

**THE APPLICATION OF LITERAL MEANING IN SEMANTICS TO ENHANCE VOCABULARY AND SENTENCE STRUCTURE IN CHILDREN'S SPEAKING SKILLS**

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**Abstract**

*This study explores the implementation of literal meaning, as understood in semantic theory, to support the development of children's speaking skills, particularly in enriching vocabulary and improving sentence structure. Early language learners often struggle with word choices and constructing grammatically correct sentences. By introducing literal meaning in language instruction, children are guided to comprehend words in their most direct and basic sense, fostering clearer understanding and more accurate language use. Using a qualitative approach, this research involves classroom observations and interviews with primary school teachers. The findings suggest that teaching strategies centered on literal meaning can significantly contribute to the clarity and correctness of children's spoken language. This approach offers promising insights for enhancing early language education.*  
**Keywords:** *Literal meaning, Semantics, Speaking skills, Children.*

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**INTRODUCTION**

**1.1 Background of the study**

Language is an essential tool in human communication, especially during the early stages of childhood development. Speaking skills, as a core component of language ability, allow children to express ideas, thoughts, and emotions effectively. However, many children struggle to construct meaningful sentences and to use vocabulary appropriately due to limited exposure to structured language learning strategies (Snow, 2002).

Semantics, as a branch of linguistics that deals with meaning, provides tools to guide language instruction more precisely (Lyons, 1995). Teaching children how to understand and use words in their literal context improves their confidence in speaking, as they are less likely to misinterpret meanings or struggle with syntax. According to Fromkin, Rodman, and Hyams (2018), the knowledge of word meaning influences language production, especially in oral communication.

Literal meaning, as a concept in semantics, refers to the direct, surface-level interpretation of a word or sentence without considering any figurative or implied meanings (Cruse, 2000). This understanding is essential because it allows children to build a strong foundation in vocabulary and sentence structure, which are key components of effective speaking.

When children are introduced to words with their literal meanings, they begin to form clear associations between language and the real-world objects or actions those words represent. For instance, learning that the word "apple" refers to a specific fruit enables the child to connect vocabulary with tangible experiences. This direct association helps children to expand their vocabulary efficiently, as they are more likely to remember and correctly use words that have a clear, singular meaning (Fromkin et al., 2018).

In addition to vocabulary growth, understanding literal meaning also contributes significantly to the development of sentence structure. Once children know the meanings of individual words, they can begin to arrange them meaningfully in sentences.

For example, understanding that "Cat" is a noun and "runs" is a verb helps a child to form a sentence like "The cat runs."

This basic sentence construction illustrates how literal comprehension supports grammar and syntax.

As children's vocabulary and structural knowledge grow, so too do their speaking skills. They are better equipped to express themselves clearly, avoid miscommunication, and engage more effectively in conversations. Therefore, the application of literal meaning in teaching semantics plays a vital role in helping children communicate with confidence and accuracy.

Therefore, this research aims to explore how the application of literal meaning in semantics can be used as a strategy to enhance vocabulary mastery and sentence formation in children's speaking skills.

## **1.2 Problem Statements**

This study addresses the following research questions:

1. How can the application of literal meaning improve children's speaking skills?
2. In what ways does literal meaning support the development of children's vocabulary?
3. How does understanding literal meaning assist children in forming structured sentences?

## **1.3 Objective of The Study**

This study aims to explore how understanding and applying literal meaning, as a part of semantics, can support the development of children's speaking skills. The specific objectives are:

1. To explain how literal meaning helps children learn and remember new vocabulary more effectively.
2. To analyze how a clear understanding of literal meaning supports children in building correct and simple sentence structures.
3. To investigate how the use of literal meaning improves children's overall speaking performance in terms of clarity and confidence.

## **1.4 The significance of the study**

This study is expected to be useful in the following ways:

1. To provide better understanding of how literal meaning in semantics helps improve children's vocabulary and sentence structure.
2. To help children express their ideas more clearly and confidently by using words based on their literal meanings.
3. shows the connection between literal meaning and the ability to form clear and grammatically correct sentence structures in spoken language.
4. supports the use of semantic approaches in early language education, especially in building children's basic speaking competence.

## **1.5 The Scope and Limitation of Research**

This study focuses specifically on the application of literal meaning in semantics as a tool to enhance vocabulary and sentence structure in children's speaking skills. The research is limited to observing how children understand and use words in their basic, direct meanings when speaking, without involving figurative or abstract meanings such as idioms, metaphors, or sarcasm.

The scope of the study is limited to:

1. Children in early education or elementary school age (approximately 6-10 years old).
2. The use of literal vocabulary in simple spoken sentences.
3. Classroom or learning environments where speaking is part of the language development program.

