CHAPTER FIVE

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

5.1 Discussion

This part attempts to discuss the effects of the iconic-morphological approach via commonly-used roots on vocabulary teaching from three aspects. The first aspect concerns the responses of the subjects. The second part is related to the role of the teacher. The final part involves instruction in background knowledge of etymology and culture.

5.1.1 The Responses of the Subjects

According to the questionnaires in Appendix I, Appendix J, and Appendix K, sixty-eight percent of the subjects in this project encounter the greatest trouble in memorizing new words rather than in familiarizing themselves with English grammar. As a result, students always complain that they are often required to memorize words without being given enough time to familiarize themselves with the words. This is why words already learned are still forgotten, in turn leading to poor reading comprehension. Gradually, students lose interest in learning English because the efforts they put in vocabulary memorization still do not produce the desired results.

The researcher has observed that the responses of the subjects in the iconic-morphological group are quite different from those in the other two groups. The subjects in the former group show the most active participation in vocabulary

learning. In addition, the classroom atmosphere is also the most pleasant among the three groups. In the non-iconic morphological group, the subjects are inclined to seek out similar commonly-used roots for facilitating vocabulary memorization. However, the subjects in the iconic-morphological group are more highly motivated in looking for the stems and in creating image of unfamiliar words. They voluntarily ask their English instructor for more information about new words or about the relationships of words that are similar in forms or in sounds. As a result, they approach all the tasks with more interest and curiosity. In contrast, the way of vocabulary memorization remains the same in the definition-based group. The subjects still use their own methods to memorize words after the traditional vocabulary instruction. As a result, most of their unfamiliar words remain unfamiliar.

5.1.2 The Role of the Teacher

In the traditional definition-based group, the English teachers function only as instructors rather than as facilitators. They presume that their duties are to teach students the pronunciation of the words, to explain the definition and the translation of new words as well as the grammar of the sentences, to describe the usage of the target words by putting them in the context, and to translate the English texts into Chinese ones. Naturally, they take it for granted that vocabulary memorization is the only way for students to show their diligence in studies. Naturally, the teachers in the traditional definition-based group are not facilitators in the instruction of unfamiliar vocabulary.

On the other hand, the teachers in the iconic-morphological group conduct a systematic and useful way of vocabulary memorization. They direct students how to parse unknown words into meaningful components, to relate the words to the commonly-used roots, and to generate the icons of words. By highlighting the word

structures through commonly-used roots and icons creation, teachers can help students memorize similar unknown words. Gradually, students retain more and more words in their minds, realizing that this approach is definitely meaningful learning. As a result, possessing morphological knowledge ensures that students can identify unfamiliar words through the forms or the sounds of their familiar words. In conclusion, the teachers in the iconic-morphological group are indeed not only the instructors but also the facilitators of vocabulary instruction.

However, the instruction of morphological vocabulary appears to be a challenging task for English teachers. Without sufficient professional knowledge of morphology and etymology, the teachers' incompetence in word analysis emerges. The questions raised by their students may frustrate or embarrass teachers. This is probably why lots of English teachers avoid the instruction of morphology because they are not well acquainted with it. Therefore, it is imperative that teachers get extensive training in morphological teaching and learning.

5.1.3 The Instruction of Background Knowledge of Etymology

Word structures are closely related to the knowledge of etymology. Therefore, in order to be proficient in vocabulary teaching, one should also be well-versed in etymology. Denning and Leben (1995: 95) contend that etymology should be a guide instead of a tyrant to which the language must bend. This means that without making any reference to etymological background knowledge, learners can take advantage of their imagination to associate the unknown words with known words.

More often than not, students can utilize their imagination to memorize words without any application of etymology. However, teachers should still possess the knowledge of etymology. It is only then that they can direct their students towards

viewing the invention of English words. When the students' interest in English

vocabulary are triggered and promoted, they will have better opportunities to explore

the structures of words and let go of the mistaken concept of one-to-one relationship

between the English word and its Chinese equivalent. In summary, the knowledge of

etymology indeed plays a crucial role in vocabulary teaching and learning.

5.2 Conclusion

The conclusion first provides the pedagogical implications for the

iconic-morphological teaching method to English vocabulary instruction and learning.

The second part concludes with the limitations concerning the experiment and

furnishes recommendations for further research.

5.2.1 Pedagogical Implication

First, in this study, the subjects can learn words by rote for a short period of

time regardless of their vocabulary size. That is, there is no significant difference in

the short-term memory for words among the subjects at different levels. This is why

many students devote themselves to learning words by rote; however, these words are

easily forgotten. Interestingly, this research shows that the subjects with better

long-term memory for words always have larger vocabulary size. This also means that

vocabulary size can be expanded if words can be retained in the long-term memory.

Both frequency and familiarity can enhance the retention of vocabulary. Nation

and Coady (1988: 97) claim that vocabulary difficulty results from word frequency or

familiarity. Seamon et al. (2002: 337) also state that retention is enhanced by

repetition, and that repetition produces familiarity. That is, two ways can be used to

keep words stored in the long-term memory. One is the increase in the students'

exposure to unknown words, and the other is the utilization of meaningful learning.

However, students have very limited time. It seems impossible for students to increase their exposure to every unknown word. In contrast, the utilization of meaningful leaning appears more important and practical than increased exposure to new words.

