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**English Vocabulary Exercises on the Web:
Semantic Categories as a Basis for
Learning English Vocabulary**

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1. Introduction

In Taiwan, Ministry of Education has promoted English learning through every possible means and recently it has commissioned ROC Multimedia English Learning and Instruction Association (ROCMELIA) to design National English Test in Proficiency for All on the Web (NETPAW). In 2002 I compiled an English word list of 6,480 concept words (words that are non-inflectional and not derived by adding regular affixes such as “-ly,” “-less,” “-ment,” etc.) for Taiwan’s College Entrance Examination Center (CEEC) to be used for its English tests. This *CEEC English Word List* (Jeng et al. 2001) was classified into six levels based on the criteria of socio-cultural backgrounds of the English-speaking peoples put forward by Mogilner (1992) and the Chinese-speaking people in Taiwan, Dale’s list of 3,000 words known by American grade 4 students (Chall and Dale 1995), Taiwan’s high school students’ mentality, the morphological structures of English words, and word frequency counts provided by *Cobuild English Dictionary for Advanced Students* (2001) and *Collins WordBank Online*. This *CEEC English Word List*, according to my statistics, can account for at least 95% of the words appearing in the major English magazines and newspapers such as *Time*, *Newsweek*, *The Economist*, *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, the major English broadcasts such as *CNN*, *BBC* and *VOA*, daily English conversations and fiction. Such statistics conform to Cheng’s (1998: 4) view that about 7,000 concepts words of a language are sufficient for daily use. Each of the six levels includes 1,080 words, and these six levels roughly correspond to the respective six grade levels in USA and UK. Furthermore, I have also organized the 6,300 content words of this word list (excluding the 180 function words) into 50 semantic categories such as body parts, home life, vegetables, fish and meat, meals and desserts, verbs about metabolism, senses and actions of body parts, beverages, cooking and ingredients, fruits, kinship terms, etc. (Jeng 2004) It has been found that these 6,300

English content words, if classified into such categories, will facilitate Chinese students' learning of them through their own similar Chinese semantic categories because most semantic categories in English and Chinese are similar.¹

Being a member of the Executive Committee of NETPAW, I am engaged in designing English vocabulary exercises for students to do on the web. These exercises are based upon the 50 semantic categories proposed by me and it is expected that the students' own Chinese semantic categories will help them learn English words of similar semantic categories, because these semantic categories correspond to the similar cognitive domains of knowledge representation in English native speakers and Chinese native speakers. Moreover, English vocabulary exercises based upon semantic categories can make students acquire groups of words in all the cognitive domains of knowledge representation in a balanced and systematic way. Each exercise on the website of NETPAW consists of ten items containing words from the same semantic category. Scores will be given immediately after the students have completed a group of three exercises at each of the five NETPAW levels to show them whether they have reached a certain level of English vocabulary proficiency. A sample of 9 exercises of three levels will be presented in this paper.

2. Semantic Categories and Levels of English Words

Since the *CEEC English Word List* includes only 63,00 content words, it is not necessary to have as many as 1,000 semantic categories found in *Roget's Thesaurus of English Words and Phrases* (1852), which includes 15,000 words, or 1,075 categories of *Roget's International Thesaurus* (ed. B. A. Kipfer, 2001), which includes 320,000 words, or 800 categories of *Word Menu* (ed. Stephen Glazier, 1997), which includes 75,000 words. It is supposed that 50 semantic categories are sufficient for these 6,300 content words to cover the various cognitive domains of knowledge representation. For a semantic category, the label of this category is the hypernym, and the words within this category may be synonyms, antonyms, polysemous or words subsumed within the cognitive domain of this category. These 50 English semantic categories are simple and easy enough for the Chinese students to grasp because of their similarities to Chinese semantic categories. The 50 semantic categories of these 6,300 English words are given below:

- (1) Body parts and gestures; (2) Home life; (3) Foods from plants; (4)

¹ But if some English words are polysynonymous, they will be more difficult. This point will be discussed in section 4 of this paper.