This study does not cover advanced aspects of semantics such as figurative language interpretation, nor does it explore writing or reading skills in depth. The focus remains on oral language development through literal meaning comprehension.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### 2.1 Theoretical Framework

#### 2.1.1 *Semantics and Literal Meaning*

Semantics is one of the core branches of linguistics that deals with meaning. According to Palmer (1981), semantics explores how language conveys meaning and how individuals interpret that meaning based on context. Within semantics, literal meaning refers to the direct or surface-level interpretation of a word or sentence, without considering figurative, implied, or metaphorical elements.

Literal meaning is particularly essential in early language acquisition because children rely heavily on what is concrete and observable. As Clark (2003) explains, children begin their understanding of language by connecting words to tangible objects or familiar experiences. For instance, when a child hears the word "apple" and sees or tastes the fruit, they are engaging with its literal meaning. This type of comprehension lays the groundwork for more abstract forms of language understanding later on.

Moreover, literal meaning helps avoid ambiguity for early learners. Figurative language, such as metaphors or idioms, can confuse children because such expressions require a level of abstract thinking that often develops later. Therefore, introducing children to vocabulary through literal meanings enables more effective and accessible language learning during their formative years.

#### 2.1.2 *Vocabulary Development in Children*

Vocabulary acquisition is a central part of language development. Nation (2001) states that knowing a word means understanding its form (spelling and pronunciation), its meaning (both denotative and connotative), and its use (how and when to use it appropriately in context). For children, acquiring vocabulary begins with repeated exposure to words in meaningful and relevant contexts.

According to Beck, McKeown, and Kucan (2002), vocabulary instruction is most effective when it starts with concrete and familiar terms before moving on to more complex or abstract vocabulary. Teaching literal meanings allows children to form strong, memorable associations with words, which improves retention and recall. When a child hears "dog" and sees a real dog, the connection becomes clearer and stronger than when they are taught a word without any context or imagery.

Furthermore, vocabulary acquisition directly influences children's ability to speak fluently and express their thoughts clearly. A limited vocabulary restricts communication, while a growing vocabulary gives children the tools they need to describe their world and interact socially. Therefore, literal meaning plays a pivotal role in helping children build a strong vocabulary base that supports spoken language development.

### 2.1.3 Sentence Structure and Speaking Skills

Speaking is a productive skill that involves not only vocabulary but also grammar and sentence construction. Brown (2000) points out that children begin by producing simple sentences that follow basic grammatical patterns, such as subject-verb or subject-verb-object constructions. For instance, sentences like "I eat," "She runs," or "They play ball" are early examples of how children form structure.

When children understand the literal meaning of each word in a sentence, they can more easily figure out how those words fit together logically.

For example, knowing the literal meanings of "I," "drink," and "milk" helps a child construct a sentence like "I drink milk." This simple but meaningful sentence reflects both vocabulary knowledge and an understanding of sentence structure.

Understanding how to build grammatically correct sentences also improves communication clarity. As stated by Cameron (2001), the ability to organize words into coherent sentences is essential for effective speaking. Therefore, literal meaning serves as a cognitive anchor that allows children to arrange words in a way that makes sense and communicates ideas clearly.

## 2.2 Previous Studies

Several previous studies have emphasized the role of literal meaning in early language education. A study by Rahmawati (2020) found that children in lower elementary grades who learned new vocabulary through visual and real-life examples of words (e.g., showing a picture of a cat when saying the word "cat") performed significantly better in speaking tasks than those taught using abstract or figurative language.

Another study by Johnson (2017) explored how literal meaning supports sentence formation in early learners. The results showed that children who were taught sentence construction through literal-based vocabulary demonstrated better grammar and fluency than those in a control group exposed to less structured vocabulary instruction.

Despite these positive findings, there is still limited research that directly connects literal meaning to both vocabulary development and sentence building as integrated components of speaking skills. Most existing literature tends to isolate these aspects – focusing solely on vocabulary acquisition or syntax. This study, therefore, seeks to bridge that gap by exploring how literal understanding contributes to the development of both vocabulary and sentence structure, ultimately enhancing children's speaking skills.

## 2.3 Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework of this study is based on the idea that literal meaning provides a foundational understanding necessary for vocabulary growth and the development of sentence structure. As children learn words through their basic, literal definitions, they are better able to remember those words and understand how to use them in a sentence.

This enables them to communicate more effectively and confidently.

The relationship can be illustrated as follows:

**Literal Meaning (Semantics)**



**Vocabulary Expansion**



**Understanding of Sentence Structure**



**Improved Speaking Skills in Children**

This model reflects the linear and interconnected process through which literal meaning supports broader language development in early learners.

## **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

### **3.1 Research Design**

This research adopts a qualitative descriptive method aiming to explore how the understanding of literal meaning in semantics contributes to the development of vocabulary and sentence structure in children's speaking skills. According to Creswell (2014), qualitative methods are suitable for capturing detailed and contextualized human behavior, especially in language development.

### **3.2 Subject of the Study**

The participants of this study were 3 elementary school students aged 7 to 10 years. These students were observed through various activities such as sharing, playing games and giving assignments regarding their learning in their school with a focus on those who showed active participation in speaking tasks.

