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THE IMPORTANCE OF SEMANTIC MAPPING WITHIN THE COMMUNICATIVE APPROACH TO TEACHING ENGLISH

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Abstract: *Semantic mapping has turned out to be an effective technique in the process of teaching/learning with native speakers at all levels, in different classes or study groups, regardless of their age. The students who resorted to mind maps have shown a considerable improvement in their reading and writing skills, as well as in their vocabulary. They also demonstrated higher summarizing and learning abilities when exposed to diagrams or graphical aids.*
Therefore, the validity of this method has been acknowledged in the process of learning new foreign languages. Research studies performed by Crow and Quigley or Brown and Perry vouch for mind mapping as an efficient strategy to enhance vocabulary.
Key words: *semantic mapping, graphical aids, reading skills, teaching/learning process*

WHAT IS SEMANTIC MAPPING?

Over the years semantic mapping has been granted several definitions. In this respect, semantic mapping is "a graphic representation of knowledge, a picture of conceptual relationship" (Antonacci, 1981); "a graphic arrangement showing the major ideas and relationships in text or among word meanings" (Sinatra and Berg, 1984), or "a categorical structuring of information in graphic form" (Johnson, Pittelman, and Heimlich, 1986). Nevertheless, we consider that a personal classroom illustration is the most appropriate method to make semantic mapping more explicit. After reading several papers on this matter, we deem proper to introduce it as an effective learning method; therefore the aim of our paper is to share our experience in using it. While teaching beginner students, more than once we faced the following problem: how to get students focus not only on individual details but also on the text structure. We consider semantic mapping an extremely useful tool for achieving our objectives.

IMPLEMENTING A SEMANTIC MAPPING READING ACTIVITY

As a first step, students have been pointed out the rationale for the use of this semantic map which will definitely help them with their reading practices. Using white chalk, we drew a large oval on the chalkboard and inside it-centrally- we wrote the word "Weather" which represented the topic of the next reading-focussed assignment. Then the students were asked to tell what they knew about that particular topic. Their answers were recorded separately, away from the center, using chalk of a different color. The moment no further responses were forthcoming, the students were asked to suggest the best way to group the listed topic-related words. Their first suggestion was: "Seasons".

Using red chalk this time, we drew four rectangles and connected them to the purpose topic. The name of one season at a time was placed in each rectangle.Then, we began to gather the suggested words and group them according to their significance and relationship to each season. Some of the words appeared several times since they matched more than one season. Thus, the word "rainy" was related to both spring, fall and winter. New words were introduced and marked in a different color. For instance, the word "rain" gave us the opportunity to introduce the word "shower" which in this context was new to most students. We also tried to use as many words as possible that belonged to the same word families (*rain* as a verb but also as a noun, *rainy* as an adjective), etc.

The immediate effectiveness of this activity quickly became apparent to both our students and us. For them, the map provided a graphic conceptualization of their randomly given initial ideas. Our attempt to structure individual details was supplemented by the introduction of new vocabulary whose importance was immediately noticed by students even though they had not been previously warned about that. Their need to find out new words and improve their vocabulary arose from the very task and was not imposed on them. In our capacity of both initiators and monitors of this activity, we were provided with the opportunity to check students' knowledge of a topic that had not been tackled before. Both our students and we realized that the input had been systematically controlled by them although the shaping of the map had been our joint venture. After categorizing and incorporating the ideas that had been suggested by the students, they copied the map on their notebooks. Then each student was given a copy of the text "Weather" and they were told to feel free to add any new ideas they would come across during the reading activity, by using the same graphic method: subordinating squares, circles, rectangles, etc. As they read, we monitored their progress, paying closer attention to the additions and changes they made to their previous semantic map. After the finishing touch, the students were given the opportunity to add some new pieces of information in order to develop the existing chalkboard version of the map. They were recorded in blue chalk. As expected, due to the differences in interpreting and approaching the text showed by the students, more precisely regarding the hierarchy of words and ideas according to their importance, there were some disagreements about the final shape of the map. We consider this part of our activity the most valuable since it entails interaction among all students.

The shape of the map per se is not as important as the discussion it triggered. The changes, rearrangements, eliminations and additions all resulted in shaping up the final map version that was produced in the post-reading activity.

At this point, we asked the students whether they had found the activity useful .Some of them were satisfied with their capacity of anticipating some of the major ideas in the text. Others were of the opinion that the use of different colors had allowed them to see the relationships among the sources – prior knowledge, categorization, and actual reading. Others again indicated that the geometrical figures had facilitated their understanding of the way the text had been structured. Nevertheless, they all agreed upon the importance of their "disagreements" in the process of map creation. Taking into account the fact that the activity was designed with the clear purpose of improving students' ability to recognize the structure of an essay, we collected all the copies of the reading text previously distributed to them and let them only retain the maps they had produced. We assigned a short essay about "Weather" as homework.

