

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

Part 2

by Patrick T. Randolph

University of Nebraska-Lincoln

I. Introduction



“Hold, as ‘twere, the mirror up to nature.”

—Hamlet (Act 3, Scene II)

This second installment of the Head-to-Toe Method’s second category of tools—the language-based components—continues to highlight the words of Hamlet and “[h]old, as ‘twere, the mirror up to nature.” I want to show just how close words are to reality and how English language teachers can help their students personalize and internalize lexical items, and transform their apparent abstract nature into concrete, dynamic, life-like entities.

In Part 1, I focused on (1) understanding words as friends—this showed how to personify lexical items; (2) pronunciation and mindfulness—this demonstrated how to feel the sound and soul of words; (3) the dynamics of definitions—this centered on how to elicit the meanings of lexical items; and (4) identifying the parts of speech—this focused on determining a term’s grammatical applications.

In Part 2, I will introduce a very useful tool I call “verbpathy,” show how emotion-based associations help develop a visceral feel for lexical items, and I will finish with a word or two about how to raise our ELLs’ awareness concerning register. Let us now survey these components and see how they “[h]old a mirror up to nature.”

II. Verbpthy: Using Basic, Immediate Responses to Connect with Words



As I mentioned in previous installments in this series, the vast majority of the lexical items that we ask our ELLs to learn are often abstract in nature. It is our job, then, to help make these abstract terms more concrete, understandable, personal, and easy to learn and use. One very effective way to transform the abstract into the concrete is to employ what I call “verbpthy.”

What, you may ask, is verbpthy? The meaning of the term is what its etymology implies—word (verb) feeling (pathy). That is, “verbpthy” is “word-feeling;” it is the immediate, intuitive, and personal feeling one experiences when he/she first encounters a word, phrase, or idiom during the encoding process. These verbpthy-based reactions to lexical items might be visceral, rational, spiritual, or even comical. In terms of deploying verbpthy, I address it after we have defined a term and identified its part of speech. I then ask students to assign a verbpthy to the term; this entails having the students categorize the verbpthy of a term as positive, negative, or both positive and negative.

In addition to asking the students to assign the verbpthy to the terms, I also request that they explain why they assigned the verbpthy that they did. Their explanations are usually straightforward and clear. The fact that they can go into detail about their responses shows they are conscious of why they feel they way they do. Moreover, I believe that talking about the verbpthy gives my students a chance to analyze their feelings and think about the terms in an elaborate and useful way. This may, at first glance, appear to be rather simple, but it is actually a very complex and effective way to examine thoughts, feelings, and meaning. It also supports the work of Craik and Lockhart (1972) who demonstrated that the more one thinks, analyzes, and talks about something, the greater chance they have of truly learning it and committing it to their long-term memory.

Now, let’s take a look at some examples. Lexical items like “blissful,” “come up with,” “reach out to,” “juxtapose,” “analyze,” and “research” are typically assigned positive feelings of verbpthy. This is because the terms are either innately positive, or they lead to positive consequences. For example, the more “research” that is done will lead to solving problems or treating a serious disease. Terms like “convoluted,” “depression,” “dishonest,” “come down with,” “addiction,” and “murky” are assigned negative feelings of verbpthy for obvious reasons. Lexical items to which students will often assign both positive and negative feelings of verbpthy

are terms like “habit,” “take advantage of,” “complex,” “argue,” “ambiguous,” and “once in a blue moon.” That is, one can have a good habit and a bad habit. If one takes advantage of an experience, it is a good thing. However, if one always takes advantage of people, it is a negative thing.

There is also a very personal element to verbpathy that echoes a concept that is being studied in neuroscience. The notion is this: “You don’t perceive objects as they are. You perceive them as you are” (Eagleman, 2015, p. 33). That is, the meaning we make is really predicated on our own distinct personhood. We might share a general truth, but the details are understood in a unique and very special way.

Depending, then, on a student’s unique personality, he or she may assign a different verbpathy to a term, which is distinct from the general opinion. For instance, last year in one of my classes, we were studying the idiom “be tied up” (be very busy). All the members of the class except one agreed that this idiom possessed a negative verbpathy. An older, male student, however, argued the term was positive. He felt “that ‘being tied up’ implies one is busy, and, if one is busy, he/she is being productive and contributing to society in a positive, helpful way” (Randolph, 2017, para. 7). And, as the tool of verbpathy is based on one’s immediate, personal “feeling,” I felt that his interpretation was valid and plausible. Moreover, if that particular verbpathy-based interpretation helped him learn, personalize, and internalize the term, then I felt it was a correct use of the tool. In this sense, verbpathy is far from the concept of “connotation” because the “feeling” comes solely from the students’ own personal histories (Randolph, 2017).

