The Effectiveness of De-contextualized and
Contextualized Vocabulary Teaching on Word Learning

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Abstract

Teaching vocabulary is significant for supporting English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners to enhance vocabulary knowledge. This article aimed to discuss the effectiveness of de-contextualized and contextualized vocabulary teaching techniques on EFL learners' word learning achievement. De-contextualized teaching technique might be suitable for the beginners and might enhance the word memorization in limited time. Contextualized teaching technique might support the word memorization by surrounding clues and might enhance the long-term memorization of vocabulary. In addition, the contextualized teaching technique would enhance students' reading comprehension during reading text. In conclusion, according to the various studies, the single vocabulary teaching could not lead the learners to succeed in vocabulary learning. Instructors should integrate both contextualized and de-contextualized appropriately in language course. Practiced contextualized word learning technique, university students could have appropriate technique to build up their vocabulary ability when reading various texts.

Keywords : Vocabulary teaching, De-contextualized teaching, Contextualized teaching, Vocabulary knowledge

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ประสิทธิผลระหว่างเทคนิคการสอนคำศัพท์โดยไม่ใช้บริบทและ
ใช้บริบทต่อการเรียนรู้คำศัพท์

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บทคัดย่อ

การสอนคำศัพท์เป็นสิ่งสำคัญในการช่วยเหลือผู้เรียนภาษาอังกฤษในฐานะภาษาต่างประเทศเพื่อ เสริมสร้างความรู้คำศัพท์ บทความนี้มีจุดประสงค์เพื่ออภิปรายประสิทธิผลระหว่างเทคนิคการสอนคำศัพท์ โดยไม่ใช้บริบทและใช้บริบทต่อผลสัมฤทธิ์การเรียนรู้คำศัพท์ของผู้เรียน เทคนิคการสอนคำศัพท์โดยไม่ใช้ บริบทอาจเหมาะสมสำหรับผู้เริ่มต้นและเสริมสร้างการจำคำศัพท์ภายในเวลาจำกัด เทคนิคการสอนคำศัพท์ โดยใช้บริบทอาจช่วยเหลือการจำคำศัพท์ด้วยบริบทและอาจเสริมสร้างการจำคำศัพท์ระยะยาว นอกจากนี้ เทคนิคการสอนคำศัพท์โดยใช้บริบทสามารถเสริมสร้างความเข้าใจในการอ่านในขณะที่อ่านบทความอีกด้วย จากผลงานวิจัยต่างๆสรุปได้ว่าการสอนคำศัพท์เพียงวิธีเดียวไม่สามารถทำให้ผู้เรียนประสบความสำเร็จใน การเรียนรู้คำศัพท์ ผู้สอนควรบูรณาการทั้งเทคนิคการสอนคำศัพท์โดยใช้บริบทและไม่ใช้บริบทในรายวิชา การที่นักศึกษามหาวิทยาลัยได้รับการฝึกฝนการใช้บริบทในการเรียนศัพท์จะช่วยพัฒนาความสามารถศัพท์ ในการอ่านรูปแบบต่างๆ ได้

คำสำคัญ : การสอนคำศัพท์ภาษาอังกฤษ, การสอนแบบไม่ใช้บริบท, การสอนแบบใช้บริบท, ความรู้คำศัพท์

Introduction

Learning a language involves various skills including pronunciation, writing, grammatical accuracy, register, reading, composition, and so on, but the most significant aspect is vocabulary (Folse, 2004). Vocabulary is considered an important element to language learning. It helps learners effectively acquire the target language whether in ESL or EFL learning (Leaver, Ehrman & Shekhtman 2005). Now many researchers have increasingly highlighted the importance of vocabulary and vocabulary teaching in English language teaching (ELT) research (Alhaysony, 2012; Alharthi, 2014).

One of the innovative methods for vocabulary teaching based on the communicative approaches is to use context to help learners guess the meaning of words or so-called contextualized teaching. It helps word memorization and the long-term retention

This method is in contrast to the de-contextualized vocabulary teaching technique which isolates the word from any communicative context. For example, learning vocabulary by using word lists and flashcards is considered a de-contextualized teaching technique. It is believed that without context, learners will focus more on the memorization of word meanings and pronunciation (Oxford & Crookall, 1990). However, which method is more effective for EFL Learners is still a matter of controversy especially for EFL learners. In addition, there is a lack of study on the effects of contextualized and de-contextualized vocabulary teaching on learners' recognition and memorization of word meanings in the Thai EFL context.

In Thailand, the goals of EFL teaching, as stated in the basic educational core curriculum B.E. 2551 (Ministry of Education (MOE), 2008), is to communicate and to make use of all four language skills (listening, speaking, reading, and writing) effectively. Furthermore, students should be able to learn from and exchange cultural knowledge with native speakers of English (The Ministry of Education, 2008). However, Thai students, especially learners studying in local institutions seem to have limited knowledge of vocabulary, which is basic knowledge to develop other language skills.

