

More than Words: A Systematic Review on the Contributions of Synonymy in Language Learning

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Abstract

The use of synonyms in language learning offers numerous benefits, including vocabulary expansion, contextual understanding, and language variety. This systematic literature review gives birth to the contributions of synonymy in language acquisition based on a number of researches that have been published in a number of publications and are accessible in a number of online databases. It focuses explicitly on examining the different uses of synonymy and its effect on acquiring a language. The data which was plotted on the repertory grid were analyzed to identify the gaps in the research conducted. The findings of the study established five (5) significant roles synonymy holds in language acquisition: word substitution, sense, and context relation, register identification, repetition avoidance, and language embellishment. The results of this study provide English teachers with a deeper insight into the impact of synonymy on students' language acquisition. Consequently, this study allows teachers to reflect with more excellent knowledge of the main benefits involved in the use of synonyms in teaching/learning English. Besides, the knowledge of synonyms instills confidence in language learners. It allows them to communicate more precisely and flexibly, leading to increased fluency and proficiency in the language. Thus, to make the most of synonymy in language learning, learners should pay attention to the subtle differences between synonyms, learn their appropriate usage in different contexts, and practice incorporating them into their active vocabulary., and practice incorporating them into their active vocabulary.

Keywords: language learning, systematic literature review, synonymy

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1. Introduction

Language learning involves the acquisition and mastery of various aspects of a target language, including vocabulary. Synonyms, which are words with similar meanings, play a crucial role in expanding learners' vocabulary and enhancing their language proficiency.

Synonymy in a language is viewed as a basic concept of lexicology. Most academics are likely to highlight the idea of synonyms in their study when examining the semantic relationships between words. (Harley, 2006) years ago. Kazaal (2019) defined synonyms as words or phrases that are in the same language. These are words that have the same meaning, a universal linguistic phenomenon that occurs in the linguistic system of language (Krebt, 2017; Afghari & Khayatan, 2017).

Synonyms are a crucial subject to understand when learning English. Synonyms are an important concept for English language learners to understand and master. It is an element in learning a second language which helps in developing the writing skills and in improving the vocabulary of students. In fact, students recognize the significance of synonymy, vocabulary in general, to their language learning. Schmitt (2010) claimed that learners carry around dictionaries and not grammar books.

Though considered important in understanding a language, the concept of synonymy in teaching vocabulary is found difficult to grasp. Its value of substitution still depends on how well a synonymous word preserves semantic meaning, as any attrition in meaning can lead to problems with collocation and sense. Additionally, the meaning, style, or connotation of what is being said or written must not alter as a result of the substitution of one term for another (Jackson & Amvela, 2000). Since any one of these can be used in this situation, it is up to the speaker or writer to decide which to choose.

In consonance with the effect of synonymy on learning a language, Higa (1963) found out that learning pairs of synonyms would take much more time to understand than learning pairs of unrelated words. Such investigation pointed out the confusion experienced by learners to words that are similar in meaning to words that do not have semantic links. It is based on the theory that learning and understanding words may be more challenging depending on how complex their semantic relationships are.

Thus, to understand synonymy, learners must need to realize the role, significance, and contribution of synonyms and be familiar with the concepts of connotation and denotation of the language being studied. Because few synonyms may be substituted in every context, a newly acquired synonym is likely to be used incorrectly without familiarizing denotative and connotative meanings. Once learners have acquired

familiarization of the meaning and usage of words with a known synonym, they may gain partial knowledge of its paradigmatic association, grammar, and syntagmatic association if they can link it with its synonym.

Studies on the contributions of synonymy were less observed in the field of research, the reason why most of the literature regarding its use and effects was dated more than five years ago. Therefore, taking into account this gap in the literature, the present study explores its uses of synonyms for learning English. This study provides English teachers with a deeper insight into the impact of synonymy on students' language acquisition. Consequently, this study will allow teachers to reflect with greater knowledge of the main benefits involved in the use of synonyms in teaching/learning English. Hence, this systematic analysis is conducted.

