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The Effectiveness of Contextual Learning Strategies in Enhancing Vocabulary Retention Among Foreign Language Learners

Abstract

The vocabulary knowledge is central in the reading, writing, listening and speaking skills development when learning a foreign language. Nevertheless, the learning of words in the form of isolated lists or employing direct translation is not always guaranteeing long-term memory. This article aims to review the effectiveness of contextual learning strategies in improving the vocabulary retention of students of a foreign language. The research is premised by the conceptual-analytical method and comparative analysis of the foundations and recent research on second language vocabulary studies. The article asserts that contextual learning strategies enhance retention due to the fact that they relate word form, meaning, and collocation and communicative function unlike lexical items as independent entities. Meanwhile, context is not enough in itself. Great retention comes with the reinforcement of contextual exposure by repeated exposure, scaffolds of a teacher, design of purposeful tasks, note taking, and planned focus on target vocabulary. The comparison of incidental and intentional vocabulary learning is discussed and demonstrates that the best model is an integrated one. The article concludes that contextual learning based on authentic texts, dialogues, collocation-based practice, and staged review processes may do a great job in enhancing both vocabulary memory and the capacity of learners to apply words in where they are used in real communicative contexts.

Keywords: *vocabulary retention, contextual learning, foreign language teaching, lexical acquisition, incidental learning, intentional learning*

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Xarici Dil Öyrənənlər Arasında Lüğət Yaddaşının Gücləndirilməsində Kontekstual Öyrənmə Strategiyalarının Effektivliyi

Xülasə

Xarici dil öyrənərkən lüğət bilikləri oxu, yazı, dinləmə və danışmaq bacarıqlarının inkişafında əsas yer tutur. Buna baxmayaraq, sözlərin təcrid olunmuş siyahılar şəklində öyrənilməsi və ya birbaşa tərcümədən istifadə edilməsi həmişə uzunmüddətli yaddaşı təmin etmir. Bu məqalənin məqsədi xarici dil tələbələrinin lüğət yadda saxlamasının yaxşılaşdırılmasında kontekstual öyrənmə strategiyalarının effektivliyini nəzərdən keçirməkdir. Tədqiqat konseptual-analitik metod və əsasların müqayisəli təhlili və ikinci dil lüğət tədqiqatları üzrə son tədqiqatlara əsaslanır. Məqalədə kontekstual öyrənmə strategiyalarının söz formasını, mənasını, birləşməni və kommunikativ funksiyanı leksik elementlərdən fərqli olaraq müstəqil varlıqlar kimi əlaqələndirdiyinə görə yadda saxlamağı artırdığı iddia edilir. Bununla yanaşı, kontekst özü-özlüyündə kifayət deyil. Təkrarlanan məruzə, müəllimin skeletləri, məqsədyönlü tapşırıqların dizaynı, qeydlərin aparılması və hədəf lüğətə planlaşdırılmış diqqət yetirilməsi ilə kontekstual məruzə qalmanın gücləndirilməsi əla yadda saxlama qabiliyyətinə gətirib çıxarır. Təsadüfi və qəsdən lüğət öyrənməsinin müqayisəsi müzakirə olunur və ən yaxşı modelin inteqrasiya olunmuş model olduğunu göstərir.

Məqalədə orijinal mətnlərə, dialoqlara, kollokasiya əsaslı təcrübəyə və mərhələli təkrar proseslərinə əsaslanan kontekstual öyrənmənin həm lüğət yaddaşını, həm də öyrənmələrin sözləri real ünsiyyət kontekstlərində istifadə etdikləri yerlərdə tətbiq etmək qabiliyyətini artırmaqda böyük iş görə biləcəyi qənaətinə gəlinir.

