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Contextualization in L2 vocabulary instruction – an action research study

For many years specialists in teaching English vocabulary have endeavoured to analyse key issues concerning L2 vocabulary teaching and seek appropriate instructional techniques in order to solve a variety of problems emerging in the classroom environment. In recent years a plenitude of such techniques for both presenting and practising lexical items have evolved, although only some have been given a prominent status. One of them - contextualization - has been given a careful consideration among others by Ying (2001), Chodkiewicz (2000), Stahl (1999), Kruse (1987) and Nation (2001). It is frequently forgotten that words do not function in isolation but with other words, and overburdening students with lengthy decontextualized word lists to be memorized may be ineffective in retaining L2 lexical items. Learning vocabulary is an arduous process, thus several exposures to the word used in various situations are needed. Contextualizing new vocabulary items may prove to be a powerful tool for the teacher to enhance students' work on vocabulary and to help enrich their word knowledge.

The action research study reported in this article investigated the issue of contextualization of L2 lexical items as a way of contributing

to their effective learning. Additionally, the degree to which the use of context in the vocabulary instruction provided fostered the learners' motivation was considered. The present article first discusses the purpose of the study as well as the materials used by the author. Then, the design and the procedure according to which the lessons were conducted are presented in depth. Finally, the article centres on the interpretation of the results of the study by analysing the vocabulary tests and the questionnaire the subjects completed.

1. The goals of the study

The goals of the study whose subjects were 30 secondary school students, representing the intermediate language of language proficiency, were:

1. to make the students aware of the importance of making fine distinctions between word meanings;
2. to give the students an opportunity to practise selected vocabulary in context;
3. to check if teaching the target words in context would help the students use them in a meaningful way in the teacher-prepared tasks;
4. to verify the effectiveness of the conducted lessons for the subjects' vocabulary enrichment;
5. to determine whether and to what degree the use of contextualization in teaching L2 vocabulary would increase the students' positive attitudes to learning.

2. Materials

Presentation worksheets were prepared by the author of this article, at the same time the teacher of the students participating in the course. For research purposes they incorporated definitions and sentences clarifying the meaning of the L2 target vocabulary. The additional information the handouts included concerned the words' grammatical form, countability, plurality and their synonyms. When necessary, Oxford and Longman dictionaries and British National Corpus were consulted.

A set of pictures accompanying the lessons and acting as an impetus for the students to elaborate on a given topic using the implemented words were adapted from the coursebook *New Opportunities Pre-Intermediate* (2004).

The texts selected for the study along with the target lexical items were also adapted from the coursebook and they dealt with topics of general interest.

Reading tasks included reading for general and detailed information and required the following:

- matching the paragraphs with their titles;
- deciding whether the given statements are true or false;
- answering the questions on the basis of the text;
- completing gapped sentences in texts;
- multiple-choice questions;
- choosing the best endings for the sentences provided.

As far as activities for practising and revising L2 target words are concerned, they were either teacher-prepared or adapted materials. The teacher's tasks aimed to generate the target vocabulary.

Vocabulary test, administered before and after the study in form of a pre- and post-test in order to determine the usefulness of a context-based course for vocabulary enrichment was teacher-prepared. It consisted of a set of tasks in which the target words could appear in a number of contexts natural for their use. The test involved, among others, cloze procedure exercises checking if the students would succeed in completing the gaps with the items practised throughout the course, multiple-choice tasks or fill-in-the-blanks, and examined the students' capability of distinguishing between various word senses and their accurate use in a range of contexts. The general goal of the post-test was to determine the usefulness of the conducted lessons for the subjects' vocabulary enrichment.

The post-study questionnaire was carried out in Polish so as to ascertain that enquiries included in it would be thoroughly understandable to the students. Besides examining the extent to which the tasks presented in the study enhanced the students' motivation and

encouragement, the survey attempted to verify the usefulness of the teacher-prepared activities.

