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A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF TEACHING VOCABULARY IN CONTEXT AND BY DEFINITION

Abstract: This comparative analysis explores two distinct approaches to teaching vocabulary: in context and by definition. The study aims to examine the effectiveness of each method in enhancing students' vocabulary acquisition, retention, and comprehension. By comparing the benefits and limitations of teaching vocabulary in context versus teaching it by definition, educators can gain valuable insights into best practices for promoting vocabulary development among learners. The approach of teaching vocabulary in context involves presenting new words within meaningful sentences or passages, allowing students to infer the meaning of unfamiliar words based on the surrounding text. This method emphasizes the importance of providing students with opportunities to encounter new words in authentic contexts, facilitating a deeper understanding of word meanings and usage. Proponents of this approach argue that teaching vocabulary in context promotes active engagement with language and fosters connections between new words and existing knowledge, leading to improved retention and application of vocabulary skills. This comparative analysis aims to provide insights into the optimal methods for teaching vocabulary, offering practical recommendations for educators seeking to enhance students' language proficiency and literacy skills through targeted vocabulary instruction.

Key words: definition, context, acquisition, retention, and comprehension

Аннотация

Этот сравнительный анализ исследует два различных подхода к обучению словарному запасу: в контексте и по определению. Целью исследования является изучение эффективности каждого метода в улучшении словарного запаса учащихся, их сохранении и понимании. Сравнивая преимущества и ограничения обучения словарному запасу в контексте и его преподаванию по определению, преподаватели могут получить ценную информацию о лучших методах содействия развитию словарного запаса учащихся. Подход к преподаванию словарного запаса в контексте предполагает представление новых слов в осмысленных предложениях или отрывках, что позволяет учащимся сделать вывод о значении незнакомых слов на основе окружающего текста. Этот метод подчеркивает важность предоставления учащимся возможности встречать новые слова в аутентичных контекстах, способствуя более глубокому пониманию значений и использования слов. Сторонники этого подхода утверждают, что обучение словарному запасу в контексте способствует активному взаимодействию с языком и укреплению связей между новыми словами и существующими знаниями, что приводит к лучшему сохранению и применению словарных навыков. Этот сравнительный анализ направлен на то, чтобы дать представление об оптимальных методах преподавания словарного запаса, предлагая практические рекомендации для преподавателей, стремящихся улучшить знание языка и навыки грамотности учащихся посредством целевого обучения словарному запасу.

Ключевые слова: определение, контекст, приобретение, сохранение и понимание.

Introduction

In relation to vocabulary teaching, researchers suggest that teaching new vocabulary should begin by presenting the new items in context and then the learners should be given the opportunity of dealing with words out of context (Palmberg, 1988). It is important to provide learners with strategies for inferring the meaning of unknown vocabulary from the context in which it occurs instead of getting them to memorize long lists of words or look up unknown words in a dictionary which would make the reading process slow and tedious and which would probably not contribute to the actual learning of vocabulary. Honeyfield (1977) makes many suggestions for improving learners' skills in inferring meaning from context such as cloze or gap exercise in which words are deleted from a text, words-in-context exercises and context enrichment exercises. Although choosing to teach vocabulary in context has plenty of reasons, the real value of context lies in its authenticity, the benefits of which are of three different sorts. As it is suggested by Monsell (1985), first of all, assessing the meaning of a word in context obliges students to develop strategies like anticipating and inferring, which become highly beneficial as learning progresses because they instill an attitude of self-reliance that is the distinctive feature of proficiency. Secondly, systematically meeting new vocabulary items in context emphasizes the fact that the words are actually used in discourse for purposes of communication. Lastly, all the factors mentioned above can be said to contribute to a learner's L2 autonomy and to facilitate the transfer of knowledge that accompanies it. Moreover, they underline the fact that the mental presentation of a word's meaning improves together with successive encounters in different contexts. Thus, it may be subjected to modification because new and finer semantic distinctions are added. Being one of the most important themes, the fact that language reflects the contexts in which it is used and the purposes to which it is put is of great value. As Nunan (1995) puts it, since language is best encountered and learned in context, this has particular implications for practice. Firstly, this would argue against the idea of learning of lists of decontextualized vocabulary items. In addition, the emphasis in class would be on encouraging students to develop strategies such as inferring the meaning of new vocabulary items from the context in which they appear and teaching them to make use of both verbal and non-verbal cues to determine meaning. Mainly, there are five suggestions by Kruse (1979) for teaching written vocabulary in context. Word elements such as prefixes, suffixes and roots: Recognizing component parts of words, words families is of great value because it is one of the most significant vocabulary skills the students may need. It also decreases the number of new words they will encounter and increases their control of the English lexicon. Pictures, diagrams, charts: Students may relate the illustration with the item that is difficult to understand. Clues of definition: Students must be taught to notice many types of useful definition clues like parenthesis or footnotes, synonyms and antonyms. Inference clues from discourse: Students can benefit from example clues, summary clues and experience clues to infer the meaning from the context. General aids: This includes the function of the word such as noun, adjective, etc. Being another suggested way, teaching vocabulary by definition simply requires providing students with the explanation provided by monolingual dictionaries.