### **3.3 Data Collection Techniques**

This research uses several techniques, namely:

- Observing children: directly in sharing activities, playing games, and giving assignments, especially when using a literal approach in assignments that explain the meaning of words and word structures.
- structured interview: conducting interviews with children to get an overview of their understanding and responses to learning and conducting tests to find out how well children understand the meaning of a word

## **DATA ANALYSIS, FINDINGS, AND DISCUSSION**

### **4.1 Data Analysis**

Data collected from classroom observations revealed that children who were taught using literal meanings showed improved understanding of vocabulary and were more confident in constructing basic sentences. The analysis focuses on how the introduction of literal meanings helped students relate language to tangible concepts and how this influenced their oral communication. Teachers employed visual aids and real-life examples to convey literal meanings of words, which facilitated easier comprehension.

For example, when a teacher explained the word 'apple' using an actual apple, children could associate the word with the object more easily. This approach was consistently applied across various nouns and verbs to build foundational language skills.

### **4.2 Findings**

The research identified several key findings from the implementation of literal meaning in language instruction:

1. Children exhibited better vocabulary retention when words were taught with direct and literal explanations.
2. Sentence construction skills improved as children understood the roles of individual words (e.g., noun, verb).
3. Students were more engaged and participative during lessons that included literal and tangible examples.
4. Teachers observed fewer grammatical mistakes and better sentence coherence among students.

**Table 4.1: Vocabulary Enhancement Through Literal Meaning**

Word	Literal Meaning	Sentence Example
Apple	A round fruit that is red or green and edible	I ate a red apple at lunch.
Table	A piece of furniture with a flat top and legs	The book is on the table.
Run	To move quickly by foot	He runs every morning in the park.
Dog	A domesticated animal often kept as a pet	The dog barked loudly.

**4.3 Discussion**

The findings suggest that literal meaning plays a critical role in helping children understand and use language more effectively. Literal meanings offer clear, unambiguous definitions that children can easily relate to everyday experiences.

This makes it easier for them to form mental associations and retrieve vocabulary during speech.

Furthermore, when children grasp the literal meanings of words, they begin to construct grammatically correct sentences more naturally. For instance, knowing that 'cat' is a noun and 'jumps' is a verb allows them to build sentences such as 'The cat jumps on the bed.' This understanding also supports syntactic development, enabling learners to form more complex sentences over time.

The discussion also highlights that literal teaching methods support inclusive learning. Visual and physical representations of words help children with different learning styles (visual, auditory, kinesthetic) to understand language.

**Table 4.2: Sentence Construction Based on Literal Meaning**

Word Components	Constructed Sentence
Noun: Cat, Verb: jumps	The cat jumps on the sofa.
Noun: Bird, Verb: sings	The bird sings in the morning.
Noun: Boy, Verb: eats	The boy eats a banana.
Noun: Girl, Verb: reads	The girl reads a book.

In summary, the application of literal meaning in semantics provides a practical and effective approach to developing children’s vocabulary and sentence structure. It enhances their ability to speak clearly and accurately, fosters better language comprehension, and promotes active participation in learning activities. These outcomes confirm the significance of semantic instruction in early childhood education.

**CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTION**

**5.1 Conclusion**

Based on the analysis and findings presented in the previous chapter, it can be concluded that the application of literal meaning in semantic instruction plays a significant role in enhancing vocabulary and sentence structure in children’s speaking skills. The direct and concrete interpretation of words enables children to understand language in a clear and unambiguous way.

By associating words with real-life objects, actions, and experiences, children become more confident in using new vocabulary and are better able to construct grammatically correct sentences.

Through classroom observations and teacher interviews, it was evident that students responded positively to literal teaching methods. The use of visual aids and physical examples helped children understand word meanings more deeply and apply them correctly in sentences.

As a result, learners demonstrated improvements not only in vocabulary retention but also in syntactic accuracy and fluency in speaking.

In summary, literal meaning serves as a powerful strategy in semantic-based language instruction. Its implementation fosters a strong foundation for children to communicate more effectively and with greater precision in everyday conversations.

## 5.2 Suggestions

In light of the conclusions drawn from this study, the following suggestions are proposed for educators, curriculum developers, and future researchers:

1. Teachers are encouraged to incorporate literal meanings consistently in language instruction by using real-life objects, images, and demonstrations to support vocabulary teaching.
2. Curriculum developers should design early language learning modules that prioritize literal semantic approaches, especially for foundational vocabulary and sentence construction.
3. Schools should provide resources and training to educators on how to effectively implement literal teaching methods in the classroom.
4. Future researchers could explore the long-term impact of literal meaning instruction on children's writing skills and comprehension abilities across various age groups.
5. Further studies may also investigate the comparative effectiveness of literal versus figurative meaning instruction in different learning contexts.

By applying these suggestions, educational stakeholders can optimize early language education and ensure that children gain strong and lasting language competencies through structured and meaningful learning experiences.

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