

บริบทสำคัญหรือไม่ในการเรียนรู้คำศัพท์

DOES CONTEXT MATTER IN VOCABULARY LEARNING?

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บทคัดย่อ

ความรู้เรื่องคำศัพท์ภาษาต่างประเทศนั้นมีส่วนสำคัญอย่างยิ่งในการศึกษาภาษาใดก็ตามให้ประสบความสำเร็จ อย่างไรก็ตามยังมีข้อถกเถียงกันอย่างมากในเรื่องวิธีการเรียนรู้คำศัพท์อย่างมีประสิทธิภาพ แม้ว่าการเรียนคำศัพท์แบบมีบริบทนั้นได้รับการยอมรับอย่างกว้างขวางว่าเป็นวิธีการที่มีประสิทธิภาพที่สุด แต่นักวิจัยจำนวนหนึ่งยังเชื่อว่าการเรียนคำศัพท์แบบนอกบริบทให้ผลลัพธ์ที่ดีกว่าในแง่ของการจดจำคำศัพท์ บทความนี้มีวัตถุประสงค์ที่จะนำเสนอแนวทางการเรียนการสอนคำศัพท์ทั้งสองแบบและประเด็นโต้แย้งเกี่ยวกับวิธีการสอนที่ดีที่สุด อย่างไรก็ตามการหาวิธีการที่ดีที่สุดเพียงหนึ่งเดียวในการสอนคำศัพท์ให้กับทุกคนนั้นคงเป็นไปได้ยาก เพราะวิธีการสอนทั้งสองแบบสามารถเป็นวิธีที่มีประสิทธิภาพได้เท่าๆ กัน หากผู้สอนนำไปใช้ให้เหมาะสมกับบริบทและระดับความสามารถทางภาษาของผู้เรียน

คำสำคัญ: วิธีสอนแบบมีบริบท วิธีสอนแบบนอกบริบท คำศัพท์

Abstract

Vocabulary knowledge of a foreign language is believed to be a crucial element for successful language learning. However, there have been debates regarding effective vocabulary learning method. While contextualized vocabulary acquisition is widely seen as the most effective, a number of researchers believe that decontextualized approach yields better results in terms of word retention. This article mainly focuses on these two approaches of vocabulary acquisition and the debate over which approach is the best. It should be noted that it seems impossible to find a single best method of vocabulary learning to suit every language learner. Both methods can be equally effective if used in the appropriate context and with appropriate English efficiency levels of students.

Keywords: Contextualized Approach, Decontextualized Approach, Vocabulary

Introduction

Vocabulary is one of several important factors that enables language learners to develop their language proficiency. Enhancing vocabulary knowledge will help them improve their reading, writing, and speaking skills (Nist & Simpson, 2001; Scurfield, 2003). The importance of vocabulary in language learning is currently recognized by many language teachers and researchers as we can see more studies on lexical learning in various aspects (Gu, 2003; Laufer, 2009). However, many non-native speaking students who study English as a foreign or second language tend to face many problems regarding vocabulary learning and acquisition. For example, Yang and Dai (2011) point out that non-native speaking students appear to have limited vocabulary knowledge and quickly forget the words they have already learned. Consequently, students' insufficient knowledge of vocabulary usually results in difficulties in learning the second language (Saengpakdeejit, 2014).

Additionally, rote learning and memorizing words have been the main approaches in teaching vocabulary to non-native speaking students in most Asian countries (Sinhaneti and Kyaw, 2012). As rote learning is regarded as repetition and memorization, what most second language learners usually do is to repeat the learned words without understanding their usage. Thus, learning vocabulary for most of them means memorizing and repeating words with fixed meanings (Yang & Dai, 2011; Sinhaneti & Kyaw, 2012). As a result, students know only the meaning of words. When using English in real life, students cannot use the words they have learned in the right context and cannot form grammatical sentences. Although learning vocabulary from word lists may enable students to remember the meaning of words, students are not able to put those memorized words into sentences correctly and efficiently.

There have been some debates concerning vocabulary learning method. While learning words in context is strongly supported, some believe that learning words from word lists is more effective. Therefore, this article mainly discusses two approaches of vocabulary learning: contextualized learning method and decontextualized learning method. We will also discuss the findings of two approaches and the arguments stemmed from these differing views of teaching vocabulary.

