Helping Adult Chinese EFL Learners Acquiring Vocabulary Via a Context - based Approach

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A very important way of coming across new vocabulary in context is through extensive reading. Developing strategies for handling unknown words has been one of the objectives of English reading classes. There are different ways to achieve this objective. In China the usual practice is that the class reads only passages where every word is known before, or is allowed to consult a bilingual dictionary or a teacher for meanings or the definition of every new word if there is a new word in the text. The drawbacks of this approach are obvious. Too much dictionary work can kill all interest in reading and even interfere with comprehension because the reader is so concerned with individual words that he is less aware of the context which gives them meaning. It also results in very slow and inefficient reading (Wallace, 1982: 13).

After several years of teaching in China, I have found that using a context-based approach to enable students to derive meaning with the help of context clues is an effective way to increase the students' vocabulary and reading comprehension.

Rationale

Context can be viewed as morphological, syntactic, and discourse information in a given text which can be classified and described in terms of general features. This is the context within the text. But the reader also has background knowledge of the subject matter of a given text, i.e. the general context. Good readers take advantage of such background knowledge in processing the context, and in creating expectations about the kind of vocabulary that will occur.

Guessing vocabulary from context is the most frequent way to discover the meaning of new words. Honeyfield (1977: 35-40) stresses the importance of context saying that even with a functional vocabulary of the three thousand most frequently occurring items in English, learners will still not know around 20 percent of the items they will encounter in an unsimplified text.

Research shows that to learn words in a context and not in isolation is one vocabulary learning strategy over which there is unanimity and is deemed effective by most researchers (Kruse, 1979; Nation, 1980; Gairns & Redman, 1986; Oxford & Crookall, 1988; Cohen, 1991). A word when used in different contexts offers different interpretations. Thus, simply learning the definitions of a word without giving illustrations or examples as to where and when it occurs will not help learners to fully understand its meaning. In fact, learning an isolated list of words without reference to the context is merely a memorisation exercise, and it is difficult for learners to apply the knowledge in spoken and written situations. Looking at the context in which the word appears seems to be the best way of learning vocabulary.

Assumptions

1. The Schema theory suggests that the knowledge we carry around in our heads is organised into interrelated patterns. These are constructed from our previous experience of the experiential world and guide us as to what we might expect to experience in a given context (Nunan, 1991: 68). The Schema theory suggests that we need to utilise information not explicitly contained in the text (i.e. 'inside the head' knowledge) to comprehend more texts adequately. Making use of what we know in order to infer the unknown is a common practice in our daily lives. For instance, if we are in a building and observe that someone is coming into the building folding an open umbrella, we will infer that it is raining outside. Drawing inferences from what we observe is fundamental to thinking and the same principle can be used in the reading process.

2. Vocabulary is connected with grammar. Grammar and vocabulary can be seen together, e.g., a word can be classified as a grammatical item or seen as a vocabulary item. For example, on the one hand *beautiful* is a vocabulary item, on the other hand it is labelled as epithet in the nominal group 'the beautiful girl' in functional grammar, which reflects the speaker's attitude to the person described.

The connection between vocabulary and grammar can be seen by the interdependence of grammatical and lexical cohesion. In a typical text, grammatical and lexical cohesion move hand in hand, the one supporting the other (Halliday, 1978: 83).

To demonstrate this point, let me examine the five clauses below taken from a typical text. Within each of these clauses there are components that enter into a grammatical (girl, she, etc.) or lexical (went, walk, and got) cohesive relation.

Once upon a time there was a little girl and she went out for a walk and she saw a lovely little teddybear and so she took it home and when she got home she washed it. (This example is cited from Halliday--- 1978:72).

3. Redundancy in texts. The subject matter of a passage is interrelated and the text is often redundantly structured. In order to help readers, writers often give definitions or extensive clues within the text when a new word appears. So readers have more than one chance to retrieve information for understanding the passage.

4. By nature, reading is a process of hypothesis formation and verification. It is a communicative act between a faceless writer and a large number of nameless readers; consequently the understanding the readers achieve is unlikely to be 100 percent accurate. "The mother-tongue speaker learns to be content with *approximate meaning*. In other words, he is satisfied with a meaning which makes sense of the context. In the secrete service there is a principle called the 'need-to-know' principle---in other words, agents are not told more than they need to know in case they get caught and betray their comrades. Perhaps in vocabulary learning the 'need-to-know' principle could also be applied: students should not be told more about the meanings of words than they need to know to understand the context so that they don't get confused" (Wallace, 1982: 33).

