Examining the Language-Based Components of the Head-to-Toe Method of Associations for Vocabulary Acquisition

Part 3

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I. Introduction

"Hold, as 'twere, the mirror up to nature."
—Hamlet (Act 3, Scene II)

This article continues with the second category of tools for the Head-to-Toe Method. In this installment, I will focus specifically on the significance and use of examples and images that help ELLs encode, learn, and employ lexical items.

In surveying the second category of tools, I have tried to show the magnitude of Shakespeare's idea of holding "the mirror up to nature," and suiting "the action to the word" and "the word to the action" to illustrate the intimate relationship that words, phrases, and idioms share with the thoughts, feelings, and actions of our lives. Let us continue, then, by demonstrating the profound importance of examples and images as they help our ELLs acquire new vocabulary in a fun and natural way.

II. Examples and Images: Internalizing Lexical Items

Before I detail the various kinds of examples and images used in the Head-to-Toe Method, I would like to briefly list seven very significant features about the use of these tools in vocabulary pedagogy. Having students create examples and images of the terms facilitates a number of crucial points. Primarily, it

- immediately connects the learner to the lexical items through a very personal process; that is, the learning is highly personalized;
- nurtures an awareness or mindfulness of how to use the terms;
- helps the students develop an emotional connection to the terms because the examples or images they create are unique and often generated from personal experience;
- allows for effective repetition as terms are used frequently in a restricted amount of time;
- fosters the visualization of the terms, which helps reinforce the meaning and use of the terms in the ELLs' embodied semantic neural network; see Randolph (2018a);
- promotes an immediate attention and interest in the items; and
- creates a sincere sense of ownership in the students' minds; the lexical items truly become theirs and are not merely abstract terms in the English language.

The above seven elements are all highly supported by both neuroscientists (Davidson & Begley, 2013; Medina, 2009; Ratey, 2002) and educators (Jensen, 2008; Willis, 2006) as imperative ingredients for successful learning and the motivation to learn. The idea of creating examples and supplying corresponding images of those examples is powerful because it, in essence, illustrates that we really do "learn by doing." The parallel reality of mimicking something by practicing and using it creates multiple neural pathways in the brain, and reinforces the long-term memory of that material on a number of levels (Eagleman, 2015; Willis, 2006).

Let us now look at how various types of examples and images are used in the Head-to-Toe Method, both inside and outside of the classroom. It should be noted that one could easily argue that all 40 components of the Head-to-Toe Method offer "examples" of word use and meaning in one way or another, as they show multiple ways of using terms in different linguistic and pragmatic situations. However, the following types are *specifically* designated as particular kinds of examples and images used in the method.

III. Examples: "Suit the action to the word, the word to the action."

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Teacher-Generated Examples

(1) Black/whiteboard examples: As mentioned in Part I of this series on language-based components, I always elicit the definitions of vocabulary terms by using teacher-generated example sentences. These example sentences (usually one or two) are written directly under the lexical item we are studying; for example:

shed light on: _____

- Balaqis ***shed light on*** why she chose to study in the United States.
- Hayder hopes his math professor will ***shed light on*** the importance of the formula.

(2) Worksheet examples: These are examples that help define the terms on the weekly vocabulary worksheets that I give the students. The setup on the worksheets (i.e., the new lexical item and the one to two examples) is exactly the same as the setup on the board. These worksheet examples function as a reinforcement and an additional exposure to the terms that we are studying. The students can also use these examples as models when they create their own original example sentences for their homework assignments.

(3) Spontaneous oral teacher examples: These types of examples (usually two or three) are presented orally to the students. They are offered in addition to the ones on the board and the ones on their worksheets. The oral examples simply act as more information and helpful examples from which the students can infer the definitions of the terms. I make sure, when appropriate, to use the students' names, or create connections and associations to the terms and the students in both the written and spoken examples.

I have found that using my students' names, their various personality traits, hobbies, or home countries in the example sentences to be a very effective tool in getting ELLs to promptly attend to and connect with the terms we are studying (Randolph, 2013). It evokes the employment of the amygdala—the all-important area in the brain that deals with the emotions and their relation

to learning and memory (Randolph, 2016). These emotion-based connections are crucial for learning because they assist in developing associations and forging a complex network of neural pathways that help to encode and learn new vocabulary terms. Another key factor, or course, is that the students enjoy seeing their names in print, and, as above, have a positive and instantaneous reaction to seeing something familiar in the example sentences.