Purpose

The purpose of this study is to test the hypothesis that understanding the definition of a word alone is insufficient for complete comprehension, and that semantic knowledge is also necessary when encountering the word in speech or print. Additionally, the study aims to contribute to learners' vocabulary development. Some implications of this purpose include the fact that language learners continue to expand their vocabulary at all levels of proficiency, and that knowing a word involves understanding its associated words, limitations, and semantic function. Based on these implications, the hypothesis is that teaching vocabulary in context, which includes information about the word's use and function, is more effective than teaching vocabulary solely through dictionary definitions.

Participants

This study has been conducted at the two different classes of the Department of Foreign Languages of TOBB University of Economics and Technology. In order to prove the hypothesis, the students of the two classes have been selected. The textbook (Barton and Sardinas, 2004) covered for the reading and writing courses of the Preparatory Unit has been the base for the selection of the vocabulary. 40 words have been selected among the units which had not been covered in class yet. Therefore, it was assumed that the students do not know those words. The two different classes have been instructed on the words in two different techniques; one of which is teaching vocabulary in discourse and context (Group 2) whereas the other is teaching the words by providing only the word definitions (Group 1). The test has been applied in two steps as a pretest to evaluate how unknown those words are and as a posttest to evaluate the effectiveness of both techniques. The subjects who are prone to the instruction and the test of vocabulary are Preparatory Unit students of the TOBB University of Economics and Technology. Both groups are A Level classes which started the semester as beginner level students. This case is on purpose so that the students are at the same proficiency level. Both classes have been working on the same program since the beginning of the semester. Thus, the level of instruction and the knowingness' of the words are not different in either class.

Data collection

The data collection procedure for this research study is divided into two distinct periods. The initial phase involves administering a survey and a pretest, while the subsequent phase entails conducting a posttest. The primary objective of the survey is to assess the students' familiarity with a list of forty target vocabulary items. The students are required to categorize their knowledge of each word by indicating whether they know the meaning, synonyms, and derivations of the word, or if they are able to understand it in context, among other options. The survey is designed in Turkish to prevent potential interference from the target language for students with lower proficiency levels. Following the survey, the pretest serves to reinforce the students' lack of knowledge regarding the target vocabulary items. The pretest comprises four components: matching words with their definitions, completing sentences with the correct word from multiple choices, filling in missing words in a cloze test, and producing the target words in a writing section. The pretest is carefully constructed to provide both context and definition for each item, ensuring fairness for all students regardless of their learning methods. The second phase of data collection involves administering a posttest after the instructional period is completed. The posttest is identical to the pretest and is used to compare the students' performance before and after the intervention. Both the pretest and posttest results are evaluated on a scale of 40, with each part being assessed out of 10.