Fish and meat; (5) Meals and snacks; (6) Verbs about metabolism; (7) Senses and actions of body parts; (8) Beverages; (9) Cooking and ingredients; (10) Fruits; (11) Kinship terms; (12) Clothing, accessories and cosmetics; (13) Numbers, quantities, calculation and assessment; (14) The natural environment; (15) Architecture and public places; (16) Animals in addition to category 3; (17) Plants in addition to category 4; (18) Temporal concepts; (19) Colors; (20) Educational terms; (21) Transportation and communication; (22) The humanities; (23) The arts; (24) Science and technology; (25) The law and public affairs; (26) Economy and business; (27) Instruments in addition to category 2; (28) Recreation; (29) Health and medicine; (30) Conflicts and weapons; (31) Materials and energy; (32) Emotions and personality traits; (33) Agriculture and fishing; (34) People and occupations; (35) Attributes of people, animals and things (adjectives, adverbs and verbs);(36) Actions of people, animals and things (verbs); (37) Light and fire; (38) Address forms; (39) Spatial concepts; (40) Measurements; (41) Possession, management and planning; (42) Different stages of life; (43) Weather and climate; (44) Fortune and vicissitudes; (45) Social relations and services; (46) Language structure; (47) Cultural values; (48) Weaknesses and evils; (49) Observation and reasoning; (50) Urban and suburban environments.

Some words in these 50 semantic categories are easier than others, so it is important to prepare English vocabulary exercises according to the five levels of NEPTAW. For example, from the socio-cultural viewpoint, body parts and household words are the first words children learn in any language and they are easier than the words learned outside their homes. Most of the words in categories 1 through 12 are such words, and they are considerably easier than the words in abstract categories 44 through 50.

3. The Five Levels of English Proficiency in NETPAW

NETPAW (National English Test in Proficiency for All on the Web) now has five levels of English proficiency, and each of these five levels has a specific number of English vocabulary. Level 1 (roughly corresponding to the preschool level of English-speaking countries) has a list of 500 words for Taiwan's grades 3 and 4 students of the elementary school, who begin to learn English; level 2 (roughly corresponding to the grade 1 level of English-speaking countries) has a list of 1,000 words for Taiwan's grades 5 and 6 of the elementary school and also the first-year and second-year students of the junior high school; level 3 (roughly corresponding to the

grade 2 level of English-speaking countries) has a list of 2,000 words for Taiwan's junior high graduates; level 4 (roughly corresponding to the grade 4 level of English-speaking countries) has a list of 4,000 words for Taiwan's senior high graduates; level 5 (roughly corresponding to the grade 6 level of English-speaking countries) has 6,480 words from the *CEEC English Word List* for Taiwan's non-English major college graduates. In the future, NETPAW may expand to 8 levels, with three additional levels corresponding respectively to the junior high level (8,000 words), senior high SAT level (10,000 words) and GRE level (12,000 words) in English-speaking countries.

In the sample of nine vocabulary exercises to be presented in this paper, only three NETPAW levels of English vocabulary, namely 1, 2 and 5, will be illustrated (three exercises for each level).

4. English Vocabulary Exercises Based on Semantic Categories and NETPAW's Three Levels of English Proficiency

In the following sample of English vocabulary exercises based on semantic categories and NETPAW's vocabulary of levels 1, 2 and 5, each level consists of 3 exercises and each exercise contains 10 items. A student has to get 8 items correct to pass an exercise and s/he has to pass 2 of the 3 exercises of each level to be qualified for this level of English vocabulary proficiency. When a student has passed a certain level, s/he can go on to the next level until s/he reaches the top level (level 5).

A. Level 1 English Vocabulary Exercises (500 words)

Ex. 1: Body parts and gestures (Category 1)

Since the vocabulary exercises of this level are mainly for the very beginning students in learning English, in this exercise, there are 10 items worded in a very simple question "What is this?" Four options are given for the students to match a correct word with a picture shown beside this question. The body part words are all within the range of 500 words for NETPAW level 1.

(1) What's this? (A picture of a hand is given.)

It's a _____. (A) foot (B) head *(C) hand² (D) nose.