3. Design and procedures

The research study took place in September and October 2006 in one of the secondary schools in Lublin and lasted six weeks. The seven lessons devoted to presenting and practising 69 target English words were conducted on the basis of the coursebook with a range of activities designed by the author of the present paper, and were preceded by a test checking the students' knowledge of the vocabulary to be introduced. The sequence of the lessons required that the lexical items be constantly revised and practised. During the last lesson the vocabulary post-test as well as the questionnaire were administered.

The major aim of every lesson was to provide the students with a thorough context-based presentation and practice of the target vocabulary selected from the coursebook. The presentation stage addressed the two language skills, namely speaking and reading, which meant that the target L2 lexical items (8-13 per lesson) appeared in the pre-speaking or in the pre-reading stage. In the case of the former, vocabulary explanation was followed by the students' speaking performance strictly controlled by the teacher. As regards the reading lessons, the meanings of the target words were either introduced by the teacher in the pre-reading phase, or left to be arrived at by the students by guessing from context.

On offering the words' definitions in the presentation stage, the teacher supplied their synonyms or antonyms. The students were also requested to restate the definitions given or discuss them with their peers. This verified their proper understanding of the words' meanings explained. While introducing the items with multiple meanings, the teacher aimed to equip the students with many contexts in which a particular word might be found. She provided several sentences clarifying the meanings of the target words so that students could realize how crucial it is to make fine distinctions between various word senses.

The practice phase comprised a vast array of tasks with diverse contexts created by employing synonyms, antonyms, contrast or comparison. These exercises revised the target lexical items. What is more, some activities demanded that the students write a short extract, a letter, an interview, or rewrite a story in own words, yet including the target vocabulary. Such tasks aimed to investigate whether the context-based instruction of the target vocabulary contributed to its proper exploitation by the students.

As stated before, the course of lessons was followed by a general revision of the target lexical items presented and practised throughout all the lessons, and concluded with a final test administered with the aim of evaluating to what degree the target words practised were retained by the students.

4. Results and discussion

The results of the pre-study test (Table 1) revealed that the subjects had not been acquainted with the target lexical items selected for the course. The majority of the students did not even attempt to complete the tasks, and only several learners were able to fill in one up to two gaps. The activity appeared to be easier for two learners who scored two points each, nevertheless since it was a multiple-choice activity, the correct answers might have been provided at random.

Table 1. Numbers of students who obtained particular ranges of points on the pre-test.

	Pre-test results n=30						
	Task 1	Task 2	Task 3	Task 4	Task 5	Task 6	Task 7
0-2 points	30	29	30	30	29	28	30
3-5 points	0	1	0	0	1	2	0
6-8 points	0	0	0	0	0	0	0

As regards the subjects' responses to the lessons, they varied depending on the phase of the lesson and the difficulty of particular tasks. As stated before, two kinds of lesson procedures depending on the purpose of introducing the key words were differentiated: the presentation phase followed by the subjects' speaking performance supervised by the teacher, and the presentation phase followed by a reading task.

The students' oral presentation was to be strictly controlled by the teacher, who encouraged them to employ the newly introduced words. Several students manifested some inhibitions to express themselves in English. The confident ones got involved in the oral performance more willingly and did exceptionally well using the target words properly during the talk, whilst the ones not willing to speak proved to be better at writing tasks.

In the reading lesson, inferring the meanings proved particularly difficult with regard to some phrasal verbs (*miss out on, be left out, undergo, make up for, go by*). Enquired about the reason for some vocabulary words being troublesome, the students indicated too poor a context to provide enough details for a word to be identified. In order to eliminate further misunderstandings with regard to the word meanings, an adequate explanation was provided.

