

The Effects of Contextualized and De-contextualized Vocabulary Teaching on Learners' Memorization and Recognition of Word Meanings

Natthicha Siangwan, Jirapa Abhakorn

Abstract

When learning English as a Foreign Language (EFL), learners are expected to broaden their lexical repertoire not only to learn and to be able to use unfamiliar words, but also to develop other language skills. This study investigates the effects of contextualized and de-contextualized vocabulary teaching on learners' memorization and recognition of word meanings, and to evaluate the learners' attitudes towards the two strategies for teaching vocabulary. Data were collected with two sets of instruments: a test and a delayed test, and an attitude questionnaire. The participants were 39 students, aged 12-13 years old who were studying at a local school in Phetchaburi province in Thailand. The results show that the de-contextualized technique is more effective than the contextualized technique in helping the learners to achieve vocabulary memorization. However, the contextualized technique outperforms the de-contextualized technique in developing vocabulary recognition. The research findings have implications for vocabulary teaching in that word meanings should be taught in isolation as well as in context to focus on both the language features and the appropriateness for use in daily life.

Keywords: contextualized vocabulary teaching, de-contextualized vocabulary teaching, English language teaching, word recognition, word memorization

บทคัดย่อ

ในการเรียนภาษาอังกฤษเป็นภาษาต่างประเทศนั้นผู้เรียนถูกคาดหวังว่าจะต้องมีความรู้คำศัพท์ ไม่ใช่แค่เพื่อใช้ในการเรียนและการใช้คำศัพท์ที่ไม่คุ้นเคยเป็นแต่เพื่อพัฒนาทักษะทางภาษาด้านอื่นๆ อีกด้วย งานวิจัยนี้ศึกษาผลจากการสอนคำศัพท์แบบใช้บริบทและไม่ใช้บริบทที่มีต่อการพัฒนานักเรียนในด้านการจำ และการรู้ความหมายของคำศัพท์และประเมินความคิดเห็นของนักเรียนที่มีต่อกลยุทธ์การสอนทั้งสองแบบ ข้อมูลถูกเก็บจากเครื่องมือสองชนิดคือแบบทดสอบ (Test and Delayed Test) และแบบสอบถามความ

คิดเห็น ผู้ร่วมวิจัยเป็นนักเรียนจำนวน 39 คน อายุ 12-13 ปี ซึ่งกำลังศึกษาในโรงเรียนท้องถิ่นในจังหวัดเพชรบุรี ประเทศไทย ผลจากการวิจัยแสดงว่าการสอนแบบไม่ใช้บริบทมีประสิทธิภาพมากกว่าการสอนแบบใช้บริบทในการช่วยให้นักเรียนจำคำศัพท์ อย่างไรก็ตามการสอนแบบใช้บริบทดีกว่าการสอนแบบไม่ใช้บริบทในการช่วยให้นักเรียนรู้คำศัพท์ ผลการวิจัยให้ความรู้ต่อการสอนคำศัพท์ภาษาต่างประเทศว่าคำศัพท์และความหมายควรจะสอนทั้งแบบมีและไม่มีบริบทเพื่อนำการเรียนรู้ทั้งลักษณะทางภาษา (language features) และการนำไปใช้ในชีวิตประจำวันให้เหมาะสม

คำสำคัญ การสอนคำศัพท์แบบใช้บริบท การสอนคำศัพท์แบบไม่ใช้บริบท การสอนภาษาอังกฤษเป็นภาษาต่างประเทศ การรู้คำศัพท์ การท่องจำคำศัพท์

Introduction

Learning a language involves various skills including pronunciation, writing, grammatical accuracy, register, reading and composition, and so on, but the most significant aspect is vocabulary (Folse, 2004). The focus of language teaching on lexis has often been neglected in both the older grammar, and the more recent communicative teaching approaches. 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 to guess the meaning of words. 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 learners of English as a foreign language (EFL) is still a matter of controversy especially for young EFL learners since there have been only a few studies on vocabulary for this group of 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 classroom context.

In Thailand, the goals of EFL teaching for primary school students, as stated in the National Curriculum, 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, 2009). However, Thai students, especially young

learners studying in local or public schools seem to have limited knowledge of vocabulary, which is basic knowledge to develop other language skills. According to a report by the National Institute of Educational Testing Service (NIETS, 2014), the mean score of the Ordinary National Education Test (O-NET) of English for students in the sixth grade of primary school in the academic year 2014 was 36.02 from 100. One of the main reasons was a lack of basic vocabulary.