Types of Context Clues

1. Analysis.

The students can be taught to derive word meanings by examining their internal contextual features, e. g.(1) dissimilarity: dis-similar-ity (2) morphological instruction: the students are provided with mastery learning instruction of some root words, e. g. dorm (sleep), taph (tomb), chrom (colour) etc. In working out the meaning of new words, it is useful for the learner to be trained to see the common element in one kind of word, where the common element conveys a certain idea.

2. Word Order, Word Class, Reference words, the Sentence Structure

Sometimes, the syntactic structure of the reading passage can make the students glean any information from grammatical signals such as word order, word class, the sentence structure, but it should be a level of complexity appropriate to the class. For example, the student is a step nearer the meaning of "messed" if he is able to see that "the late arrival of the train" is the subject of the sentence below and is followed by a word describing an action, "messed", and the object is "all our plans".

The late arrival of the train messed up all our plans.

In the example, "Malnutrition gave him the shallowest of chests, thinnest of limbs; it *stunted* his growth," identifying the referents of such grammatical items as pronouns "it" may provide a clue to the meaning of the unfamiliar word "stunted". Through a series of questions the teacher helps the student to find the clues in the sentences. "It" refers to "Malnutrition". The effect of malnutrition at the beginning of the sentence is obvious: He had malnutrition.

The result on his appearance was that kind of terrible chest and limbs. It should not be too difficult for the student to guess what malnutrition could have done to growth.

The structure of the sentence generally gives sufficient indication of words that are semantically related, as in the example "Then why do I remember such *anguish*, such tears, such sobs racking up from the soles of my feet, mouth agape, misery, hopeless misery?" (This example is adopted from Chandrasegaran's article. 1980: 63) "Why do I remember" is understood before "such tears", "such sobs" etc. "Tears", "sobs", "misery" share the same lexical environment as the unfamiliar "anguish". The student can examine the familiar "tears" and "sobs" for clues to the meaning of the unfamiliar "anguish". Sometimes words in the same sentence or in adjacent sentences give an indication of the meaning of an unfamiliar word, because these words regularly co-occur with the unfamiliar word producing what has been termed "collocational cohesion"(Halliday and Hasan, 1976 : 287).

3. Synonyms

Often the reader can find the experiential meaning of both items is the same, e. g. "We had never seen such a large cave: it was simply *enormous*." Obviously the unknown word *enormous* is a synonym for 'very large'. This context clue (paraphrasing) would help a reader guess the meaning of the word.

4. Antonyms

Words with opposite experiential meanings may be found in the same context, e. g., " To be white and not black, *affluent* and not poor, represents status in certain social groups." We note that white and black are

opposites, so when we see the next pair of words in a parallel construction, we can assume that *affluent* is the opposite of poor, and must therefore mean rich.

5. Hyponyms

Very often the reader can see the relationship of an unfamiliar word and the familiar word(s) are part of a general concept or term and specific example(s), e. g., " The museum contained almost every type of *vehicle*: cars, buses, trains and even old carriages and coaches." *Vehicle* is being used here as a hyponym, i. e. it includes all the other items which are listed. On the contrary, all the other items are the same kinds of things called **co-hyponym /example or co-ordinates**. Cars, buses, trains, etc. are co-ordinates.

6. Definitions

Sometimes the writer defines the meaning of the word right in the sentence, e. g., "Many animals live only by killing other animals and eating them: They are called *predatory* animals".

7. Alternatives

The writer may give an alternative of the familiar that represents the unfamiliar to make the meaning known, e. g., "*Ichthyologists*, or specialists in the study of fish, have contributed to our understanding of the past." The word *itchyologist* is unfamiliar to some readers, the writer explains the meaning by giving a familiar word *specialist*.

8. Explanation or Restatement

Often the writer gives enough explanation for the meaning to be clear, e. g., "X-ray therapy, that is treatment by use of x-ray, often stops the growth of a tumour." *Therapy* is a new word for most of the students, but the phrase *that is* commonly signals a clarification of a previously used word.

9. Example or Illustration

Many times an author helps the reader get the meaning of a word by providing examples that illustrate the use of the word, e. g., "All the furniture had been completely removed so that not a single table or chair was to be seen." Here the learner should be able to guess the meaning of *furniture*, from the examples of furniture which are mentioned.