This study specifically focuses on examining the different uses of synonymy and its effect on acquiring a language. It intends to investigate the characteristics or nature of synonymy as a word-relation device and an instrument for comprehending the English language. It is very informative to know these characteristics and effects since most students rely on using synonyms to better understand learning modules sent by their respective teachers.

Furthermore, this review aims to explore the existing literature on the use of synonyms in language learning, examining their benefits, instructional strategies, and implications for learners.

2. Methodology

This study employed a systematic literature review method. A systematic literature review (often referred to as a systematic review) is a means of identifying, evaluating, and interpreting all available research relevant to a particular research question, topic area, or phenomenon of interest. Individual studies contributing to a systematic review are called primary studies; a systematic review is a form of secondary study (Kitchenham, 2007).

This systematic literature investigation focused on studies that discussed the contributions of synonymy in learning and understanding a language.

2.1 Research Data

To be able to meet the aims of this study, the search of multiple databases to locate related studies on synonymy and word relation was the first step. The search process was based on the eligibility criteria that were established before the process of retrieving research articles needed to start. The eligibility criteria specified which studies will be included and which will be excluded from the systematic review. The criteria used for including and excluding studies form the operational definition of the problem (Abrami, Cohen, & d' Apollonia, 1988), and they provide a clear guideline in the selection of research articles.

Table 1. Features of the Eligibility Criteria

Parameters	Inclusion Criteria	Exclusion Criteria
Types of Research	Primary research published in peer-reviewed journals and scientific papers	Book reviews, opinion pieces, literary reviews, policy documents
Results of the study	Research articles or scientific papers that dealt with synonymy.	Research articles or scientific papers which did not wholly discuss
Language	Research articles or scientific papers that primarily made use of English.	Research articles or scientific papers that did not make use of English.
Data Base	Google Scholar, EBSCO, ERIC, and other scholarly sites.	Databases not accessible to the researcher
Time Frame	Research articles or scientific papers on synonymy published from 2007-2021.	Research articles or scientific papers before 2007.

After ensuring that the research articles meet the said criteria, the quality of the papers was further evaluated for the selection of the final papers to be included in the review identified. The papers should have at least the generally accepted structure of a scientific paper sectioned as the introduction, methods, results/findings, and discussions (Sharp, 2002).

2.2 Treatment of the Data

A repertory grid was utilized to plot the details relevant to the research question of this study. The data on the grid were analyzed to be able to identify related themes.

3. Findings and Discussion

In the field of lexical semantics, synonymy is a type of sense relationship between words whereby these words have similar basic senses (Saeed, 2003 in Alanazi, 2017). These words usually differ in the sense that each one has an added implication or, rather, a connotation that is distinct from other words. Researchers have explored the role of synonyms in language teaching and learning, emphasizing their importance in vocabulary development, word choice, and language proficiency (Bahrani & Shahriari, 2019; Li & Zhang, 2010). Studies

have highlighted the use of synonyms in teaching strategies such as vocabulary expansion exercises, synonym-based activities, and the use of thesauri as reference tools (Yoshii & Flaitz, 2002; Gultom, 2017).

Moreover, in this study, the contributions of synonyms in learning English as a second language are presented in themes and further discussed. The data were elicited from an exhaustive investigation of related studies.

3.1 Word Substitution

Synonyms are decisive to the mastery of English at all levels of learning. One of their roles in language learning deals with serving as substitutes for words that share almost the same core meaning. In fact, Karakas (2019), in his study on exploring psycholinguistic difficulties in learning foreign language vocabulary in light of the English language, defined synonyms as words that substitute in a context for other words. Through substitution, learners are allowed to broaden their vocabulary and provide alternative words that convey similar meanings. By learning synonyms, learners can express themselves with more precision and variety, enhancing their overall language proficiency.

