

## Application of Context Theory in the Vocabulary Teaching in Junior Middle Schools

Sunshu Li

College of Foreign Language, Weinan Normal University, Shaanxi Weinan, 714000, China

**Keywords:** vocabulary teaching; Context theory; junior middle schools

**Abstract:** The study of context theory has become one of the hot topics in linguistic field in recent years. A word meaning is from its context environment to support and help. Without context, the meaning of the word can not determine the specific meaning. This theses aims to help teachers and students make use of context theory in vocabulary teaching and learning in junior middle schools. After giving a brief overview of the context theory, it gives some specific suggestions about vocabulary teaching in junior middle schools which are based on context theory.

### 1. Introduction to context theory

Vocabulary is the foundation for English teaching, for vocabulary is central to language and of vital importance to language users. David Wilkins, an English linguistics, pointed out that “without grammar very little can be conveyed, without vocabulary nothing can be conveyed.” (D. A. Wilkins 1983, 111)

The New English Curriculum requires not only students to master a large amount of words but the meaning of the words in the specific context. However, vocabulary teaching and learning have been undervalued in foreign language teaching. As for English teaching, most teachers organize their lessons around a set of grammatical points, with vocabulary selected to support the topic of the lesson units. Namely they teach words and grammar separately, with grammar as their main concern, without the specific context about the words. As for English learning, students learn vocabulary through memorization of a list of words with countless oral repetitions. Although they spend huge amount of time remembering vocabulary, few of them do they actually master. Consequently, after several year's English learning, some of them even are incapable of writing a right sentence. The reason is that they master vocabulary out of context.

To a large extent, the meaning of the words are restricted by context. We can not define the exact meaning of the words without the help of context. Although much of the work of vocabulary is the task of students, teachers' guidance and help are extremely helpful. If teachers present new vocabulary items in the specific context, it saves a lot of time and energy for consolidation. Additionally, students know how to use the words correctly. So it is high time that teachers introduced context theory into vocabulary teaching in junior middle school.

### 2. Context Theory Used in Vocabulary Teaching

I would like to have a brief introduction of vocabulary before vocabulary teaching. All the words and expressions we will use in the following parts are chosen from the text book “go for it” from grade 7 to grade 9. It was published by People's Education Press. And in the following examples the author adopted the Task-Based Teaching Method. The textbook are gradually experimented and promoted through the whole China from the autumn of 2002.

In a broad sense, lexical context refers to the collocation context of a word. In other words, it means the collocation relationship of the vocabulary with other words. Vocabulary teaching, based on the lexical context is suitable for vocabulary teaching in junior middle school.

Teachers should teach students that the meanings of a word vary from context to context. The meanings of a word are often influenced by the word before or after it. Therefore, it is essential for teachers to teach vocabulary in real context and teach students the collocation principles of

vocabulary. The teaching method will lay a solid foundation for students to learn vocabulary.

As for the synonymous words and words with many collocations, teachers could teach vocabulary by adopting spreading teaching method. For example, teachers could center on the target vocabulary, instructing students to remember the basic meanings and usages of the word. Then teachers could give some examples about the new meanings and usages of the word. At the same time, teachers could guide them to conclude the meanings and usages of the word. We could combine the meanings with the collocation of the word.

Taking the word make as an example, the common meaning of the word is “制作”.(make is a synonymous word)

Step1 Teachers could introduce the word make by writing the sentence “My father is learning to make cakes.”on the blackboard. Students have learned the basic meaning of the word, they will know it means “制作”.

Step2 Teachers could write other sentences on the blackboard.

(1) Can you make a sentence by using the word “leave”? (造句)

(2) My little brother has learned to make bed. (铺床)

(3) Helping others could make our world more harmony. (使)

Before telling the meaning of the word make in the above sentences, teachers could let students have a brainstorming, guessing the new meaning of the word.

Step3 Teachers could guide students know the meaning of the word make in the above sentences by instructing students the words followed by make. For example, make a sentence, sentence means 句子, so it is not difficult for students to know make a sentence means “造句子.” make bed, bed means “床”.make bed means “铺床”.

Step4 Teachers could summarize the new meanings of the word make and its collocations with students together.

