

Necessity of Linguistic Context in Teaching Vocabulary in EFL/ESL Classroom

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Abstract

The proposition in this research paper is about the significance of linguistic context in teaching English vocabulary; particularly, when English is a foreign or second language to learners. As part of a rational argument, the investigation brings forth some theoretical and functional concepts related to *Language Acquisition* and *Language Learning*. Unlike acquisition, learning is a conscious process. Hence, learning entails an appropriate context to provide connection between words and their **accurate** meanings. Functional perspective of language emphasizes that context is the predominant precursor of language. In linguistic spectrum of a language, context is connected to semantics, lexico-grammar, phonology and phonetics of a language. With this functional viewpoint about language and its usage, a pilot study was conducted in support of the proposition. According to its findings, the nature of vocabulary errors made by learners evidently reflects that various contexts provided while teaching are insufficient to learn meaningfully accurate words with aptness for real context.

It is observed in many Indian English classes that teaching vocabulary is deviant from *linguistic context*. Consequently, it is reflected in learners' improper choice of words and their usage. Linguistic context has theoretical association with Halliday (2004) in the view that grammar and vocabulary are two ends of single continuum; they are not separate. This study identifies that intervention of both target language and first language constitutes linguistic context in teaching vocabulary. On the whole, this research attempts to uncover the inconsistency between theoretical notions and practical applications of teaching.

Keywords: Context, Learning, Teaching, Vocabulary, Lexico-grammar, Linguistic context.

English in India is generally regarded as second language. From the point of many learners, it is still a foreign language. India has bilingual and/or multilingual setting in every geographical state. In the globalized context, like the people from various countries, Indians also give immense priority to learning of English, as the language serves as the important lingua franca of the country; moreover, communication in English is interconnected with career development in most of the professions people prefer to choose. In spite of having second language status, many learners have no sufficient exposure to English from their right age for language pick up. In many states of the country English speaking environment is only limited to official purposes and high class societies. Besides, English learning has become the need of adult learners in view of their career development instead of casual communicative purpose. This environmental situation causes uncertainty in English learning class room; many learners are still unable to pick up language and its proper usage due to various other factors also. At this juncture, learning English has become a tough task for many students; thereby teachers and

researchers of English also try to explore different approaches and teaching methods to improve the academic situation by providing better learning environment. In pedagogic perspective, second language/ foreign language teaching and learning process entails use of context for better results. The present research paper proposes to

involve linguistic context as an important element in contextualization of teaching vocabulary in EFL/ESL classrooms. The necessity of linguistic context is emphasized with supportive theoretical arguments and a practical pilot study. The theoretical arguments focus on importance of context; and the pilot study provides empirical proof of the vocabulary learning problem and its nature. The nature of the problem apparently identifies that students are learning words without their grammaticality; thereby sentences produced by the EFL/ESL students are erroneous due to improper choice of words. Hence, the paper recommends that intervention of linguistic context is necessary in classroom teaching for improvement in the meaningful and effective usage of words.

Teaching Approaches and Methods

To address language problems, various approaches and teaching methods are explored by linguists and teaching methodology investigators. Some focus on skill-based approaches like LSRW skills. Some invent item-wise¹ designs and models of teaching. Different activities, implementation procedures and tasks are planned according to various situations of students and classroom. In fact, all these methods and approaches, prior to language teaching, create an environment for involvement in language learning. In linguistic terminology, this environment is called *context*. In teaching and learning process, context is the basic and primary aspect which is potential to lead learners towards natural internalization of a language. The main emphasis of this research paper is understanding context as a teaching input as well as learning input. In case of obstacles in providing a context which can give access to accurate meaning, we need to find another appropriate context to reduce complexity of learning.

