

WORD KNOWLEDGE AND THE THEORY OF MEANING TYPES: A CASE STUDY ON OLD LITERATURE AND *BEOWULF*

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ABSTRACT

The issue of knowing a word and understanding the different contexts in which a word might be found in a foreign language, is one that has been regarded as crucial for the comprehension of written and spoken language. For quite some time now teachers in the field of teaching English have argued that it is very difficult to deal with and teach vocabulary and words in the foreign language, especially those involved with specific terminology. This is normally due to the level of frequency in their usage, the period of time in literature, the different meanings an individual word might have and the many definitions it is made of. This paper attempts to narrow down some conceptions and misconceptions regarding the issue and to provide insights, both theoretically and practically. The study was conducted at SUT (State University of Tetova) with university students of the English Department. Students are of both genders (male and female) and of mixed nationalities (Albanian, Macedonian and Turkish) between the ages 19- 21. The number of students that participated are a total of 50 first year students. The instrument used in the study is a questionnaire consisting of three parts: reading comprehension (interpreting knowledge and analysis), Bloom's Taxonomy and a post-reading survey. The main aim of this questionnaire is to test students' level of academic reading in different periods of literature, with different tones and styles and normally different terminology (Old and Modern English). The procedure, results and findings will be further elaborated in the paper.

Key words: *Foreign Language, Comprehension, Vocabulary, Bloom's Taxonomy etc.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Perhaps one of the most important matters of reading comprehension is *word knowledge*. A reader needs to understand what is being read- on the contrary, what is the use of reading? If a reader cannot grasp the authors' idea or picture the story, the reading is ineffective. Over a half century ago, Davis (1944) and Thurstone (1946) wrote that knowledge of word meanings is one of the most important factors in reading comprehension. Duin and Graves (1987) said that "words embody power, words embrace action, and words enable us to speak, read, and write with clarity, confidence, and charm" (p. 312). Knowing a word involves an understanding of the word's definition as well as the word's approximate contextual usage. (Stahl & Fairbanks, 1986). However, sometimes it doesn't necessarily mean that the reader does not know the word at all, because perhaps the reader could relate the words to own experience, "it is generally agreed that readers "can" know a word, but each person may relate it to a different experience." (Richardson, Morgan, Fleener, 2009. pg.290) They further associate word knowledge as follows, "we may think of word knowledge as being similar to coming to know a person. Initially a word is a *stranger*, one we have not seen or heard before. Then that word becomes an *acquaintance*; we have seen or heard it and know little about it. As our depth of understanding grows and we become confident using the word in

a variety of contexts, it takes on the status of a *friend*” (2009, pg. 290). Furthermore, The Partnership for Reading (2003) has used the following three levels to describe students’ knowledge for word meanings:

- Unknown: The word is completely unfamiliar and its meaning is unknown.
- Acquainted: The word is somewhat familiar; the student has some idea of its basic meaning.
- Established: The word is very familiar; the student can immediately recognize its meaning and use the word correctly. (p. 43).
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Accordingly, two kinds of theory of word meaning can be distinguished: the *semantic* theory and the *foundational* one. A *semantic* theory of word meaning is interested in clarifying what meaning-determining information is encoded by the lexical items of a natural language. The second type of theory, the *foundational* theory of word meaning, is interested in singling out the facts whereby lexical expressions come to have the semantic properties they have for their users. (<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/word-meaning/>)

Table 1. What is involved in knowing a word?

Aspect	Component	Receptive Knowledge	Productive knowledge
Form	Spoken written word parts	What does the word sound like? What does the word look like? What parts are recognizable in this word?	How is the word pronounced? How is the word written and spelled? What word parts are needed to express the meaning?
Meaning	form and meaning concepts and referents associations	What meaning does this word form signal? What is included in this concept? What other words does this make people think of	What word form can be used to express this meaning? What items can the concept refer to? What other words could people use instead of this one?
Use	grammatical functions collocations constraints on use (register, frequency ...)	In what patterns does the word occur? What words or types of words occur with this one? Where, when, and how often would people expect to meet this word?	In what patterns must people use this word? What words or types of words must people use with this one? Where, when, and how often can people use this word?