Açar sözlər: *lüğətin yadda saxlanması, kontekstual öyrənmə, xarici dil tədrisi, leksik mənimsəmə, təsadüfi öyrənmə, qəsdən öyrənmə*

Introduction

Vocabulary is among the most conclusive elements of foreign language competency as without adequate lexical knowledge, the learner can not be able to engage in communication effectively. Vocabulary can no longer be perceived in the context of a modern applied linguistics as a mere body of word meanings. Rather, it involves form, meaning, use, collocation, association, and discourse functional (Nation, 2013; Read, 2000; Schmitt, 2008). This is why the vocabulary retention cannot be diminished to the temporary memorization of translation equivalents. It should be considered as the progressive evolution of working and stable lexical knowledge. The big problem with foreign language teaching is that the learners tend to forget words shortly after their initial exposure. This issue is more evident in EFL classrooms where input in the classroom could be the primary lexical source. Conventional methods like memorizing lists, copying definitions or learning isolated equivalents might aid early noticing although they do not tend to result in profound remembering. Contextual learning strategies on the other hand present words in meaningful sentences, texts, dialogues and tasks where meanings can be inferred, patterns of use are noticed and through association with prior knowledge new items are made (Hulstijn, Hollander, and Greidanus, 1996; Pigada and Schmitt, 2006). The topicality of contextual learning can be also understood better in the context of the wider theories of language acquisition. The input-based approaches lay stress on the fact that, language is better developed when learners are taught useful and comprehensible language as opposed to decontextualized forms. In this regard, the view of Krashen is still formative and Mammadova (2024) shows how a meaningful input can lead to the development of language. Similarly, real classroom conversation may provide a more enriched vocabulary learning atmosphere and in particular when learners encounter words in realistic communicative context (Ibrahimli, 2024). This article is aimed at describing the effectiveness of contextual learning strategies in vocabulary retention among learners of foreign languages. The discussion is around lexical depth, contextualized input, incidental and intentional learning, repetition, task induced involvement as well as pedagogical implications in EFL teaching.

Research

Word knowledge and vocabulary retention Multidimensionality. The vocabulary retention has a tight relationship with the level of lexical knowledge that the learners acquire. There can be a learner, who knows the main meaning of a word but cannot apply it to speaking or writing. This is the reason why size of vocabulary and depth of vocabulary matter. It has been established that language performance cannot be achieved based on the quantity of words learners are aware of alone, but also on the quality of that awareness (Laufer and Goldstein, 2004; Qian, 2002; Enayat and Derakhshan, 2021). In real-life terms, a retained word is not just the one that can be recognized, but one that can be understood in context, related to other lexical meaning, and can be used constructively. In this sense, contextual learning is extremely applicable since it adds lexical representation. Whenever a word is used in a meaningful sentence, paragraph or conversation, the learners decode more than the meaning found in the dictionary. They are also aware of co-text, collocation, pragmatic value and semantic nuance. According to Nation (2013), word knowledge contains a number of aspects, which are interrelated and in context, these aspects do not form independently of each other. This is among the reasons why contextual learning tends to be more permanent than rote memorizing.

Contextual learning as a foundation of greater retention. Contextual learning techniques are useful in that they put vocabulary within the context of meaningful language. Students are exposed to a word in the context of discourse rather than acquiring it as an independent object. These

interactions aid in drawing conclusions, semantic representation, and semantic matching. Hulstijn, Hollander, and Greidanus (1996) demonstrated that contextual factors, glosses, use of dictionary and repetition affect incidental learning of vocabularies. This is because, according to their findings, context assists learners to develop their initial lexical knowledge, although the quality of consideration to target items is also important. The real language materials come in handy particularly in this regard. Ibrahimli (2024) focuses on the idea that authentic conversations provide learners with an exposure to the real-life linguistic use and communicative patterns. This is significant in vocabulary retention since vocabulary acquired in natural conversation is commonly remembered along with their situational and functional applications. Equally, Zhou and Wu (2024) demonstrate that, contextual cues can go a long way in facilitating EFL vocabulary learning because they can steer learners to construct meaning as opposed to memorizing. Nonetheless, contextual learning cannot be glorified as an independent solution. In their meta-analysis, Webb, Uchihara, and Yanagisawa (2023) show that learning incidental vocabulary when the input is consequential and based on meaning does take place, however, the improvements are average and strongly influenced by the conditions of learning. It implies that there is context advantage to the learners but all context does not ensure good retention in the long-run.