Importance of Context

As human beings with ability to perceive and express about the world we experience, different contexts make us to share our thoughts, experiences through communicative acts of conversation. The term context refers to any situation that provides natural setting for an event or an action. In accordance with Halliday (2004) context is the predominant precursor of speech event, and the nature of speech event is also dependant on its context. According to his Systemic Functional Theory of linguistics, context initiates semantics of a language in terms of speech functions such as statement, question, command and request. In a linguistic spectrum of a language, beginning from semantic level, the linguistic operation systematically occurs in accordance with contextual needs of interlocutors who participated in the conversational situation.

A context can be social, cultural, political, legal etc. Any aspect that serves as a situation for communicative needs is a context for usage of a language. For instance, the word 'bank (noun)' is potential for

two different meaningful references depending on its contextual occurrence. The word 'bank' refers to a financial establishment or a sloping border of a river. In the context of applying for a loan, one person may say 'I want go to the **bank**'. The choice of his meaning must be interpreted as '**a financial establishment**' in the context of situation. Hence context is an inevitably important factor in both perception and production of language. In addition, as an inseparable causative of communication, it is always essential in teaching and learning process of any language also.

To achieve pedagogic goals of English language, teaching methods/approaches, like Bilingual Method, Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), Cooperative Language Learning Approach, Lexical Approach etc are followed presently in many English classrooms. These teaching methods provide various situations for initiation of conversations by providing context for communication. However, these methods, without linguistic intervention in terms of grammatical importance, may not be sufficient to fulfill the contextual purpose when teaching targets at the students who crossed their adolescence and who learn English as a foreign/second language. We need to consider three things for this reason. Firstly, foreign language is not the first language (First language is generally an effortlessly acquired language). Secondly, language learning is conscious process after the age of 13 years (according to Chomsky's assertion of *Language Acquisition Device* and his claim of *Critical Period Hypothesis*) and thirdly, along with the communicative context which is provided while teaching English, it is also necessary to include linguistic situations of first or known language (to reduce complexity in learning a target language).

Language Acquisition Concepts

Since this paper focuses on the perspective 'teaching English as a foreign language', the view of research point is interlinked with some theoretical concepts which are related to language acquisition and language learning. In language learning, particularly English, the phrases *English as a foreign language* and *English as a second language* are frequently heard in literature. Within minor differences in terms of environmental linguistic acquaintance with learners or users, practically both phrases are connected to the concepts of *language acquisition* and *language learning*. Hence teachers of foreign and/or second language are generally advised to understand some theoretical notions which draw attention to the difference between acquisition of language and learning of language; because, in acquisition, language teachers are not mandatory for children who have social and linguistic environment; but the process of learning requires language teachers to provide context, linguistic information and its elucidation. Hence language teaching process is theoretically and practically dependent on the stage of learners. Regarding acquisition of languages some theoretical notions are recurrently mentioned by researchers in language and its learning.

Language Acquisition Device (LAD) was a proposed theoretical notion of Noam Chomsky. According to this, humans are born with innate ability to acquire language. Chomsky claims that the ability in children to receive and produce language quickly is because of *Language Acquisition Device* which is a natural mental capability developed during certain age called *window period*² (according to Eric Lenneberg's *Critical Period Hypothesis*). Window period is considered as

an ideal time for brain development for acquiring language capacities in a linguistically rich environment. The strength of these theoretical concepts relies on the evidence that children, after providing exposure to any language, can acquire it with a native essence in its production. In spite of exposure to a limited lexical items and their usage within the window period, a child can pick up words and phrases, and utter grammatically accurate sentences of the language he/she is exposed to. After this window period, acquisition of a language gradually becomes a conscious act of learning and turns into a effortful task. Learning of a foreign language in mature adults is a life-time process and its perfection cannot be compared with his first language. Hence the initial stage of exposure to language is very important in acquiring first language.

M.A.K. Halliday's concept of language acquisition is strictly functional. The needs of social interaction build situational context for language usage. Inherent sociability of children creates an atmosphere for expression. Halliday also proposed a functional model of child language acquisition.

