

Вестник Череповецкого государственного университета. 2023. № 3 (114). С. 224–236.  
Cherapovets State University Bulletin, 2023, no. 3 (114), pp. 224–236.

Научная статья

УДК 378.147

<https://doi.org/10.23859/1994-0637-2023-3-114-18>

### **Improving the effectiveness of teaching synonyms to translation students: a psycholinguistic aspect**

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**Abstract.** The article examines the impact of psycholinguistic factors on the retrieval of synonyms in speech production in a foreign language (L2). The issue has significant implications for translation-oriented language teaching as L2 speech production is an essential process in translation into a foreign language (L2 translation). We have identified a number of psycholinguistic factors, which can potentially hinder the successful retrieval of synonyms in L2 speech production, and described their negative impact on this process. It has been concluded that these factors should be taken into consideration when designing and implementing learning activities for teaching synonyms to translation students. It has been suggested that to make the psycholinguistic preconditions that can ensure the successful retrieval of L2 synonyms, the practice of synonyms should include three stages. The study provides a description of each stage in terms of aims, learning activities as well as recommendations and guidelines for their implementation. The theoretical contribution of the study lies in the fact that it can advance the understanding of the challenges faced by learners in the acquisition and use of L2 synonyms. At the practical level, it can improve the effectiveness of the professional training of translators.

**Keywords:** L2 translation, synonyms, mental lexicon, context, explicit / implicit knowledge

**For citation:** Emelyanova Y. B. Improving the effectiveness of teaching synonyms to translation students: a psycholinguistic aspect. *Cherapovets State University Bulletin*, 2023, no. 3 (114), pp. 224–236. <https://doi.org/10.23859/1994-0637-2023-3-114-18>.

### **Повышение эффективности работы с синонимами в процессе иноязычной подготовки переводчиков: психолингвистический аспект**

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**Аннотация.** Статья посвящена вопросу о необходимости учитывать факторы психолингвистического характера при организации работы с синонимами в процессе иноязычной подготовки переводчиков. Это может способствовать повышению качества и

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скорости извлечения синонимов в процессе речепорождения на иностранном языке. Речепорождение играет первостепенную роль в переводе с родного языка на иностранный. Выявлены психолингвистические факторы, создающие препятствия для адекватного и оперативного извлечения синонимов в иноязычной речи. Предлагается организовать работу с синонимами в три этапа с учетом формирования психолингвистических предпосылок. Для каждого этапа даны рекомендации относительно целей, задач и принципов работы и предложены соответствующие упражнения.

**Ключевые слова:** перевод на иностранный язык, синонимы, ментальный лексикон, контекст, эксплицитные / имплицитные знания

**Для цитирования:** Емельянова Я. Б. Повышение эффективности работы с синонимами в процессе иноязычной подготовки переводчиков: психолингвистический аспект // Вестник Череповецкого государственного университета. 2023. № 3 (114). С. 224–236. <https://doi.org/10.23859/1994-0637-2023-3-114-18>.

### Introduction

Synonyms are words which share the same denotational meaning but differ in many aspects, including connotations, collocations, degree of formality, grammatical patterns and style. Research has shown that the use of synonyms in speech production seems to be a stumbling block for many learners of English, including advanced learners<sup>1</sup>. It has been established that synonyms account for up to 40<sup>2</sup> per cent of all lexical errors. As regards translation, inability to appropriately use synonyms in L2 speech production can significantly affect the quality of translation into a foreign language.

However, the findings mentioned earlier suggest that there seem to be some persistent problems that prevent the successful retrieval of L2 synonyms, especially in speech. Retrieval is defined as the process of accessing stored information<sup>3</sup>. However, researchers confirm that knowing something does not necessarily mean being able to successfully and rapidly retrieve this information.

Word retrieval is key to speech production, and it relies on a number of processes. The concept chosen by the speaker activates lexical candidates in the mental lexicon which express the target and related concepts and compete for selection. The process of competition between these candidates ends with the selection of the highest activated lemma which is then phonologically encoded for speech production. It may be hypothesised that certain psycholinguistic factors prevent the activation and retrieval of synonyms.

In L2 translation, such psycholinguistic problems can (a) slow down the translation process, (b) negatively affect word choice in L2, (c) require additional attentional resources. Given that L2 translation is generally associated with slower translation latencies and lower translation accuracy, these aspects can increase the psychological and cognitive

<sup>1</sup> Liu D., Zhong S. L2 vs. L1 use of synonymy: An empirical study of synonym use/acquisition. *Applied Linguistics*, 2014. Vol. 37 (2). P. 239–261.

