

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

Part I

by Patrick T. Randolph

University of Nebraska-Lincoln

I. Introduction



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

—Hamlet (Act 3, Scene II)

This article will look specifically at the Head-to-Toe Method’s second category of tools—the language-based components. These components will be divided into two parts: In this installment, we will look at words from a new perspective, examine effective pronunciation methods, consider how to effectively define lexical items, and address their parts of speech. Part II will look at verbpathy, emotions, register, word parts, collocations, and sentence building.

In Shakespeare’s Hamlet, the protagonist tells his performers to act and represent the truth, to mirror what is real:

Suit the action to the word, the word to the action, with this special observance that you o’erstep not the modesty of nature...hold, as ‘twere, the mirror up to nature; to show virtue her own feature, scorn her own image, and the very age and body of the time his form and pressure.

(Act III, Scene II, Lines 18-25)

I would like to play with this idea of careful representation, and ask the reader to look closely at words. Instead of accepting the conventional idea (see Saussure, 1998) of words being arbitrary (more on this below), I would like us to hold a mirror up to words, think about, and

observe what they really are. As a teacher of vocabulary, I'd like to offer the suggestion that we "suit the action to the word, the word to the action" and walk hand in hand with lexical items to see, feel, and understand the life they hold within.

II. The Language-Based Components



The language-based components, at first glance, may appear to be the most conventional tools of the Head-to-Toe Method, because they include definitions, pronunciation, and collocations. However, they also deal with looking at words as people and probing into the verbpthy of words and our emotional associations with lexical items. As mentioned above, I will urge the reader to think outside the box, and, in doing so, help teach vocabulary in a way that makes words come to life.

I should also like the reader to note that, as was the case in [the previous article that looked at body-based components](#), not all the language-based components are necessary to teach each lexical item. For example, teaching affixes and roots is not always necessary. On the other hand, teaching verbpthy and helping elicit the emotional connections, or defining the terms and working with the pronunciation are crucial tools needed for each term. This language-based category, like the method itself, emphasizes using what is needed *at the moment*, and what is needed to help the students learn, retain, and use the vocabulary terms. I will now survey the first four tools of the language-based components.

1. Understanding Words as Friends: Personalizing English Vocabulary



At the beginning of each semester, I ask my students not to look at words merely as parts of a language or symbols of something, but rather as living, breathing, feeling beings—I ask them to look at words as people, and, if possible, as friends.

I realize that this is a highly unconventional request for two common reasons. First, we are often told that language is arbitrary, and there is no real relation between the meaning of a lexical item and its sound (Saussure, 1998). Second, when scholars and teacher trainers write books on vocabulary, they all ask the same question—What does it mean to know a word?—and they all give the same or similar answers. Folse (2004) tells us that knowing a word entails knowing its multiple meanings, its connotation, spelling, pronunciation, part of speech, frequency, usage, and collocations. Thornbury (2002) emphasizes knowing its form, meaning, and use. While these are, to be sure, important, I feel they miss the mark on what it is to truly know a word.

I think to really know a word, we need to hold a mirror up to it, see what’s there; and most important, we need to play with it (Randolph, 2014). For in playing with a word, phrase, or idiom, we learn how a term works. Moreover, this is really how we acquire our native language. That is, we learn through playing with words, manipulating their meanings and uses, and ultimately becoming familiar with them by feeling their meanings, their sounds, and yes, by befriending them (Randolph, 2009).

When we become friends with someone, it usually starts with seeing them or hearing their voice; that is to say, our initial contact is based on perception. We might walk the same route to work or frequent the same grocery store. The next time we meet, there is the state of recognition, and we might even exchange a few words. The next level of this blossoming friendship might include some longer, friendly chats, and we may even set up a place to meet and get to know one another more. This “getting to know” phase ushers in a sense of comfort. When we meet, we might discuss topics based on previously learned information. The more we meet, the more comfortable we become. This deeper understanding of each other develops our intuitive feel for the friendship, and soon a sense of love and ownership of the friendship unfolds, and we become responsible for each other (Randolph, 2014).

I have argued that his natural course of developing a friendship is very similar to “getting to know” a lexical item (Randolph, 2009; Randolph, 2014). First, you perceive the term, then you later recognize it, and within time start to understand it (i.e., its use, register, and connotations.) We gradually learn the word, develop an ownership of it, and nurture a sense of responsibility in terms of use. We may even come to love it at a certain level. Not all words can become “friends,” but many can, at least, become acquaintances.

Once we look at a lexical item as a friend, the desire to deepen our understanding grows, and the ability to play with words expands and opens up possibilities to take risks and create unique thoughts. This, then, is the first language-based component of the method—the idea that teachers ought to help their students look at words as friends, or as living entities with whom we can have a dynamic relationship. The elements that follow will assist in this process.

2. Pronunciation & Mindfulness: Feeling the Sound and Soul of Words



One of the fundamental features of the Head-to-Toe Method rests on the idea that it tries to recreate the most natural way we acquire lexical “friends.” This includes something as simple—or as challenging—as the pronunciation component.