10. Cause and Effect

A cause-and effect relationship may reveal meaning, e. g., "At first he could hardly summon the energy to get through the day's work because he found the climate so enervating." Assuming that the word summon may be the unknown word which occurs in the effect clause of a cause-effect relationship then it is possible to find the meaning of the word because the clause is inferable from the effect.

11. Summary

A summary clue sums up a situation or an idea with a word or a phrase, e.g., " Mrs Christopher contributes money to the Red Cross, the Girls' Club, and the Cancer Society; she also volunteers many hours in the emergency ward of the hospital. *She is indeed altruistic*." From the account of Mrs Christopher's deeds, the reader may well infer that *altruistic* means unselfish.

12. Characteristic or Quality

From the writer's description of the characteristic or quality of a person or a thing, e. g., "A *villa* was far too large for our needs: its two floors contained four public rooms and six bedrooms, and the

garden extended for almost an acre," the reader can infer *a villa* is obvious a house of some kind: mention of two floors seem to exclude bungalow, and the mention of a garden makes flat unlikely.

13. Comparison and Contrast

Comparison and contrast usually show the similarity and difference between persons, ideas and things, e.g., " The ancient mammoth, *like other elephant*, is particularly huge." The phrase *like other elephants* indicates that the ancient mammoth is a type of elephant. In the example, " His class is *soporific*, but her class is not sleepy," " but" introduces a clause that contrasts in meaning with the previous one and signals the fact that "soporific" is the opposite of "not sleepy."

14. General Knowledge

Sometimes the source for the interpretation of a word lies outside the co-text and can only be found through an examination of the context. So students need to be encouraged not to leave their experience of the world behind when they come to English class, e. g., " The hotel has every facility. At the top of it there is even a helicopter which will take you straight to and from the airport if you are in a hurry." The ability to guess the word *helicopter* and or its meaning depends to some extent on the student's background knowledge.

15. Punctuation

Readers can interpret punctuation clues such as italics (showing the word will be defined), quotation marks (showing the word has a special meaning), dashes (showing apposition) or brackets (enclosing a definition) etc., e.g., colon in type. See 3. 5. 6. 12 above for context clues used after a

main clause where the following statement illustrates or explains the content of that clause.

Class Application

1. Introduce inference word clues like *this, that, it* (like the second example in type 2 of context clues) etc., signal words or indicators to help the students spot context clues. Signals of connection like *and, that's to say, but, in spite of this* etc. relate sentences or parts of sentences to each other. Generally, they specify "the way in which what is to follow is systematically connected to what has gone before" (Halliday and Hasan, 1976:227) (See Nation, 1979:102, for a fuller list). The teacher's task is to draw the students' attention to these inference words, signals or indicators when they occur, e. g., the first example in type 7 of context clues above. To that end, I will introduce or guide the student towards clarifying for himself the function of the signal word in the sentence. Knowing that *ichthyologists* is a new word for most students, I will tell them that the conjunction word *or* commonly signals an explanation of a previously used word. By introducing the explicit function value of this signal word in the sentence, the teacher helps them work out the meaning of the difficult sentence or an unfamiliar word. The student becomes sensible to these signals for context clues step by step, and they become skilful in identifying and using them to successfully infer the word's meaning.

An alternative is for the teacher to impart a few strategies to their learners (see Robinson, 1993: 184-202, for his suggestion of the study strategies for different text patterns in social texts). Let me take the example of the text pattern,

'effect-cause context clue'. The strategies for such a pattern include firstly, recognising the pattern of 'effect-cause'. Secondly, the learner or the reader must recognise the 'effects' and locate the 'causes'. As these are not often neatly arranged in different paragraphs or come with headings, the weaker learners or readers only differentiate the two sets of information by being told that 'signals words' like 'leads to' 'results in', 'because' or 'caused by' are used to indicate 'effect-cause'. By suggesting a few strategies to be carried out for each of context clues, the teacher helps them comprehend the large 'chunks' of information found in texts that would get them over the 'word-block'.