> In fact, a student recently commented that a major problem with many dictionary examples is that they have no or very little, at best, relation to the ELLs' lives. She likes the Head-to-Toe Method because of the immediate, personal, and engaging examples on the worksheets and ones given by me and her classmates during the lesson. (Randolph, 2016, para. 26)

Using the students' information allows them to instantly personalize the terms, whether they are reading their own name in the example sentence or one of their classmates' names. It should, however, be pointed out that I do not use the students' names or other kinds of personal information if the term is a negative one (e.g., annoying, pessimistic, sneaky, or racist). In such cases, I use generic or common English names, or names of famous people who have a connection to or relation with the term/terms.

Student-Generated Examples

(1) Oral student examples: These examples are generated or produced by the students after they have defined the term in question, identified its part of speech, and addressed the other main associations of the Head-to-Toe Method. I ask the students to volunteer as many original example sentences as they can during class time to help get a natural feel for the term we are studying. I have found that during this process, the volunteers like to use both themselves and their classmates in the examples to help fortify and emphasize the meanings and connotations of the lexical items. Not only does this help motivate the learning process, but it also helps build a strong sense of family and community within the class. When classmates begin to represent and exemplify the lexical items, a genuine feel for the terms develops and learning becomes a relevant and refreshing experience.

(2) Written student examples: The written examples are student generated and used for homework assignments to review the terms studied in the class. On the one hand, I prefer that the students write these examples outside of class to enforce the idea of repetitive intervals. According to Medina (2009), "[m]emory may not be fixed at the moment of learning, but repetition, doled out in specifically timed intervals, is the fixative" (p. 130). Having the students write these examples five to 24 hours after the initial exposure helps internalize the terms and review them at the same time. On the other hand, having the students write example sentences in class can be equally effective if they do it in the subsequent lesson. This can be done a day or two later (i.e., a day or two after the initial exposure). The added benefit of writing the examples in class is that students are assured to write original examples without the help of online resources or the help of a friend or roommate. As with the teacher-generated examples and the spoken student examples, I ask the students to use themselves or their classmates in the written examples to help develop and personalize the connections and associations with the terms.

(3) Personal Memory Associations: These are specific kinds of examples based on the students' personal memory system and its association to a lexical item. These kinds of examples are elicited a day or so after the initial exposure of a term. I define a Personal Memory Association (PMA) as

> a particular, personal, and genuine memory that a student has of a person, event, or place. It does not have to be sensational in any way; rather, the memory can be very simple. It merely needs to have value in the student's psyche and involve a crucial emotional connection. (Randolph, 2018b, p. 39)

These examples can be elicited through either a spoken or written activity. For example, the teacher can

a. elicit these PMAs as spoken examples from the students as a class activity;
b. have students exchange their examples in pairs and then record them in written form in notebooks;
c. assign students to create and write one or two sentences about the PMAs as homework; or
d. assign students a written paragraph about the PMAs as homework (Randolph, 2018b). More on this will be discussed in the Personal Associations-Based Component installment in this series.

As we can see, the focus here is to help the students develop an emotional and personal connection to the terms being studied. If they can find a way to connect them to their personhood, then they can internalize them and make them a part of who they are as unique individuals.

(4) Who in the class _____? example: This is a fun activity for creating examples in which the students connect the terms to classmates via spoken sentences. Once the vocabulary terms' definitions are clear, I write the list on the board and add two to three terms from previous weeks. Next, we briefly review the definition of each term. Then, I ask the class, "Who in the class _____?" and fill in the lexical item. So, if the list is "analytical," "be on cloud nine," "burn the midnight oil," "comical," "meticulous," "tenacious," "wise," and "warmhearted," I might ask, "Who in the class is analytical?" The students respond by answering with one of their classmates, "Hanan is analytical!" I, then, ask why? An answer from a recent class was, "Because she likes to think about topics in many different ways." After one or two terms have been done once or twice as a class, I make groups of three and have the students ask their group members the same questions while using the vocabulary terms. The group members can answer by naming any member of their class; they are not restricted to only naming members of the group. This activity is a nice warm-up as it gets the students to think quickly, make associations, and think of creative reasons to support their answers. It should be noted here that (1) this works best as a review activity; (2) it should be done when the students become familiar with their classmates' personality types; and (3) it works with all kinds of lexical items (single-words, phrases, and idioms), but it is perhaps most useful with adjectives.