The tasks the students were to perform not only gave them a possibility to practise the target lexical items in context, but simultaneously helped to check whether due to L2 vocabulary teaching relying on contextualization the students could learn the new words in a meaningful way. The teacher observed the subjects' performance during the lessons and analyzed their responses to the tasks they accomplished. In the course of the first two lessons the participants of the study were unenthusiastic about carrying out the tasks as the majority of them required some amount of reading, which the pupils had not been accustomed to. Nonetheless, owing to the course based on a regular repetition and practice, the subjects acquired more fluency with time, accomplished the activities quicker and more willingly. The tasks with a broad context and a set of lexical items to choose from proved to be the most complicated and challenging. Also

activities concerning phrasal verbs and involving multiple contexts to be filled in with the same word caused difficulty. Yet, however demanding these types of activities were, the pupils eventually succeeded in supplying correct answers. Surprisingly, writing the interviews on the basis of the clues supplied, gave relatively good results. The other writing assignments were mostly designed to be carried out at home due to a considerable amount of time necessary to complete them. The teacher's analysis of students' contribution leads to conclusion that along with the lessons, the progress in the students' performance could be observed, and it was clearly noticeable that constant revision aided the learners to retain the target vocabulary.

The general revision helped the students go through the practised vocabulary again prior to the final test, which they were not informed about the test so as to make its outcomes more credible. During the revision lessons, more time was devoted to the activities covering the vocabulary from the initial stages of the study. Since the subjects retained the target vocabulary items through practice without memorising them by heart, some information gathered at the beginning might have been forgotten, and therefore those words needed further attention. Still, even though the students found some lexical items problematic and sought the advice of the teacher, the tasks were performed accurately. Having revised all the target vocabulary, the subjects took the post-test (Table 2).

Table 2. Numbers of the students who obtained particular ranges of points on the post-test

	Post-test results n=30						
	Task 1	Task 2	Task 3	Task 4	Task 5	Task 6	Task 7
0-2 points	5	2	9	3	2	1	0
3-5 points	12	4	18	12	15	6	6
6-8 points	13	24	3	15	13	23	24

The scores achieved by the students clearly indicate that they were able to retain the majority of the lexical items provided throughout the

study. The first task, a cloze procedure activity, gave the lowest results on the pre-test. Demanding as it was, after the sequence of lessons 13 students succeeded in obtaining more than a half of the points. In the multiple-choice task the majority of the students provided minimum six correct responses. Nearly all the words tested in this activity were compound words or phrasal verbs with one of their parts already provided, which made the task slightly easier. The sentences referring to phrasal verbs were deemed problematic throughout the whole course and thus included mistakes on the test.

Another task covered the knowledge of all the phrasal verbs practised, and required not only identifying suitable contexts for the given lexical items, but also their form to the tense of a particular context. The statistics shown reveal that this exercise was most troublesome. In many cases, although adequate contexts were correctly recognised, the students still offered the verb in the infinitive notwithstanding the form needed to suit a given sentence.

The gap completion task was carried out relatively well with only 3 participants revealing problems with completing the activity. The subjects identified accurately the words such as *broken*, *veteran* and *pretend*, and as regards the other lexical items, no regularity could be identified since mistakes occurred in different sentences. Another test activity was carried out correspondingly, whereas hardly any student had difficulty with the last two tasks, which did not demand as much reading as the others.

On the whole, the results of the post-study test make it possible to conclude that the study succeeded in improving the students' knowledge of the target lexical items. The statistics clearly show progress in vocabulary development, thus the effectiveness of the conducted lessons may be rated fairly high.

On closer examination of the tests, some additional observations could be made. Firstly, in spite of the attempts to create rich contexts, some gaps proved to have more than one possible answer. The context being insufficiently specified, led to the subjects' mistakes. Further, some contexts were likely to be too difficult for the students to fully understand them. Another explanation for this can be the word's

complexity, as some lexical items e.g. phrasal verbs are generally more problematic to students and require further practice.

In general however, the results obtained made it evident that the usage of contextualization for L2 vocabulary teaching as well as the teacher's self-designed tasks were efficacious and the purpose of enriching the students' vocabulary was achieved.

The post-study questionnaire was conducted with a view to investigating the students' attitude to the course they participated in and their general assessment of the study. Generally, the learners' feelings about the sequence of lessons were positive and revealed their interest in the activities they performed. The questions asked were mainly of a closed type, the students having e.g. to estimate on a scale the difficulty or effectiveness of the tasks employed in the study.

Responding to the question pertaining to the subjects' general perception of the difficulty of learning English vocabulary as many as 21 pupils found learning vocabulary easy or quite easy (See Table 3 below).