Because of the interest in vocabulary teaching to young learners and to fill the research gap, this study aims to examine whether the de-contextualized or the contextualized technique is more effective in enhancing the recognition and memorization of word meanings for Thai primary school students in the sixth grade (12-13 years old). In addition, the students' attitude towards the de-contextualized and contextualized methods will be evaluated.

Literature Review

There have been various vocabulary teaching techniques proposed by scholars in the field of ELT. Among the various well-known vocabulary teaching methods are de-contextualized and contextualized vocabulary teaching techniques. Lists of activities for de-contextualized and contextualized vocabulary teaching techniques are presented in Figure 1.

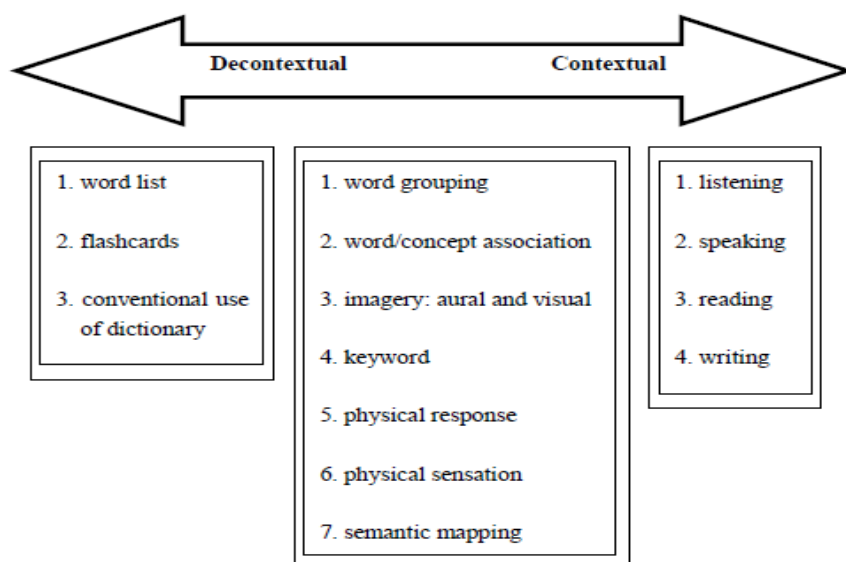


Figure 1 De-contextualized and contextualized vocabulary teaching activities (Shen 2003: 190)

For de-contextualized vocabulary teaching, learners learn words and meanings from word lists, flashcards, and dictionaries. 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.”

As for contextualized vocabulary teaching, learners learn vocabulary in context which allows the learners to guess the meaning of words, for instance, in reading and listening practice and in speaking and writing practice (Oxford & Crookall, 1990). There are studies that 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”. Amirian & Momeni (2012) found that the de-contextualized technique is more effective in enhancing vocabulary knowledge than the contextualized technique when investigating two groups of grade one students in high school and pre-university.

The research mentioned above illustrates that there are mixed results for the use of both de-contextualized and contextualized 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 contextualizing can enhance longer term memorization of words because of the deeper memory process. Since there are still conflicting opinions, research in this field is therefore useful.

Methodology

The study employed a quantitative method. The data were collected from experiments to compare the effects of de-contextualized and contextualized vocabulary teaching techniques on learners' memorization and recognition of word meanings. Learners' attitudes towards the two teaching techniques were collected through questionnaires. The participants were 39 sixth grade students in a gifted program at Tessaban 3 Wat Chan Thra Was School in Petchaburi, Thailand. They were purposively selected based on the fact that they were a homogenous sample in terms of their learning proficiency, which was higher than the students in other classes at the school.

For the data collection, the researcher first surveyed and listed the twenty most unknown words to the participants through a vocabulary test. Then two lesson plans, one using a de-contextualized technique and the other a contextualized technique for vocabulary teaching, were prepared for this study. Each teaching lesson was planned to teach ten different words obtained from the vocabulary surveys within two days. After each lesson, the students were asked to do a test (see Appendix) and the attitude questionnaire, and then the retention test the following day. Descriptive statistics (*Mean*, *S.D.*) were used to investigate the effect of the contextualized and de-contextualized vocabulary teaching on students' recognition and memorization of word meanings, and to evaluate the students' attitude towards the two teaching techniques. In addition, an independent sample *T-test* was used to find significant differences in the effect of the two teaching techniques on students' recognition and memorization of word meanings.