<sup>2</sup> Shalaby N. A., Yahya N., El-Komi M. Analysis of lexical errors in Saudi college students' compositions. *Journal of the Saudi Association of Languages and Translation*, 2009. Vol. 2 (3). P. 65–93.

<sup>3</sup> Roediger H. L., Guynn M. J. Retrieval processes. E. L. Bjork, R. A. Bjork (Eds.), *Handbook of perception and cognition: Memory*. Academic Press, 1996. P. 197–236.

load on the translator, thereby significantly reducing the quality of L2 translation. Thus, the *aim* of this paper is to:

(a) identify the psycholinguistic factors which hinder the successful retrieval of L2 synonyms and are not addressed by the learning activities currently used for teaching synonyms to translation students;

(b) provide examples of exercises and activities which can be used to deal with these problems and give recommendations and guidelines for their implementation.

The theoretical significance of this paper is determined by the fact that knowledge of these psycholinguistic factors can give teachers a better understanding of the problems faced by students in the acquisition and production of synonyms. On a practical level, the paper provides specific recommendations and examples of learning activities which can make the teaching of synonyms more effective.

### **Psycholinguistic factors affecting word retrieval**

#### *Association with L2 concepts*

Inadequacy of association between an L2 word and L2 conceptual information may hamper the process of retrieval. This problem can manifest itself in several ways.

First, learners' knowledge of L2 words may be heavily influenced by L1 conceptual information. In the process of second language acquisition, L2 form is often mapped onto L1 meaning, especially in formal instructional settings. According to the model of the stages of lexical development in L2 proposed by N. Jiang, many L2 words are blocked or "fossilised" at this stage and never reach the final stage of word knowledge where L1 information is replaced with the new meaning or concept of the L2 word<sup>1</sup>. This effect was observed in less proficient and advanced learners. Relying on L1 conceptual information when choosing an L2 synonym for a particular context will in most cases result in choosing an inappropriate word.

Second, learners may only have an approximate understanding of the concepts expressed by L2 synonyms, as opposed to fine-grained lexical knowledge representations. The idea of 'granularity of representation of word meaning'<sup>2</sup> was put forward by P. Edmonds and G. Hirst to reflect the degree of detailedness of a person's knowledge of a word's meaning. A fine-grained representation reflects all the nuances of meaning, while a coarse-grained representation includes only general information.

Failure to clearly establish boundaries between the meanings of synonyms and identify the ways in which they relate to each other may result in difficulty recalling and retrieving the appropriate synonym in a particular context. As evidenced by neurolinguistic research, in the process of speech production all synonyms known to a speaker have a higher likelihood of being activated and competing for production as they are stored together in the mental lexicon like all semantically related words. In the absence of a fine-grained knowledge about these synonyms, the speaker is more likely to make an arbitrary choice

<sup>1</sup> Jiang, N. Form-meaning Mapping in Vocabulary Acquisition in a Second Language. *Studies in Second Language Acquisition*, 2002, no. 24. P. 617–637.

<sup>2</sup> Edmonds P., Hirst G. Near-Synonymy and Lexical Choice. *Computational Linguistics*, 2002. Vol. 28 (2). P. 105–144.

based on the frequency of use or degree of familiarity with a particular synonym which may not necessarily be appropriate in a particular context.

Comparing synonymic sets in L2 and L1 also contributes to the acquisition of fine-grained knowledge representations. It can draw learners' attention to their similarities and differences in terms of structure and meaning as it is often the case that several L2 synonyms may share the same L1 equivalent and vice versa. Absence of clear links in the mental lexicon between synonyms in L1 and L2 will hamper recall and retrieval.

Third, L2 words may be simply assigned to their L1 translations and exist in what may be called a conceptual void. Synonyms have different frequency of occurrence which results in different types of bilingual memory representation. The dominant synonym is usually a high-frequency word with the most general meaning; other synonyms, however, may have narrower meanings and lower frequency of occurrence. As evidenced by A. de Groot, high-frequency words are usually stored in concept-mediation representations (L1 and L2 words are connected to conceptual representations), whereas low-frequency words are more likely to be stored in word-association representations (L2 words are connected to L1 words)<sup>1</sup>. This suggests that synonyms with lower frequency of occurrence may have a lower likelihood of being linked to conceptual information and are assigned to their L1 translations. In speech production, when word candidates in the mental lexicon are activated in response to the concept the speaker wishes to name, such synonyms may fail to be recalled as they are not associated with any concept.