Therefore, most Thai teachers use the vocabulary teaching relates to two strategies: teaching individual word meaning (de-contextualized teaching) and teaching how to derive words from context (contextualized teaching). In classroom, most of them often gives the word synonyms or their definitions to students during teaching vocabulary and even translate the words in Thai. They always teach students to memorize the unknown words without critical thinking or using dictionaries (Mala, 2018). According to Kuehn (2018), teaching word meaning particularly by giving a definition or translation in EFL country such as Thailand and China have been common for a very long time.

On the other hand, according to Liangpanit (2015), a number of teachers believe that learning words in context and studying words in texts is crucial to enhance

vocabulary knowledge because it helps students understand that the same word can have different meaning in various contexts and sentences.

In order to the find the most appropriate way to teach university students vocabulary, in this study, the contextualized (reading text) and de-contextualized (wordlist) vocabulary teaching will be discussed in the following sections.

De-contextualized vocabulary teaching

For de-contextualized vocabulary teaching, learners learn words and meanings from word lists, flashcards, and dictionaries. For instance, in word list activity, students are told to memorize an unpaired wordlist of target language (L2) which does not include the words' definition in source language (L1) or paired wordlist of L2 which includes the words' definition in L1 by rote memorization (word repetition). In addition, flash card technique involves writing down (copying) the L2 word on the front of a card, writing the word's L1 meaning on the back, and then using the card to become familiar with the new word and its meaning. Other decontextualized technique is looking up the dictionary for the meaning of unknown words and memorize it (Oxford & Crookall, 1990).

Nielsen (n.d.) stated that the de-contextualized teaching technique should be employed with beginner learners to enhance vocabulary knowledge. Some evidence shows that the de-contextualized teaching technique helps learners to deal with words effectively in a limited time by using memorization (Fitzpatrick, 2008; Takahashi, 2011; Unaldi & Bardakci, 2013). However, there are contrasting beliefs from other researchers who found that using word lists, or looking up words in dictionaries, will lead students to encounter disadvantages in long-term vocabulary learning (Shen, 2003). Oxford and Crookall (1990) also argued that wordlists, especially with mother-tongue equivalents, are not very useful because learners "might not be able to use the new words in any communicative way." Accordingly, Nation (as cited in Mediha & Enisa, 2014) stated that using the de-contextualized activities could not be the appropriate for vocabulary teaching because there are the numerous words in the language and word meanings vary according to their contexts. Therefore, the instructor would take a long time by intentional teaching. This technique would make the vocabulary learning challenging and the learners could not remember words taught in isolation.

Contextualized vocabulary teaching

As for contextualized vocabulary teaching, learners learn vocabulary in context which allows the students to guess the meaning of words, for instance, in reading and listening practice and in speaking and writing practice (Oxford & Crookall, 1990). For instance, as for reading activity, all of the target words were presented in meaningful and coherent contexts with reading activities. Before vocabulary instruction, discussions about the topics were made to activate learners' schemata. Skimming and scanning activities

were carried out. The target words were highlighted in their own contexts, and the students were allowed to negotiate on the meaning through group discussions. Guessing the new word from the context was demonstrated by the instructor, and then the learners were encouraged to make guesses and share their ideas with the whole class (Unaldi et al., 2013).

Some studies support the contextualized techniques. Schouten-van Parreren (1989 as cited in Tricia, 2000) stated that the contextualized technique supports the learners' memory by surrounding clues to enhance vocabulary recognition. This technique also provides the usage of words in real linguistic structures. Similarly, Nuraisha et al. (n.d.) examined the effect of teaching vocabulary using inference contextual clues on vocabulary acquisition. The participants were 37 sixth grade students of a primary school in Indonesia. The findings revealed that using inference contextual clues can increase students' achievement and that inference contextual clues are an effective way to teach vocabulary. Shokouhi & Askari (2010) also revealed that the participants who employed a contextual guessing strategy performed better than with a non-contextual method. The result of examining the effect of guessing vocabulary in reading authentic texts by pre-university students also suggests that contextual guessing strategies enhance vocabulary growth. However, Shen (2003) stated "the uses of contexts in reading do not guarantee an increase in the quantitative size of the mental lexicon quickly, and they do not necessarily lead to immediate retention of items".

Related Research on Vocabulary Teaching

Much research in this field showed mixed results on de-contextualizing and contextualizing techniques. In regard to the comparison of contextualizing and decontextualizing vocabulary techniques, Yu (2011) found that 16 ESL Swedish pupils in primary level at Kristianstad could remember words by memorization from word lists only achieve in short-term retention. However, the pupils who learned words with a sentence writing method could remember words and have long-term retention.