Learning Words in Context

Learning words in context or contextualized vocabulary acquisition is the method of teaching words to students studying English as a second language (ESL) by presenting the target vocabulary items in context or example sentences. Students tend to infer the meaning of words from the context. Also, students can learn how to put those words in a sentence.

According to McCarthy's (1990, cited in Nielsen, n.d.) research, learning words in the meaningful context helps improve students' ability to remember and assimilate the words learned. Similarly, Baicheng (2009) conducted an experiment with 58 Chinese students who had been studying English for almost eight years and they were the 2nd year English majors. Each student was given a number of target words to study and then took the tests. The experiments were conducted during classes over three weeks. As a result, he found that learning words in context or using example sentences helped promote students' vocabulary learning skill and influenced retention effects. It is also interesting to note that students did better when they wrote their own example sentences. Nevertheless, he admitted that there were limitations in his research. There

was no control group whose test scores could compare with the results of the experimental group. Besides, the 58 subjects of this experiment were not selected through true randomization. Instead, 32 of them were selected from one class (Baicheng, 2009).

Here are some examples of words in context provided to students by Baicheng (2009):

1) cringe [krɪndʒ] vi. 畏缩，卑躬屈膝，阿谀奉承 The young man used to cringe to his boss.

2) primate ['praɪmət] n. 大主教，总主教，首席主教 Primates are powerful in religion and politics.

3) succumb [sə'kʌm] vi. 屈服，认输，死 We never succumb to threats of violence.

As we can see, students were given the target words to learn including the meaning in Chinese, since they are Chinese students, and the example sentences which contain the target word. Thus, students were not learning only the words and definitions, but they would know how to put the target words in a sentence.

Webb (2008) goes further by providing the contexts with different amount of information to his subjects. He conducted this research with two groups of Japanese college students studying English as a foreign language. He gave each group a number of target words with different kinds of context. One was given the contexts that contained more contextual clues than the other. The contexts used in this experiment were rated by the English native speakers according to the amount of information these contexts provided about the meaning of the target words. The contexts were rated from the least informative to the most informative. Basically, the least informative contexts did not give participants any contextual clues and sometimes might be misleading whereas the most informative ones contained enough information and participants would be able to infer the meaning correctly.

In addition, he replaced the target words with disguised forms in order to ensure that the participants did not have knowledge of the target words before the experiment was done. The following are some examples of the disguised forms of the target words and their meanings: ancon (hospital), cader (lunch), dangy (street), denent (remember), etc.

Here are examples of contexts for the target word ancon (hospital) rated from the least to most informative (Webb, 2008):

1) He could read about things, and talk to his visitors, but he could not go out of the ancon by himself. He thought and played like a child.

2) "She's ill, that's all," I said quickly. "We're going to the ancon."

3) He was not ill, and of course the beds in the ancon are for ill people.

From the examples above, we can see that the first context does not give any informative clues. It is almost impossible for participants to guess the meaning of the target word. Conversely, the second context contains more information and participants may acquire partial knowledge in order to infer the actual meaning of the target word. However, the third context gives the clearest contextual clues so that the exact meaning of the word can be guessed correctly.

After several tests, the results showed that the group given the contexts with more contextual clues performed better in the tests. Besides, the quality of contexts played a crucial role in participants gaining knowledge of meaning. Webb (2008) also suggests that teachers and writers of course books and teaching materials should be aware of the importance of informative contexts in enhancing students' vocabulary knowledge. Teachers should consider how the context might have an effect on learning and prepare the course accordingly.

Furthermore, Scurfield (2003) states that learners' guessing ability is also very crucial when they encounter new words in reading materials. This skill can be acquired through practice and it can be done through classroom activities.

All in all, learning words in context can be most beneficial to language learners when the target words are presented with informative clues. The effectiveness of vocabulary acquisition crucially relies on the quality of contexts given. Therefore, teachers need to be aware of this when presenting contextualized words to students or when designing course books or materials on vocabulary learning.

Learning Words out of Context

Unlike learning words in context, learning words out of context or decontextualized vocabulary acquisition is the method of teaching vocabulary by presenting word lists. In other words, students learn only the definition of words without example sentences or knowing how to put words in a sentence.