Further, the use of synonyms in English is a rather delicate matter, and therefore, when memorizing each new word, it is necessary to study as many examples as possible in which it is used.

"The criterion of synonymy is the coincidence of the volumes of meanings and the possibility of using the word for the name of all objects that make up the volume of the meaning of the word (a set of objects of the same class to which the given word is applicable as a name) (Abdul Khaeva et al., 2021).

Replacing a word with an equivalence can improve how ideas should be communicated. Here, the context helps learners to see the associations among the words (Karakas, 2020). Words are in many ways related to each other in terms of semantic relationship, and those relationships between words are better noticed in sentential contexts.

Moreover, in order to recognize lexical items as synonymous, they should not contrast with each other; that is, it is essential; for their constructiveness to be explicit (Krebt, 2017). This points out the important role of collocation as an important parameter in using synonyms:

"The important role of collocation is utilized to discriminate the meaning of near-synonyms, i.e., near-synonyms verbs 'tremble', 'shake', 'shiver', and 'shudder' are denoted to movement, but only one of them, which is the verb shiver can be applied with the adverbial with cold (Krebt, 2017)."

"If learners realize that an unknown word has a more frequent synonym, a transfer of knowledge may help to facilitate learning. If one considers low-frequency words such as lane, doze, and sob, thinking of words that would appear with them in context is quite easy despite the fact that they are relatively uncommon. This might be because they can be substituted into some of the common contexts in which their more frequent synonyms, street, sleep, and cry, occur (Webb, 2007)."

Knowledge of synonyms enhances learners' ability to adapt their language to different contexts. It allows them to use different words with similar meanings based on the formality, tone, or specific requirements of a situation. English is primarily a language of context (Abdul Khaeva, Madaminova, Baratova, & Mamadieva, 2021), and therefore, in each case, the concept of the word beautiful will require its own semantic and emotional coloring. Synonyms enable learners to choose the most appropriate word or phrase to convey their intended meaning. This helps them become more proficient in expressing their thoughts and ideas, as they have a wider range of options to choose from. For example, the concept of a beautiful man can be substituted by the word handsome. Classical beauty can be characterized by the words fine, while dazzling and breathtaking by the adjective stunning.

On the other hand, synonymy's value of substitution depends on how well the pair of words preserve their sense semantically. The substitution of a word for the other must not result in a change in the meaning, style, and connotation of what is being said or written (Jackson & Amvela, 2000). Since any one of these can be used in this situation, it is up to the speaker or writer to decide which context to choose.

What makes the studies of Abdul Khaeva (2021), Webb (2007), and Krebt (2017) interesting is the introduction to the importance of collocation and association, especially in learning synonyms. They emphasized the concept that students who had wider vocabularies would be able to acquire words more quickly than students with fewer vocabularies as a larger vocabulary would be helpful in the learning process.

3.2 Sense and Context Relation

Researchers have examined the acquisition of synonyms in second language learning, highlighting the challenges faced by learners in understanding and using synonyms accurately (Kim, 2016; Lee, 2011). Studies have emphasized the importance of explicit instruction, contextualized practice, and exposure to varied contexts for developing learners' synonym knowledge and usage (Bilal, 2018; Lee, 2013).

However, not all synonyms can be interchangeably in every context. There are certain terms that can only be used in a certain setting, and others are only suited to other contexts. Trudgill, 1990 and Jack & Amvela, 2000

cited in Phoocharoensil (2010), mentioned that some synonyms differ in terms of the connotations they express, and some are different in the regions in which they are used.

This type of synonym is coined as loose ones. Loose synonyms are words that are not interchangeable in the context of use. According to Phoocharoensil (2010), their differences lie in many factors. The slight but significant differences in meaning between synonyms could cause and make a big difference as well in writing. That is why it is important that teachers should point out these differences when teaching synonymy to language learners. Raising students' knowledge of the idea of loose synonyms in English will improve their comprehension of the relationship between sense and context, particularly when it comes to the fact that words differ in specific ways or senses of meaning and connotation.

