

Acquiring vocabulary through a context-based approach

DEVELOPING STUDENTS' STRATEGIES FOR HANDLING UNKNOWN WORDS has always been one of the principal challenges of English reading classes. In China, 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 word in the passage. The drawbacks of this approach are obvious. 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 (Wallace 1982).

After several years of teaching, I have found that enabling students to derive meaning with the help of context clues is an effective approach to increase vocabulary and reading comprehension.

Rationale

Guessing vocabulary from context is the most frequent way to discover the meaning of new words. Honeyfield (1977) stresses the importance of context by arguing that even with a functional vocabulary of the 3,000 most frequently occurring items in English, learners will still not know approximately 20 percent of the items they will encounter in an unsimplified text.

Researchers (Kruse 1979; Nation 1980; Gairns and Redman 1986; Oxford and Crookall 1988) 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 spoken and written language. 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 background knowledge in processing the context and in creating expectations about the kind of vocabulary that will occur in the reading.

Assumptions

Four assumptions underlie this discussion of a context-based approach to acquiring 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). 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. For example, a word can be classified as a gram-

matical item or as a vocabulary item. *Beautiful* is a vocabulary item, and in functional grammar it is also an epithet in the nominal group the *beautiful girl* and reflects the speaker's opinion of the person described. 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.... [H]e 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.... [I]n 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).

Types of context clues

There are a number of different context clues that can help a reader infer the meaning of a new word.

Morphology The students can derive word meanings by examining internal, morphological features, like prefixes, suffixes, and root words.

Reference words Identifying the referents of pronouns may provide a clue to the meaning of an unfamiliar word.
Example: Malnutrition gave him the shallowest of chests and thinnest of limbs. It *stunted* his growth.

In this sentence, the effect of malnutrition is obvious. Students should be able to guess what malnutrition could have done to growth.

Cohesion Sometimes words in the same sentence or in adjacent sentences give an indication of the meaning of an unfamiliar word, because these words regularly co-occur with the unfamiliar word, producing what has been termed "collocational cohesion" (Halliday and Hasan 1976:287).

Synonyms and antonyms Often the reader can find the meaning of new items in the same sentence.

Example: We had never seen such a large cave: it was simply *enormous*.

Obviously, the unknown word is a synonym for large.

Example: To be pretty and not plain, *affluent* and not poor, represents status in certain social groups.

We note that pretty and plain are opposites. When we see the next pair of words in a parallel construction, we can assume that affluent is the opposite of poor, and must therefore mean rich.

Hyponyms Very often the reader can see that the relationship between an unfamiliar word and a familiar word is that of a general concept accompanied by a specific example (a hyponym).

Example: The museum contained almost every type of *vehicle*: cars, buses, trains, and even old carriages and coaches.

Vehicle is being used as a hyponym; it encompasses all of the other items which are listed. Also, all of the listed items are of the same category.

Definitions Sometimes the writer defines the meaning of the word right in the text.

Example: Many animals live only by killing other animals and eating them. They are called *predatory* animals.

Alternatives The writer may give an alternative of an unfamiliar word to make the meaning known.

Example: *Ichthyologists*, or specialists in the study of fish, have contributed to our understanding of the past.

The word *ichthyologist* is unfamiliar to some readers, but the writer explains the meaning by giving a more familiar term.

Restatement Often the writer gives enough explanation for the meaning to be clear. Example: *X ray therapy*, that is, treatment by use of X ray, often stops the growth of a tumor.

The phrase *that is* signals a clarification of a previously used word.

Example Many times an author helps the reader get the meaning of a word by providing examples that illustrate the use of the word.

Example: All the *furniture* had been completely removed so that not a single table or chair was to be seen.

The learner should be able to guess the meaning of *furniture* from the two examples which are mentioned.

Summary A summary clue sums up a situation or an idea with a word or a phrase.

Example: Mrs. Christopher contributes money to the Red Cross, the Girls Club, and the Cancer Society. She also volunteers many hours in the emergency ward of the hospital. She is indeed *altruistic*.

From the account of Mrs. Christopher's deeds, the reader can infer that altruistic means unselfish.

Comparison and contrast Writers can show similarity or difference.

Example: The ancient *mammoth*, like other elephants, is huge.

This sentence indicates similarity and clearly states that the ancient mammoth is a type of elephant.

Punctuation Readers can also use clues of punctuation and type style to infer meaning, such as quotation marks (showing the word has a special meaning), dashes (showing apposition), parentheses or brackets (enclosing a definition), and italics (showing the word will be defined).

Class application

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. Generally, they specify "the way

in which what is to follow is systematically connected to what has gone before" (Halliday and Hasan 1976:227).

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 skillful in identifying and using them to successfully infer meaning. To that end, in my classes I guide the students to clarify for themselves the function of the signal word in the sentence. I introduce cue words like *this*, *that*, *it*, and other indicators to help the students spot context clues. See Nation (1979) for a complete list of connectors.

Let me take the example of cause-and-effect context clues. The strategies for such a pattern include recognizing the pattern and then locating the effect(s) and the cause(s). These are not always neatly arranged. Students should be told that signal words like *leads to*, *results in*, *because*, and *caused by* are used to indicate the cause-and-effect relationship. By suggesting a few strategies to be carried out for context clues, the teacher can help students comprehend the larger chunks of information found in texts and get them over "word block." See Robinson (1983:184–202) for his suggestions of study strategies for different text patterns.

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 practice 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 practice 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 center 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 (see British Council Teachers 1980:83–85).

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Advantages of a context-based approach

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. This approach 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 my classes. 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.

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