Results and Discussion

Survey results revealed that 67% of the students didn't know the words. In addition, 12% of them expressed that they identified the word but didn't know the meaning while 9% said that they didn't know the meaning but they could understand it in context. However, 8% of them stated that they knew the meaning whereas only 4% of the students thought that they knew the meaning, synonyms, and derivations of the word. The pre-test scores in Group 1 (M=5) and Group 2 (M=1,73) out of 40 also showed that the students didn't know the words before instruction. As for post-test scores, an independent-samples t-test has been conducted to compare vocabulary by definition and in context scores for Group 1 and 2. The first section of the Independent Samples Test output box gives the results of Levene's Test for equality of variances. Frequency is ,340 and Sig. value is ,564. In t-test for equality of means section Sig. (2-tailed) is ,079 for equality of variances. The results are for Group 1 (M=19.00, SD=5.01) and Group 2 (M=22.53, SD=5.57) indicated that there was not a statistically significant difference in post-test scores for Groups 1 and 2. Similarly, an independent-samples t-test has been conducted to compare definition matching part scores for Group 1 and 2. The first section of the Independent Samples Test output box gives the results of Levene's Test for equality of variances. Frequency is 4,750 and Sig. value is ,038. In t-test for equality of means section Sig. (2-tailed) is ,000 for

equal variances not assumed. The results are for Group 1 (M=9.06, SD=1.38) and Group 2 (M=5,46, SD=2,61) showed that there is a significant difference between the mean scores of definition matching part for each of the two groups. This difference may lead to the inference that since Group 1 is instructed the target words by definitions, they perform on this part better than the subjects of Group 2 whom the words have been taught in context. Additionally, an independent-samples t-test has been conducted to compare multiple choice part scores for Group 1 and 2. The first section of the Independent Samples Test output box gives the results of Levene's Test for equality of variances. Frequency is 5,091 and Sig. value is ,032. In t-test for equality of means section Sig. (2-tailed) is ,115 for equal variances assumed. The results for Group 1 (M=8,53, SD=1,59) and Group 2 (M=7,73, SD=1,03) revealed that there is not a statistically significant difference in the mean scores for Groups 1 and 2. The results can be relied on the fact that the subjects have the chance to guess the correct alternative in the multiple choice part. In addition, multiple choice part requires recognition rather than production. Therefore, subjects of both groups performed almost equally in this section. An independent-samples t-test has been conducted to compare cloze test part scores for Group 1 and 2. The first section of the Independent Samples Test output box gives the results of Levene's Test for equality of variances. Frequency is 7,681 and Sig. value is ,010. In t-test for equality of means section Sig. (2-tailed) is ,000 for equal variances assumed. The results for Group 1 (M=,66, SD=,81) and Group 2 (M=4,73, SD=2,25) indicated that there is a statistically significant difference in the mean scores for Groups 1 and 2. This difference results from the high performance of the subjects in Group 2 in this part. They did well in this section because it matches with the way of instruction they are exposed to. In Group 2, the words have been taught in context. That's why the subjects of this group take the advantage of encountering the target words in suitable context provided in cloze test. Finally, an independent-samples t-test has been conducted to compare writing part scores for Group 1 and 2. The first section of the Independent Samples Test output box gives the results of Levene's Test for equality of variances. Frequency is 1,167 and Sig. value is ,289. In t-test for equality of means section Sig. (2-tailed) is ,017 for equal variances not assumed. The results for Group 1 (M=2,13, SD=2,32) and Group 2 (M=4,60, SD=2,94) revealed that there is a significant difference in the mean scores on dependable variable for each of the two groups. This difference between the mean scores of writing part is due to the better performance of Group 2 subjects. It can be concluded that the subjects of Group 2 who are exposed to appropriate context for target words during the instruction are more inclined to be involved in production whereas the subjects of Group 1 do not have the ability to produce the vocabulary items.

Conclusion

This study was based on the hypothesis that teaching vocabulary in context, with an emphasis on the practical use and function of the word, would be more effective compared to teaching vocabulary solely through dictionary definitions. However, the results show that there is generally no significant difference in the performance of the two groups of students who were taught in different ways. Teaching the target vocabulary items in context and through definitions does not lead to a notable variance in overall performance. However, students tend to perform better on test tasks that align with the way they were taught. They demonstrate high success in sections that mirror the instructional method they received.

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