Table 3. The students' perception of the difficulty of learning English vocabulary.

Learning English words n=30					
	easy	quite easy	quite difficult	difficult	very difficult
No. of answers	4	17	4	4	1

When asked whether the activities supplied by the teacher were interesting the majority of students appeared to have enjoyed the tasks prepared by the teacher. It can be seen from Table 4 that most participants thought the tasks to be interesting.

Table 4. The students' evaluation of the attractiveness of the teacher-prepared tasks.

Teacher-prepared tasks n=30					
	boring	not very	quite	interesting	very

		interesting	interesting		interesting
No. of answers	0	1	9	13	7

The students were also asked to evaluate the usefulness of the teacher-prepared tasks. Most participants of the study claimed that they found the implemented activities useful (17-yes, 13-rather yes).

Finally, the subjects were to estimate the difficulty of particular tasks supplied by the teacher for the research purposes (See Table 5). Surprisingly enough, hardly any learners considered the employed activities to be very demanding, yet many students rated a few types of activities as problematic. The completion activities were estimated from relatively easy to difficult.

Table 5. The students' evaluation of particular activities in terms of their difficulty.

Types of tasks	easy	quite easy	quite difficult	difficult	very difficult
1. the completion activity (paragraph, story);	1	5	19	4	1
2. the completion activity (sentences);	6	7	16	1	0
3. the completion activity (dialogues);	9	12	9	0	0
4. the completion activity (several examples with the same word);	0	1	12	15	2
5. writing a story, or an interview on the basis of words/clues given;	4	3	16	7	0
6. rewriting a story using vocabulary underlined in the version offered by the teacher;	2	7	14	6	1
7. substituting the words in the text with their synonyms;	18	8	4	0	0
8. multiple-choice task;	6	7	13	3	1
9. discussing the topic or given pictures using newly introduced words;	6	11	7	5	1
10. matching the halves of the sentences;	17	7	4	1	0

11. matching the verbs with prepositions so as to create phrasal verbs to be put in the right context and proper form;	1	4	18	6	1
12. filling the gaps in the text with the first letters of correct words already provided.	8	17	3	2	0

Writing assignments proved to be fairly problematic. Rewriting a story with employing target lexical units was deemed slightly less difficult, possibly owing to being offered the model version illustrating the usage of the target vocabulary. Both substituting the words with their synonyms and matching the halves of the sentences were declared effortless, there being only a few students who rated the activity as complex. The learners' attitude towards the completion activity with the first letters of the words supplied was analogous. In the case of the multiple-choice activities or multi-part verbs exercises, the subjects assessed them as rather difficult to complete. Interestingly enough, the speaking tasks were found fairly easy or quite difficult although throughout the course they seemed to be troublesome and inhibiting to students.

5. Conclusion

Summing up, the assumption that contextualization fosters vocabulary development has been confirmed by the present action research study. Adopting traditional ways of teaching L2 target vocabulary is surely extremely boring to students, that is why more effective techniques for teaching words could be employed. It is the teacher's task to adjust his/her classroom procedures so that they help students to practice and recycle target vocabulary and, as a result, keep it active (Bermheden 2002, Cameron 2001). The outcomes of the study support the view that exploiting context for the purpose of vocabulary presentation and practice contributes substantially to its enrichment and expands students' general knowledge of lexis. The usage of contextualization for teaching English vocabulary facilitated its acquisition by the students. The results obtained from the final test showed that the tasks prepared by the teacher were conducive to retaining the target lexical

items. Furthermore, the students' responses to the tasks employed in the study assured the writer that contextualizing unknown words helped the subjects use them in a meaningful way in both writing or speaking activities. The data gathered from the post-study questionnaire made it apparent that the students were biased in favour of the conducted course and willing to participate in the contextualization-based lessons. They evaluated the teacher-prepared activities as interesting and confirmed their usefulness in practising as well as retaining new vocabulary. Evidently, despite considerable effort devoted to accomplishing the teacher's tasks, the lessons were greatly appreciated and regarded as beneficial for expanding English vocabulary.

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