When introducing the pronunciation of lexical items, I like to first relax my students’ minds by getting them to go through a short period of mindfulness. They take a deep breath, relax—if they can—and visualize a positive moment or listen to their present state of mind (Randolph, 2017). This gets them ready to focus and become more aware of themselves as language learners.

Let us now take a look at the various ways I treat the pronunciation of words. To help students start to understand a word’s meaning through pronunciation, I have set up three specific categories that vary in degree from easy to difficult. These are as follows:

(1) words from which students can feel and infer the meanings from the sounds (e.g., blissful, stress, glide, harmonious);

(2) words that are more difficult to feel and infer the meanings from the sounds (e.g., meticulous, tip, convoluted, murky);

(3) words that are difficult, if not impossible, to feel and infer the meanings from the sounds (e.g., principle, legitimate, factor, multiply).

The first category lends itself to a strong visceral or intuitive connection with the word and its sound. With respect to this category, I want my students to directly “feel” the relation to the sound of the word and predict its meaning based on how the dynamics of the sound go through their vocal chords and make them feel. To help set the stage for this, I have them close their eyes and repeat the word, paying very close attention to the sound. It should be noted that this is done before we set out to define the term.

Let’s take a look at an example from the first category. When I teach the word “blissful,” I have the students repeat it a minimum of four to five times. This word’s sound is soothing, and students are able to feel the gentle power of its melody. When they are asked what they think it means, they often say, “I don’t know the exact meaning, but it makes me feel peaceful, relaxed, or joyful.” One student claimed there was a “happy-peacefulness” in her chest. As we can see, the answers are either right on the mark or not far from it.

The second category is a little more difficult, but there is a visceral reaction nonetheless that gets the students close to the term’s meaning. Let’s take “meticulous” as our example. When we learn this term through our pronunciation practice, students say it makes them feel “strict,” “orderly,” “a little stressed,” “serious,” and “attentive.” While the exact definition of “paying close or careful attention to details” is not given, the students are in the general ballpark. For one *is* serious, attentive, and orderly when being meticulous. Moreover, when we do define the term, the students “feel closer” to the meaning on a sensory level, and the definition seems to mean more to them. This ties into the ideas of embodied cognition and embodied semantics discussed in the last article on body-based components; that is, “our language faculty,” according to Lisa Aziz-Zadeh, is “intrinsically tied to the flesh” (as cited in Iacoboni, 2009, p. 95).

The third category represents words like “principle,” “legitimate,” “factor,” and “multiply.” These are hard to “feel” or “guess,” but I still go through the same pronunciation practice. With these “difficult” terms, I’ve found it effective to use the gestures and facial expressions discussed in the previous article, as a way to help my students understand or come closer to an intuitive feeling for the terms.

Before closing this point, I’d like to say a word about category three or difficult words in general. In Thornbury’s book, *How to Teach Vocabulary*, he claims “[r]esearch shows that words that are difficult to pronounce are more difficult to learn” (2002, p. 27). While this may be true to a certain degree, I have two techniques that may help guide teachers to tame these difficult-to-pronounce and -learn terms. First, to help students pronounce challenging terms, I have found it best to have them first “see” how to pronounce a term and then close their eyes and try to pronounce the word again. The first step, then, is for them “to see” how it is pronounced; for example, the θ , or the *voiceless dental fricative*, needs a tongue and dental connection. Once they see how it is pronounced, then they turn to use their auditory faculties and pronounce the

word. So, I have students close their eyes and listen to me say the word. We do this together a few times until they say it correctly.

Second, if the word is long, I use the “end first technique.” That is, I have the students pronounce the last syllable first and move backwards until the word is successfully pronounced. That way, they get to practice pronouncing the whole word in segments in an easy and fluid way. So, for example, if we are trying to pronounce the word *collaborative*, we would start with “tive” and then move to “rative,” and go through each syllable in the reverse order. These, then, are two techniques I’ve found that help combat the challenging pronunciation of difficult terms.

3. Definitions: Eliciting the Meaning of Words



Defining lexical items is crucial, but *how* that is accomplished is perhaps the most important. The Head-to-Toe Method is very sensitive to the fact that the encoding stage—the very moment our brain’s neurons are exposed to and decide to begin to learn something—is extremely significant. If the brain is alert, aroused, and ready to learn, then the encoding will be successful (Medina, 2009).

I start the definition process by giving my students a handout with a few of the Head-to-Toe components on it and the lexical terms with one or two corresponding examples for each term. I, then, write the same terms and examples on the whiteboard. For the sake of simplicity, I will give one term and its example sentences below to illustrate what the students receive.

- come up with:** _____
- Akiko **came up with** a great topic for her essay.
 - Javier always **comes up with** new ways to learn vocabulary.

In addition to the examples on the board and on the handout, which include using the students’ names for added interest, I spontaneously create and give the students two or three more examples to help them guess or infer the meaning of the term (Randolph, 2016).