#### *Context of use as an encoding and retrieval cue*

Successful retrieval depends to a large extent on the match between the contexts of encoding and retrieval which is known as the encoding specificity principle<sup>2</sup>. It means that the context in which a piece of information was remembered (encoded) and the encoding cues available in that context should be similar to the context and the cues of retrieval. This match is seen by most researchers as key to successful retrieval.

With regard to vocabulary acquisition, this principle brings to the fore the importance of remembering and practising words in multiple contexts. This idea is supported by the priming theory<sup>3</sup> which posits that the process of priming lexical items in our mind is strongly dependent on the context, thereby suggesting that a familiar context of use can be an effective retrieval cue. The more contexts a word is associated with, the more meaningful it becomes for the learner and the more easily it is remembered and retrieved. And conversely, remembering a word in one context might result in a short-range contextual dependency, i.e., inability to retrieve the word outside this context.

In the case of synonyms, the context of use is essential as they express similar meanings for different contexts. They have different collocational relations and behaviour which

<sup>1</sup> De Groot A. Lexical representation and lexical processing in the L2 user. V. Cook (Ed.), *Portraits of the L2 user*. Multilingual matters, 2002. P. 29–64.

<sup>2</sup> Tulving E., Thomson D. M. Encoding Specificity and Retrieval Processes in Episodic Memory. *Psychological Review*, 1973. Vol. 80 (5). P. 352–373.

<sup>3</sup> Partington A. Utterly content in each other's company: Semantic prosody and semantic preference. *International Journal of Corpus Linguistics*, 2004. №. 9. P. 131–156.

reflect the nuances of their meanings and are seen by many researchers as a key factor in determining semantic differences between them<sup>1</sup>. Therefore, it is important to ensure that synonyms are practised in multiple contexts, thus allowing students to form strong associations between synonyms and their numerous collocates as well as phrases they form part of.

### *Explicit vs implicit knowledge*

One more factor which can significantly influence the process of word retrieval is the type of knowledge the speaker relies on. Speech production and comprehension are mainly based on implicit rather than explicit knowledge<sup>2</sup>. These types of knowledge are (a) dissociated, (b) located in different areas of the brain, (c) different by nature and (d) rely on completely different mental processes.

Implicit knowledge is (a) automatic and unconscious, (b) available easily and spontaneously, (c) rapidly accessed and (d) acquired through exposure to language. As regards explicit knowledge, it (a) is conscious and declarative, (b) requires intentional action, controlled processing, attentional resources and (c) can be taught and verbalised<sup>3</sup>. One type of knowledge does not exclude the other, i.e., learners may have implicit and explicit knowledge of a certain linguistic structure. However, lack of implicit knowledge may result in the speaker's inability to use linguistic structures correctly and fluently in speech production.

Opinion is divided as to whether explicit knowledge can become implicit. The non-interface position rejects this possibility altogether<sup>4</sup>; the weak interface position does not exclude this possibility but suggests that this process occurs under specific conditions, while the strong interface position claims that explicit knowledge can become automatized with practice, thus becoming "functionally equivalent" to implicit knowledge<sup>5</sup>.

Learning tasks traditionally used in teaching L2 synonyms, such as analysing dictionary definitions, choosing the right synonyms to complete sentences, matching synonyms with their collocates etc., mainly contribute to the acquisition of declarative knowledge and do not allow for its proceduralisation. As a result, retrieval of this knowledge is slow, requires a conscious effort and attentional resources. All these factors impede fluent speech production in L2.

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<sup>1</sup> Phoocharoensil S. A genre and collocational analysis of 'consequence', 'result', and 'outcome' // *The Southeast Asian Journal of English Language Studies*, 2020. Vol. 26 (3). P. 1–16.

<sup>2</sup> Ellis R., Roever C. The measurement of implicit and explicit knowledge. *The Language Learning Journal*, 2018. Vol. 49 (5). P. 1–16.

<sup>3</sup> Ellis R. The definition and measurement of explicit knowledge. *Language Learning*, 2004. № 54. P. 227–275.

<sup>4</sup> Robinson P., Mackey A., Gass S. M., Schmidt R. Attention and awareness in second language acquisition. S. M. Gass, A. Mackey (Eds.), *The Routledge handbook of second language acquisition*. Abingdon: Routledge, 2013. P. 247–267.

