hoang Thi Hoa, Nguyen Thi Tinh, Tran Cam Ninh
Hung Yen University of Technology and Education

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Abstract:

This study deals with English homonyms and difficulties in understanding and using them faced by the second year English major students at Hung Yen University of Technology and Education. To achieve the aims of the study, qualitative and quantitative methodologies were chosen and three methods of data collection including reflective journal, survey and tests were employed. The participants of the study were the second year English majors who were chosen randomly at UTEHY. The survey and the tests were carried out to explore the 2th year English major students' difficulties and also reasons causing those difficulties, from then some solutions helping the 2nd year English major students to deal with those were given difficulties of English homonyms.

Keywords: *homonyms, difficulties, solutions.*

Introduction

As we know, English is the most internationally popular language, which supports for both academic studies in many fields such as science, economy, politics and communicating between people and people who come from many different countries on the world. Due to the importance of English, it becomes a compulsory subject of almost every schools and universities in Vietnam.

However, learning English is not easy. Many learners of English in general find it hard to learn English, because of many reasons. For instance, the English grammar has varieties of exception; Some certain English vowels and consonants are unfamiliar to learners. Among those difficulties are comprehending as well as using homonyms, which makes learning English of students more difficult. Despite the fact that a large number of words have the sameness in spelling, or pronunciation or both spelling and pronunciation, those meanings are totally unrelated. This makes Vietnamese students confused easily, and caused ambiguity obstacle to them in understanding and using English homonyms.

According to Formal Semantics – an introduction written by Ronnie Cann, a sort of ambiguity occurs where an expression is associated with two or more unrelated meaning. For example, in sentence “Ethel’s punch was impressive”, the word punch may be interpreted as a drink or as an action. “Lexemes whose word forms have this property are called homonyms”. Ronnie Cann,

(1993), *Formal Semantics – an introduction*, pp.8. On the other word, “Homonyms are source of ambiguity”. Nguyen Hoa (2004), *An introduction to semantics*, pp.31. A question of identifying those obstacles and finding out solution to them needs answering.

The aims of the study

The study is carried out with the hope that it will be theoretically and practically helpful to second year English major students at UTEHY. My research is supposed to focus on four following objectives:

- To give general knowledge of homonyms.
- To find out difficulties of the second - year English major students at UTEHY in understanding and using homonyms.
- To find out the reasons why the second - year English major students at UTEHY have difficulties in understanding and using homonyms.
- To give some recommendations helping the second-year English major students at UTEHY to get over their difficulties in comprehending and using English homonyms.

Literature review

Originally, the word “homonym” comes from the conjunction of the Greek prefix homo-, meaning “same”, and suffix - onymos, meaning “name”. Thus, it refers to two or more distinct concepts sharing the “same name” or signifier.

Howard Jackson and Peter Stockwell

defined homonyms: “Words which share the same spelling and pronunciation, such as ‘fan’, are called homonyms (from two Greek words, homo “same”, nym “names”). Howard Jackson and Peter Stockwell, *An Introduction to the Nature and Functions of language*, (pp.26), Lyons (1982: 72), Oxford Word power (2000: 366); Richards and Schmidt (2002: 241); and Yule (2006: 107) define ‘homonyms’ as a term used in semantics for lexical items that are identical in spelling and pronunciation but have different meanings. These ways of definition are all identical and only mention to the homonyms in case they are similar in both orthography (spelling) and phonetics (pronunciation). However, they are not totally great ways to define homonyms in case they only share the same orthography, or phonetics. For example, “ad/ add”, “nt/ aunt”, “plum / plumb”, etc, are the pairs which are only identical in phonetics. For other examples, “desert” means “a hot, arid region”; also means “to leave”, buffet means “to hit”, punch or slap”; also means “a self-serve food bar” are pairs sharing the same orthography. In my viewpoint, these definitions are not satisfactory.

Hartman and Stork (1976: 105; Atchison 1993: 52; and Fromkin et al. (2003: 71) agree that homonyms are different words with the same pronunciation that may or may not be identical in spelling. Thus, they give them a definition that is partially similar to that of homophones. On the other hand, Watkins et al, (2001: 269) defines it just like defining homophones, i.e., “words that sound exactly like other words but have different spellings” in spite of the fact of not naming them ‘homophones’ in addition to ‘homonyms’ as Fromkin et al (2003: 71) do.