Chomsky's concept argues on cognitive ability as an inborn mechanism; on the other hand, Halliday argues on functional ability as a social need in language acquisition. However, in these two models, environmental input for language is an inherent procedural application for language acquisition. Pedagogically speaking, this use of language environment is indisputably necessary as a context for both acquisition and learning.

Learning is a conscious process with theoretical description of teaching in a formal setting. Providing a context for natural acquisition is different from providing a context for conscious learning. Hence using linguistic information of first language or known language as a part of context in teaching English vocabulary can be an effective method in achieving good results. For better understanding of relation between context and language, we need to observe the system of stratification in language.

Stratification of Language

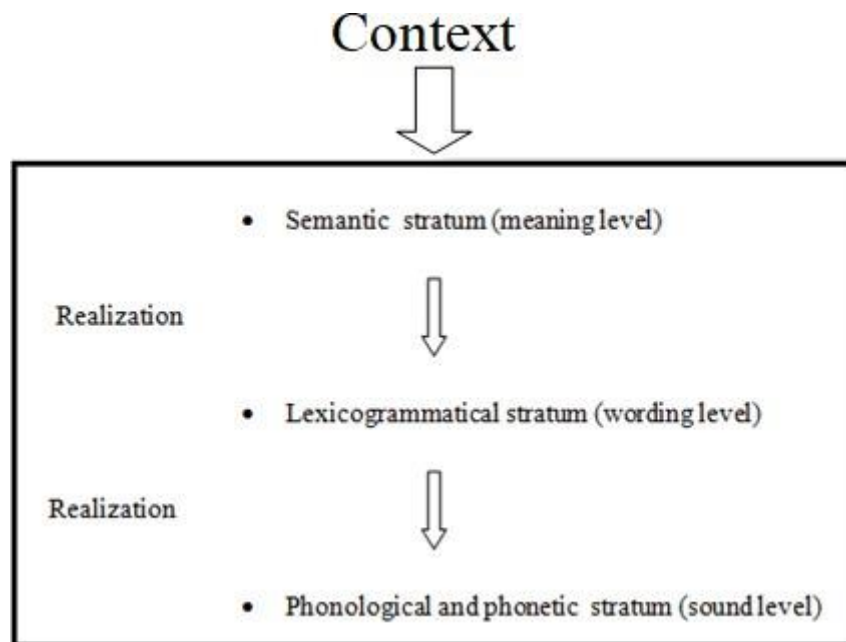
In the theory of Systemic Functional Linguistics, stratification is one of the five dimensions of language. According to the concept, language is a stratified system; the strata are semantic stratum, lexico-grammatical stratum and phonological & phonetic stratum. All these strata operate under context of situation. The operational principle is known as realization. Context provides a setting for conversation and initiates semantic stratum of language in terms of speech functions, i.e., statement, question, command and request. The semantic stratum realizes lexico-grammatical stratum of language; the wordings (according to their grammatical classes) are organized as clauses and realized as declarative, interrogative and imperative clauses. The lexico-grammatical stratum is further realized as phonological stratum in terms of tones (falling tone, rising tone etc). In this way, under context, meaning is realized in structure, and the structure is realized in sound; and thereby expressions are meaningful and appropriate to their context.

Since the main focus of this research paper is teaching English vocabulary, we are more concerned with lexico-grammatical stratum than the rest. Halliday (2004) emphasizes that **'grammar and vocabulary are not two separate components of a language – there are just the two ends**

of single continuum' (p.7). The main emphasis of present research article is based on this theoretical and functional notion of lexico-grammar. Hence, this paper asserts that this notion, as linguistic context, is to be considered essential in teaching vocabulary of a language.

Acquisition Verses Learning

In acquisition of a language, context is a natural occurrence. Consequently, as propounded in functional perspective of language, context initiates semantic stratum, semantic stratum construes lexico-grammar; and lexico-grammar construes phonology in natural way. According to the contextual need of meaning, we choose wordings; it is practical and subconscious without requirement of any grammatical knowledge.