<sup>5</sup> DeKeyser R. M. Implicit and explicit learning. C. Doughty, M. Long (Eds.), *Handbook of second language acquisition*. Malden: Blackwell, 2003. P. 313–348.

We believe that to address the issues described above, the process of acquisition and practice of synonyms should include three stages which are described in the following section.

### **Pedagogical implications**

#### *Stage 1*

The first stage aims to ensure the acquisition of explicit knowledge about the concepts expressed by L2 synonyms and the way they relate to each other and to concepts expressed by their L1 equivalents. To achieve this aim, consciousness-raising tasks can be used. These tasks provide learners with some data and require them to perform some operations on these data. They can be inductive or deductive, and both types of learning are considered explicit<sup>1</sup>. One major advantage of such tasks is that they enable learners to develop explicit L2 knowledge independently. In addition, they (a) provide meaning-focused input, (b) ensure multiple encounters with target vocabulary, (c) develop noticing skills and (d) require a cognitive effort and active processing of the information.

Synonymic sets were provided by the teacher and were a) part of topic-related vocabulary or (b) chosen based on the vocabulary from the study materials (texts, videos etc.) if the need arose. Students were provided with example sentences (10-15) for each synonym from a synonymic set and asked to:

- (1) find and compare 3-4 dictionary definitions of the given synonyms and identify the nuances of their meanings;
- (2) analyse their usage patterns in example sentences and see how these patterns relate to the information in step 1;
- (3) find their L1 equivalents and identify the degree of overlap between the synonymic sets in L1 and L2;
- (4) summarise the information and present it visually to illustrate the relationship between the synonyms in terms of similarities and differences.

A few comments need to be made about the preparation and implementation of this activity. According to researchers, dictionary definitions (step 1) may (a) mostly focus on denotational meaning, (b) be rather abstract and use 'vague and arcane language'<sup>2</sup>, (c) fail to reflect the nuances of meaning<sup>3</sup> and (d) provide insufficient contextual and collocational information<sup>4</sup>. This justifies the importance of analysing several dictionary definitions.

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<sup>1</sup> Wang Y. *English transitivity alternation in second language acquisition: An attentional approach*. Routledge, 2017. 186 p.

<sup>2</sup> Lee C-Y., Liu J-S. Effects of Collocation Information on Learning Lexical Semantics for Near Synonym Distinction. *Computational Linguistics and Chinese Language Processing*, 2009. Vol. 14 (2). P. 205–220.

<sup>3</sup> Chen M-H., Huang S-T., Chang J., Liou H.-C. Developing a corpus-based paraphrase tool to improve EFL learners' writing skills. *Computer Assisted Language Learning*, 2015. Vol. 28 (1). P. 22–40.

<sup>4</sup> Jafarpour A. A., Hashemian M., Alipour A. A Corpus-based Approach toward Teaching Collocation of Synonyms. *Theory and Practice in Language Studies*, 2013. Vol. 3 (1). P. 51–60.

Providing plenty of example sentences (step 2) is essential as they contribute to the acquisition of contextual knowledge<sup>1</sup>. However, care should be taken to ensure that these sentences provide appropriate and representative examples. Asking students to find example sentences may be counterproductive as the process (a) is time-consuming and laborious, (b) may yield undesirable results, i.e., sentences which do not cover all typical usage patterns. Therefore, we believe that it should be the responsibility of the teacher to provide example sentences for this task.

Working with bilingual dictionaries (step 3) is an essential step. It demonstrates that several L2 synonyms can have similar L1 translations which suggests that such dictionaries should be used in combination with monolingual dictionaries.

Presenting visually (step 4) the way synonyms in a particular set relate to each other may be a helpful strategy for several reasons. First, it requires considerable cognitive effort to (a) thoroughly analyse the information about each synonym and the relationship between synonyms in a particular set, (b) identify areas of overlap and difference between the synonyms in terms of meaning and usage and (c) come up with a visual representation of this information. Second, it increases the amount of time learners spend interacting with synonyms. As a result, words become more meaningful to learners and are better remembered. Third, presenting information visually may facilitate the processing and retention of information, especially for visual learners. Obviously, depending on the concept expressed by synonyms and individual learners' perception of this information, visual presentation may vary from learner to learner. There is no right or wrong. What is important is the effort learners put into this task and the benefits they receive.

