

# Importance of Teaching and Developing Reading Vocabulary through Context- Based Approach

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## Abstract

*Vocabulary teaching and learning is increasingly viewed as crucial to language learning process. The teacher and scholars know teaching and learning vocabulary is a tedious job and is not intrinsically motivating for the learner. In this regard, the researchers keep looking for different methods and strategies to make teaching and learning vocabulary easier and more pleasant for learners. In fact, the greatest tools we can give our learners for succeeding, not only in their education but more generally in life, is a large, rich vocabulary and the skills for using those words in different context. Expanding a learner's vocabulary by using contextual clues is way to reduce the need for consulting dictionaries and memorizing list of words*

## Introduction

Words are the basic tools we use to think, to express ideas and feelings, to learn about the world. Because words are the very foundation of learning, developing students' vocabulary knowledge has become an educational priority, students word knowledge is strongly linked with their academic accomplishment, because a rich vocabulary is essential to successful reading comprehension.

Developing students' strategies for handling unknown words has always been one of the principal challenges of English reading classes. After several years of teaching, I have found that enabling students to drive meaning of unknown words during reading classes with the help of contextual clues is an effective approach to increase vocabulary and reading comprehension.

Guessing vocabulary from context is the most frequent way to discover the meaning of new words. Researchers (Kruse 1979; Nation 1980; Gairns and Redman 1986; Oxford and Crookall (1988), as cited in Yu Shu Ying (2001:19) agree that to learn words in context and not in isolation is an effective vocabulary learning strategy. A word used in different contexts may have different meanings; thus, simply learning the definitions of a word without examples of where and when the word occurs will not help learners to fully understand its meaning. Learning an isolated list of words without reference to the context is merely a memorization exercise which makes it difficult for learners to use the words in different context. Looking at the context in which the word appears seems to be the best way of learning vocabulary. Good readers also take advantage of their

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background knowledge in processing the context and in creating expectations about the kind of vocabulary that will occur in the reading.

In Pakistan, vocabulary is taught only through reading. The reading texts seem to be the only means of providing new vocabulary. The usual approach to this challenge is to have students read only passages in which every word is known, or else allow them to consult a bilingual dictionary or the teacher for the definition of every new / unknown word in the passage and students try to memorize these words. As a result, learners forget words easily. The drawbacks of these approaches are obvious. As Wallace (1982) states, 'Too much dictionary work can kill all interest in reading and even interfere with comprehension, because readers become more concerned with individual words and less aware of the context, which gives them meaning. It also results in very slow and inefficient reading'. Yet, As Nation (1990, 1993, 2001) also states, 'For English Second Language Learners, unknown words in texts often create obstacles to their comprehension'. When encountering an unfamiliar word, learners can resort to different resources to deal with the problem, such as using dictionary, seeking help from the teacher or a peer, or attempting meaning from the context (Harley & Hart 2000). Since a contextual way of teaching and learning vocabulary is possible, we need to know how to train learners in this skill. Nation (1983, as cited in Yang Zhihong, 2000:19) gives a good model on how to guess unknown words:

- (a) Look at the unknown word and decide its part of speech. Is it a noun, a verb, an adjective, or an adverb?
- (b) Look at the clause or sentence containing the unknown word. If the unknown word is a noun, what does this noun do, or what is done to it? And what adjectives describe it? What verb is near? If it is a verb what noun does it go with? Is it modified by an adverb? If it is an adjective, what noun does it go with. If it is an adverb what verb is it modifying?
- (c) Look at the relationship between the clause or sentence containing the unknown word and other sentences or paragraphs. Some times this relationship will be signalled by conjunction like but, because, if, when or by, adverbs like however, as a result. The possible types of relationship include cause and effect, contrast, time, exemplification, and summary.
- (d) Use the knowledge you have gained from step a to c to guess the meaning of the word.
- (e) Check if your guess is correct.

Teachers can assist learners by marking words which learners should try to infer before using other sources as well as by providing glosses (Hulstijin, Hollander, & Greidanus, 1996, as cite in Hunt & Beglar, 1998:5). Once learners decide that a word is worth guessing, they might follow a five-step procedure like that of Nation, (1983, as cited Yang Zhihong, 2000:19). Again same five-step procedure recommended Nation and Coady (1988), as cited in Hunt & Beglar, (1998:5):

1. Determine the parts of speech of the unknown word.
2. Look at the immediate context and simplify it if necessary.
3. Look at the wider context. This entails examining the clause with the unknown word and its relationship to the surrounding clauses and sentences.
4. Guess the meaning of the unknown word
5. Check that the guess is correct.

There are four assumptions underlie this discussion of a context-based teaching and developing reading vocabulary.