Language stratification

On the other hand, learning of language occurs with planned teaching under a created context. Since it is not natural context, there is always a possibility for confusion in the **realization** process. The created context in teaching may not be sufficient to initiate semantic stratum in the target language. It only provides a space for a need of conversation. Hence, in teaching a language, we start from lexico-grammatical stratum; any foreign language class begins with introducing vocabulary in the first place. From the point of lexico-grammatical stratum, we try to identify meaning of words and imagine the context of its use. However, in many English classrooms, it is an observable fact that words and meanings are taught without their grammatical information. Grammar is treated as a separate element altogether. This situation causes uncertainty in the choice of words that are meaningfully suitable to the context. Halliday (2004) stated that 'a language is a resource for making meaning, and meaning resides in systemic patterns of choice' (p. 23). When learners are taught

vocabulary without grammatical information, the choice of words is affected in conversation.

Let's look into the following words,

Nation(noun)	National(adj)	Nationality(noun)	
	Nationally(adv)	Nationalize(verb)	Nationalization(noun)
national(adj)	International	(adj)	Nationalist(noun)
			Nationalist(adj)
			Anti-

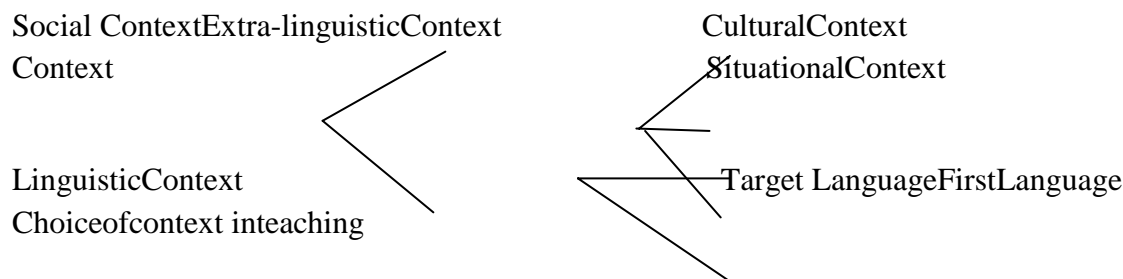
Here we can observe that every word has its root meaning close to each other; but with a little grammatical change at morphological level, every word has become unique with its particularity of contextual usage. Merely, the lexical similarity cannot fulfill the need of contextually befitting choice. The changes in meaning are the changes in grammar of the words. Hence, we require linguistic interference in teaching/learning vocabulary. Linguistic environment as a context can make vocabulary learning faster. As vocabulary and grammar are not two separate components of a language, the vocabulary learned in linguistic context can be effectively used by learners with accuracy in its contextual meaning.

Linguistic Context

In two aspects, a context can be viewed, i.e., extra-linguistic context (which includes society, culture, time etc) and linguistic context (which includes grammar, meaning and its operational network as a system). Teaching vocabulary, as mentioned earlier, demands both extra-linguistic and linguistic contexts. The first provides a situation for need of meaning to converse; the second provides a situation for accuracy in choosing proper wordings towards its meaning. Hence, linguistic context is a central facet in teaching vocabulary of a language.

Linguistic context in teaching vocabulary, as mentioned earlier, entails awareness of lexico-grammatical stratum. In the case of mature adults who learn English as a foreign/second language, providing linguistic context to target language may not be sufficient for construal of meaning with accuracy, because, as the learners are grownups, there is always a possibility of searching for a grammatical context in their first language. Hence, interference of lexico-grammar of their first language in teaching to decode the lexical items of the target language may serve as a linguistic context in teaching English vocabulary.

Through linguistic context, words are to be identified along with their grammatical classes such as noun, verb, adjective and adverb in linguistic environment of target language. Derivational suffixes markers, which determine words as nouns, verbs, adjective and adverb, are to be practically identified with the help of first language also. This type of linguistic context enables learners to get awareness on the wordings whether they are used as subject, complement or predicate etc. In this way, providing context in teaching vocabulary is to be considered as shown below.