Table 1. What is involved in knowing a word? Adapted from Nation (2001, p. 27)

2. What it means to “know” a word

Often, readers are in the position of not knowing a word, two or maybe a whole bunch of them. They might have encountered them in real life or in reading before, but the memory of them is “vague.” Knowing a word assumingly means knowing it in at least two different contexts/meanings out of the many meanings it may imply. The reason I argue for this is because the degree of knowing a word interprets our experience with it in our everyday. Accordingly, “it is generally agreed that even if readers “know” a word, each person may relate it to a different experience (Richardson, Morgan, & Fleener, 2006, p. 280). The example such as “Andrew gave the report” could be related to different experience. If a teacher were to read it, it would be based on giving final grade reports for example. A policeman would associate it to reporting a crime. Both situations occur not because readers do not know the word, but because they know different usages of the same word and relate it at first thought to their everyday. Simpson (1987) notes that “word knowledge is not a static product but a fluid quality that takes on

additional characteristics and attributes as the learner experiences more,” (1987, p. 21). Full- concept learning of vocabulary, according to Simpson (1987, pg. 20-27), requires:

- i. Recognizing and generating critical attributes-both examples and non-examples - of a concept. (asking students to exclude a concept from a list of concepts to which it does not belong for e.g. muezzin mosque minaret mangrove *(further explanation of Simpson’s theory taken from Richardson, Morgan, Fleener, 2006, p.283)*)
- ii. Seeing relationships between the concept to be learned and what is already known, (by brainstorming about targeted vocabulary concepts, then writing possible definitions, 2006, p. 283)
- iii. Applying the concept to a variety of contexts, (by being exposed to the word in different contexts, 2006, p. 283)
- iv. Generating new contexts for the learned concept. (by creating new sentences using previously learned concepts. (2006, p.283)

Blachowicz and Fisher (2000, p. 504) in their research on vocabulary instruction found four guiding principles. “Students should: *be immersed in words (incidental), personalize word learning (intentional and incidental), continue to add to their word knowledge through varied and repeated exposures (intentional), be actively engaged in their own vocabulary development both to come to an understanding of words to choose and apply strategies for independent word learning (intentional).*” Therefore, pre-defining lists of words and vocabulary that could be encountered in the texts could assist students in realizing their meanings based on the context and situation and facilitate comprehension in a foreign language.

3. What to do and how?

In cases when teachers are teaching academic course subjects with difficult vocabulary either old terminology or new in the target language i.e. English, there are different tasks that can be implemented. As previously mentioned, this study developed in three phases. The main instrument that was employed in conducting the research was a questionnaire consisting of three parts: *reading comprehension (interpreting knowledge and analysis), Bloom’s Taxonomy and a post-reading survey.* The main aim of the questionnaire was to test students’ level of academic reading in different periods of literature, with different tones and styles and normally different terminology (Old English). The English literature teachers were consulted by me beforehand regarding the syllabus and material (topics they had covered) and their personal assumptions of what students should possess knowledge of were also taken into consideration. The process and obtained results will be further discussed.

I. Text interpreting

The first part was formulated upon the hypothesis that academic reading and literature were particularly difficult especially for students during their first year of study who are required to comprehend a higher level of English. The questions were formulated according to the syllabus and the period of English literature taught at this year of studies - Old English. The questions asked were related to basic knowledge that each and every student needed in order to pass the exam i.e. sufficient information regarding “Beowulf” and not difficult questions. The main aim was to conclude whether or not students had comprehended the language used, the style, metaphors etc. It also attempted to distinguish whether or not the replies that were circled would further be “put into use” in the second part i.e. Bloom’s Taxonomy.

The obtained results indicated that most students had understood information **to some extent**. (NOTE that all questions are in Appendix)

Table 2. Sample of questions and replies: Text interpreting “Beowulf”

Academic Reading and Anglo-Saxon literature: Comprehension of “Beowulf” The following questions are based on interpreting knowledge of the Anglo-Saxon epic poem “Beowulf,” followed by Bloom’s Taxonomy and a post-reading experience survey. Thank you in advance for your contribution in the research.			
1. Who is Hrothgar?			
a. King of the Danes (people of Denmark)			
b. King of England			
c. King of Sweden			
2. What is Herot?			
a. a Banquet hall			
b. a wooden, large, mead hall where men of the community go to meet, celebrate, eat, sleep, etc.			
c. A conference hall			
3. Describe Grendel using the most specific details from the text.			
a. a powerful monster, demon, fiend who haunts the moors (marshy wild land), has great claws- tears apart and eats men/ drinks their blood			
b. spawned (given birth) by a pair of monsters descended from Cain.			
c. Has great claws- tears apart men.			
4. What irritates Grendel and becomes his motive for attacking Herot?			
a. the men are happy, they enjoy music, enjoy each other’s company in the mead hall;			
b. they live in nature’s beauty			
c. they are too noisy;			
Question	Correct responses	Wrong responses	Other (blank etc.)
1.	41	8	1
2.	48	1	1
3.	45	5	
4.	9	40	1
5.	41	7	2
6.	47		3
7.	34	14	2
8.	49	1	
9.	30	20	
10.	6	41	3
11.	39	10	1