Before moving on to the emotion-based associations, I’d like to share a caveat about an earlier view I held concerning verbpathy. For many years, I defined verbpathy as a positive feeling, negative feeling, a combination of both a positive and negative feeling, or a neutral feeling toward lexical items (Randolph, 2009; Randolph, 2015; Randolph, 2016). Originally, while developing the Head-to-Toe Method, I felt that such a feeling of neutrality was possible, but the more I researched various discoveries in neuroscience and learned how so many things are profoundly connected to our emotions (Davidson & Begley, 2013; LeDoux, 1996); and how the feelings of happiness (positive) and unhappiness (negative) are two basic systems in our brain’s neurochemistry (Breuning, 2016), I was more and more convinced that a “neutral feeling” for a term was just not possible. Moreover, it appears our brain works off of survival instincts that we have nurtured for millions of years and the concept of neutrality would not allow us to survive and thrive. It is in our DNA to look at things in a way that will increase our chances of survival and help us live and evolve in a stronger and better way.

Perhaps the most significant justification for discontinuing my use of the neutral aspect of verbpathy was my students’ reactions to it. They often claimed that a positive or negative “feel” for a term made an immediate, deep, and lasting impression on them. However, if and when a term was assigned a “neutral feeling,” it did not connect to their inner system of excitement or fear. There seemed to be a lack of emotional investment, and, as a consequence, the term or verbpathy of the term piqued little interest. This type of reaction to neutral phenomena is well-documented in John Medina’s *Brain Rules*. His research has shown that “[e]motionally arousing events tend to be better remembered than neutral events” (2009, p. 79).

These student reactions, I think, provide us with a crucial insight into the learning process: that is, learning is—to a large extent—predicated on the presence of emotions, and this takes us to our next tool.

III. Emotions: Using Emotion-Based Associations to Strengthen Learning



If we incorporate some kind of emotional content or emotion-based association in the vocabulary learning process, our students will not only learn the lexical items, but they will also have *fun* doing it—the latter element is perhaps the most vital ingredient in any successful pedagogical recipe. In addition, I have found that employing the emotion-based associations component immediately or soon after assigning the verbpthy is both “a necessary and logical step” (Randolph, 2017, para. 9). That is, the positive or negative verbpthy is effectively reinforced with an emotion-based association.

The use of the emotions is simple and straightforward. Once we have addressed the definition of a term, its part of speech, and its verbpthy, I ask the students to associate an emotion that they feel the term represents or that they associate with the term; that is, they connect an emotion to the lexical item in question.

Let’s take our vocabulary from the verbpthy section as examples. Most recently, students associated emotions like “joy,” “excitement,” and “endless happiness” with the term “blissful.” They associated “a feeling of curiosity,” “a desire to learn,” and “confidence” with “juxtapose” because, as above, the more one compares or contrasts something, the more they learn and ultimately understand the complexity of its nature. The term “convoluted” was associated with feelings or emotions of “unhappiness,” “fear,” and “anxiety.”

Two added benefits of employing the tool of emotion-based associations are (1) students will often justify why they associated or assigned the emotions to the terms, and (2) they will also share stories or memories that are connected to the emotion of the vocabulary term. Not only does this help the student at the moment of encoding (cf. Craik & Lockhart, 1972), but it also helps the other students in the classroom, as they will often remember the story or memory and refer to it later in the semester during a class discussion or in a writing

assignment. This clearly shows how impressive these little vignettes are for both the contributing student *and* his/her classmates. In fact, so many students have started offering memories related to the emotions and vocabulary terms that I have incorporated the “Personal Memory Association” in the Head-to-Toe Method. This tool will be addressed when we discuss the personal-association based components.

IV. Register: Addressing the Formal or Informal Feel of Vocabulary



How a term is used, with whom you use it, when, and where it is used are all important; and correct use of lexical items in these cases does show a true understanding of and genuine feel for a term. So, I believe, it is crucial to teach a term’s register (or *style*) to our ELLs.

However, like so many other topics that we have discussed concerning vocabulary pedagogy, I think that addressing a term’s register ought to be kept simple and straightforward. If one gets too involved in explaining a term’s register, students may quickly find themselves being led down a rabbit hole. I have observed occasions where teachers begin to talk about the formality or informality of a term, and simultaneously open up Pandora’s box; the expressions on many students’ faces range from that of doubt to overwhelming confusion.

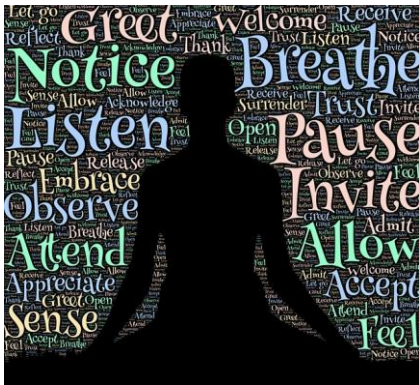
That said, I do believe we should teach the ins and outs of register for the sake of our students’ assimilation into their new host culture and an understanding of its language. I find it best to discuss register after we have covered the four major elements of a term that I discussed above: the definition, the part of speech, the verbpthy and the emotion-based associations. Once the students have covered these, a term’s register almost becomes self-evident.