Lexical context can be also applied in the verb collocation which has the concrete meaning. Taking the word take as an example. (1) The plane took off despite the fog. (起飞) (2) I take back what I said. (收回) (3) I want to take away the pen I lent you. (拿走) There are many examples about take. It has different meanings when it collocates with the prepositions and adverbs and so on.

It is impossible to teach all the collocations of the target vocabulary. What the writer tries to get is that student could understand the meanings of the word vary in different context and students could choose the correct collocation of each word.

Grammatical context can be further classified into morpheme context and Syntactic context. Here the writer mainly talks about vocabulary teaching based on the morpheme context.

Teachers could apply morpheme context in vocabulary teaching from these aspects. 1. Remembering vocabulary by imagining its word family. 2. Teachers can teach vocabulary by teaching the prefix and the suffix of the word. 3. Teachers can teach vocabulary by teach the principles consisting of the compound words.

(1) Teaching vocabulary by imaging the word family.

For example, when the teacher teaches students meaningful, they could write meaningless and meaning on the blackboard. So the students will find mean is the root of all these words.

(2) Teaching vocabulary by teaching the prefix and the suffix.

Taking the word foretell as an example.

Step1 Teachers could direct students to remember the suffix and prefix.

Step2 Teachers could tell students that fore means “前,向前”. And then teachers could direct students know the meaning of the word “forecast”.

Step3 After knowing “fore” means “前; 向前”, so forecast means “预报”.Tell means “告诉”. Then students will guess foretell means “提前告诉”. And then teachers tell students it means “预告”.

Teachers could teach students the suffix in the same way. Taking the word historian as an example.

Step1 Teachers could direct students to recall the words “American and musician”.students know

American means “美国人”; musician “音乐家”.

Step2 Teachers could direct students to find the two words have the same suffix \_an and \_ian. Then telling students that \_an and \_ian mean “.....地方的人， 精通的人”.

Step3 Then instructing students to guess the word historian, history means “历史”. \_ian means “人”. Namely, historian means “历史学家”.

(3) Teaching vocabulary by teaching the principles consisting of the compound words.

If teachers want to teach students the new word skateboard, they could help students thinking of the word blackboard. Black is “黑色” and board is “板”. If the students have some memory of the word skating, they will guess the meaning of skateboard is “滑板”.

Teachers can help students go over their vocabulary by hollowing out in a text. For example, when the teachers go over boring, bored, bores, they can hollow out in a sentence, letting the students fill the blanks according to the usage of these words and context of this sentence.

The little girl felt b\_\_\_\_\_ with the b\_\_\_\_\_ novel, that is to say, the novel b\_\_\_\_\_ the girl.

Teaching vocabulary based on morpheme can not only help students consolidate the vocabulary they have already learned, but also enlarge their vocabulary quantity.

### 3. Non-Linguistic Context in the Application of Vocabulary Teaching

Situational context refers to the specific situation when the speech takes place, which is related to several factors including the styles of the speech, time and place, The degree of formality, the speech scope and the topic and so forth. To some extent, these factors have a direct influence on the choice of words. The specific situational context refers to the concrete life situations, performance context, the context of visual aids, imaging context and so on. Teachers can not only help students understand the word meaning but also can apply the words students have learned into daily use.

Teachers could teach students vocabulary in the following activities:

1) Introducing new words based students' existing knowledge.

Teachers can combine vocabulary teaching with students' formation of previous words and their common senses or life experience. For example, teachers could presenting students with the direction signs, information signs, warning signs and instruction signs when the teacher teach new words direction, warning and instruction in the unite of “signs around us”. Students can easily master these words because they are familiar with these concrete objects in daily life.

2) Presenting new words by material object or the real situation in the classroom.

This kind of activity is suitable for teaching nouns referring the material object. Teachers should try their best to teach these words in English connecting English vocabulary with the concrete object. For example, the word “stomach”

Step1 Teachers could tell students that this word is a part of our body. Students will know this word has something to do with our body. Then they will guess what is the meaning of the word.

Step2 Teachers touch their stomachs and say: “this is my stomach”. Then students will know .

3) Presenting vocabulary by pictures, Power Point and Brief strokes.

According to the real demands of teaching, teachers could provide students with pictures, Power Point and brief strokes relating to the target words. Teaching vocabulary in this way can not only equip students with real situations to learn and use the new words, but also raise their vocabulary efficiency. For example, teachers could adopt this method when they teach these words block, architect, construction in the unit “jobs people do” .