(2) What's this? (A picture of a nose is given.)

It's a _____. (A) mouth *(B) nose (C) tongue (D) face.

(3) What's this? (A picture of a foot is given.)

It's a _____. (A) hand (B) knee (C) neck *(D) foot

² Henceforth, the asterisked option is the correct answer.

- (4) What's this? (A picture of an eye is given.)
It's an _____. *(A) eye (B) arm (C) ear (D) ankle
- (5) What's this? (A picture of an ear is given.)
It's an _____. (A) ankle (B) eye (C) arm *(D) ear
- (6) What's this? (A picture of a tongue is given.)
It's a _____. *(A) tongue (B) head (C) neck (D) tooth
- (7) What's this? (A picture of a head is given.)
It's a _____. (A) foot *(B) head (C) finger (D) hand
- (8) What are these? (A picture of legs is given.)
They are _____. (A) feet (B) eyes *(C) legs (D) fingers
- (9) What are these? (A picture of teeth is given.)
They are _____. (A) eyes *(B) teeth (C) ears (D) legs
- (10) What are these? (A picture of lips is given.)
They are _____. (A) feet (B) ears (C) fingers *(D) lips

Ex. 2: Home life (Category 2)

For a beginning student of English, it is important to learn some basic words about familiar objects at home. The following items are mainly about the functions of such objects.

- (1) A ____ is for drinking water. (A picture of a cup is given.)
(A) desk (B) dish (C) chair *(D) cup
- (2) A ____ is for telling time. (A picture of a clock is given.)
(A) key (B) lamp *(C) clock (D) fork
- (3) A ____ is for cutting food. (A picture of a knife is given.)
(A) table *(B) knife (C) bed (D) glass
- (4) A ____ is for reading books. (A picture of desk with a book on it)
(A) table (B) key *(C) desk (D) chair
- (5) A ____ is for giving light. (A picture of a lamp above a desk)
(A) bed (B) cup (C) sofa *(D) lamp
- (6) A ____ is for you to sit on. (A picture of a chair is given.)
*(A) chair (B) home (C) key (D) dish
- (7) A ____ is for you to live in. (A picture of a house is given.)
(A) spoon *(B) house (C) bed (D) clock
- (8) You eat with a _____. (A picture of a fork is given.)
(A) soap (B) table *(C) fork (D) cup
- (9) You open a door with a _____. (A picture of a key is given.)
(A) glass (B) sofa (C) knife *(D) key

- (10) You sleep in a _____. (A picture of a bed is given.)
(A) dish (B) desk *(C) bed (D) table

Ex. 3: Colors (Category 19)

Colors are important words for the very beginners in learning English.
They should learn to identify the colors of familiar objects.

- (1) What color is the apple? (A picture of a red apple)
It's _____. (A) black *(B) red (C) yellow (D) pink
- (2) What color is the book? (A picture of a blue book)
It's _____. (A) green (B) white *(C) blue (D) orange
- (3) What color is the car? (A picture of a pink car)
It's _____. (A) gray (B) brown *(C) pink (D) purple
- (4) What color is the flower? (A picture of a purple flower)
It's _____. (A) blue (B) white (C) red *(D) purple
- (5) What color is the fish? (A picture of an orange fish)
It's _____. (A) pink *(B) orange (C) black (D) blue
- (6) What color is the leaf? (A picture of a green leaf)
It's _____. (A) gray (B) yellow *(C) green (D) red
- (7) What color is the cake? (A picture of a brown cake is given.)
It's _____. *(A) brown (B) black (C) yellow (D) orange
- (8) What color is the cup? (A picture of a white cup)
It's _____. (A) gray *(B) white (C) green (D) pink
- (9) What color is the door? (A picture of a yellow door.)
It's _____. (A) blue (B) red (C) purple *(D) yellow
- (10) What color is the dog? (A picture of a black dog)
It's _____. (A) yellow (B) brown *(C) black (D) brown

B. Level 2 English Vocabulary Exercises (1,000 words)

Ex. 1: Senses and actions of body parts (Category 7)

Senses and actions of body parts are one's most immediate experiences and they are shared by English and Chinese, so Chinese speakers will find them quite easy to grasp.