Meaningful learning means associating unknown information with prior knowledge. By being meaningfully preserved in long-term memory, unknown words can become known words, which can be used to relate to other unknown words. Vocabulary is expanded in the process. Therefore, it is suggested that students spend time and effort associating new words with their familiar structures rather than learn as many words by rote as possible in a short period of time. After all, words memorized via such a meaningless learning method are hardly retained in the long-term memory, and subsequently becomes part of lost memory. This is why most students consider spending time and effort in vocabulary memorization a useless task.

Second, in this study, those who display higher awareness of morphology are shown to have better short-term memory for words, better long-term memory for words, and better spelling abilities. Conversely, those who lack the awareness of morphology have the worse short-term memory for words, worse long-term memory for words, and worse spelling abilities. That is, students with lower awareness of morphology also have worse long-term memory for words, which definitely leads to smaller vocabulary size. Therefore, it is suggested that students be encouraged to learn more morphological knowledge and cultivate their awareness of morphology.

However, Li (1998: 74) states that the English teacher training programs in Taiwan pay little attention to vocabulary instruction, let alone morphological

instruction. According to the researcher's interviews with many English teachers, morphological instruction is hardly prevalent in senior high school because morphological knowledge is not commonplace in teaching English. Consequently, teachers subjectively presume that the application of morphology to vocabulary instruction and memorization is impossible in senior high school. In order to alleviate students' burden in vocabulary memorization, this study suggests expanding teachers' training in morphology and its practical use. Furthermore, teaching materials concerning morphological knowledge should be well designed and prepared.

Additionally, students can use morphological clues to infer the meanings of unknown words if they possess higher awareness of morphology when reading English articles. By gradually getting accustomed to the slight vagueness of the sentences and phrases, students will be able to spend less time consulting the dictionaries for unknown words. In addition, morphemes are also beneficial to reading comprehension. Conversely, those who lack morphological knowledge find it harder to tolerate the vagueness of passages, becoming largely dependent on dictionaries. As the result, they fail to acquire a large vocabulary though they, indeed, were extremely dedicated to memorizing new words.

Third, those who learn the iconic-morphological approach via commonly-used roots can develop higher awareness of morphology, which in turn lead to better short-term memory for words, better long-term memory for words, and better correct spelling abilities regardless of their vocabulary size. That is, with the aid of similar commonly-used roots and iconic illustration, students can effortlessly process and retain the meanings and structures of the unknown words possessing the same morphemes with the commonly-used roots. This way, students can develop and

promote not only awareness of morphology but also short-term memory for words, long-term memory for words, and accurate spelling abilities. In other words, icons and morphemes can lead to the cooperation of the left and the right brain hemispheres. In this way, words being memorized can be retained in the long-term memory, which results in the expansion of one's English vocabulary size.

Fourth, instruction of morphology can bring about a pleasant classroom atmosphere. Accustomed to and tired of the traditional definition-based teaching method, students must always memorize new words on their own. Since teachers seldom provide their students with any morphological knowledge, the common perception is that English words are non-decomposable icons and meaningless masses. Thus, learning by rote seems the only way for most students to memorize words. However, morphological instruction leads to a more dynamic and entertaining class as students interact more with the teacher. Students with morphological knowledge become more active in raising questions and in exploring the mystery of morphology. Thus, it is recommended that English teachers become proficient in morphological knowledge to be able to inspire students to relate the unknown words to the words they already know. Afterwards, there are more and more interactions between teachers and students, which enable them to create a happy, interactive classroom.

Finally, the instruction of morphology can result in better understanding about the history and the culture of English words. With more contact with the history and culture of English words, students can observe the invention of English words. This makes memorizing vocabulary no longer a hard, tedious, and boring task, but an interesting and meaningful learning process. Furthermore, those who better understand the resources of English words can have larger vocabulary size.

5.2.2 Recommendations for Further Research

In this study, there are some limitations concerning the experiment of the iconic-morphological approach via commonly-used roots to vocabulary teaching. Therefore, the following recommendations for further research are aimed at compensating for the limitations of the study.

First, the subjects of the study are limited to the third-year students at the National Overseas Chinese Experimental Senior High School in Taipei County. It is suggested that further research expand the pool of subjects to include students from other senior high schools. Moreover, the first-year or second-year students in senior high schools or students in colleges or junior high schools should also be given the opportunity to participate in the experiment. As a result, there may be some astounding outcomes.

Second, time is limited in the experiment. After the subjects have learned about the different approaches, only forty unfamiliar words are used to examine the subjects' awareness of morphology, short-term memory for vocabulary, long-term memory for vocabulary, and accurate spelling abilities. The experiment was especially conducted on November 3, 2003 with the help of the subjects' English teacher, Jen-ju Lu, according to their curriculum schedules. The students did not have additional time available as they had to prepare for both the Subject Ability Test and the Department Required Test held the following year. It is recommended that experiments for further research be carried out in accordance with the word lists in their textbook. After a semester or an academic year of instruction of the iconic-morphological approach via commonly-used roots, the subjects will adapt themselves to such an approach. Then,

preceding the recall tests taken, a new study can offer another forty or fifty unknown words.

Finally, this study does not compare the subjects' memory for the words of different lengths. It is suggested that the further research can examine and discuss the subjects' memory for the words of different lengths.