

PROBLEMS OF CONTEXT IN TEACHING ENGLISH VOCABULARY

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Abstract: The role of context in teaching English vocabulary is crucial for developing learners' communicative competence. However, many teachers and students face difficulties when dealing with contextualized vocabulary learning. This paper discusses the main problems related to using context in vocabulary teaching and proposes possible solutions. It focuses on challenges such as misunderstanding of contextual meaning, insufficient exposure to real-life contexts, and lack of appropriate teaching techniques. The study emphasizes the importance of integrating contextual clues into reading, listening, and speaking tasks to enhance lexical competence.

Keywords: context, vocabulary teaching, communicative approach, lexical competence, EFL learning

Introduction

Vocabulary is one of the most essential components of language learning. Without a sufficient knowledge of words, learners cannot effectively communicate or understand the target language. In modern approaches to English language teaching, vocabulary instruction through context is considered more effective than isolated memorization. Context provides learners with semantic, syntactic, and pragmatic information that helps them to internalize meaning naturally.

However, the implementation of contextual vocabulary teaching is often challenging. Teachers must select appropriate materials, design tasks that reflect authentic language use, and encourage learners to infer meanings from context. In many educational environments, especially in EFL settings like Uzbekistan, students are rarely exposed to real communicative situations, which limits their ability to understand vocabulary in its natural context.

The Importance of Context in Vocabulary Teaching

Context helps learners understand how words function in meaningful discourse. Words are not independent entities; they derive meaning from surrounding words, sentences, and the situation in which they appear. For example, the word "light" can mean "illumination," "not heavy," or "pale" depending on context. Thus, understanding the context is essential to mastering vocabulary use.

Contextual teaching supports deeper processing and retention. Research shows that vocabulary encountered in stories, conversations, or authentic materials is more easily remembered than isolated lists. Context also exposes learners to collocations and idiomatic expressions, making

their speech more natural and fluent. In addition, contextualized learning enhances motivation, as students find language more meaningful when it reflects real-life experiences.

Major Problems in Teaching Vocabulary through Context

a) **Misinterpretation of Contextual Meaning**

Students often misunderstand the meaning of words when they lack cultural or linguistic background knowledge. A single word may carry multiple meanings depending on tone, situation, or collocation. Without guidance, learners may misapply vocabulary, resulting in communication breakdowns.

b) **Lack of Real-life Exposure**

In EFL contexts, such as Uzbekistan or other non-English-speaking countries, students have limited opportunities to hear or use English in authentic situations. Textbook dialogues or artificial examples rarely reflect natural usage, and as a result, learners fail to grasp subtle contextual nuances.

c) **Inadequate Teaching Techniques**

Traditional vocabulary instruction often focuses on memorization and translation. Teachers may introduce new words through lists or drills without providing context, leading to short-term retention and lack of communicative competence.

d) **Insufficient Reading and Listening Practice**

Contextual vocabulary learning requires continuous exposure to rich linguistic input. Unfortunately, many students are not encouraged to read extensively or listen to authentic materials such as podcasts, films, or news. Limited exposure prevents them from recognizing how vocabulary operates in real discourse.

Pedagogical Approaches and Practical Solutions

1. **Use of Authentic Materials:** Teachers should employ movies, short stories, articles, and online resources to present vocabulary in natural contexts. Authentic materials engage learners emotionally and intellectually, which increases memory retention.

2. **Training in Guessing from Context:** Students should be taught to infer the meaning of unfamiliar words using clues from grammar, syntax, or nearby words. This strategy improves reading comprehension and reduces dependency on dictionaries.

3. **Cultural Awareness:** Teachers should explain cultural references, idioms, and expressions that affect meaning. Understanding the cultural background of a text helps learners interpret vocabulary correctly.

4. **Integration of Language Skills:** Vocabulary should not be taught in isolation. Reading, writing, speaking, and listening activities should reinforce each other to promote deeper lexical understanding.

5. **Task-Based and Project-Based Learning:** Students can be assigned projects such as interviews, surveys, or presentations that require them to use new vocabulary in real contexts. This approach enhances motivation and long-term learning.

The Role of Teachers and Learners in Contextual Learning

Teachers play a crucial role in facilitating contextual learning. They act as mediators between text and learner, highlighting how context changes meaning. Effective teachers encourage students to explore, hypothesize, and verify meanings through discussion and reflection.

Learners, in turn, must become active participants in their learning process. They should develop habits such as keeping vocabulary notebooks, noting contextual examples, and revisiting words in different situations. Cooperative learning, peer discussion, and group tasks promote sharing and negotiation of meaning, which are key to mastering contextual vocabulary.

Challenges in the Uzbek EFL Context

In Uzbekistan, English is taught mainly as a foreign language, and many schools still rely on grammar-translation methods. Teachers face large classes, limited access to authentic resources, and insufficient technological support. These constraints make contextual teaching difficult.

However, with the growth of digital tools and international communication, teachers can now integrate online materials, virtual exchanges, and multimedia content into lessons. By adapting such methods, contextual vocabulary teaching can become more effective and engaging for Uzbek learners.

In the 2022–2026 New Uzbekistan Development Strategy, the learning of foreign languages, including English, is mentioned under the 4th priority direction, namely equitable social policy and human capital. The document outlines the task of “aligning the quality of education with advanced international standards.”

- Within directions such as development of science, spiritual progress, and focus on the individual, language, language policy, or foreign languages are objectively covered as part of the education system.

Research Findings and Theoretical Support

Studies by Nation (2001), Schmitt (2010), and Thornbury (2002) confirm that contextualized learning significantly improves vocabulary retention. Learners exposed to meaningful contexts retain new words for longer periods and use them more accurately in communication. Krashen’s Input Hypothesis (1982) also supports this idea, emphasizing the need for comprehensible input—language slightly above the learner’s current level but understandable through context.

Moreover, Laufer (1997) demonstrated that students who encounter new words repeatedly in different contexts are more likely to integrate them into their active vocabulary. This indicates that teachers should prioritize depth over quantity, focusing on contextual richness rather than memorizing numerous isolated words.

Conclusion

Teaching English vocabulary through context remains a powerful but complex process. While context-based learning promotes deeper understanding, motivation, and communication skills, it also presents challenges related to cultural interpretation, resource limitations, and teacher preparation. To overcome these problems, teachers should integrate authentic materials, cultural explanations, and skill-based activities. Learners must be encouraged to infer meaning, practice vocabulary in context, and engage with English outside the classroom.

Ultimately, effective vocabulary instruction depends on meaningful exposure, consistent practice, and a learner-centered approach.

When vocabulary is taught through context, it transforms from a list of definitions into a living, communicative tool for real interaction.

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