- (1) The air smells clean and _____.
(A) sour *(B) sweet (C) noisy (D) loud
- (2) This place is very _____.

- (A) tasty (B) light (C) heavy *(D) quiet
- (3) A _____ person cannot see.
(A) deaf (B) loud *(C) blind (D) sweet
- (4) The room with many children in it is very _____.
(A) dry *(B) noisy (C) sleepy (D) juicy
- (5) A big dictionary is very _____.
*(A) heavy (B) light (C) loud (D) tasty
- (6) John can _____ very high.
*(A) jump (B) jog (C) dance (D) run
- (7) This dog often _____ people. You had better stay away from it.
(A) wakes (B) carries *(C) bites (D) kicks
- (8) Paul _____ TV every day.
(A) catches *(B) watches (C) notices (D) tastes
- (9) He _____ a bag on his back.
(A) smiled (B) caught (C) jogged *(D) carried
- (10) The monkey has _____ up the tree.
*(A) climbed (B) laughed (C) smiled (D) kicked

Ex. 2: Clothing, accessories and cosmetics (Category 12)

Clothing, accessories or cosmetics are what everyone uses every day, so they constitute an important semantic category in one's daily life.

- (1) A _____ keeps you warm in winter.
(A) T-shirt (B) bag *(C) sweater (D) watch
- (2) A _____ is usually worn outside a shirt.
(A) cap (B) glove (C) hat *(D) jacket
- (3) _____ are usually blue.
(A) Coats *(B) Jeans (C) T-shirts (D) Skirts
- (4) Men usually don't wear _____.
*(A) skirts (B) sweaters (C) jackets (D) pants
- (5) You wear _____ to keep your hands warm. .
(A) caps (B) jeans (C) trousers *(D) gloves
- (6) A _____ is good for warm days.
(A) sweater (B) coat *(C) T-shirt (D) jacket
- (7) A _____ is used for carrying things.
(A) hat (B) glove (C) skirt *(D) bag
- (8) My _____ keeps good time.
(A) cap *(B) watch (C) hat (D) coat

- (9) Dresses, trousers and shirts are all _____.
 *(A) clothes (B) sweaters (C) jackets (D) jeans
- (10) A _____ is for covering your head.
 (A) glove (B) bag *(C) cap (D) watch

Ex. 3: The natural environment (Category 14)

- (1) Many people like to come to this _____ for swimming.
 *(A) beach (B) earth (C) star (D) land
- (2) There are many boats in this _____.
 (A) ground (B) hill *(C) river (D) desert
- (3) There are many _____ in the night sky.
 (A) oceans (B) islands (C) lakes *(D) stars
- (4) Many people live on the _____ of Taiwan.
 (A) earth *(B) island (C) river (D) beach
- (5) A _____ has a lot of dry sand.
 *(A) desert (B) star (C) lake (D) land
- (6) There are many animals in the _____.
 (A) moon (B) river *(C) hill (D) lake
- (7) This _____ has many kinds of fish.
 (A) land *(B) ocean (C) ground (D) desert
- (8) The _____ has several oceans.
 (A) beach (B) hill (C) lake *(D) earth
- (9) This tree's roots spread far below the _____.
 (A) star (B) sea *(C) ground (D) land
- (10) The _____ includes lands, rivers, and oceans.
 (A) desert *(B) environment (C) island (D) mountain

E. Level 5 English Vocabulary Exercises (6,480 words)

For the following more abstract and advanced semantic categories, they have more synonyms, antonyms and polysemes, which have fine shades of meaning and are more difficult for students to acquire.

Ex. 1: Fortune and vicissitudes (Category 44)

- (1) It was quite a _____ that I met Paul at the train station.
 *(A) coincidence (B) handicap (C) catastrophe (D) substitution
- (2) There are no feasible _____ to this plan.
 (A) incidents (B) hazards *(C) alternatives (D) hardships
- (3) Their baseball team has suffered a _____ in losing a game to the

Redsocks.