As Hornby defines homonym as a word which is spelt like another word (or pronounced like it) but which has a different meaning. As Hornby, *Oxford advanced Learner’s Dictionary*, pp.747. In this way of homonyms’s definition, he divides homonyms into homophones (different spelling and similar pronunciation, unrelated meaning e.g., no vs. know; peace vs. piece; write vs. right) and homographs (identical spelling and different pronunciation and meaning, e.g., mug ‘drinking vessel’ vs. ‘gullible person’). However his definition is not large enough to cover words which are identical in both spelling and pronunciation such as “found” – past tense verb of “find” and “found” – set up, build up.

Afanasyeva (1985: 128) defines homonyms as words which are identical in sound and spelling, or at least, in one of these aspects, but different in

their meaning.

In my point of views, the first, second, and third definition are not large enough to cover all the cases of homonyms. The last definition, Afanasyeva’s definition can cover homonyms in all its cases, helping learners understand clearly and fully.

Methodology

A survey research based on qualitative quantitative methods are used and considered the most suitable to obtain the aims of the study. The study targets at analyzing the data and the outcome in numbers and figures. The data were collected by means of questionnaires and a test, which were designed and handled to a defined population. The subjects were asked to answer the questions and the questionnaires were collected right away. The answers are totally objective, not controlled by the researcher.

Findings and discussion

Difficulties of the second - year English major students at UTEHY in understanding and using homonyms

Firstly, all the second year English major students at FFL of UTEHY, more or less have difficulties in understanding and using English homonyms, concluding 3 kinds of homonym under my study, homophones, homographs, and homonyms proper.

Secondly, students have the most difficulties in using homophones and homonyms proper. In the chart 4 of the survey questionnaire, comparing the number of students rarely having difficulties in using homophones, homographs, and homonyms proper, we can see this clearly that the number of students rarely having difficulties with homographs is 40 % of students, higher than the number of students rarely having mistake with homophones and homonyms proper, which are 23 % and 20 % respectively. This indicates that the higher percentage of “rarely” option is, the fewer difficulties students have. This is also logical to analyzing of incorrect answers in three exercises of the test. The number of incorrect answers in the exercise 2, testing students’ ability of using homographs was fewer than those of two last exercises, testing students’ ability of using homophones and homonyms proper.

Thirdly, the researcher find out 4 main kinds of difficulties, students usually have when dealing with English homonyms.

- Students have difficulties in orthographically distinguishing pairs of homophones. This is the difficulties in dealing

with homophones. Students may understand the homonyms they are using, but it is hard for them to realize homophones' spelling, leading to choose wrong answers, or make spelling mistake.

- Students have trouble facing to awareness of homonyms proper. In spite of the clear given explanations, they do not know what the needed word is.

- Phonetically distinguishing homographs is one of the difficulties. This difficulty relates to homographs. For the words having the same forms but different pronunciations and meanings, students usually can not pronounce correctly, because of their confusion between two ways of pronouncing, two different functions, and two totally unrelated meanings.

- Clarifying different contexts containing homonyms is not a very difficult task but it also causes nervousness for some of the 2nd year English major students of UTEHY.

Finally the researcher find that English homonyms affects to all English skills of the students, and has great influence to learning speaking skill and listening skill of the 2nd year English major students (chart 7). Due to inability of distinguishing phonetics or spelling, inability of understanding the fully meaning of homonyms, etc, students may not be able to hear and understand the homonyms, leading to misunderstand, and a lot of pun situations. And wrong pronunciations during speaking may make hearer misunderstand, and even don't understand what the speaker is saying. This is the relation between homonyms and listening, speaking skills.

The reasons why the second - year English major students at UTEHY have difficulties in understanding and using homonyms

The first reason is students' limitation of English homonyms' knowledge. The number of English homonyms is very potential, owing to the long history of word formation. Meanwhile, students' knowledge of homonyms is limited, which causes a lot of difficulties for them during learning English.

The second main reason is students' disregard of pronunciation and orthography's factor. This reason relates to kinds of difficulties in part I. Disregard of pronunciation usually leads students to pronounce homographs incorrectly, which have the same spelling, but different phonetics and meanings. They may speak a pair of homographs in the same way. Of course this makes them usually confuse the meanings as well as the functions of words, causing inability of phonetically distinguishing

homographs.

Disregard of orthography's factor of homophones causing students' inability of orthographically distinguishing homophones. They will be unable to choose or write correct words, event when they know exactly the word they are thinking of.