1. Drawing inferences from what we observe is fundamental to thinking, and the same principle can be used in the reading process. Schema theory suggests that the knowledge we have is organized into interrelated patterns. These patterns are constructed from our previous experiences and guide us as to what we might expect to encounter in a new context (Nunan 1991, as cited in Yu Shu Ying 2001:19). Making use of what we know in order to understand the unknown is a common practice in our daily lives. For instance, if we are in a building and observe that someone is entering folding a *wet umbrella*, we will infer that it is raining outside.
2. Vocabulary is connected with grammar, so familiarity with grammatical patterns helps the reader guess the meaning of words. The connection between vocabulary and grammar can be seen by the interdependence of grammatical and lexical cohesion. In a typical text, grammatical and lexical cohesion support each other.
3. The subject matter of a passage is interrelated and the text is often redundantly structured. To help readers, writers often give definitions or extensive clues within the text when a new word appears. So readers may have more than one chance to understand the passage.
4. By nature, reading is a process of hypothesis formation and verification; it is a communicative act between a writer and a reader (possibly a large number of readers). Consequently, the reader's understanding is unlikely to be 100 percent accurate. As Wallace (1982:33) puts it, "The mother-tongue speaker learns to be content with approximate meaning; in other words, he is satisfied with a meaning which makes sense of the context." He compares this view of reading to the work of secret agents: "In the secret service there is a principle called the 'need-to-know' principle.... In other words, agents are not told more than they need to know in case they get caught and betray their comrades. Perhaps in vocabulary learning the 'need-to-know' principle could also be applied: Students should not be told more about the meanings of words than they 'need to know' to understand the context so that they don't get confused" (Wallace 1982:33).

There are three stages of applying a context-based approach to vocabulary acquisition for adult EFL learners.

1. The teacher's first task is to draw the students' attention to cue words and phrases. Signals of connection, such as the words *and* and *but* and the phrases *that is to say* and *in spite of*, relate sentences or parts of sentences to each other.

By introducing the explicit function value of a signal word in a sentence, the teacher helps students work out the meaning of a difficult sentence or an unfamiliar word. Students become sensitive to these signals for context clues step by step, and they become skilful in identifying and using them to successfully infer meaning. To that end, teacher guide the students to clarify for themselves the function of the signal word in the sentence. Teacher introduce cue words like *this, that, it*, and other indicators to help the students spot context clues. Nation (1979, as cited in Yu Shu Ying 2001:21) for a complete list of connectors.

2. The second task is to use leading questions to direct the students in a step-by-step search for context clues. With their limited experience in the target language and without the guidance of the teacher, students may find it hard to identify context cues. The available clues may be unnoticed or students may not be aware of words that are collocational. The teacher should use specific questions that direct the students' attention to the surrounding environment of an unknown word and that elicit responses to help focus the discussion.

One example is to ask students to use a substitution word or expression for the unknown word. The teacher then asks if the substitution fits the context clues. Students can revise their ideas to fit the context, probably resulting in a different substitution word. Obviously, some vocabulary development will occur when using this type of substitution strategy.

3. The third task is to prepare exercises that practise inferring the meaning of unknown words in short contexts. In the long run, it is probably more important for students to be able to explain how they infer the meaning of new words than simply to get a particular example right or wrong. In this step, the teacher selects some short paragraphs, appropriate in terms of level of difficulty, to practise strategies of inference. Each paragraph should contain one or more context clues. The teacher should ask students to infer meaning independently and then to explain how they made the inference.

The teacher provides the students with a handout of selected paragraphs of suitable length containing underlined words which are not known by the class. The students' task is to work out the meaning of the unknown words and to explain how they did it. In this exercise, the emphasis is on the process of inferring. Discussion should centre on the strategies the students apply and the useful cue words and phrases they can find in the passage that help them guess. The aim is not to always guess a meaning exactly, but to become aware of the surrounding information in which a word is embedded, which both influences and points to its meaning. Some students may make wrong guesses. However, they should be encouraged as long as their attempt to infer the meaning of the unknown word uses an active searching and thinking process. Sooner or later they will master the skill of developing vocabulary by inferring.

There is a more advanced and elaborate type of follow-up to this kind of exercise,

in which a number of unknown words are located in one passage. The learner is asked not to define the target words, but to indicate which words or phrases are helpful in inferring the meaning (Wallace 1982).

There are other useful types of inference exercises that help develop the skill of inferring from context, for example, gap-filling, cloze exercises, context enrichment exercises, and word-replacement techniques (British Council Teachers 1980:83–85, as cited in Yu Shu Ying 2001:21).

### **Advantages of a context-based teaching and developing reading vocabulary**

In addition to increasing students' vocabulary, this approach has several advantages:

1. It helps readers not only learn words but also know how to use them in context. Guessing the meaning of a word from its use in context requires an understanding of semantic properties, register, and collocation. It makes readers aware of one important feature of vocabulary, namely, that context determines the meaning of words.
2. Training students to infer meaning from context gives them a powerful aid to comprehension and will speed up their reading.
3. It allows the learners to make intelligent, meaningful guesses. This will make the learning task much more active and challenging than direct explanation of words. It has a problem-solving characteristic that appeals to most people and challenges them to make use of their intelligence to an extent that is not always common in language classes.
4. It helps readers develop a holistic approach toward reading. Because the context of a new word may be drawn from a group of sentences, a paragraph, or even the entire text, they learn to direct their attention to language units larger than the sentence while they are looking for context clues.

### **Conclusion**

Application of this approach has been successful in many classes in my experience. The students find it stimulating and enjoyable, and are eager to try it whenever an unknown word appears. They become more independent and develop learner autonomy. This approach has a positive effect on the students' reading habits. It helps them build up confidence in their reading. Expanding a learner's vocabulary by using context clues is a way to reduce the need for consulting dictionaries. It is therefore important to provide learners with strategies for inferring the meaning of unknown vocabulary from the context in which it occurs.

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