### Stage 2

Stage 2 is devoted to making explicit knowledge more automatic through practice in multiple contexts. It is also expected that Stage 2 will lead to:

- (a) the development of 'word consciousness'<sup>2</sup> with regard to synonyms which involves 'awareness of the communicative power of a word' and the ability to use it appropriately;
- (b) the 'restructuring of L2 vocabulary knowledge'<sup>3</sup> to incorporate the acquired fine-grained representations of synonyms into the existing knowledge.

When designing activities for this stage, we proceeded from several assumptions. First, to ensure retention and further recall of a word form and its meaning in new contexts, vocabulary practice should involve (a) different cognitive operations, (b) frequent and contextualised retrieval of words and (c) exposure to words and their typical collocates in multiple contexts.

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<sup>1</sup> Rupley W. H., Nichols W. D. Vocabulary Instruction for the Struggling Reader. *Reading & Writing Quarterly*, 2005. Vol. 21 (3). P. 239–260.

<sup>2</sup> Graves M., August D., Mancilla-Martinez J. *Teaching vocabulary to English language learners* (Language and literacy series). New York: Teachers College Press, 2013. 176 p.

<sup>3</sup> Pavlenko A. Conceptual representation in the bilingual lexicon and second language vocabulary learning. A. Pavlenko (Ed.), *The bilingual mental lexicon*. Bristol: Multilingual Matters, 2009. P. 125–160.



*Inside the room there was the ..... of sweaty feet. (unmistakable odour)*

*The ... .. of fresh bread wafted out of the bakery. (delicious aroma)*

10. Render the following phrases into English and use them to complete the following sentences.

Ужасный запах, приятный запах

*She smelled the ... .. of the lilies. (sweet scent)*

*What's that ... .. ? (terrible smell)*

11. Think of the most suitable English word to translate the words in brackets.

*The ... (zanax) of fresh baking wafted towards her. (aroma)*

12. Find and correct the lexical errors in the sentences/phrases below where necessary.

*What's that funny scent? (smell)*

13. Correct the lexical/collocational/prepositional errors in the following sentences/phrases where necessary.

*the stale scent of cigarette smoke. (odour)*

*The smells in the kitchen filled the room. (from)*

*The room was filled with a musky aroma of woodsmoke. (strong)*

14. Use the following words to complete the sentences/phrases below.

burning    drifted

*Cooking smells ... .. up from the kitchen. (drifted)*

*a smell of ... .. in the air (burning)*

### Stage 3

The aim of Stage 3 is further proceduralisation of explicit knowledge and the development of the ability to effortlessly use synonyms in different communicative contexts. As with implicit knowledge, automatised explicit knowledge should be (a) associated with correct and fluent use of target language, especially in oral production, (b) rooted in real-life applications, (c) automatic and require little or no conscious effort. Thus, the activities used at this stage should:

(a) involve the use of synonyms in real-life contexts;

(b) be communication-oriented as opposed to language-oriented, i.e., the focus should be shifted from using the correct synonym to communicating a message in a foreign language;

(c) develop fluency and accuracy in choosing the right synonym for a specific context with little or no conscious effort.

To achieve these aims, the following activities can be recommended:

1. Act as interpreter in the following conversations (English/Russian; Russian/Russian).

2. Render the following sentences/ short stories into English.

3. Read the following Russian article/text. Discuss the article in groups (in English)/ Share the information from the article with the class (in English).

4. Describe a picture/ a series of pictures/ a real-life situation.

5. Make a report/ presentation about ... .

It should be noted that most of the exercises and activities in Stages 1, 2 and 3 are not really new. However, they have been selected and grouped together to address the specific psycholinguistic problems identified earlier which can hinder the retrieval of L2 syno-

nyms. Thus, the key strength of the proposed approach is that it makes teaching synonyms more effective by targeting the cognitive mechanisms which ensure the successful retrieval of synonyms in L2 speech. The proposed learning procedure can be used independently or as part of vocabulary practice at the discretion of the teacher. It can also be used by students for learning synonyms independently.

The proposed activities were used to teach synonyms to two groups of 3<sup>rd</sup>-year full-time translation students (28 students). Synonymic sets were studied as part of topic-related vocabulary (2 units). To assess the effectiveness of the proposed approach, a pre-test and a post-test were conducted. The pre-test was conducted before the treatment and aimed to test the knowledge of synonyms which were taught using the traditional approach. The aim of the post-test, which was conducted after the treatment, was to test the knowledge of synonyms which were taught using the approach proposed in this paper. The exercises in the tests did not include any material from practice exercises. Both tests included the following exercises:

*Exercise 1.* Analyse the use of the dominant synonym in the following sentences. Make changes where necessary (5 sentences/in class/in writing).

