

# Study on the Application of Context Theory on English Vocabulary Teaching in High School

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**Abstract:** Vocabulary teaching runs through senior high school English teaching. Learning vocabulary well is the foundation of learning English well. The traditional vocabulary teaching method makes students feel boring and obscure, which limits their vocabulary input, and most students were found to have neglected the contextual knowledge of English vocabulary. Therefore, the emergence and development of context theory makes it possible for vocabulary teaching to be effective. This study aims to explore the situation of the use of context theory in each stage: vocabulary teaching, vocabulary practice and vocabulary consolidation by observing some cases. It is found that in high school English vocabulary teaching, context helps students to guess and determine the meaning of words, stimulate students' interest in vocabulary learning, help students remember vocabulary, and help students use vocabulary comprehensively. Simultaneously, some strategies are put forward for senior high school English vocabulary teaching.

**Keywords:** Context Theory, Vocabulary Teaching, Senior High School.

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## 1. Introduction

At present, New English Curriculum Standards for Senior High Schools (2020 Edition) (short for Standards) points out that "Words are the basis of language and the smallest unit of language that can be used independently. Vocabulary teaching at the senior secondary level, apart from guiding students to a deeper understanding and a wider use of the vocabulary they have learnt, focuses on cultivating students' awareness of chunks of words in context, and further expanding their vocabulary and improving their ability to use vocabulary to comprehend accurately and express meanings exactly through extensive reading." Standards advocates that students learn words through context. However, in the reality of English teaching, many English teachers teach vocabulary in isolation and students learn vocabulary in isolation, which results in insufficient learning of vocabulary, inability to use it in real life, and lack of understanding of the cultural connotations of vocabulary. Neglecting context in vocabulary teaching not only fails to make students really understand the meaning and usage of vocabulary, but also conveys a wrong approach to language learning (Xia, 2014).

Context teaching, simply speaking, means teaching in a specific context, which is generally applicable to language disciplines. Chen (2019) pointed out that vocabulary teaching under the guidance of English core literacy should serve the theme context and discourse understanding. Hoey once said, "It is meaningless to learn words in isolation from the context." (2000:240). Therefore, teachers should attach importance to the application of context theory in vocabulary teaching (Wu, 2021).

In this study, the author will observe the excellent vocabulary teaching cases online, study their vocabulary learning condition through observation. Observe their teaching methods and frequency of using context teaching methods and analyze the data. In the end, put forward strategies on English vocabulary teaching for senior high school.

## 2. Literature Review

Vocabulary is a central component of English learning and is related to the quality of students' second language acquisition. Without vocabulary, it is impossible to form a language.

As for vocabulary learning strategies, many foreign language learners think that mastering good strategies can improve learners' learning results, realize their learning goals, and make in-depth research on learning strategies. In the period when grammar-translation method was dominant, people only pay attention to the explanation of the meaning and form of words, ignoring the contextual meaning in practical application. In the 1920s, situational method was put forward by A.S.Homby and H.E.Plamer, who believed that vocabulary learning should be accomplished through situational activities. In the 1940s, audiolingual method, based on structuralist linguistics and behaviorist linguistics, began to rise. It overemphasizes the mechanical sentence pattern drill, neglects the language meaning and the content, has been divorced from the context. Communicative approach originated in Europe in the 1970s. Hymes(1972) put forward the concept of "communicative competence", which enriched the connotation of communicative approach and trained students to communicate in the target language.

Wilkins(1972) thought that learners should be in a large number of language input environments to master vocabulary. The research on context theory originated from human linguists Malinowski (1923), Firth (1950), Halliday (1973), etc. They made very important contributions to the birth, inheritance and development of context theory. Brown (2002), a linguist, said that learning new words in dictionary is equivalent to memorizing words, which is inefficient. However, based on the cognitive subjective learning theory, trying to guess the meaning of words in context can get a more rational effect. Twaddll (1972) believes that students will feel anxious when they encounter unfamiliar words in reading and listening, and this phenomenon will be improved if they can grasp the method of guessing words from context. Therefore, he recommends that the majority of English teachers guide

students to master the method of guessing words in context in teaching. The important role of context in helping vocabulary teaching not only attracts the attention of western linguists, but also attracts the attention of Chinese linguists.

