

At the University of Cyprus

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CYPRUS BRANCH



7th

IATEFL

CONFERENCE

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ENGLISH AS A FOREIGN
LANGUAGE

Additional Papers

Synonymy : R. I. P.

Glenn Fulcher

Providing students with a synonym is possibly the most common method of explaining unknown lexical items. It is also arguably the most effective technique in making student production unnatural.

"Dead" means "deceased" or "departed" I can hear a teacher say. Perhaps adding "not alive" for good measure. A host of eager learners jot down the explanation with, in some cases, the Greek translation "nekros". A more careful teacher may go on to point out that the word is an adjective, and that it can be a modifier ("dead person") or subject complement ("the person is dead"). It could also be used as a noun ("the dead") referring to fatalities.

So far, so good. Our thoughtful teacher has gone a little beyond the provision of a lexical item to explain the unknown item by giving some grammatical information. In the next piece of work produced by the student, a man who has just been killed is referred to as "the dead". "But you can't do that..." explains the teacher. "But you can say "the deceased". You could also say "the dead man". "The student, being fairly bright, asks whether she can say "the deceased man" or "the departed man". The teacher explains that there is an expression "the faithfully departed", after which the student asks if she can have "the faithfully deceased". Who said that vocabulary was a (dead/deceased/departed) subject?

The problem with the concept of synonymy does not stop here. A task can be dead easy, and a person dead drunk. You come across signs saying "DEAD SLOW!" (What is a "slow" and what did it die of?). You can be dead to the world when sleeping heavily, half dead if you're fairly ill, dead beat if you're tired, and dead from the neck up if you're stupid. You can be dead right or dead wrong, you can hit dead centre and be dead on time. There can be dead silence in a library, but of course silence can never be dead!

Let's put some more nails in the coffin of synonymy. A nightspot can be dead on week-days. A rather informal expression common to spoken English. In written English we would probably say it was "quiet" during the week. "Lifeless" carries a pejorative overtone. Context does seem to play a morbid role. In the dead of night we might contemplate more idiomatic phrases. Does a friend "pass away" or "kick the bucket"? We also have phrases such as dead end, a dead heat and dead wood. If we sit and think about it long enough our legs may even go dead!

Is any plan to teach vocabulary using synonymy as a major technique destined to be a dead duck? Providing synonyms is a quick, dirty method of teaching vocabulary. We should not be dead to the arguments or the examples.

Like the Munchkins in the Wizard of Oz, we may proclaim the demise of the wicked witch of synonymy, "...but we've got to verify it legally to see if she is morally, spiritually, physically, positively, absolutely, undeniably and reliably dead." Try the following test items:

1. And when war is done and youth stone I'd toddle safely home and die - in bed.

(Sassoon, Base Details)

- (a) deceased
- (b) dead
- (c) departed
- (d) tired

2. You know, of course, that the Tasmanians, who never committed adultery, are now
(Somerset Maugham, *The Bread-Winner*)

- (a) extinct
- (b) dead
- (c) lifeless
- (e) fatalities

3. Kennedy was a great statesman and will be a great loss to international diplomacy. He is but not forgotten.
(Anon.)

- (a) obsolete
- (b) extinct
- (c) dead
- (e) gone

4. Consistency is contrary to nature, contrary to life. The only completely consistent people are the
(Huxley, *Do What You Will*)

- (a) inanimate
- (b) departed
- (c) deceased
- (d) dead

Synonyms as a key teaching technique? Over my dead body. I wouldn't be seen dead without my collocation grids, spray charts, examples of syntactic restrictions, and contextual restraints.

I have attempted to (a) murder, (b) exterminate, (c) slaughter, (d) do in, (e) assassinate, (f) slay, (g) kill, (h) terminate, (i) massacre the ill-founded concept of synonymy. All that exists is similarity of meaning. I concur with the Munchkin coroner: "I've thoroughly examined her, and she's not only merely dead, she's really most sincerely dead."