Some researchers have found that the de-contextualizing technique is effective in vocabulary learning. Amirian & Momeni (2012), investigating two groups of grade one students in high school and pre-university, found that the de-contextualizing technique is more effective in enhancing vocabulary knowledge than the contextualizing technique. One group was taught using contextualizing strategies in reading, inferring the meaning of unknown words and identifying the meaning of unknown words in texts. The other group was taught employing de-contextualizing strategies by learning new word translations out of context before a new lesson. The findings showed that the 53 students in the second group (de-contextualizing) outperformed the first group (contextualizing) on the vocabulary post-test. Similarly, Unaldi et al. (2013) found that high school pre-intermediate language learners in the control group who performed contextualizing

vocabulary activities had the worst performance. The corpus-informed group had better performance than the former group. The decontextualizing group scored a significantly higher mean in the post-test. Some evidence shows that the de-contextualizing technique is able to deal with words effectively in a limited time by using memorization. Takahashi (2011) revealed that students at Bunkyo Gakuin University who employed word list vocabulary instruction had a higher average score by 10%. According to the Tayebi & Marefat (2017), the rote learning (word list learning) positively resulted in recalling the new words while the 31 participants were taught by this teaching technique.

Phonlawan (2014) examined the effect of guessing vocabulary on vocabulary retention through contextual clues and a bilingual word list with 50 high vocational college students at Buriram College of Agriculture and Technology. The recall tests and semi-structured interviews were conducted with the participants. The result of this study revealed that the participants who used a bilingual word list had higher scores than the students who guessed vocabulary through contextual clues. After interviewing, students who were 17-18 years old tended to prefer the bilingual word list, although they believed that guessing words from context was more useful than the word list.

On the other hand, there are some studies that support contextualizing techniques. Some researchers stated that not only do de-contextualizing techniques enhance vocabulary memorization but so do contextualizing techniques. According to Soureshjani's (2011) study, the control group was used de-contextualizing strategies by presenting new words via word lists with Persian translations and the experimental group used contextualizing strategies by presenting new words in model sentences. The latter group had better performance than the former group in a vocabulary memorization test and a sentence-making test. Similar results were found in Webb's (2008) study, which divided Japanese university students learning English as a foreign language into two groups. The first group was presented with more contextual text containing the target words. The second group received less contextual text containing the same set of words. The findings indicated that the context affects the acquisition of knowledge about the word meaning. In addition, Khabiri & M. Pakzad (2012) found that contextualizing techniques can enhance vocabulary retention and the vocabulary repertoire by critical reading in which the target words are embedded.

The use of flashcards with pictures is also considered to be a contextualizing technique and is a supportive way to promote students' vocabulary and could enhance learners' awareness. Mohammadnejad's (2012) examined two techniques of vocabulary teaching using flashcards and wordlists. In this study, the flashcards consisted of pictures with the new word in L2 on one side and a translation in L1 on the other. The findings showed that the use of flashcards for vocabulary learning program promoted students' vocabulary learning better than the wordlist technique. Mediha & Enisa (2014) claimed that the contextualized teaching by integrating the literature into lessons enhanced the

learners' vocabulary knowledge. Also the experimental group exposed to the contextualized teaching technique has higher vocabulary retention than that of the control group exposed to the decontextualized teaching technique as the traditional method in most institutions. Similarly, Nuraisha et al. (2015) examined the effect of teaching vocabulary using inference contextual clues on vocabulary achievement. The participants were 37 sixth grade students of the Primary School SD Muhammadiyah 2 Pontianak, Indonesia. The findings revealed that using inference contextual clues can increase students' achievement and that inference contextual clues are an effective way to teach vocabulary to students. Kermani & Seyezdrezai (2015) investigated the effectiveness between contextualized vocabulary instruction and definition-based vocabulary teaching of Iranian learners at intermediate level at Eram English Institute in Gograg, Iran. The findings of such study revealed that contextualized vocabulary instruction enhanced the learners' retention of words and this teaching technique should be considered as the useful vocabulary instruction in the EFL classroom. Shokouhi & Askari (2010) also revealed that the participants who employed a contextual guessing strategy had better performance than the non-contextual method. The result also suggests that contextual guessing strategies enhance vocabulary growth by examining the effect of guessing vocabulary in reading authentic texts by pre-university students. Khaghaninejad & Amirahmadi (2015) revealed that the contextualized teaching by using the reading text did not enhance only the vocabulary knowledge but also reading comprehension. Read and finding new words in the context would be helpful to lower the burden of many words in the reading text.