I am aware that Folse (2004), in his book, *Vocabulary Myths*, makes the claim that guessing the meanings of lexical items from context is not effective, especially for ELLs. I, however, believe that if the examples are helpful, emotional, motivating, personal, and well crafted, then the meaning can be guessed from the context. I spent the first two years of my six-year stay in Japan guessing meaning of words from context, and it helped me acquire a *genuine* feel for the words and their connotations. In sum, I believe students can learn a great deal from actively using clues to infer the meaning from a certain context.

I'd like to point out that the classroom is not an isolated environment where students must fend for themselves; there is plenty of help and support from the teacher; that is, I do help elicit the definitions by providing them with examples and asking questions about the examples. The key factor here is that I do not simply give the definitions, the students come up with these on their own with my guided assistance.

I have found that the Socratic method of eliciting the definitions is a very powerful tool (Randolph, 2016), for students take ownership of the definitions, and it gets them immediately involved with the encoding process. And, as mentioned above, if there is immediate involvement and interest in the encoding stage, then more effective learning will take place.

Before moving to our next tool, I'd like to address one more step in the defining process. Once the students are comfortable with the meaning of a term, I ask them to paraphrase it by developing their own definition. The students' paraphrased definitions tend to be longer, but they help personalize the term and create that "friendship" with the lexical item.

I do this at the end of the defining process so that they have had time to digest the meaning and feel comfortable with the class-generated definition. The confidence, then, that is nurtured helps produce a sense of heightened creativity, which adds to that personal element of understanding and owning the term.

4. Parts of Speech: Determining a Word's Psychology



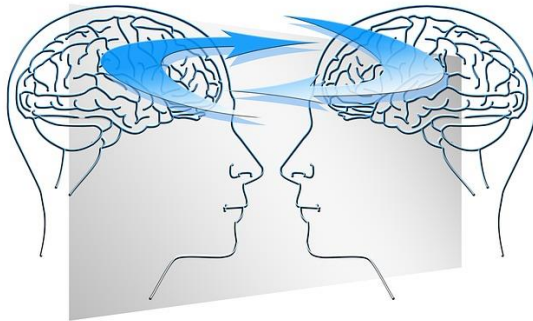
Knowing the part of speech of a term is vital, for it really is the term's psychological identity; and how it functions with its word peers in a sentence depends on its own

characteristic of being a noun, verb, adjective, adverb, pronoun, determiner, conjunction, or interjection.

I always cover the part of speech for each term immediately after we formulate the definition, because it is so central to the actual use of the term. And, just as I elicit the definitions from the students, I also elicit the part of speech for each term. As we can now see, the teacher's role in using the Head-to-Toe Method is really "elicitor-in-chief," for the majority of the components are produced by the students. As touched on above, the more they contribute to both the class and the understanding of each term, the more ownership they develop in the learning process.

One significant teaching point to note while covering the part of speech for each term is "less is best." So, if a term has multiple parts of speech (e.g., "calm" has an adjective, noun, adverb, and verb form in its "word family"), I have found it best to cover just one part of speech for each term if I am teaching a number of vocabulary items. I usually teach three new terms per lesson and focus on only one part of speech for each one. Giving more than one part of speech has a tendency to confuse the learners. Advanced ELLs may be able to handle learning more than one part of speech at a time, but even so, I would proceed with care and caution. In short, teachers should use their own discretion to teach what is appropriate for their respective classes.

Concluding Remarks



If we "hold a mirror up to nature," we can get a more accurate reading of what words are, and we can develop a sincere feeling of the genuine nature of words. The first four language-based components—(1) looking at words as friends; (2) using our intuition and sensory intelligence to understand words through pronunciation; (3) eliciting the definitions and (4) assigning the parts of speech to terms—can help teachers "suit the action to the word, the word to the action" and "hold, as 'twere, the mirror up to nature." In doing so, teachers can start to see words as dynamic and unique beings that help make our world a place of endless inquiry and joyous learning, and most important, these new ideas will help our students begin to find a passion and interest in learning about the intriguing complexities of English lexical items.

References

Folse, K. S. (2004). *Vocabulary myths*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.

Iacoboni, M. (2009). *Mirroring people: The science of empathy and how we connect with others*. New York, NY: Picador.

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. (2014). Synesthesia's magic: Tell me about the personality of your word. *Selected Proceedings of the 2014 Michigan Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Language Conference*.

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. Retrieved from <http://minnetesoljournal.org/spring-2016/introducing-randolphs-head-to-toe-method-of-associations-for-vocabulary-acquisition-to-break-the-ebbinghaus-curse>

Randolph, P. T. (2017). Tapping into discoveries from neuroscience to help ELLs in the prewriting process. *CATESOL News* (49) 2.

Saussure, F. (1998). *Course in general linguistics* (R. Harris, Trans.). Peru, IL: Open Court Publishing Company.

Thornbury, S. (2002). *How to teach vocabulary*. Essex, England: Pearson Education.

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

PATRICK T. RANDOLPH was recently awarded the "Best of the TESOL Affiliates" for his presentation on vocabulary pedagogy. 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 except the "Word Man" photo on page 3 are from www.pixabay.com. The source of the page 3 photo is Google Images. All images are used with permission.