Incidental and deliberate learning on vocabulary development. Incidental and intentional learning is one of the most significant problems of vocabulary pedagogy. Incidental learning happens when a learner acquires vocabulary when he or she is concentrating on meaning. Direct and conscious focus on lexical items is what is called intentional learning. Investigations indicate that they both are obligatory. Pigada and Schmitt (2006) discovered that vocabulary can be developed through extensive reading but the result is biased. This implies that incidental exposure comes in handy but not in most cases alone. The intentional work is essential when the learners are to achieve the stabilization of the new vocabulary in the memory. Hulstijn and Laufer (2001) maintain that the level of retention is highly reliant on the level of involvement brought about by the task. Their Hypothesis of Involvement suggests that the need, search and evaluation tasks produce deeper lexical processing and as such better retention. Joe (1998) also discovered that text based activities that encouraged generation facilitated incidental vocabulary learning better as compared to the less tasking tasks. A moderate approach is thus more efficient than the selection of one mode to the other. New objects can be initially explored in the context with the help of reading, listening, or dialog, but then they must be consolidated by means of planned activities such as taking notes, sentence constructions, matching collocations, or brief output. Mammadova (2024) is in favor of meaningful input, however, the practice in the classroom proves that meaningful input is the most effective when the meaningful input is supported by guided consolidation.

Repeating, collocating, and lexical richness. Another significant aspect of vocabulary retention is the repetition. One experience with a new word can result in recognition, but regular repetition is likely to create stable retention. Webb (2007) established that the effect of repetition in vocabulary knowledge is very high, and the influence is more effective when learners encounter words in different contexts. Their discovery is particularly relevant to the EFL classrooms, where the teacher is able to consciously recycle lexical information in between classes. The retention is also enhanced when the students study words in forms of collocational and phraseological patterns. Durrant and Schmitt (2010) discovered that collocational information is memorized by adult second language learners as a result of exposure. This implies that context is not only useful in the sense that it explains the meaning of individual words, but also, it shows the combination of words with other words. The effect of collocational learning is the enhancement of lexical knowledge and facilitation of retrieval of lexical information in the future. This depth is important since the use of vocabularies in actual communication require a lot of phraseological competence. In case learners can only memorize single words meaning, their production vocabulary is also poor. Contextual learning with the assistance of repetition and collocation-specific activities assists in transferring the vocabulary knowledge of passive familiarity to active command (Nation, 2013; Schmitt, 2008).

Task design and pedagogical effectiveness. Task design is important in the contextual learning process. It is not sufficient to expose learners to a text that contains words. Activities that involve

active processing of vocabulary are most productive tasks. Hulstijn and Laufer (2001) demonstrated that vocabulary retention increased with involvement-rich tasks, and the more recent study by Eskandari et al. (2024) demonstrates that the type of task and cognitive engagement are the factors that can impact vocabulary acquisition in EFL learning. In the case of teachers, it implies that contextual learning must be organised. Once students have been introduced to some target vocabulary in a reading or dialogue, they are expected to perform semantic choice, example generation, collocation matching, contextual paraphrasing, or short written production tasks. These activities enhance mental load and memory bias. Organized combinations of authentic dialogues, short passages of reading, contextual guess activities, vocabulary notebook, and spaced review can all be put to use as a means of retention (Ibrahimli, 2024; Webb, 2007). One more significant thing is that the most effective contextual learning requires the input to be comprehensible. When there are too many unfamiliar words in the context, or too much structural complexity, the learners might not be able to obtain the meaning correctly. It is here that teacher scaffolding is required. Portfolio contextual learning can be more effective by pre-teaching the useful contextual hints, suggesting the strategy of inference to students, and using instructional strategies to hint at the selected lexical elements (Mammadova, 2024).

Conclusion

The postulation made in this article demonstrates that the contextual learning strategies are significant in the improvement of vocabulary retention in the students of foreign languages. Their greatest advantage is that they enable the students to make a connection between word meaning and use, collocation, discourse use, and communicative intent. Contextual learning in this respect leads to more rich and more longlasting lexical development as compared to isolated memorization. Simultaneously, the conclusions presented in this article ensure that the context is not sufficient. Enhanced retention is achieved with contextual exposure with back-ups of repetitions, deliberate attention, teacher assistance, and cognitively challenging activities. Thus, an integrated model of pedagogy is the best one: new vocabulary has to be introduced to the learners in real and contextual situations, yet the words must be considered once again and processed intentionally within the classroom setting. In EFL classrooms, this model may be introduced in the form of authentic texts and dialogues, practice based on collocation, vocabulary notebooks, repeated encounters, and staged review. Once these factors are put together, contextual learning is not only a means of introducing vocabulary, but a bigger approach to the creation of stable lexical knowledge and communicative competence.

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