Nasser (2021) concluded in his study on the difficulties of using synonyms that in order for learners to improve their vocabulary, teachers shall practice sense relations in teaching synonyms. Learners could build on their initial knowledge through the production of ideas or uses which are connected to lexical concepts. In reading, for example, synonymy enhances reading comprehension skills by exposing learners to different words and helping them understand synonyms used in various contexts. It enables learners to decipher the meaning of unknown words by drawing connections to familiar synonyms or related words they have encountered before.

Moreover, learning synonyms helps learners develop a deeper understanding of the subtle nuances and connotations associated with different words. This understanding of contextual variations allows learners to grasp the finer details of a language and use words appropriately in different situations.

Although two words may refer to the same thing or notion with the same referential meaning, these words could differ in the emotive or expressive meanings they convey (Finegan, 2007, cited in Phoocharoensil, 2010).

"For example, the verbs smile and sneer do share a common action of making one's mouth curve upwards. Nevertheless, a smile has a positive connotation as it is an act of expressing friendliness and happiness. On the other hand, the connotation of sneer is clearly negative. This word means "to smile or speak in a very unkind way that shows you have no respect for someone or something" (LDOCE, 2009, cited in Phoocharoensil, 2010).

Rohmatillah (2014) found difficulty in choosing the appropriate meaning of words as these sometimes have overlapping meanings.

"In this case, the student looks for the word in his mind and does not know the exact collocation. He tries to find the words that best fit the sentence semantically, so he tries to pick up the word which is closest in meaning. However, the choice could not be undoubtedly correct since the students randomly selected the word. If the choice of word is not correct, the whole meaning of the word may be distorted" (Rohmatillah, 2014).

Research has shown that synonyms can have subtle variations in meaning, usage, and appropriateness in different contexts, requiring learners to develop a nuanced understanding of their distinctions (Daskalovska & Gudeva, 2013; Martínez & Schmitt, 2012).

3.3 Register Identification

Synonyms provide learners with alternative ways to communicate their ideas. When faced with challenges in finding the right word, knowing synonyms allows learners to express themselves effectively, even if they can't recall the exact word they initially intended to use.

In the same vein, synonymy might be discriminated against by the impact of register. Register is any kind of variety that refers to a particular situation. That is, one uses different registers according to the different situations he is in. Hence, register is context-dependent.

For example, words like 'lady' and 'woman' are synonymous nouns in which they express the same meaning. However, 'woman' is neutral and used by every person, whereas 'lady' is more commonly used by the upper class (Thakur, 2001 in Krebt, 2017).

The example above presents the idea that synonyms help in changing the amount of formality or informality of a language. Knowing synonyms and how they can be used to compare in terms of formality could really be of great help in making clear registers. Not only will synonyms better suit the relatively informal or formal medium one is working in, but students may be pleased as well with the varied vocabulary used.

As regards the sample synonyms above, the degree of formality is estimated by dictionaries and the metalinguistic awareness of speakers in forums. Without any language data, it is hard to prove this. It is much easier, though still difficult, to characterize registers.

Moreover, the transfer of knowledge between synonyms may facilitate learning and, at the same time, may identify the appropriate register need in any particular situation. However, this transfer is more likely to take place in the latter phases of vocabulary development when learners have a larger vocabulary and are more likely to acquire an appropriate register of terms in a synonymy pair.

3.4 Repetition Avoidance

Synonyms provide learners with options to avoid repetitive language usage. Using a variety of words with similar meanings makes their speech or writing more engaging and avoids monotony. Khazaal (2019), in his investigation and analysis on using synonyms revealed that synonyms prevent someone from repeating the same word many times, which makes a speech boring and useless.