Out of a total of 50 students that participated, only 1 case had provided NONE correct answers regarding text interpreting, whereas the others were satisfactory results. We shall further examine results obtained from Bloom’s taxonomy, which served as a precise indicator of individual responses i.e. if students could copy the circled answers from their peers or colleagues during reading comprehension, they could not provide the same answers in the second part.

II. Bloom’s taxonomy

The second part was based on Bloom’s taxonomy (table 3) and on distinguishing whether or not students could put their existing knowledge of the epic poem to use. The first and second questions were similar to

prior questions in order to test if students were aware of what they answered previously; the third and fourth questions were based on vocabulary acquisition and were regarded as the most important indicators because they test students' comprehension of the words and their usage in sentences; the last two questions require students' creativity and deep analysis of major characters in the epic poem. The results showed that *applying* words in sentences and *analyzing what the words mean* were most difficult for students, either because they had not read the poem and noticed their definition or simply because they had never thought of the words in usage (both words are not frequently used in everyday communication, especially "writhing").

Table 3. Blooms taxonomy (applying and analyzing i.e. the focus of the paper)

1. Remembering- who was Beowulf?	
2. Understanding- what is a mead hall?	
3. Applying- use "urge" in a sentence.	
4. Analyzing- "writhing monster" means?	
5. Evaluating- Grendel is a sad monster- do you agree? Why?	
6. Creating- use ONE word to describe Beowulf.	

How much do students understand vocabulary and terminology? My personal assumption was focused on the issue of frequency words and how often students were encountered with a certain word would determine how much they understood its meaning. Since the word "urge" is more frequently used, 22 out of 50 students used it correctly in a sentence (almost half of them), and accordingly, since the term "writhing" is less used, 31 out of 50 left it blank and 10 out of 50 supplied wrong answers (used it in meaningless sentences).

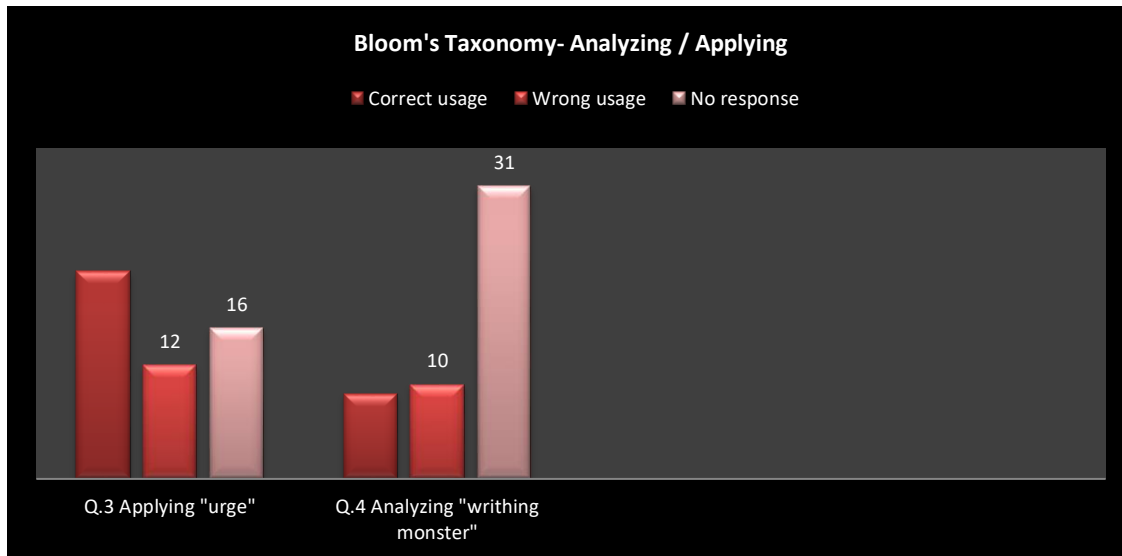


Fig.1. Student responses- Bloom's taxonomy analyzing/applying

I recognized that Bloom's taxonomy seemed to be the most difficult when it came to using words in sentences and therefore only 9 students attempted to complete both applying and analyzing.