The research on vocabulary teaching in China appears relatively late. Since 1990s, the research on vocabulary teaching in China has gradually developed. Ying (1998) pointed out that vocabulary ability cannot be overemphasized. Chen (2011) said that the root affixes method is the most scientific vocabulary memorizing method, which is of great significance for expanding vocabulary and improving language ability. Liu (2000) holds the view of "vocabulary communication", and thinks that memorizing words in isolation and passivity is not effective. Vocabulary teaching should guide students to talk about topics that they are interested in or related to real life by using known vocabulary and vocabulary they are learning, arouse students' real needs, and combine vocabulary teaching with listening and speaking activities, so that students can learn vocabulary in a relaxed and pleasant atmosphere or context.

Lv (2004) believes that vocabulary teaching should combine vocabulary, grammar and discourse. Lu (2001) affirmed the important role of context in cultivating the ability to guess words, and emphasized that vocabulary learning can't be separated from the whole context. Pu (2003), based on the Chinese Learner Corpus, observed that second language learners are prone to collocation errors in the use of common words. After further analysis, the author concluded that domestic learners lack in-depth research on common words, and vocabulary learning often stays on the sound, form and meaning of a single word and a few phrases, which makes the vocabulary learning effect unsatisfactory. Therefore, Chinese learners should strengthen the lexical chunk learning of common words. Different schools in China have different understandings of context. Chen (1997) explained context from six aspects: "why, what, who, where, when and how", that is to say, context can refer to both the internal environment of a text and the "situational context", that is, the surrounding situation of the text when it came into being, the nature of the event, the relationship between participants, time, place and way, etc. Gui (1988) pointed out that the learning of word meaning cannot be separated from context. Wang (2003) put forward a new theory of the role of context, namely "the hypothesis of complement". This theory holds that the prerequisite for correct and fluent use of language is the effective combination of language form and contextual knowledge. Because foreign language learning lacks a real and appropriate context. It is necessary to intervene in the native language contextual knowledge in the process of understanding, acquiring and using foreign languages. The new curriculum reform requires expanding students' vocabulary, which brings new challenges to teachers and students. Wei (2007) pointed out words are endowed with specific meanings by the environment, and the meanings of words are clear and specific only in the context. If teachers break away from the context on which the meaning of the vocabulary depends in the process of vocabulary teaching, the students will only memorize the word's form and meaning. It is hard to reflect in practical application, so vocabulary teaching should be integrated.

### 3. Theoretical Framework

#### 3.1. Definition and Classification of Context Theories

The study of context started from Malinowski. He studied the language of indigenous people from the perspective of anthropology. According to his own observation and experience, he put forward the concepts of "situational context" and "cultural context" in 1923 and 1935 respectively. Based on this, Firth, Halliday, Fishman, Hymes and others conducted a more in-depth study of context from different perspectives. Halliday (1964) is regarded as one of the scholars who have made the greatest contribution to the study of context theory. On the basis of inheriting the context thought put forward by Ma and Firth, he divides context into linguistic context and non-linguistic context. Linguistic context refers to inter-textual context and intra-textual context, while non-linguistic context includes cultural context and situational context. And put forward the famous "register theory" in 1964. Halliday's register concept promotes the further development of context to a certain extent and plays a positive role in the study of context theory. The research of Firth and Hymes focuses on the research of situational context. In addition, Hymes combines context with language teaching, which paves the way for applying context to classroom teaching later.[5].