There have been some language researchers and linguists who believe that learning vocabulary in context or with example sentences cannot help improve students' vocabulary learning skills. In the findings of the study conducted by Amirian and Momeni (2012), students learning words out of contexts performed better than those learning words in context. Their participants were 103 female students whose ages range from 16-19 years. The Oxford Placement Test was used to select the participants and the results showed that most participants were at the elementary level. The participants were randomly divided into two groups: the contextualized and decontextualized. The contextualized group was given the meaning inference lessons. They would be able to guess the meanings of words from contexts. The prefixes and suffixes were included in the lessons in order to assist their inferencing skills. In contrast, the decontextualized group was taught the words out of context. Rote learning of the translations of the words was the main approach. Then both groups were given the same vocabulary test and the results revealed that the group taught with decontextualized method did better than the other one. Amirian and Momeni (2012) point out that when it comes to inferring the meanings of new words, context seems unhelpful. This is because students in the contextualized group seemed to focus on the understanding of the whole texts but ignored the words and their morphological and phonological features. However, it should be noted that this study was conducted with high school students who studied English as a foreign language and their level of English proficiency was mostly elementary. Thus, their language skills and lexicon knowledge might be limited.

According to Huckin's (1987, cited in Stein, 1995) research, learning words from context did not have any impact on the improvement in vocabulary learning for students who study English as a second language because words in context or example sentences did not provide

enough information in order to clearly understand the meaning of words. Granted, sometimes example sentences do not give enough clues and it is extremely unlikely that target words can be inferred correctly. However, according to Webb's (2008) experiment mentioned above, we can see that guessing the exact meaning of words can be achieved if we provide students with the most informative context. Thus, it is a teacher's duty to prepare the suitable course materials that will develop students' vocabulary knowledge.

Similar to Huckin (1987, cited in Stein, 1995), Ciftci and Uster (2009) studied these two ways of teaching vocabulary and found that contextualized vocabulary learning did not make any difference in enhancing students' vocabulary proficiency. They conducted this research by dividing students into 2 groups. These students were from different classes of the Department of Foreign Languages of TOBB University of Economics and Technology and they were at the same proficiency level. Group 1 was taught by providing only definitions of words whereas Group 2 was taught by providing words in context. Words used in this experiment were selected from the units that had not been taught in class. Thus, it can be assumed that the students in both groups did not know these words. The students were instructed to do pretest which consisted of the target words they did not know. Then, both groups were taught the target vocabulary items in two different ways: one with the decontextualized method and the other with the contextualized one. After that, the students were asked to do the same test again in order to evaluate the effectiveness of these two teaching approaches. After the tests, the researchers found that there was no great difference between the performances of these two groups. The results of the posttest showed that there was no statistical significance in the students' scores of both groups. It can be concluded that giving target words in context is not more effective than teaching by providing only definitions of words (Ciftci & Uster, 2009).

In addition, there are other techniques commonly used in decontextualized vocabulary acquisition. For example, mnemonic and non-mnemonic techniques are effectively used in decontextualized vocabulary learning strategies (Nielsen, n.d.). They are believed to be more helpful than memorization strategies such as oral rote-repetition.

Mnemonic techniques are employed in order to enhance memory, so it is believed that it should help increase the effectiveness of lexical learning of foreign language (Gu, 2003). In mnemonic techniques, visual and verbal mental imagery are used to relate a word to be memorized. Nation (1982, cited in Nielsen, n.d.) points out that the Keyword Method is better than other methods in mnemonic techniques. The Keyword Method consists of two different versions: one based on the construction of visual images and the other the construction of sentences. Here is an example of how both versions can be used (Pressley et al., 1982 cited in Nielsen, n.d.):

Take the Spanish word *carta* (which means letter) as an example and use the keyword cart. A student might create an image of a shopping cart delivering a letter, or think of a sentence such as The cart carries the letter. This method seems helpful and makes students remember the word easily by generating images in their minds or forming sentences related to the keyword given. However, Hulstijn (1997) argues that this method can be used efficiently with concrete words only- the words that can be perceived visually such as cart, table, book, etc. In contrast, it seems to be less effective with abstract words such as peace, honesty, unity, etc.