Results

In the first part, the results from the tests and the delayed test collected from the learners who had been taught using contextualized and de-contextualized vocabulary teaching are shown in the tables below.

Section	Test		Delayed test		Retention
	Mean	S.D.	Mean	S.D.	
Recognition (Total score = 5)	4.95	.320	4.95	.320	Equal
Memorization (Total score = 5)	1.87	1.750	1.36	1.581	Less

Table 1 The mean scores of the test and the delayed test collected after employing the contextualized vocabulary teaching technique

Table 1 shows the mean scores of the test and the delayed test after the learners had been taught with the contextualized vocabulary teaching technique. The results show that the

mean scores from the recognition section of the two tests are not different (Mean = 4.95, S.D. = .320), whereas the mean score of the memorization section of the test (Mean = 1.87,

S.D. = 1.750) is a little higher than that of the delayed test (Mean = 1.36, S.D. = 1.581).

Section	Test		Delayed test		Retention
	Mean	S.D.	Mean	S.D.	
Recognition (Total score = 5)	4.9	.307	4.87	.339	Less
Memorization (Total score = 5)	2.28	1.376	1.97	1.530	Less

Table 2 The mean scores of the test and the delayed test collected after employing the de-contextualized vocabulary teaching technique

According to Table 2, for the recognition test, the mean score from the test was 4.9 (S.D. = .307), and the mean score from the delayed test was 4.87 (S.D. = .339). These results reveal that the retention of words in terms of recognition decreased. In the memorization tests, the mean score was 2.28 (S.D. = 1.376), while the mean value from the delayed test was 1.97. These results reveal that the retention of words in terms of recognition also decreased. In the next section, the test and delayed test mean scores from the de-contextualized and the contextualized techniques are compared.

Section	Contextualizing		De-contextualizing		t	df	Sig.
	Mean	S.D.	Mean	S.D.			
Recognition (Total score = 5)	4.95	.320	4.9	.307	.721	76	.237
Memorization (Total score = 5)	1.87	1.750	2.28	1.376	1.151	72	.127

Table 3 Comparison of the mean test scores for the contextualized and de-contextualized vocabulary teaching techniques

Table 3 shows that there was not a significant difference in the effect of contextualized teaching and de-contextualized teaching on the test of word

recognition, $t(76) = .721$, $p > .05$, or the test of word memorization, $t(72) = 1.151$, $p > .05$.

Section	Contextualizing		De-contextualizing		t	df	Sig.
	Mean	S.D.	Mean	S.D.			
Recognition	4.94	.320	4.87	.339	1.031	76	.154
Memorization	1.36	1.581	1.97	1.530	1.747	76	.046

Table 4 Comparison of the mean delayed test scores for the contextualized and de-contextualized vocabulary teaching techniques

Table 4 shows that there was not a significant difference in the effect of contextualized teaching and de-contextualized teaching on the delayed test of word recognition, $t(76) = 1.031$, $p > .05$. However, there was a significant difference between the mean score of the delayed memorization test for contextualized teaching and de-contextualized teaching, $t(76) = 7.747$, $p < .05$. This means that the de-contextualized teaching helps learners to retain word meanings better than with contextualized teaching. The following section reports the learners' attitudes towards contextualized and de-contextualized vocabulary teaching.

Questions	Yes	No
1. Does the student prefer the rote memorization of word meanings and spellings from word lists? Why?	46%	54%
2. Does the student think that the rote memorization of word meanings and spellings from word lists is an effective way to improve word memorization and spelling?	67%	33%
3. Does the student have better understanding and memorization of words after learning by rote memorization?	33%	67%
4. Does the student want to use rote memorization in future courses?	100%	0%

Table 5 The learners' attitude towards de-contextualized vocabulary teaching

As shown in Table 5, the percentage of learners who prefer rote memorization of word meanings and spellings from word lists (46%) is slightly lower than those who do not (54%). Most of them (67%) believed that the rote memorization of word meanings and spellings from word lists was an effective way to improve word memorization and spelling. Only 33% of the students believed that they had developed understanding and memorization of words after learning by rote memorization. Finally, all students said that they wanted rote memorization in future English courses. This means that they need to use English words correctly in daily life.