IV. Images and Visualization: "Hold, as 'twere, the mirror up to nature."

Whether the learner is a child or an adult, images and visualization can significantly help play a large role in learning the meanings of lexical items (Boers, Demecheleer, & Eyckmans, 2004; Randolph, 2018a). The brain designates a vast amount of energy to the faculty of vision; in fact, "about one-third of the human brain is devoted to vision" (Eagleman, 2011, pp 22-23). It is indeed quite amazing to think that our visual system uses 30 percent of the brain's cortex when only three percent is used for hearing and eight percent for our tactile faculties (Grady, 1993, para. 12).

There are many ways in which to take advantage of our visual system in order to help learn vocabulary items. The main point to keep in mind, however, is to always make sure the images used have a close and direct relation to the lexical items so that they do not cause confusion or mislead the ELLs' understanding of the terms (McPherron & Randolph, 2014). Let us survey three ways I use images and visualization techniques in the Head-to-Toe Method.

(1) Teacher-generated images: These are images I create and draw directly next to or under the lexical item as it appears on the board. These drawings need not be elaborate, but they should be clear and helpful as their main function is to facilitate an understanding of the terms they represent. For example, our idiom, "shed light on," might have a woman behind a podium explaining something with her arms outstretched. I might also create a speech bubble next to her that says, "Now, let me explain this as clear as possible." For those who are artistically challenged, even stick figures are fine. And, in some cases, writing numbers or shapes that highlight the essence of a term's definition is also effective.

(2) Student-generated images: As mentioned above, students are given a worksheet on which they are to write original example sentences using the lexical items. Directly underneath each sentence is a box. In this box, students are required to draw an image that corresponds to the meaning or essence of the lexical item. These can be as elaborate or as simple as they want, but the main purpose is to help students create visual associations with the terms. Some students spend up to five minutes on an image and are very meticulous in drawing their pictorial representations while other students create an image in a matter of seconds. The importance of these images is not whether they are complex or simple, but that the images come from the students' unique minds and have a direct connection with the lexical items and the students' individual histories. Students often report that these images are very helpful because they create

a special representation of the lexical item that is unique to each student's own psychology or cultural background. Again, the significance here is that it is student-generated; that is, both the image and its relation are owned by the students and tied to their unique identities.

(3) Visualizing terms in the mind's eye: This is an activity that helps create mental images or scenes about a lexical item; and, in the process, it allows for a story to be told in the mind's eye. Once the students have a solid understanding of a term's definition, I ask them to close their eyes and create or imagine a scene that represents or uses the word, phrase, or idiom we are studying. For example, if the word is "smile," I ask them to create an image where this word is the focus of the scene or story. Recent visualized scenes of this word during vocabulary lessons were:

- "I smiled at my wife at the breakfast table on a Saturday."
- "I watched my parents smile at each other on a walk." and
- "I see a child. She is smiling at a bird high up in a tree."

After the students have created a mental image in their mind's eye, I ask them to explain what they saw to the person sitting next to them. Finally, I have them write the scene down. This activity is another technique to create example sentences using the terms. Visualizing the terms is very powerful because it teaches the students to create concrete images in their minds, and thus personalize and generate a special ownership of the terms in question. For more on this, see Randolph (2018a).

V. Concluding Remarks

If we "suit the action to the word, the word to the action" by developing examples and images, we will most assuredly "hold, as t'were, the mirror up to nature" and show how closely our spiritual and physical world is connected to the lexical world. By creating these various kinds of examples and images, we are learning a language by doing it, we are naturally learning it, practicing it, and developing a personal relation to words and their myriad of uses and meanings. Examples and images are so very important because they help our students experiment and play with the language—all the while developing a genuine sense of confidence and curiosity about their forever challenging yet wondrous world of words.

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