Table4. Applying/Analyzing sample sentences

Question	Applying	Analyzing
Student 1	He urged him to kill the monster.	A dying monster.
Student 2	I have the urge to meet him.	Burning monster
Student 3	I have the urge to go to the toilet.	Burning monster
Student 4	I have the urge to throw up.	Burning monster
Student 5	The monster has the urge to kill.	/
Student 6	He urged me to do that.	Something that burns
Student 7	She fought back the urge to run.	It means something that burns.
Student 8	Diedre had the sudden urge to go home.	“Writhing monster” means burning monster.
Student 9	She urged me to do something bad.	A monster that doesn’t like music.

Table 4. Student sample responses: Application of words in sentences

The above student responses are a sample of sentences students compiled. The responses provided are evidence that: only 9 out of 50 students made the effort to write a complete sentence; the number of students is too little when compared to the total number of participants; the word “*urge*” is more often used therefore it is easier for students to use it in sentences and expressions.

III. Post-reading survey

The third part regarding the post-reading reflection survey consisted of 7 questions which intended to have students self-reflect on their experience with the epic poem and to admit whether they had encountered difficulties pre and during reading. I noticed that some students’ answers did not correspond with their level of knowledge in the first and second part and regarded this as self-confidence and self-criticism and this therefore resulted in not wanting to admit difficulties.

Table 5. Post-reading survey (sample)

1. Was reading the poem difficult for you?	Yes	No
2. Did you understand it from the beginning?	Yes	No
3. Do you think previous knowledge/experience is needed when reading?	Yes	No
4. Did you base the title to the overall meaning of the poem?	Yes	No
5. Were you wrong with your assumption?	Yes	No
6. Were there many unknown words?	Yes	No
7. Did you understand all figures of speech, styles and tones etc.?	Yes	No

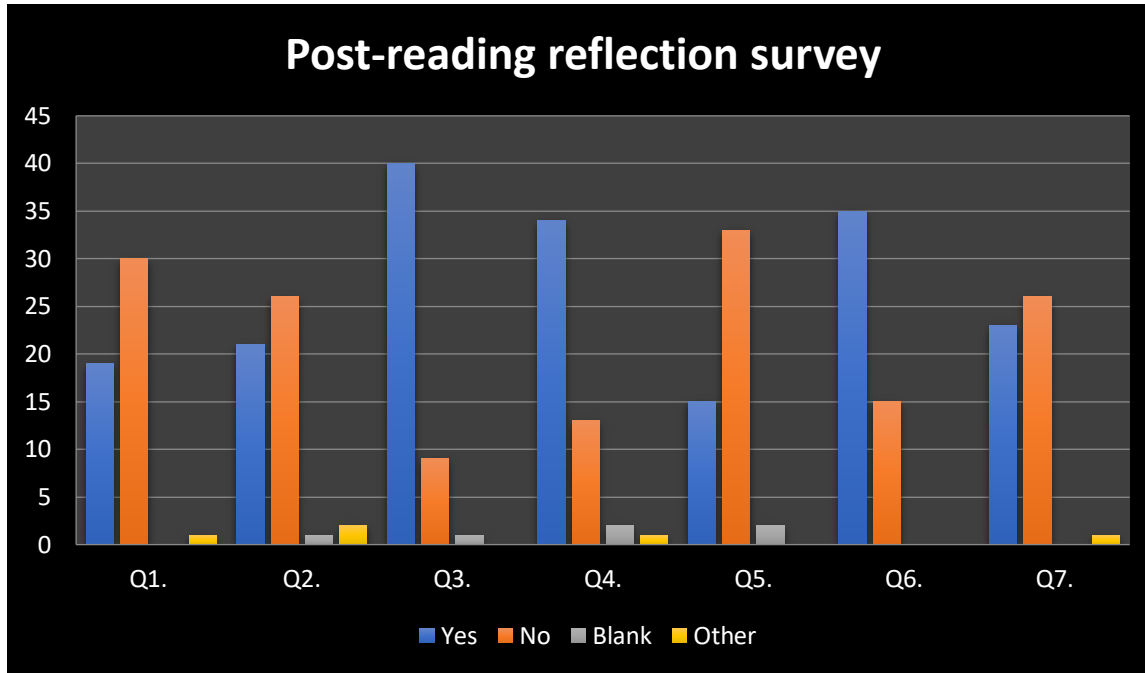


Fig.2 Post-reading reflection survey (first year student responses)