Furthermore, Gu (2003) argues that this method does not provide enough grammatical information as it seems to focus mostly on the meaning of a word. Also, it does not help increase learners' knowledge in spelling and pronunciation.

In non-mnemonic techniques, *semantic mapping* and *ordering* are two methods widely used to help students learn target words efficiently. Semantic mapping is used to encourage students to learn words by creating a map displaying the meaning-based connections between words and other related words or concepts. For example, when ESL students were asked to think of words when they heard the word 'faithfulness,' they came up with words or phrases such as cat, *friend*, *family*, trust, dog, bonds, believe in friendships etc (Sokmen, 2009). After that, they grouped the words that they thought were related and the results were as follows:

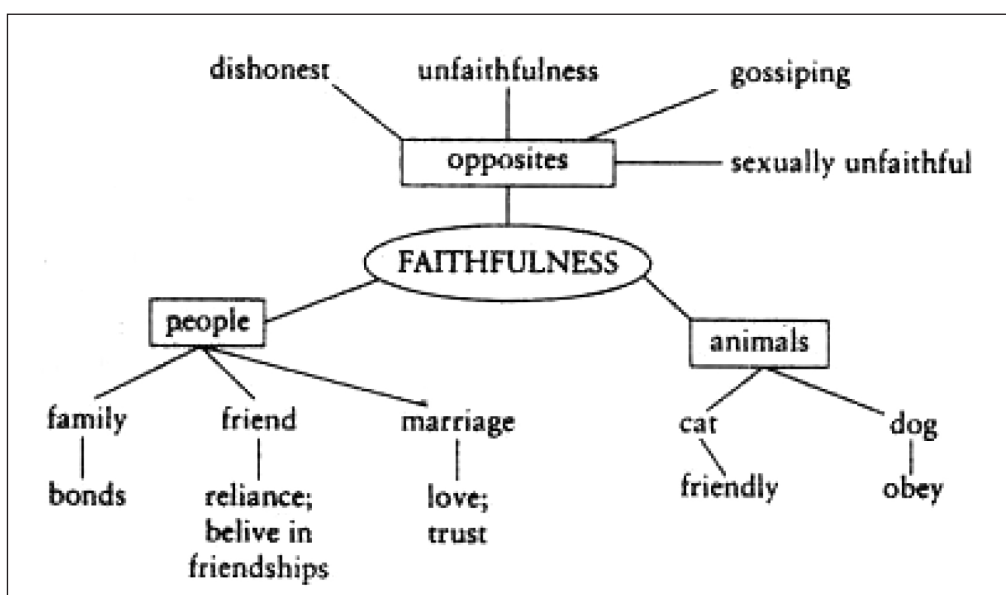


Figure 1

Source: Sokmen (2009, p. 250)

This technique may help learners remember words as well as know their semantic features. Besides, learners may be able to add new words or phrases to the charts (Sokmen, 2009)

Ordering is a method that requires students to organize the lists of words and distinguish differences in meaning (Nielsen, n.d.). For example, when ESL students are required to organize words in a particular order, they have the opportunity to learn how to integrate new information and create memory connections. Examples below are ordering practice created by ESL students (Sokmen, 2009):

Scrambled: silk paper artificial flowers plastic
Ordered: artificial flowers: silk, paper, plastic
Scrambled: talkative quiet outgoing shy
Ordered: talkative: out going quiet: shy

Another non-mnemonic technique is the Sentence Writing Method. It is used to enhance students' vocabulary learning by asking students to form a sentence using the target word. Instead of only memorizing the target word, students have to create a sentence by themselves using the target word. Thus, they have to understand the meaning of that word and construct a sentence correctly. However, the results of research on this method are mixed. Some studies (Pressley, Levin, & Miller, 1982; Barcroft, 2000) found that the Sentence Writing Method did not help students recall meanings of words whereas other studies (Coomber, Ramstad, & Sheets, 1986; Laufer, 1997) point out that this method is effective as a tool for assisting memorization of words (Nielsen, n.d.).

As you can see, there are both benefits and drawbacks of decontextualized vocabulary acquisition. Some methods can be efficiently used to increase students' vocabulary learning while some others are less effective. Nevertheless, it can be concluded that teachers who give vocabulary lessons should consider all methods thoroughly and be able to adapt them to suit their purpose and students' ability. Besides, suitable course materials should be carefully prepared in order to develop students' vocabulary acquisition skills (Webb, 2008).