Step1 Teachers could draw a brief stroke of a building on the blackboard. Then refer students the name of Susan, David and Mrs. Wang.

Step2 Teachers could write the students Susan, David and Mrs. Wang live in the same bloke of the flats on the blackboard. And then teachers could pointing at the flat in the picture, so that students will know it means “公寓”.

Step3 Teachers could present students architect and construction by presenting students pictures in the Power Point.

4) Introducing new words by aphorisms, advertising and English songs.

These are some common and interesting methods for teachers to teach and students to learn new words. Let us take “hero” as an example.

Step1 Teachers could play an English song called “hero” in the first place. After listening this song, teachers tell students hero is the word we are going to learn today.

Step2 Teachers could help students guess the meaning of this word by telling them hero is a person, especially a man who is admired by many people for doing something brave or good. Though this method students can master the meaning of the word hero, but know the qualities a hero has.

Language is not only a part of culture, but the carrier of culture. As the basic element of language, vocabulary can also be influenced by the social cultural background. Chinese culture differs in American culture in the color, number and the referring meaning of the animals. Chinese students have difficulty in learning these parts of vocabularies for different cultural meanings. For example, word dog has different meaning in china and American, such as lucky dog (幸运儿); old dog(老手) love me love my dog(爱屋及乌). In western culture dog represent cute, loyalty and smart, while in Chinese culture, dog symbols for “偷鸡摸狗, 狗仗人势, 狐朋狗友 and so on.”

Teachers could conduct the following activities when teaching vocabulary:

1) Using the original edition of English material

Teachers should use the real and original edition of English material as much as possible. Generally speaking, the original edition of English material includes newspapers, magazines, movie, TV and so on. We can know the background of culture but the trend of the modern word.

2) Organizing students to have a cultural discussion

As for Chinese students who are lack of foreign life experience, having a group discussion, free speech or have a debate to discuss the foreign culture can not only be good for students’ cultivation of cultural consciousness but picking up vocabulary.

#### 4. Conclusion

Vocabulary teaching and learning can benefit greatly from context theory.

(1) Teaching vocabulary in context can stimulate students’ interest in learning vocabulary. Compared with the traditional vocabulary teaching in class, the interactive and relaxing class model are more suitable for their age and more beneficial to using their creativity and imagination. Students’ motivation and initiative are triggered by involved in the real-life activities planed by the teacher.

(2) Teaching vocabulary in context can help students to develop a good learning habit and efficient learning strategy. Students’ learning habit and strategies are changed after teachers apply context theory into vocabulary teaching. Most of them know they should remember vocabulary in the specific context and know how to guess and memorize words in the context instead of looking them up in the dictionary or remember mechanically.

In conclusion, students can not only develop a good learning habit and efficient learning strategy, but develop self-oriented learning ability and team spirit by participating the activities. Meanwhile, students’ capacities of observing, memorizing, imagination, and creating can be also developed to some extent.

#### References

- [1] Fries, C.C. *Teaching and Learning English as a Foreign Language*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press. 1945. 36-38.
- [2] Firth, J.R. *Papers in Linguistics, 1934-1951*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. 1957.16-18.
- [3] Holliday M.A.K Has an R. *Language, Context and Text: Aspects of Language in a social-semiotic perspective*. Victoria: Dakin University Press. 1985. 23-27.
- [4] Hadley, A.O. *Teaching Language in Context*. Beijing: Foreign Language Teaching and Research

Press. 2003. 14-18.

[5] Kristen, S.D. & Terrell, T. D. *The Natural Approach*. CA: The Aleman Press. 1983. 43-45.

[6] Mondrian, J. and Wide Boer. *The Effects of Contextual Richen SS on the Guess ability and the Retention of Words in a Foreign Language*. Applied Linguistics. 1991. 45-47.

[7] Nation, L.S. P. *Teaching and Learning Vocabulary*. New York: Newbury House. 1990. 26-30.

[8] Richard, J. C. *Approaches and Methods in Language Teaching*. Beijing: Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press. 2000. 15-18.

[9] Sparer, D. & Wilson, D. Relevance. *Communication and Cognition*. Oxford Blackwell Publishers Ltd. 34-36.