The last reason is inability to know full meanings of homonyms. Because of this reason, students always have difficulties in understanding kinds of words which have the same orthography. More accurately, the 2nd year English major students have difficulties with homographs, especially homonyms proper, which have both identical orthography and phonetics.

Solutions the 2nd year English major students of UTEHY use to get over the difficulties when facing to English homonyms

Almost every students use methods, adding phrase to a homonyms, and learning by heart words in pairs or groups of homonyms to improve their ability of understanding and using homonyms. Others use methods, using dictionaries, practicing the use of homophones. And very few students use method doing homonyms exercises as much as possible and reading funny stories made with the material of homonyms.

Some suggestions in improving the knowledge of homonyms

Using dictionaries

When students come across a word of a homonyms group or pair, and they cope with obstacles to realize its meaning, it is advised to look it up in the dictionary. With a clear definition and proper introduction of its usage, a dictionary might help them not only to gain the exact meaning of the word but also to distinguish between it and its homonyms.

There are a variety of kinds of dictionaries such as explanatory dictionaries, bilingual dictionaries, learner's dictionaries and specialized dictionaries. The thirds type among them is specially compile for learners of English at different stages of advancement. The Advanced Learner's dictionary of Current English by AS Horn by is one of this this type of dictionaries which meets the needs of the advanced foreign learners of English. It provides meanings and uses of the words including homonyms. To further acquire the English homonyms, students should also make frequent use of them.

Adding a phrase to homonyms

When students make an oral or written

speech with a homonym, they should add a phrase to it. A phrase can be a noun phrase, an adjective phrase, a verb phrase or an adverb phrase. This phrase might help the hearer or the reader realise the correct homonyms with its meanings.

E.g : I go to the bank
I go to the commercial bank
I go to the river bank.

Practicing the use of homonyms

When learners have known the meanings of a homonym, they should make use of it regularly to acquire its usage. They could make sentences with that word or add a phrase to it. By practicing, learner of English could master the meaning and the use of a homonym in certain situations of word using. Moreover, they might realise a word of the same homonymous pair or group with the learned word in a message.

Example: When learning the homonym proper *tip* (the pointed or thin end of something), students should make sentences with it to acquire the use of it .

He often walks to the northern tip of the

island.

We painted a red dot on the tip of the parrot's left wing.

It's on the tip of your nose.

When coming across such a sentence as, "Their house is an absolute tip". The learner will recognize tip in this message as a homonym proper of the above *tip* in this message as a homonyms proper of the above *tip* (the pointed or thin end of something). If they continue to study the meaning, the form and the use of this new ord, they will acquire it.

Conclusion

To sum up, the researcher analyzed the data collected through the test instrument and a survey questionnaire to get the answers for three survey questions: Difficulties that the second – year English major students of UTEHY usually deal with English homonyms, reasons why students have difficulties in understanding and using English homonyms, some methods, the 2nd year English major students of UTEHY should do to get over the difficulties when facing to English homonyms.

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NGHIÊN CỨU TỪ ĐỒNG ÂM VÀ NHỮNG KHÓ KHĂN CỦA SINH VIÊN CHUYÊN NGỮ NĂM THỨ HAI TRƯỜNG ĐẠI HỌC SƯ PHẠM KỸ THUẬT HƯNG YÊN TRONG VIỆC HIỂU VÀ SỬ DỤNG CHÚNG

Tóm tắt:

Nghiên cứu được thực hiện nhằm phân tích chuyên sâu về từ đồng âm và những khó khăn về từ đồng âm mà sinh viên chuyên ngữ năm thứ 2 tại trường Đại học Sư phạm Kỹ Thuật Hưng Yên thường gặp. Để đạt được mục tiêu nghiên cứu, phương pháp nghiên cứu định tính và định lượng được sử dụng bằng cách phân tích dữ liệu, khảo sát và thực hiện các bài kiểm tra được thiết kế sẵn. Đối tượng nghiên cứu là sinh viên chuyên ngữ năm thứ hai được lựa chọn ngẫu nhiên tại trường ĐHSP Kỹ Thuật Hưng Yên. Mục đích của khảo sát và bài kiểm tra là tìm ra được những khó khăn và nguyên nhân chính của sinh viên về từ đồng âm, từ đó những giải pháp khắc phục cũng được đề xuất.

Từ khóa: Từ đồng âm, khó khăn, giải pháp.