Teaching Vocabulary to Second Language Learners

For many non-native speaking students who learn English as a second language, vocabulary learning and acquisition seems to be one of the worrisome burdens they have to get through. Teachers who have to give vocabulary lessons also face an uphill task in providing the effective vocabulary learning approach in order that students can acquire the efficient and sufficient amount of vocabulary knowledge.

Nielsen (n.d.) suggests that learning words out of context is more effective in building foundation for beginner-level students. Word lists should be used in this level. Granted, learning of decontextualized words may not give a full knowledge of word meanings, but it can improve students' skills in the first phase of learning new words (Nielsen, n.d.; Scurfield, 2003). As the language ability of students develops, teachers should gradually move from decontextualized vocabulary method to contextualized one. Contextual reading should steadily be applied in class, so students will be familiar with this approach and enable to develop their skills. Furthermore, having students learn both methods (contextualized and decontextualized) is believed to enable them to achieve more effective vocabulary learning in the future.

Besides, the different English proficiency levels of students may be another difficulty in teaching vocabulary if they are in the same class. Some students may have a better knowledge of vocabulary than the others. Teaching vocabulary in this situation may require a combination of both contextualized and decontextualized learning approaches. Nassaji (2004) points out that students who have stronger depth of vocabulary knowledge perform better in inferring the meanings of unknown words. They also use some types of lexical inferencing strategies more efficiently than those who have weaker depth of lexical knowledge. This is why second language learners usually lag behind the native speakers when it comes to learning new words because the native speakers have stronger knowledge of vocabulary.

According to Saengpakdeejit's (2014) research on strategies used by Thai university students in dealing with vocabulary learning problems, the strategies commonly employed were using

a dictionary and guessing words from the context. This may be because a dictionary provides guidance on pronunciation and usage. Also, it gives example sentences containing the target words in various contexts (Carter, 1987; Saengpakdeejit, 2014). In addition, watching English-speaking films and listening to English songs were strategies used by a few students in order to learn new words (Saengpakdeejit, 2014). It can be believed that authentic materials are suitable for second language learners to acquire new words in the context. Moreover, some students also learn words by reading novels, newspapers, magazines, etc. These reading materials can help increase their lexical knowledge. Obviously, we can conclude that, according to Saengpakdeejit's (2014) research, many second language learners employ strategies mostly related to contextualized method to enhance their vocabulary knowledge. Instead of only memorizing words, they tried to learn new words from context such as watching movies, reading novels and etc. This approach seems to be more efficient for Thai EFL learners than decontextualized method or rote learning.

In addition, according to my experience as an English language teacher teaching English to Thai university students, decontextualized learning method seems effective for short-term purposes such as scoring well in vocabulary tests. However, when it comes to constructing grammatical sentences, students are not able to use those memorized words in the appropriate context. This may be because students know only the meanings of words without recognizing their syntactic elements. Therefore, it seems difficult for most students to put those newly learned words into the right place in order to form grammatically correct sentences. Personally, learning words in context seems to be the most effective method if our purpose is to enhance students' overall language proficiency rather than force them to memorize words.

Conclusion

We have discussed the two main approaches of vocabulary teaching: contextualized and decontextualized methods. However, the debate over which approach is the best seems far from over. Both methods can be equally beneficial if used in the appropriate context and with appropriate English efficiency levels of students. Amirian and Momeni (2012) point out that a single best teaching approach to suit everyone cannot be possibly achieved. Differences and needs of each language learner should be taken into consideration when it comes to designing course materials. Teachers should be aware that different strategies can be useful to students differently. Thus, teachers should be familiar with various kinds of vocabulary learning approaches and be able to apply them appropriately (Saengpakdeejit, 2014; Webb, 2008). Moreover, the combination of two learning approaches is also recommended. However, we need to bear in mind that meaning is not only one element that students should know when they encounter new words. In order to learn a word, it is necessary to recognize its word structure, syntactic pattern, and lexical relations with other words (Laufer, 2009). All in all, according to Gu (2003), language learners should be able to 'know' words as well as be able to 'use' them correctly in various language contexts.

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