

The Level of Mastery of Polysemic Words Showing Second Language Learners' English Proficiency*

Mitsuharu Mizuno

The result of an investigation on the knowledge of polysemic words among 263 subjects of high school and university students in Japan demonstrated that the wider their knowledge of polysemic words is, the higher is their proficiency in English. The meaning of polysemic words is closely interwoven with the way of thought and way of expression based on its socio-cultural background because they are used as daily-words in their linguistic world. Hence, it maybe difficult for those who are outside their linguistic world to use these words because the use of polysemic words requires a higher sense of analytic ability of lexical meaning than the others.

Key Words: Polysemic Words, SLA (L2 Acquisition), English Proficiency, Learning Set, Semantic Errors.

Most learners make much of the learning of words in the foreign language learning (Hatch, 1983). Since the vocabulary domain, in general, has much less regularity than the phonetic or syntactic domain does, the research on vocabulary acquisition has been made only a little in the field of SLA and it was hardly taken up in the theoretical framework. That is, errors in the phonetic and syntactic levels may be perceived through the contexts. Such errors make it impossible to understand communications between the interlocutors. Thus the negotiation of meaning may take place with each other and

such errors are likely to be corrected.

On the other hand, because of errors in the vocabulary level, above all in the case of semantic errors (since there is no cue to understand such errors), we are little aware of the miscommunication with each other. There is unlikely to be correction of such errors until they give rise to a serious breakdown in communications. In view of the above, recently a number of researchers pointed out the importance of research on the vocabulary acquisition (Hatch, 1983; Gass, 1988; Laufer, 1990; Luppescu and Day, 1993).

Incidentally, there are two kinds of vocabulary: one is of high frequency, and the other of low frequency. In general most words of high frequency are basic and often polysemic, which have a number of constraints in their use. There is a great semantic gap between these words and the learner's native language, especially between different families of languages. Therefore, learning these words is more difficult than the latter.

On the other hand, though the words of low frequency are of a high level of abstraction, most of them are easier to learn than the former because of their plain meaning, and they give little trouble to communication. Hence, the latter should be regarded as the words considered in the second half-period of the language acquisition.

In the present study roughly 263 subjects from high school and university students in Japan were used to conduct an investigation on some polysemic words in English. The data was obtained by testing method. The test consists of 50 multiple-choice cloze test questions. The subjects were requested to fill in the blanks with an appropriate word chosen out of 25 basic words. The 24 target items marked with asterisks among them are the words used in some phrased contexts as seen in Table 1. The coefficient of reliability in the test was 0.85 (Kuder-Richardson's $r = .85$). The result shows that those who made the higher score in English proficiency had the higher score in the test on the polysemic words. That is, the level of English proficiency of Japanese adult learners assumes an upward curve as their knowledge

