

CAPE Alumni Internet Connection: English Teacher Talk

CAPE Internet Talk was started as part of CAPE follow-up activities to continue ties with CAPE alumni and those who are interested in professional development in English teaching. It is hoped that this would increase our bond and aloha among former participants, and that the information in the TALK would help our alumni and friends/members review what you know and deepen their understanding of issues of interest in the ESL field.

What it Means to Know a Word

Part I

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Teaching vocabulary in many language classrooms often involves learning the translation for new English words. Yet gaining this understanding of a word is only the beginning. To know a word and to be able to use it effectively involves many things: knowing its various meaning, what emotions it brings to mind, what other words it is similar to and different from, and how it is used in set phrases. In this part of the article we will focus on these aspects of knowing a word.

The general meaning of a word is sometimes referred to as the denotational meaning of a word. This is the kind of information that is found in a dictionary. For example, if you look up the word *heart* in a dictionary, you will find it has several meanings. One is that it is a central organ of the body that pumps blood to the rest of the body. It also is used to refer to the center of human emotions as, for example, when we say that someone has a *good heart*. Finally, it can be used to refer to the center of something as in the expression *the heart of the city*.

The word *heart* also has personal and social meanings, often referred to as connotational meaning. For example, if someone you love just suffered a heart attack you may feel negative emotions when you hear the word. On the other hand, if you just fell in love, you may have very positive feelings when you hear the word. Some connotational meanings are very personal as in the example above, but they can also be social so that, for example, many people would not consider it a compliment to be called *skinny* whereas they would be pleased if someone called them *slender*.

Words also share meaning with other words called synonyms and have the opposite meaning of other words or antonyms. The word *heart*, for example, shares certain aspects of meaning with words such as *kindness*, *compassion* and *sensitivity*. On the other hand, it is quite opposite in meaning from words such as *cold-hearted*, *callous* or *cruel*. It is important to note that while two words can be synonyms, no two words have identical meanings. For example, the words *stroll* and *wander* both mean to walk aimlessly yet they differ in meaning in other aspects. While the word *stroll* suggests having a pleasurable walk, the word *wander* can imply not being certain where one is. To use a word effectively involves knowing both how synonyms are alike and how they differ.

Knowing a word also involves knowing the way the word is used in set phrases, often termed *idioms*. The word *heart*, for example, is included in many idioms such as *have a heart*, *take heart*, *after one's own heart*, *from the bottom of my heart*, *with all of my heart*, *to break someone's heart*, *to take something to heart*, and *to set one's heart on something*. Idioms are set phrases so that they cannot be changed in form or they lose the intended meaning. For instance, if one changes the idiom *from the bottom of my heart* to *from the bottom of my body*, the idiom no longer has any meaning.

It is interesting to ask: How does a learner acquire all these meanings of *heart*? Clearly one important way is by hearing and seeing the word in a variety of contexts. Hence, it is useful for teachers to present new vocabulary items in many different contexts and to encourage students to undertake extensive reading so that they are exposed to a great deal of English vocabulary. Vocabulary learning is an ongoing process in which there are always new things to learn about every word in English.

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