- (A) stake (B) destiny (C) dilemma *(D) setback
- (4) The _____ of these poverty-stricken people deserves our sympathy.
(A) option *(B) plight (C) task (D) venture
- (5) After the earthquake, many families were in _____.
(A) random (B) fortune *(C) peril (D) challenge
- (6) Everyone has to learn to _____ the problems s/he encounters.
(A) recur *(B) tackle (C) substitute (D) decide
- (7) He _____ heart surgery last week.
(A) undertook (B) underestimated (C) undercut *(D) underwent
- (8) The _____ of the financial crisis demands the government's immediate actions.
*(A) urgency (B) handicap (C) venture (D) survival
- (9) We are faced with the _____ of choosing between two bad solutions.
(A) lottery (B) substitution *(C) dilemma (D) encounter
- (10) It is _____ that our government must protect the environment.
(A) probable *(B) inevitable (C) possible (D) predictable

Ex. 2: Social relations and services (Category 45)

- (1) David is a _____ person; he often has many friends around him.
(A) subordinate (B) conventional *(C) sociable (D) familiar
- (2) The mayor should be held _____ for his decisions.
*(A) accountable (B) fashionable (C) agreeable (D) permissible
- (3) My friend is very _____; he frequently entertains guests at home.
(A) receptive (B) obliged (C) collective *(D) hospitable
- (4) Many countries have formed _____ to protect their own interests.
*(A) alliances (B) associations (C) assurances (D) acquaintances
- (5) It is my _____ to make you understand this complicated situation.
(A) permission *(B) obligation (C) negotiation (D) intervention
- (6) Bicycling is in _____ now in many countries for saving energy.
(A) faction (B) service (C) league *(D) vogue
- (7) Only _____ can help us overcome these political problems.
(A) accordance (B) familiarity *(C) solidarity (D) intimacy
- (8) He has lived in many countries and appears to be very _____.
(A) cooperative *(B) cosmopolitan (C) responsive (D) memorable
- (9) This library has been constructed to _____ the late president.
*(A) commemorate (B) coordinate (C) negotiate (D) imitate
- (10) The two quarreling companies have eventually agreed to _____ their

differences.

(A) contribute (B) alienate (C) intervene *(D) reconcile

Ex. 3: Cultural values (Category 47)

- (1) Taking exercise is _____ to your health.
(A) valiant *(B) beneficial (C) authentic (D) competent
- (2) We should have _____ for the miserable people.
(A) expertise (B) validity *(C) compassion (D) integrity
- (3) This newspaper has lost its _____ because of its untruthful reports.
(A) ingenuity (B) versatility (C) charity *(D) credibility
- (4) Diligence is _____ for success.
(A) credible *(B) indispensable (C) charitable (D) remarkable
- (5) I need a _____ car because I don't drive well.
*(A) sturdy (B) serene (C) secure (D) solemn
- (6) Standing here, we can have a _____ view of the mountain.
(A) worthwhile (B) valuable (C) rigorous *(D) spectacular
- (7) Despite his _____ efforts, he didn't succeed in defeating his opponent in the tennis match.
(A) versatile (B) vital *(C) valiant (D) valid
- (8) A huge crowd turned out to pay _____ to their beloved leader at his funeral.
*(A) tribute (B) prestige (C) fidelity (D) glamor
- (9) A successful businessman must always take the _____ to explore the market.
(A) breakthrough *(B) initiative (C) superiority (D) validity
- (10) This preserved forest is the last _____ for wild animals.
(A) liberation (B) donation (C) security *(D) sanctuary

5. The Problems of Hypernyms, Synonyms, Antonyms, and Polysemes

Because English semantic categories are quite similar to those of Chinese, hypernyms representing semantic categories are also similar and generally subsume similar hyponyms. The following item from Level 2, Ex. 2, demonstrates such semantic relationships:

- (9) Dresses, trousers and shirts are all _____.
*(A) clothes (B) sweaters (C) jackets (D) jeans

“Clothes” is the hypernym and the hyponyms “dresses,” “trousers” and “shirts” are subsumed under it, therefore “clothes” is the correct answer. But the other options “(B) sweaters,” “(C) jackets” and “(D) jeans”, just like the words “dresses,” “trousers” and “shirts” in the sentence, are equally hyponyms of “clothes,” so any of them cannot be the correct answer. Because Chinese has exactly the same semantic relationships among the counterparts of these words, this item poses no problems for Chinese students.