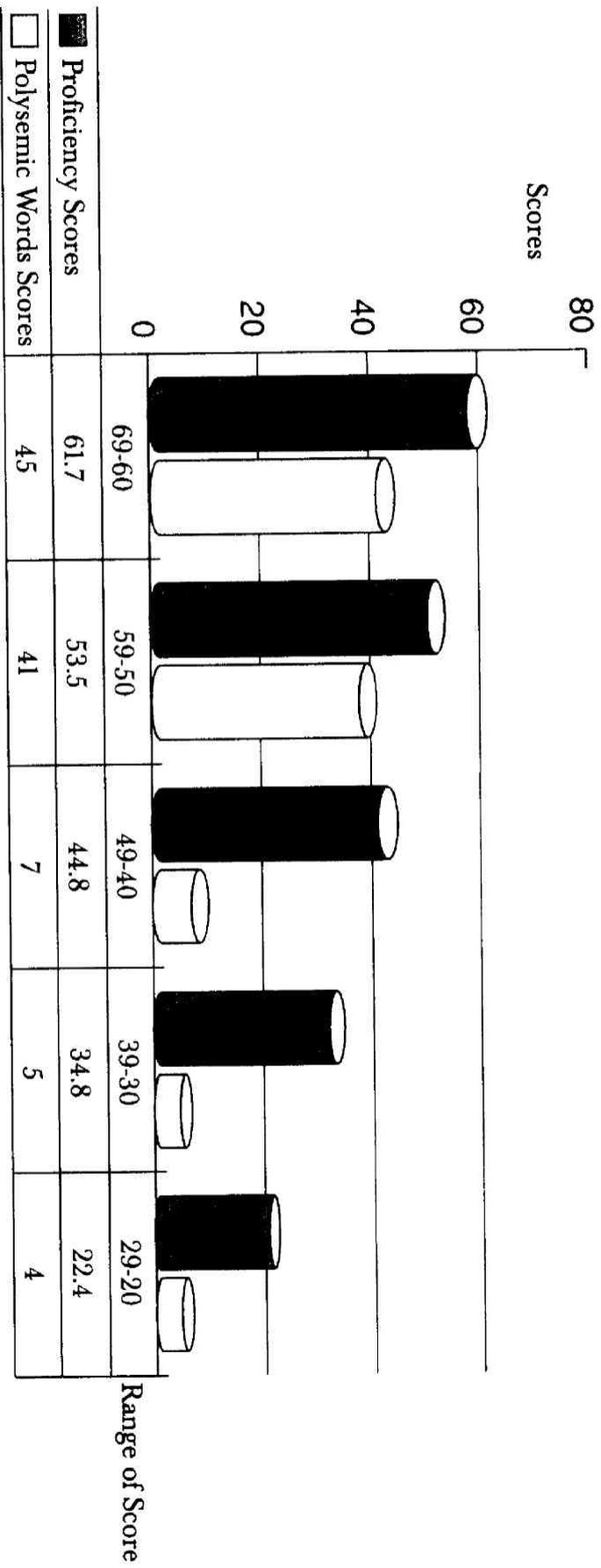
Table 1
English Vocabulary Test

Fill in the blank in each of the following English sentences with an appropriate one out of the following 25 words so as to make the sentence that best fit the context given in the Japanese sentences below.

am, are, is, break, come, cut do, fall,
get, give, go, good, have, keep laugh, let, make,
put read sit see, seem, send, swim, take.

- | | |
|--|--|
| 1. He (seems) to be a gardner.
(彼は庭師のように見える) | 15. I (came) from Hokkaido.
(私は北海道の出身です) |
| 2. They are having a (do*) for her on her birthday.
(彼等は彼女の誕生日にパーティーを開く予定だ) | 16. This work (took) three hours.
(この仕事は3時間かかった) |
| 3. I (sent) a letter of thanks to him.
(私は彼に礼状を出した) | 17. My father (gave) me the camera.
(父はそのカメラを私にくれた) |
| 4. He (gave*) his life for his company.
(彼は会社のために一生を捧げた) | 18. This fruit won't (keep) till tomorrow.
(この果物は明日までもつまい) |
| 5. She (made*) for the door to let him in.
(彼女は彼を入れるため戸口に向かった) | 19. Tom (got) the money from his mother.
(トムはそのお金を母親からもらった) |
| 6. Those two (fall) in love with each other.
(あの二人は恋愛中だ) | 20. Somebody must (break*) the sad news to
her mother. (誰かがその悲報を
彼女の母親に知らせなければならぬ) |

Figure 1
The Relation between Polysemic Words
and Proficiency Scores



of the polysemic words increases. It is important to bear in mind that especially their knowledge of polysemic words greatly increased in the latter half of the intermediate level. I would like to focus attention here on the reason for such a result (Figure 1).

Polysemic words are those which have a number of meanings derived from the basic meaning through some semantic changes as they were used in various situations and contexts. Most of them are in common use, therefore, they are closely interwoven with the way they are conceived by the people in the cultural area of the language. Those who are in the cultural area of English have no trouble in the use of these words because they frequently employ such words in their ordinary correspondence with each other. It is not easy, however, for those who are outside English cultural areas to use these words appropriately at all. The underlying semantic parameter of these words is the ways of thought and expression based on its native-speakers' socio-cultural background.

To put it in another way of indicating, the learners who are outside the cultural area of the language are far away from the native speakers' way of thought. In addition, there is some psychological distance between the native speakers and the learners of such a foreign language. Therefore, it may be said that it is harder for the learners of a foreign language to master the use of the polysemic words.

It is indispensable to have a considerable knowledge of Anglo-American culture in order to master such words in English. Otherwise, learning English as a second/foreign language would be inefficient. In the second language acquisition, the higher the level of mastery goes up, the more the errors of syntactic level decreases. The errors of semantic level of vocabulary, however, don't seem to readily go down (Takahashi, 1984; Tanaka, S. and Abe, H. 1984; Mizuno, 1986).

It is because the learners of foreign languages tend to first manage the TL (target language) based on the knowledge of their NL

(native language) when they are confronted with the TL. If there are a number of differences between TL and NL, it is harder to learn such a TL. In the developmental process of the interlanguage, the learners of a foreign language gradually shift from the holistic learning set to the analytic learning set to the TL (Mizuno, 1999). We could not say that the adult learners become proficient in the polysemic words until they employ the analytic learning set. The analytic learning set in general develops more of ten than not at the latter half period of their inter-language process. We may say, thus, that their knowledge of polysemic words can be an indicator showing the level of their proficiency of the TL.

In conclusion, the result of the present study suggests that Japanese adult learners have a tendency to process the meaning of English words through a one-to-one correspondence to their NL, which imposes considerable constraints on their L2 acquisition. It is necessary to carry out the teaching plan which plants adequate knowledge of basic words firmly in the learners' minds according to a certain schedule, early in their learning of the TL.

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