The 143 students in Samarahan District in Sarawak were divided into three group based on the proficiency level (beginner, intermediate, advanced level) and treated by contextualized word family model of DVI (direct vocabulary instruction). After treatment, these participants' vocabulary knowledge size increased and the scores were statistically significant between the pre-test and post-test scores (Subon, 2016). Accordingly, the 48 third-year students of Senior High School in Pesantren, Indonesia were exposed by decontextualized and contextualized vocabulary teaching and found out that these two vocabulary teaching techniques could enhance their vocabulary understanding. However, the students exposed by the contextualized teaching technique outperformed that of decontextualized teaching technique. In addition, the students could enhance their understanding on the word meaning, the possible meaning of words, word classes, word use and word form (Uswatunnisa, 2017).

Chansin (2007) investigated the strategies for English vocabulary learning of good and poor learners at Naresuan university. A questionnaire was used to determine the participants' vocabulary learning strategies. The participants believed that words should be acquired from context and words should be put to use. Both good learners and poor learners believed that memorizing words is not the only way to learn vocabulary.

However, good learners had more strategies to deal with vocabulary than poor learners. Orawiwatnakul (2011) suggested that teachers should strongly emphasize and explain techniques in order for students to apply vocabulary learning strategies appropriately to deal with the meaning of unknown words.

On the other hand, Yang & Dai (2011) studied the English vocabulary teaching in China. The traditional teaching method in China is to let the students memorize the word. Consequently, many students rely on this kind of method. However, Yang & Dai believed that the rote memorization and task-related activities should be integrated in order to enhance the students' vocabulary development.

The research above illustrates that there are mixed results supporting the use of both de-contextualizing techniques and contextualizing techniques. Some researchers believe that de-contextualizing is an easy, effective way to enhance vocabulary knowledge and the memorization of words in a limited time. Others argue that the contextualizing technique can enhance longer term memorization of words because of a deeper memory process. Moreover, some researchers believed that the two aforementioned techniques should be integrated into lesson to enhance students' vocabulary knowledge.

Conclusion

The de-contextualized and contextualized vocabulary teaching techniques are essential for enhancing vocabulary knowledge. The advantages of these two techniques are slightly different.

De-contextualized vocabulary teaching is suitable for beginners and might help them in word memorization in limited time (Fitzpatrick, 2008; Takahashi, 2011; Unaldi & Bardakci, 2013). In addition, this technique might not enhance the long-term word memorization (Shen, 2003). The de-contextualized teaching technique could be more effective than that of the contextualized teaching techniques in terms of word memorization, and it might be suitable for beginners ("Nielsen", n.d.; Amirian & Momeni, 2012; Takahashi, 2011; Tayebi & Marefat, 2017; Phonlawan, 2014; Unaldi et al., 2013). Given cultural context, some countries, particularly China, would be familiar with de-contextualized teaching that is to teach by wordlist. Therefore, this would be effective on some learners to enhance the vocabulary learning (Yang & Dai, 2011; Kuehn, 2018).

According to contextualized vocabulary teaching, the surrounding context could support the word memorization and could increase the long-term memory (Yu, 2011). However, it is not always guaranteed that it leads quickly to the increase in word retention (Shen, 2003). The contextualized teaching technique could be more effective than that of de-contextualized teaching technique in terms of the word retention (Khabiri & M.Pakzad, 2012). In addition, teaching with single vocabulary technique could not be always able to enhance learners' vocabulary.

The de-contextualized and contextualized should be integrated with the other useful teaching techniques such as task-related activities in the appropriate context. Given the reading text, it would be helpful to allow the learners learn the word in context. The instructor could use the literature or the excerpt of literature to provide to the learners so that the learners could enhance both the reading comprehension and vocabulary knowledge (Mediha & Enisa, 2014; Khaghaninejad & Amirahmadi, 2015). In addition, the instructor should teach the learners about which method they should use to learn vocabulary in the context such as guessing word meaning from the context (Orawiwatnakul, 2011).

However, the de-contextualized teaching is not definitely the alternative of language teaching because many factors and contexts affect the effectiveness of teaching. Some beginner learners or Asian learners tend to rely on the de-contextualized teaching technique. This facilitates the learners to memorize word without the surrounding context (Yang & Dai, 2011). Sometimes, the surrounding context would lead the beginners to make the wrong guessing of word meaning. Also, the cultural factor would involve in this issue according to Nation (as cited in Mediha & Enisa, 2014).

In conclusion, the single vocabulary teaching could not lead the learners to succeed in vocabulary learning. Instructors should integrate both contextualized and de-contextualized appropriately in language course with reading activities to enhance both vocabulary knowledge in limited time (Fitzpatrick, 2008; Takahashi, 2011; Unaldi & Bardakci, 2013) and reading comprehension at the same time (Yang & Dai, 2011). For the university students, first, instructors should use those two vocabulary teaching techniques and target words based on students' proficiency. Second, authentic text should be included in the classroom to allow the students learn vocabulary in more communicative way in order to enhance students' learning motivation.

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