The same with the following item from Level 2, Ex. 3:

- (10) The _____ includes lands, rivers, and oceans.
(A) desert *(B) environment (C) island (D) mountain

Since “the environment” is the hypernym subsuming the hyponyms “lands,” “rivers” and “oceans,” it is the correct answer. The other options “(A) desert,” “(C) island” and “(D) mountain” are equally the hyponyms of “the environment,” so they cannot be the hypernyms of “lands,” “rivers” and “oceans.” The same with their Chinese counterparts.

English synonyms may pose difficulty to Chinese students because their collocations are often not similar to the collocations of their Chinese counterparts. Observe the following item from Level 2, Ex. 1:

- (9) This tree’s roots spread far below the _____.
(A) star (B) sea *(C) ground (D) land

The correct answer to the above item is (C) ground, which is synonymous with (D) land, and both of them are translated into the same Chinese word, but the English collocations of these two synonyms are quite different from those of their Chinese counterparts. English synonyms like this may cause difficulty to Chinese students.

Another example is from Level 5, Ex. 1:

- (10) It is _____ that our government must protect the environment.
(A) probable *(B) inevitable (C) possible (D) predictable

In the above item, the correct answer is “(B) inevitable,” because it correlates with the emphatic auxiliary “must.” The other options “(A) probable,” “(C) possible” and “(D) predictable” all have something to do with chance and probability and are too some extent synonymous, but these three words are not as strong as “inevitable,” and hence are incompatible with the emphatic auxiliary “must” and are incorrect.

English antonyms seem to have quite similar Chinese counterparts, so they are quite easy for Chinese students to grasp. Examine the following item from Level 2, Ex. 2:

- (5) A big dictionary is very heavy.
*(A) heavy (B) light (C) loud (D) tasty

Since “heavy” is often associated with a big dictionary, it is the correct answer, and its antonym “light” is certainly improper to describe the weight of such a big dictionary. Chinese has exactly the counterparts of this pair of antonyms, so it is quite easy for Chinese students to get hold of the correct answer.

While most English and Chinese words in the same semantic category under the same hypernym share the similar cognitive domain, but there are some English words which are polysemous in ways different their Chinese counterparts and appear in collocations dissimilar to their Chinese counterparts. Observe the following item from Level 2, Exercise 1:

- (1) The air smells clean and _____.
(A) sour *(B) sweet (C) noisy (D) loud

The English word “sweet” is polysemous: it may refer to the sweetness of sugar or candy, or it may indicate the freshness of air, water or food. For the second sense, it is the correct answer in this item. But its Chinese counterpart has only the first sense of sweetness of sugar or candy, and does not have the second sense. Because the above item has to do with the freshness of air, which the Chinese counterpart of “fresh” does not have, it might be more difficult for Chinese students.

6. Conclusions

- (1) English vocabulary can be learned by Chinese speakers more efficiently through the semantic categories for two reasons: (a) the 50 semantic categories of English vocabulary represent similar cognitive domains of knowledge representation in English and Chinese, so Chinese speakers will find them familiar and easy to learn; (b) English vocabulary exercises written on the basis of these 50 semantic categories are more balanced and systematic.
- (2) Some English words which are synonymous (like “ground” and “land”) but with quite different collocations do not have their exact counterparts in Chinese, so they may cause difficulty to Chinese students in learning them.

- (3) Moreover, some English words are polysemous, which do not have the exact counterparts in Chinese, so such English polysemous words may also pose problems for Chinese students to learn them.
- (4) English vocabulary exercises written on the basis of semantic categories must be constrained by the levels lest some exercises be too difficult for the students of lower levels.
- (5) The above English vocabulary exercises do not include function words, which have more abstract functions and are difficult to determine their levels. They will be dealt with in syntactic exercises.

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