4. Obtained results and discussion

Regarding critical reading skills, this research proved that critical and deep approach in reading helped students surpass difficulties with comprehending text. Thinking critically about a certain written work meant approaching it in a different manner, with previous knowledge, active reading and interacting with text. Testing reading results depend and vary on the teachers' focus. If the teacher is focused on basic knowledge, it is easier to notice whether or not students have comprehended the text. On the contrary, if the teacher is focused on a deeper analysis, then this depends a lot on students' creativity and critical mind. It also is tied with students' prior experience with different texts. Also, there is a difference between academic reading skills and English literature- the approach differs, the language and vocabulary differ and also the tone and style differ. Therefore, according to the subject matter, testing and assessment should follow an ongoing procedure from day one. Teachers should prepare different types of assessment and use different types of text and materials. The use of Bloom's taxonomy in analyzing and synthesizing written work should be implemented and taught. Students show how much they have understood something when they are asked to put the knowledge to use (e.g. the task in the study that required from students to create sentences using a chosen word from the teacher). Many comprehension strategies can be used depending on the focus, however strategies such as: cognitive, memory, compensation, affective and social should be taught from the beginning of the course.

5. Limitations and further recommendations

The small-scale study, with all its limitations such as: small number of participants, usage of only one instrument and approach, provides teachers and the reader with insights regarding academic reading, the differences between academic reading and literature and points out the importance of different ways of student assessment, specifically that of word knowledge and vocabulary. It also presents different

strategies that can be implemented. The ideas presented and the manner which the students were part of the research are authentic i.e. author-developed. Similar tools with different questions and materials can be used by English teachers in order to facilitate the burden of reading comprehension for students and of course, in order to introduce higher-order thinking and creativity. I highly encourage further research in academic reading.

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Websites: <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/word-meaning/>

Appendices

The following item regards first year students and literature (Beowulf). It is based on interpreting knowledge and was compiled accordingly to the teachers’ advice and syllabus (what had previously been covered in class and what basic knowledge students were supposed to have). Question numbers 7-12 are based on Bloom’s Taxonomy, and the last questions are based on post-reading survey.

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1. Who is Hrothgar?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. King of the Danes (people of Denmark) b. King of England c. King of Sweden
2. What is Herot?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Banquet hall b. a wooden, large, mead hall where men of the community go to meet, celebrate, eat, sleep, etc. c. A conference hall
3. Describe Grendel using the most specific details from the text.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. a powerful monster, demon, fiend who haunts the moors (marshy wild land), has great claws- tears apart and eats men/ drinks their blood b. spawned (given birth) by a pair of monsters descended from Cain. c. Has great claws- tears apart men.
4. What irritates Grendel and becomes his motive for attacking Herot?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. the men are happy, they enjoy music, enjoy each other’s company in the mead hall; b. they live in nature’s beauty c. they are too noisy;
5. Who is Beowulf?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. a young warrior from Geatland b. a young prince c. an army general
6. Who is Higlac and how is Beowulf related to him?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. his friend b. king of Geatland and his uncle c. his brother
7. How does Beowulf kill Grendel?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. he cuts off his head b. he pokes out his eyes c. he cuts off his arm
8. What is Grendel’s mother motivation for going to Herot?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. she wants to get revenge for her son b. she wants to listen to music c. she wants to eat and drink
9. Did Beowulf get rewarded for killing Grendel?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. yes, he did. b. no, because he returned a favor c. he received gold
10. What was Beowulf’s motivation for killing Grendel?	

a. he wanted fame		
b. he wanted the crown		
c. he wanted victory		
11. Beowulf's last enemy to fight is:		
a. a fire breathing dragon		
b. a ghost		
c. a monster		
II. Blooms Taxonomy		
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8. Understanding- what is a mead hall?		
9. Applying- use "urge" in a sentence.		
10. Analyzing- "writhing monster" means?		
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10. Do you think previous knowledge/experience is needed when reading?	Yes	No
11. Did you base the title to the overall meaning of the poem?	Yes	No
12. Were you wrong with your assumption?	Yes	No
13. Were there many unknown words?	Yes	No
14. Did you understand all figures of speech, styles and tones etc.?	Yes	No