Domestic research on context theory began in the 1930s. Chen (1932) took rhetoric as the starting point and divided the context into two parts: scene and theme. The former is the famous "six he" theory: what, when, where, who, what and why; The latter is the style and theme of the article. In modern Chinese, Zhang classified context as realistic language environment and generalized language environment. Professor He (1997, 21) divided context into linguistic knowledge and non-linguistic knowledge. This kind of language knowledge is the knowledge of English language itself, including vocabulary and grammar knowledge, which also breaks the shackle that context is closely regarded as context in traditional context classification. On the basis of inheriting Halliday's theory, linguists Hu (2008) classified context into three categories: linguistic context, that is, the environment or context within a text; Situational context, the surrounding situation, the nature of the event, the relationship between participants, time, place, way, etc; Cultural context refers to the history, culture and customs of the language community where the speaker or author belongs. So far, the classification of context has gradually matured after a long period of development

#### 3.2. Hu Zhuanglin's Context Theory

Hu (2002) classified context on the basis of Professor He. Based on context theory, context can be divided into three categories: linguistic context, situational context and cultural context. At this point, the classification of context has gradually matured after a long development.

To sum up, the author adopts Hu Zhuanglin's view that context theory is divided into three categories: linguistic context, situational context and cultural context.

##### (1) Linguistic context

Language context includes lexical context and grammatical context. Lexical context is the collocation between words, so it is also called collocation context. The meaning of a word will be affected by the adjacent words and thus produce different meanings. For example, hard, as an adjective in hard

candy, is hard (hard candy); As an adjective in hard worker, it is diligent; difficult in a hard life; In a hard blow is violent, which means that lexical context is of great significance in vocabulary teaching.

#### (2) Situational context

It refers to some factors abstracted from the actual situation that have an impact on speech activities, including both participants, the occasion (time, place), the degree of formality of speaking, communication media, topic or register. These factors directly or indirectly affect the choice of words and the determination of word meaning, which is an indispensable part of vocabulary teaching (Zhang, 2013). For example, a person asks someone to help open the door. He can say: "Open the door, please!" If the other party is a person he is not familiar with, his words may become: "Would you mind opening the door?"

#### (3) Cultural context

Some words need specific cultural knowledge background to understand their true meaning, which is the cultural context of words. It can be divided into two aspects. One is cultural customs. It refers to the life mode that the people inherit from generation to generation in social life. It is a collective habit of the social people in language, behavior and psychology. It is normative and binding on the members of the collective. The other is social norms. It refers to various regulations and restrictions made by a society on verbal communication activities.

Cultural differences can lead to different cultural connotations of vocabulary. Understanding cultural connotations depends on the understanding of cultural environment. In particular, it symbolizes the specific connotation of "simple" words such as colors, names and numbers. For example, "It was blue today and he just didn't like going to work". It is difficult for many Chinese students to understand the meaning of this word because of their understanding of the meaning of "depression" contained in "blue". In the concrete cognition of Chinese context, blue represents broad and sunny. Another example is "dog". In the conceptual sense, there is no difference between Chinese "dog" and British and American "dog". However, the cultural connotations of "dog" in the two cultural groups are quite different. In eastern culture, "dog" immediately reminds people of "son of a bitch", "stooge" and "dog bites dog", while in western culture, "dog" symbolizes friendship and loyalty.

## 4. The application of context theories in senior high school English Vocabulary Teaching

### 4.1. Presenting Vocabulary Through Reading and Collocation.

To read effectively, people need a solid vocabulary foundation. To build this foundation, people need to read extensively. This famous saying tells the relationship between reading and vocabulary. The context provided by reading is alive and there are linguistic situations. In reading, discourse is a support of language, so teachers should take discourse as the carrier to present vocabulary from various aspects of the context. Take the reading paragraph in Unit 5 of Compulsory 1, for example, the target word is violence, it is difficult for students to guess without enough context. Then we can present the target vocabulary through the following examples: We preferred to deal with things in a peaceful way. But when

it was forbidden, only then did we decided to answer violence with violence. In the above example, the words "peaceful" and "forbidden" are intentionally inserted to context, in order to provide enough information for the context, create a context to present the target words, and facilitate students to guess the meaning of words. After reading these two sentences, students can complete the following exercises: It's time to put a stop to the\_\_\_\_\_.