*Exercise 2.* Think of the most suitable English word to translate the words in brackets (5 sentences/in class/in writing).

*Exercise 3.* Render the following sentences into English (5 sentences/in class/orally).

Exercise 1 helps to assess whether the target synonym is activated in a learner's mental lexicon in response to the context of the sentence. Exercises 2 and 3 are both translation exercises. While in Exercise 2 learners only have to give the right L2 equivalent for the L1 word that would fit the context of the L2 sentence, Exercise 3 requires them to orally render the whole sentence into English.

Reference materials were not allowed. Each exercise was scored on a scale of 0 to 5. Students could earn 1 point for each correct answer and "0" for each incorrect answer or for no answer. The results obtained are presented in the table below.

Table

Pre-test and post-test results

Score (0-5)	Percentage of students (%)					
	<i>Exercise 1</i>		<i>Exercise 2</i>		<i>Exercise 3</i>	
	<i>Pre-test</i>	<i>Post-test</i>	<i>Pre-test</i>	<i>Post-test</i>	<i>Pre-test</i>	<i>Post-test</i>
<b>0</b>	11 %	3 %	0	0	11 %	3 %
<b>1</b>	18 %	3 %	11 %	0	18 %	11 %
<b>2</b>	25 %	11 %	29 %	14 %	36 %	21 %
<b>3</b>	25 %	36 %	36 %	29 %	21 %	32 %
<b>4</b>	14 %	29 %	14 %	32 %	11 %	22 %
<b>5</b>	7 %	18 %	10 %	25 %	3 %	11 %

The findings indicate an improvement in the students' performance: there is an increase in the number of students who obtained high scores across all the exercises after the treat-

ment. However, it can be observed that the results for Exercises 1 and 3 are slightly lower than for Exercise 2. In Exercise 1, the presence of the dominant synonym creates an illusion of a perfectly correct sentence. In the absence of strong links between L2 synonyms, their concepts and contexts of use, synonyms with narrower meanings, which are more suitable in the given context, are less likely to be activated and retrieved. Exercise 3 is more challenging as it requires switching between L1 and L2 and is performed orally. However, it is the type of task which gives the teacher a clear understanding of whether a student's L2 knowledge is sufficient to translate into this language. This suggests that exercises which are more cognitively challenging should be given priority in the learning process. Overall, the findings testify to the effectiveness of the proposed approach to teaching synonyms to translation students.

### Conclusion

The use of L2 synonyms in speech production seems to be a stumbling block for learners and accounts for a large number of lexical errors. In L2 translation, this can result in additional cognitive and psychological load on the translator, thereby significantly reducing the speed and quality of L2 translation.

We have identified a number of psycholinguistic factors which can potentially hinder the successful retrieval of synonyms in L2 speech production:

- (a) absence of clear and meaningful links between L2 synonyms and L2 conceptual information;
- (b) lack of strong links between L2 synonyms and their L1 equivalents;
- (c) lack of strong associations between synonyms and their typical contexts of use;
- (d) reliance on explicit knowledge.

These findings give us a better understanding of the reasons why learners may struggle with synonyms in L2 speech production. To create the psycholinguistic preconditions that can ensure the successful retrieval of L2 synonyms, the practice of synonyms should include three stages, each with its own aim and learning activities. The proposed approach yielded positive results which testify to its effectiveness.

The recommendations given in the paper carry some implications for teachers and learners. On the one hand, this can entail (a) certain changes to the teaching process and lesson planning and (b) the necessity to develop new teaching and learning materials which can lead to additional demands on teachers' time. As regards learners, they may have to put more time and effort into doing the proposed activities as well as acquire more independence in working with dictionaries and other reference materials.

To conclude, it is our contention that helping translation students to overcome difficulties associated with the acquisition and use of L2 synonyms is a worthwhile goal. We believe that the proposed recommendations and learning activities can help teachers and learners to deal with this problem more effectively.

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Статья поступила в редакцию 13.02.2023; одобрена после рецензирования 14.03.2023; принята к публикации 20.03.2023.

The article was submitted 13.02.2023; Approved after reviewing 14.03.2023; Accepted for publication 20.03.2023.