PROCEDURE OF THE SEMANTIC MAPPING ACTIVITY

From the above the illustration, it can be seen that the semantic mapping is successfully used during three stages of a lesson:

a) as a pre-reading activity intended to test students' prior knowledge of the purposed topic or to help teachers with their assessment of students' ability to approach the topic;

b) as a strategy destined to allow students to record their learning acquisitions during the assignment;

c) as a post –reading strategy designed to allow students to synthesize their newly acquired knowledge.

As a whole, the activity involving the creation of a semantic mapping assists students in their attempt to learn new vocabulary by shifting their focus from the fragmented perspective to a more organized one.

Subsequently, we will try to illustrate the above-mentioned stages that can be broken down into five phases:

1. Introducing the topic.

The teacher will select a unit to be used in order to produce a semantic map that could be useful in the teaching/learning process. The teacher will draw an oval on the chalkboard that is intended to introduce the topic; an OHP is highly recommended in this situation as well as the use of some topic-related pictures in order to stimulate students' ideas. This procedure is also a fruitful source of inspiration.

2. Brainstorming.

The teacher will ask the students to think of words that might be related to the topic under discussion. This phase will allow students to resort to and make full use of their prior knowledge which can be used as a first step in acquiring new information. The brainstorming phase of semantic mapping gives the teacher insight into the level of interest in the topic, the reading skills, the gaps and even the potential misinterpretations of his/her students. Such an activity will obviously show that the ideas of one student will automatically engage the other students' active participation. There is also the possibility to record new pieces of information onto the very mind map; however, we found it best to list them to one side of the chalkboard and then transfer them to the semantic map during the next phase. We also consider that the use of different colored chalk will help students conceptualize and structure the topic as well as recognize the different sources of information. Within this phase, it is crucial that all responses should be accepted as long as they are related to the topic.

3. ***Graphic Representations.***

The teacher should encourage his/her students to make connections between the words and ideas they suggested. During the categorization process the teacher will use the same colored chalk s/he used in the brainstorming phase, and will inscribe the terms in geometrical figures of the same shape. Usually the geometrical figures used at this level have a different shape from the ones that were used at the primary level. For instance, a central oval was used to highlight the topic, then circles for the second-level category, and finally, rectangles for the third and fourth level categories. We were lead to the conclusion that the different shapes and colors allowed the visual aspects reinforce the verbal ones. When students experience some difficulties in identifying the right categories, the teacher can step in and help students by asking *Wh*-questions (who, what, when, where, how) to elicit answers from them.

The map will modify its shape as the class begins to organize and integrate the initial individual suggestions. This phase of "collecting information" allows students to establish the connections between their suggestions. During this phase, the teacher will also be able to introduce new words which students might need during the next phase. Once the first phase has been completed (which is an indicator of students' prior knowledge), the teacher should have his/her students make a copy of the map in their notebooks. It is high time that the students gained experience in practicing their cognitive skills, particularly in categorizing and exemplifying and also comparing and contrasting, and forming judgments.

4. Personalizing the map.

After each student has made a copy of the chalkboard version of the map, the teacher will provide them with some material on the topic. This kind of material is typically a reading passage/a newspaper article and is supposed to contain more information about the topic. A comparison with the information from the pre-reading semantic map will be made, and students will decide what to add to or to eliminate from the already existing map. New information is thereby integrated to prior knowledge.

5. ***Synthesizing.***

The last part of the class will be used to record students' suggestions. The discussions will probably center on the information acquired from the reading and the way it has modified the initial map. The teacher will necessarily underline the importance of all the ideas coming from students even if some of them have not been recorded on the chalkboard; students should not have the impression that the unrecorded suggestions are without merit. The class as a whole will decide the final version of the map. Its new version, through its different shapes and colors will show what the students knew before their assignment as against what they gained afterwards.

Ultimately, the map – either in its final or student-personalized versions – can serve as a springboard for other language activities. Thus, it can be used to assign a short essay or just paragraphs if only segments of the map will be taken into account.

CONCLUSIONS

1. Semantic mapping is interactive because in drafting the map, students work with each other both before and after the targeted language topic. Its creation entails the total involvement of the students; they are active participants throughout the map creation. The first phase (brainstorming) outlines the map; and students'output during the assignment determines the final shape the map will have.

2. Semantic mapping allows for sequential negotiation. First there is the interpersonal egotiation when students make their suggestions and categorize words. Then there is the reflective intrapersonal negotiation when each student does his/her reading about the topic-and shapes her/his own personal semantic map. Finally, there is a return to the interpersonal negotiation as the class modifies the existing map and personalizes it.

3. This activity stimulates students'interest in reading the text. They are curious to know whether their suggestions anticipated somehow the information from the text.

4. The activity is student centered. The students control each stage of the activity and make use of both their prior knowledge and newly acquired one.

5. The activity is integrative, since it allows students to connect previous knowledge with new knowledge.

Of course, as with all working techniques, semantic mapping should neither be overused nor overly detailed and multileveled since this will only result a confusing visual display. Its purpose should be to encourage students to practice their speaking and reading skills.

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