Questions	Yes	No
1. Do you like guessing words from the context clues namely sentences and pictures? Why?	56%	44%
2. Do you think guessing words from context clues, namely sentences and pictures, is an effective way to improve word memorization and spelling?	46%	54%
3. Do you have better understanding and memorization of words after learning by guessing words from the context clues, namely sentences and pictures?	38%	62%
4. Do you want to guess words from context clues, namely sentences and pictures, in future courses?	97%	3%

Table 6 The learners' attitudes towards contextualized vocabulary teaching

As shown in Table 6, the percentage of those who liked guessing words from the context clues, namely sentences and pictures, was 56%. Less than half of them believed that guessing words from the context clues and pictures is an effective way to improve word memorization and spelling (46%), and that they have developed understanding and memorization of words after learning by guessing words from the context clues and pictures (38%). Almost all of them (97%) wanted to guess words from context clues in future English courses.

Discussion and Conclusion

The results show that to develop recognition for young Thai learners who have limited knowledge of English, the contextualized technique outperformed the de-contextualized technique. This result was in line with Schouten-van Parreren (1989 as cited in Tricia, 2000) who suggested that the contextualized technique supports the learners' memory by surrounding clues to enhance vocabulary recognition. However, the de-contextualized technique outperformed the contextualized technique in helping the learners to develop and retain word meanings. This result supported Takahashi's (2011) study which found that the de-contextualized technique can help learners to memorize words in a limited time. It can be concluded that the de-contextualized technique may be useful in helping young learners who want to focus on memorizing vocabulary in a limited time. In contrast, the contextualized technique is also useful in helping them to recognize the words and further develop their vocabulary. It is certain that learners cannot learn formal features of language without its usage (Allen, 1986) but young learners need to be equipped with sufficient lexical knowledge before they can deal with communication effectively.

With regard to student attitudes, most of the participants believed that traditional rote learning could help them to memorize and to use the language correctly, and they all wanted to continue to learn English by using this technique. The reason could be that the participants are beginner learners who require vocabulary knowledge, memorization practice, and preparation for testing and further education,

and de-contextualized teaching is the method that helps them to accomplish these things. As for learning vocabulary in context, the participants preferred this method to rote learning. However, there were some students who did not like to learn new words by guessing the meaning from context. Waring (1995) argued that learners may have difficulties guessing the meaning of words from context if they do not have sufficient vocabulary knowledge. However, when the learners' are capable of handling the difficulties, context-based learning should be promoted progressively in the classroom to develop both knowledge and the use of language.

The research findings have some important implications for vocabulary teaching and learning and for further research in this field. One of the main implications is that teachers should employ more than one teaching technique to teach vocabulary. Word meanings should be taught in isolation to enhance the understanding of their features and also taught in context to indicate use in daily life. However, the learners' current level of knowledge should also be continually assessed to provide appropriate teaching and tasks. Future research may consider effective methods of vocabulary teaching for different groups of learners, such as those with different educational backgrounds or levels of English proficiency. Attitudes and suggestions from teachers are also useful; therefore, interviews could be conducted to find out about appropriate vocabulary teaching methods for particular groups of learners from a teacher's perspective.

References

- Alharthi, T. (2014). Role of vocabulary learning strategies in EFL learners' world. *International Journal of English Language and Linguistics Research*, 2(3), 13-28.
- Alhaysony, M. (2012). Vocabulary discovery strategy used by Saudi EFL students in an intensive English language learning. *International Journal of Linguistics*, 4(2), 519-535.
- Allen, V.F. (1983). *Techniques in Teaching Vocabulary*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Amirian, S. M., and Momeni, S. (2012). Definition-based versus contextualized vocabulary learning. *Theory and Practice in Language Studies*, 2(11), 2302-2307.
- Fitzpatrick, T. A. (2008). Intensive vocabulary learning: a case study. *Language Learning Journal*, 36(2), 238-248.
- Folse, K. S. (2004). Myths about teaching and learning second language vocabulary" what recent research says? *TESL Reporter*, 37(2), 1-13.
- Nation, I.S.P. (1990). *Teaching and Learning Vocabulary*. New York: Newbury House.
- Nielsen, B. (n.d.). *A Review of Research into Vocabulary Learning and Acquisition*. Retrieved on December 27, 2015. www.kushiro-ct.ac.jp/library/kiyo/kiyo36/Brian.pdf.
- Nuraisha, Suhartono, L., and Husin, S. (n.d.). Teaching Vocabulary by Using Inference Contextual Clues. Retrieved on December 12, 2015 from <http://download.portalgaruda.org/article.php?article=320480&val=2338&title=TEACHING%20VOCABULARY%20BY%20USING%20INFERENCE%20CONTEXTUAL%20CLUES>
- Oxford, R., & Crookall, D. (1990). Vocabulary learning: A critical analysis of techniques. *TESL Canada Journal*, 7(2), 10-13.
- Shen, W.W. (2003). Current trends of vocabulary teaching and learning strategies for EFL settings. *Feng Chia Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences*, 7, 187-224.