2. Use leading questions to direct the students in a step-by-step search for and use of context clues, it is fair to say that such signals in a great deal of texts will be lacking. The student finds it hard to infer without them due to his limited experience with the target language. So without the guidance of the teacher the clues available may be lost upon him, e.g., the third example in type 2 of content clues. The student may not be aware of words that are collocational. What a language teacher should do is to use set questions to get definite responses beforehand and to help focus the discussion . I can ask: "Why do I remember what?" and repeat the chain questions:

Then why do I remember such anguish? why do I remember such tears?
Why do I remember such sobs...
It will be then apparent that *anguish, tears and sobs* share a similar lexical environment. I further guide them with more questions: (i) The writer says he remembers tears and sobs. What was he doing? (ii) If he was crying can you describe the emotion he felt? (iii) He cried , he felt misery and

sadness; can you now suggest an explanation of "anguish"?

Questions like these direct the students' attention to the surrounding environment that helps them guess an unknown word.

Some vocabulary development occurs by inferring the meaning of words in context. But this should be integrated with other formats of vocabulary instruction. Example: SCANR

Substitute a word or expression for the unknown word.

Check the context for clues that support your idea.

Ask if the substitution word fits all context clues.

Need a new idea--- a new substitution word?

Revise one's ideas to fit the context, probably resulting in a different substitution word.

3. Ask students to infer meaning independently and then to explain how they made the inference. One useful type of inference exercise is to use short contexts to show learners the different ways in which the meaning of an unknown word can be inferred from the context. In all these cases, a most useful follow-up is for the student to explain how he has inferred the meaning of the word: this is probably more important in the long run than whether he has got the particular example right or wrong. In preparation for these exercise, the teacher selects some short paragraphs for the need of the students in terms of level of difficulty and suitability for the development of

techniques or strategies intended. Each paragraph should contain one or more context clues. The purpose of these exercises is to reinforce the vocabulary development strategies learned in the textbook or from the training.

The teacher provides the students with a handout of a selected paragraph of suitable length containing some selected underlined words which are probably not known by the class. These words can be usually identified by teachers on the basis of experience. The students' task is to work out the meaning of the unknown words and to explain how they did it. In this exercise, the emphasis is on the process of inferring. Discussion should centre on the strategy the students has applied and the information or helpful words/phrases they can extract from the passage to help them guess the unknown words. The aim is not always to guess a meaning exactly, but to make the students become aware of the surrounding information in which a word is embedded, and which both influences and points to its meaning. Discussion may result in different results among the students. Some of them may make wrong guesses. However, the students should be encouraged by the teacher as long as their attempt to infer brings the unknown word into contact with an active searching and thinking process. Sooner or later they will master the skill of developing vocabulary by inferring.

There is a more advanced and elaborate type of follow-up to this kind of exercise where a number of 'unknown' words are located in one passage. The learner is asked not to define the target words, but to indicate which words or phrases are helpful in inferring the meaning (see Wallace, 1982:69. For the reference of the example of this kind of exercise).

There are more useful types of inference exercises that could be developed to help develop the skill of infering from context, e.g., gap-filling or word-replacement techniques (see British Council Teachers, 1980: 83-85. For the reference of the example of this kind of exercise), cloze exercises and context enrichment exercises, etc.

The Advantages of This Approach

Apart from increasing a reader's vocabulary, this approach has several advantages.

a. It makes readers not only to 'know' a word but also to know how to use it in contexts. It is very important for the reader to learn a word in its natural environment as it were, among the words it normally collocates with, so that the learner knows the usual collocations that the word occurs in.

b. Training students to infer meaning from context gives them a powerful aid to comprehension and will ultimately greatly speed up their reading. And one of the nice things about this training is that it can be enjoyable. It has the problem- solving characteristics that appeal to most people and challenge the students to make use of their intelligence to an extent that is not always common in language classes.

c. This approach allows the learners to make intelligent guesses from a meaningful context. This will make the learning task much more active, interesting, and challenging than direct explanation of words. Guessing the meaning of a word from its use in context gives input on the semantic properties, register, and even collocation of the word taught. It makes the reader aware of one important feature

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of vocabulary, namely, that context determines the meaning of words.

d. It makes readers develop a holistic approach toward reading a text. Because the context of a new word may be drawn from a group of sentences, a paragraph, or even the entire text, they learn to direct their attention to language units larger than the sentence while they are looking for context clues.

e. It encourages readers to develop the quality of taking risks, and makes them build up confidence and independence in their approach to reading.

Conclusion

Class application of this approach turns out to be a success. The students find it stimulating and rewarding, and are eager to try it whenever an unknown word appears in their reading materials and block their reading comprehension. Once they try this approach, they become more independent and develop learners' autonomy. This approach has a positive effect on the student's reading habits.

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