The aspects of register that I often cover are (1) people, (2) places, (3) situations, and (4) language skills (e.g., writing and speaking). For instance, if we are studying a term like “once in a blue moon,” I might explain that it could be used as an informal term among friends at a restaurant or in an advisor’s or professor’s office once a comfortable relationship has been established; or, the term might be used in a creative writing assignment where informal dialogue is needed in a story, or where the description or narration is in need of an informal and friendly tone. But, it would not be appropriate for a chemistry lab report or in a formal job interview.

One activity that is both fun and quick is to subtly introduce register with the 4Ws. That is, with whom can you use it, where can you use it, when can you use it, and why would you use it? Let’s take “juxtapose” as an example. After we cover the first four elements, I might then ask, “Where can it be used?” They might answer, “In a classroom or in an academic paper or test.”

Next, I'll ask, "Who can you use this with?" Their answer might be, "With one's advisor, boss, or a professor." My next question is, "When could you use it?" They might answer, "When you are at work in a formal setting or in a formal setting at school." My last question could be, "Why would you use it?" To which they might reply, "It's best to use a formal term like 'juxtapose' in an academic situation. By doing this quick Socratic quiz, students easily pick up on a term's register for themselves. Often, without explaining that "juxtapose" is a formal vocabulary term, students will infer its register from synthesizing the information from the Head-to-Toe components and from the 4W activity. And, the more our students can determine these concepts on their own, the better intuitive feel for the language they will have, and the more confidence and comfort they will have in using it.

V. Concluding Remarks



Our goal in PART 2 has been to "[h]old, as 'twere, the mirror up to nature" and demonstrate how effectively vocabulary can be learned when put into these rich personal contexts. In this piece, I have shown how using verbpthy gets students to pay careful attention to their immediate and innate responses to terms during the encoding process by assigning them positive or negative feelings. Next, I illustrated how students become more intimate with lexical items by assigning emotion-based associations to the terms. And lastly, I explained how students develop an even deeper understanding and appreciation of the vocabulary through inferring the register of terms. The synthesis of these three tools—verbpthy, emotion, and register—helps dramatically in making lexical items tangible and real. They help show just how close language mirrors reality, and they help illustrate just how our language is a life-like, dynamic entity that is full of heart and soul.

References

- Craik, F. I. M., & Lockhart, R. S. (1972). Levels of processing: A framework for memory research. *Journal of Verbal Learning and Verbal Behaviour*, 11, 671–684.
- Davidson, R. J., & Begley, S. (2013). *The emotional life of your brain*. New York, NY: Plume/Penguin.
- Eagleman, D. (2015). *The brain*. New York, NY: Pantheon Books.

Graziano Breuning, L. (2016). *Habits of a happy brain: Retrain your brain to boost your serotonin, dopamine, oxytocin, & endorphin*. Avon, MA: Adams Media/ F+W Media, Inc.

LeDoux, J. (1996). *The emotional brain*. New York, NY: Simon & Schuster.

Medina, J. (2009). *Brain rules: 12 principles for surviving and thriving at work, home, and school*. Seattle, WA: Pear Press.

Randolph, P. T. (2009). Inspiring ownership of words in vocabulary acquisition. The 43rd Annual TESOL Convention and Exhibit, March 26-28. Denver, CO.

Randolph, P. T. (2015). Introducing verbpathy in the English language classroom: Encouraging students to feel the essence and emotion of words. *ORTESOL Journal*, 32, 13-19.

Randolph, P. T. (2016). Introducing Randolph's Head-to-Toe Method of Associations for Vocabulary Acquisition to break the Ebbinghaus curse. *MinneTESOL Journal*, 1-11.

Randolph, P. T. (2017). Using verbpathy and emotion-based associations in vocabulary pedagogy. *CATESOL News* 49(1).

Correspondence concerning this article can be addressed to patricktrandolph@yahoo.com.

PATRICK T. RANDOLPH has been awarded two “Best of TESOL Affiliates” for his presentations on vocabulary pedagogy (2015) and plagiarism (2018). He has also recently received the “Best of CoTESOL Award” for his 2017 presentation on Observation Journals. He teaches in PIESL at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln and specializes in vocabulary acquisition, creative and academic writing, speech, and debate. He has created a number of brain-based learning activities for the language skills that he teaches, and he continues to research current topics in neuroscience, especially studies related to exercise and learning, memory, and mirror neurons. Randolph has also been involved as a volunteer with brain-imaging experiments at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. He lives with his wife, Gamze; daughter, Aylene; and cat, Gable, in Lincoln, NE.

Art sources: All images are from www.pixabay.com.



Copyright © 2018 Language Arts Press
www.LanguageArtsPress.com