- Shokouhi, H., and Askari, H. (2010). The effect of guessing vocabulary in reading authentic texts among pre-university students. *Arizona Working Papers in SLA & Teaching*, 17, 75-89.
- Takahashi, N. (2011). *The Effects of 10-minute vocabulary instruction: Using word lists in the EFL classroom*. Retrieved on November 20, 2015 from [http://www.u-bunkyo.ac.jp/center/library/image/37-50\(Naoko%20Takahashi\).pdf](http://www.u-bunkyo.ac.jp/center/library/image/37-50(Naoko%20Takahashi).pdf)
- The Ministry of Education.(2009). *The National Curriculum English Version*. Retrieved on November 10, 2015 from http://www.curriculum51.net/viewpage.php?t_id=95
- The National Institute of Educational Testing Service. (2014, October 25). *Ordinary national education test (O-NET) for English subject*. Retrieved on October 31, 2015 from <http://www.onetresult.niets.or.th/AnnouncementWeb/Notice/FrBasicStat.aspx>
- Tricia, H. (2000). *Teaching and learning in the language classroom*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Unaldi, I., and Bardakci M. (2013). A comparison of contextualized, decontextualized and corpus-informed vocabulary instruction: A quasi-experimental study. *Journal of language and literature education*,8, 78-95.
- Waring, R. (1995). An early emphasis on vocabulary. *The British Council Papers at St.Andrews*. 6, 45-50.

Appendix

Test (De-contextualizing technique) จงเลือกคำแปลที่ถูกต้องของคำศัพท์ที่ขีดเส้นใต้

1. Neil Armstrong was the first astronaut. He went to the moon by Apollo 11.

- a.) ยานอวกาศ b.) นักบินอวกาศ c.) กระสวยอวกาศ d.) ดาวเทียม

2. I go to the sea. I like to breathe the fresh air.

- a.) หายใจ b.) กังวล c.) มอง d.) เป่า

3. She wants a bunch of flowers. She doesn't want a flower.

- a.) ช่อ b.) ก้าน c.) ใบ d.) กล่อ่ง

4. She is good at singing. She goes to the singing competition.

- a.) งานเลี้ยง b.) ประชุม c.) สอบ d.) การแข่งขัน

5. There are many buildings and many cars in big city. There are many trees and many rice fields in countryside.

- a.) เมืองใหญ่ b.) ป่า c.) สวน d.) ชนบท

Dictation.

จงเขียนคำศัพท์ภาษาอังกฤษตามคำบอกให้ถูกต้องในตารางด้านซ้ายและเขียนคำแปลภาษาไทยในตารางด้านขวา

English words	Thai Translation
1.	
2.	
3.	
4.	
5.	

Test (Contextualizing technique) จงเลือกคำแปลที่ถูกต้องของคำศัพท์ที่ขีดเส้นใต้

1. A cat is on the bough of tree.

- a.) ก้าน b.) ต้นไม้ c.) ดอกไม้ d.) กิ่งไม้

2. You can't touch your feet if you don't bend down.

- a.) ก้ม b.) ตรง c.) ตั้ง d.) มอง

3. I see this advertisement. I want to buy this doll.

- a.) ประกาศ b.) โฆษณานี้ c.) บ้าย d.) โฆษณา

4. The duty of soldier is protecting our country.

- a.) การบ้าน b.) หน้าตา c.)หน้าที่ d.) เวลา

5. The capital city of Malaysia is Kuala Lumpur

- a.) จังหวัด b.)เมือง c.) เมืองหลวง d.) เมืองท่า

Dictation.

จงเขียนคำศัพท์ภาษาอังกฤษตามคำบอกให้ถูกต้องในตารางด้านซ้ายและเขียนคำแปลภาษาไทยในตารางด้านขวา

English words	Thai Translation
1.	
2.	
3.	
4.	
5.	