Therefore, it is no exaggeration to infer that fluency in speech and writing depends on the richness of one's vocabulary and utilization of synonymy. Synonyms are great tools to keep everyone from getting bored. Without enough knowledge of using synonymy, some bizarre circumlocutions and a lot of repetitions may arise. In writing, for example, repeating the same words a lot of times can make any writing dull or uninteresting. This only proves that synonyms enhance learners' writing skills. Allowing students to avoid repetition and vary their word choices leads to more engaging and expressive writing that captures the reader's attention.

Knowledge of synonyms contributes to the overall fluency of language learners. When learners have a wide range of synonyms at their disposal, they can speak or write more fluidly without getting stuck searching for the right word.

3.5 Language Embellishment

Knowing synonyms is essential when learning any language. It is through synonyms that one can experience various linguistic shades, significantly enrich vocabulary and speech, and speak more freely, more correctly, and more clearly for native speakers. Thus, it allows learners to express shades of meaning, emphasizing nuances or specific details that might be lost with a single word. This precision in word choice can help learners accurately and attractively convey their intended message.

This supports the benefits of using synonyms enumerated by Kazaal (2019). One of these is synonyms clarify texts and makes the language more attractive. It also helps to ignore boring texts. He emphasized that using synonyms in speech and writing gives a good impression that the mind is full of words which makes communication more colorful.

Through synonymy, one could make his writing more vivid and could make a more intriguing image in the mind of his readers. Webb (2007) indicated in his study that synonymy might facilitate vocabulary learning, which helps as well in expanding students' knowledge of words, thus, providing unlimited access to new information. It is through a larger vocabulary that one can prevent frustrating situations.

In fact, Soto et al. (2017) affirmed in their study that synonyms help students understand and increase their vocabulary significantly, which eventually improves their writing skills. This is also seconded by the study of Abdulkhaeva et al. (2021) on the importance of using synonyms in the English language. According to them, the monotony of presentation and repetition of the same lexemes are diluted when using synonymy.

Despite the fact that the lexical meaning of synonyms is very similar, each word still has its own connotation. Each word preserves language and fixes itself on different styles. By understanding how important it is to take into account the nuances of using synonymy, one could better characterize words differently. This could diversify and embellish language in any form of utterances.

Moreover, the difference between cognitive and emotive meanings cannot always be drawn, and in many cases, it is extremely difficult to maintain. Being able to have a good bank of lexis allows someone to choose words with greater precision. In other words, the more words students knew, the faster they could shape their thoughts. Each word opens a new pathway for thought and maintains a style. Hence, the more words one knows, the greater his ability is to focus on his own ideas and consider those of others.

4. Conclusion

Very little research has investigated the contributions of synonymy in language learning. In a classroom set-up, Teachers and students may be more motivated in the classroom to teach and learn terms that convey new knowledge than teaching and learning forms that convey information comparable to what students already know. However, learning the synonyms of known terms may be simpler than learning words without known synonyms due to the similarities between synonyms. Overlaps in collocation, associations, grammatical functions, and meaning and form between synonyms may help to facilitate language acquisition. The narrow interpretation of synonymy certainly deprives English teachers of a very useful pedagogical technique that may be used in the early stages of teaching.

The results of this study provide English teachers with a deeper insight into the impact of synonymy on students' language acquisition. Consequently, this study allows teachers to reflect with greater knowledge of the main benefits involved in the use of synonyms in teaching/learning English more than just teaching words.

Besides, the knowledge of synonyms instills confidence in language learners. It allows them to communicate more precisely and flexibly, leading to increased fluency and proficiency in the language. Thus, to make the most of synonymy in language learning, learners should pay attention to the subtle differences between synonyms, learn their appropriate usage in different contexts, and practice incorporating them into their active

vocabulary. By actively incorporating synonyms into their language learning process, learners can enhance their vocabulary, communication skills, and overall linguistic competence.

Overall, the literature on synonyms encompasses various aspects, including their role in language teaching and learning, lexical and semantic analyses, cognitive processes involved in synonym recognition, and their significance in second language acquisition. Further research continues to explore the complexities of synonyms and their implications for language learners and educators.

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