Depending on the learners' situations, English language teachers can utilize linguistic context as a choice for effective teaching.

Vocabulary

As a primary concern in teaching, vocabulary is connected to the aspects like spelling meaning and structure in general perspective. Lexical items of a language possess structural elements along with their meaning. Apart from the basic content meaning, words have many other qualities which make them suitable for contextual usage. Social and cultural aspects are always involved in the use of vocabulary. In linguistic perspective, words have semantic and grammatical information. This semantic information includes its basic meaning, and the grammatical information allows the words as appropriate components in sentence structures in the meaning making process. For example, let us observe the words in the sentences.

- He is **acting** in the movie → Verb
- He is **active** in the movie → Adjective
- His **action** is good in the movie → Noun
- He needs **activeness** in the movie → Noun
- He **actively** performed in the movie → Adverb
- The **activities** are shown in the movie → Noun
- His **acting** skill is **activated** in the movie → Noun & Verb

All these sentences are grammatically correct because of the apt choice of words according to their meaning. The words highlighted in the above sentences are morphologically derived from a root word 'act'. Each of these derived words has its own significance in terms of its grammatical class with appropriate meaning³. Learners should be taught vocabulary along with grammatical information to achieve better results in vocabulary learning. This procedure should be practical under provision of linguistic environment as an additional context.

Apart from the general perspective as mentioned above, words have many other qualities associated with them. Words in a language have orthographic form in terms of spelling. Words have system of sounding which is realized in pronunciation. Words have grammaticality which is realized at morphological level. Word classes have syntactical properties which construe meaning of clauses. Words have neighboring words which contextually co-occur as collocations. Finally words

have quality of situational appropriateness depending on its user and context.

In fact, all these aspects should be considered in teaching of English vocabulary. As a present concern in Indian teaching environment, the priority should be given to words and word classes. In the examples given above, the root word 'act' is realized as different word class at sentence level by adding morphological derivative markers. The meaning realized in each sentence is clearly specific in its own right. Hence vocabulary teaching needs to create a contextual access to the learners from the level of word to the level of word class. As lexical-grammatical components, word classes can be observed from semantic stratum as processes (i.e., verb class), entities (i.e., noun class), qualities (i.e., adjective class) and manners of process (adverb class). In construction of meaning, the word classes operate according to paradigmatic choice and syntagmatic choice of a language. Thereby, word classes are very important in understanding the system of language.

Pilot Study on Vocabulary Proficiency

As a teacher and researcher, after continuous observation of many students and their English vocabulary proficiency level, I found that the cause of their low proficiency in vocabulary and its usage is surrounded by some factors.

1. English is a foreign language/second language.
2. The learners are mature adults with insignificant English exposure in their childhood.
3. They are able to identify content meaning but confused about grammatical meaning.
4. The learners have no awareness about word classes and their contextual usage.

With these basic observations, a pilot study was conducted on some undergraduate students who have their mother tongue as their primary instructive medium of the course concerned. These learners are studying English as their second language according to their prescribed syllabus.

In order to identify the nature of errors in vocabulary, a context-relevant choice-based activity was given to these informants. In the activity, the informants are supposed to choose an option to fill in the blank in each sentence. In fact, the planned options of each word are the derived forms from the same word. All the words given in the choice list are high frequency words in several social situations. Hence, the informants are well acquainted with these words in day-to-day exposure in terms of listening. The list of words is given as shown below.

List of Words with Choice

Noun	Verb	Adjective	Adverb
Happiness	-----	Happy	Happily
Beauty	Beautify	Beautiful	Beautifully
Development	Develop	Developing	-----
Need	Need	Needy, needful	-----

Meaning	Mean	Meaningful	Meaningfully
Love	Love	Loving,Lovable	Lovingly,Lovably
Perfection	Perfect	Perfect	Perfectly
Grammar	-----	Grammatical	Grammatically
Effect,Effectiveness	Effect	Effective	Effectively
Influence	Influence	Influential	
Closeness	Close	Close,Closing	Closely
Greatness	-----	Great	Greatly
Intelligence,Intelligent	-----	Intelligent	Intelligently
Brightness	Brighten	Bright	Brightly
Danger	Endanger	Dangerous	Dangerously
Information	Inform	Informative	-----
Positivity	-----	Positive	Positively
Activity,Activeness	Act,Activate	Active	Actively
Significance	Signify	Significant	Significantly
Remark	Remark	Remarkable	Remarkably
Confidence	-----	Confident	Confidently
Politeness	-----	Polite	Politely
Freedom	Free	Free	Freely
Anger	-----	Angry	Angrily
Care,Carefulness	Care	Careful,Caring	Carefully,Caringly

Some Questions from the Activity

1. I need in my life (happy /happily/happiness)
2. You should your house (beauty/beautiful/beautify/beautifully)
3. He involved in the game. (acting/actively/active/action)
4. Are you telling? (confident/ confidently/confidence)
5. She has a weakness of..... (angrily/angry/anger)
6. You need..... in your subject (perfection/perfectly/perfect)
7. The medicine worked..... (Effect/Effectiveness/Effective/effectively)
8. It was an answer with (Intelligence/Intelligent/Intelligently)
9. It is to climb that hill (Danger/Dangerous/Dangerously)
10. We need..... in our observation (Care/Carefulness/Careful/Caring /Caringly)

After filling the blanks, the consolidated result of the data indicates that 95% are erroneous but they are not randomly chosen. It is an interesting fact that all the informants chose similar options as their answer in each question. It is observed that the options chosen by them are more

frequent words in their everyday conversation than other words in the given choice. For instance, the word 'happy' is more frequent than 'happiness' and 'happily'; 'happy' is commonly found in code-mixing conversations of the students. However, it is an identifiable fact that these students are not certain about the difference between 'happy' and 'happiness'. The lack of awareness about accuracy causes inappropriate and ungrammatical choice of usage. The following are the answers filled by the students. In this pilot study.

1. Happy(W)⁴
2. Beauty(W), Beautiful(W)
3. Active(W), Actively(R)
4. Confident(W), Confidence(W)
5. Angry(W)
6. Perfect(W)
7. Effective(W)
8. Intelligent(W)
9. Danger(W)
10. Careful(W)

The analysis of the study provides a logical proof about the nature of their errors. The words given in choice have similarity in its basic content meaning but they have difference in its grammatical meaning. Hence, because of uncertainty, all the informants made errors in picking up an appropriate option. The findings indicate that their learning of vocabulary is limited to content meaning. The grammar in lexical items is totally ignored. This practical observation about the nature of error suggests improvisation of teaching environment by providing linguistic context.

Conclusion

In this research, importance of linguistic context is suggested as primary concern in teaching English vocabulary in EFL/ESL classrooms for better understanding and proper usage of words. The proposition about the necessity of linguistic context attempts to unveil theoretical aspects about language learning; because language learning is a conscious process. Thus, conscious activity of learning entails certain context which leads learners from word level to its accurate meaning. In many Indian classrooms, it is an observable fact that EFL and ESL teaching classes are not providing sufficient and appropriate context to learn vocabulary. Intervention of linguistic view is ignored as a priority in teaching. In these classes, vocabulary and grammar are treated as separate aspects of English language. Subsequently, many learners are uncertain about proper usage of words which they learned. Furthermore, findings of the pilot study unfold the fact that the nature of vocabulary problems is related to grammar of words and usage. In this study, theoretical views about adult language learning emphasize about necessity of context in teaching. Practical vocabulary errors of students reveal that linguistic context is a major concern in teaching vocabulary. Finally, it is suggested that, along with linguistic aspect, context in every possibility should be provided to learners to achieve perfection in English wordings and language.

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