[Teaching clip] —This case is selected from a high school vocabulary teaching. Studying and distinguishing "worth" and "worthy".

T: The novel by Milton is well worth reading. The novel by Milton is worthy of being read. What's the difference?

S: Worth is used in the active voice. Worthy is used in the passive voice.

T: and more?

S: Worth is generally the structure of be worth doing when it is used in sentences. Worthy follows with of.

By establishing such a different context, students can better grasp the use of vocabulary and distinguish the differences and applications between similar words.

### 4.2. Consolidating vocabulary Through Oral Activities in the Created Situation.

In the vocabulary teaching, teachers should give full play to creativity and design new ones. Theme can help students better grasp the vocabulary they have learned in the context, or use the vocabulary in the article to make various grammatical structures, so that students can create their own contextual content. For example, in Book 1 Unit5. When reviewing the vocabulary about characters in Book 1 Unit5, students can consolidate the target vocabulary in the context through the following dialogue.

T:I have a friend who has never paid the bill when we eat out together. What quality do you think he has?

S:I think he is very mean.

T:Ok, you said it. But if a friend is always willing to lend me his car for my holiday, what do you think of him?

S:He is generous.

T:What about those who think only of their own needs.

S:Selfish, of course.

T:Do you think your mother is selfish?

S:Absolutely not. She is selfless for she devotes all her selfless love to me.

T:So you should respect her. Maybe you can become devoted friend with her.

Teacher can also present these adjectives describing the characters to the students first. Then the teacher designs some short dialogues for the students to think carefully after listening. And choose a word that can properly describe the second person's quality.

A:I'm in desperate need of money, can you lend me some?

B:Of course, how much do you need?

According to this created situation, students are likely to choose the word generous. Therefore, in each chapter teaching, this method can be used to create situations to attract students' interest and attention, so that students can participate more actively.

### 4.3. Using Words in Cultural Context.

Cultural context helps to understand the words related to culture. These important functions of context also directly determine that students can consciously distinguish the meanings of synonyms and polysemous words through word

meaning discrimination in vocabulary application, so as to use vocabulary more appropriately and appropriately. Therefore, English teachers should pay more attention to culture in the teaching process. In the New English Curriculum Standards(2020 Edition) for Senior High Schools, teachers are required to infiltrate culture-related knowledge in teaching, so that students can understand cultural differences. Cultural differences come from differences in language

expression. Therefore, it is necessary for teachers to distinguish the cultural differences between China and the West, especially some obvious cultural differences between China and the West. Take one case in China Teaching and Research Network for example. The following pictures are designed by a teacher to explain colors. In the process of explaining color vocabulary, teachers ask students to explore the deep meanings represented by different colors.

Types	Examples	Feelings
calm	Blue (sky, sea)	A feeling of harmony...
	White(snow, cloud)	Pure-purity, peaceful
warm	Orange(orange)	Cheerful,hungry,satisfied,bring,succ ess,represent joy...
	Yellow (sun, light)	Wise-wisdom
energetic	Green (trees, grass)	Represent new life and growth, the color of envy jealous
strong	Red(rose, heart)	Hot...

Figure 1. Teaching design.

We can find that this teacher attaches great importance to the exercise of students' vocabulary association, but if we want to do this, we should have a high teaching capacity. Then the teacher asked the students to imagine what's the favorite color of students. Some students answered blue. In China, "blue" can symbolize "harmony", while in the west, "blue" sometimes means that a person is in a sad atmosphere. Therefore, when teachers associate words, they need to further explain the differences of words in different cultures. In fact, differences in habits, language use and customs are the embodiment of cultural differences. When students come into contact with such differences, they will obviously enhance their interest in learning. The following example is selected from China Teaching and Research Network. When the teacher explained the word "dragon", he didn't pass it by, but popularized Chinese and western cultures to the students. In the east, dragons represent a higher level of authority. Therefore, our country calls itself "the descendant of the dragon", and in ancient times, the emperor was regarded as the real dragon emperor. But in the United States and other countries, "dragon" is regarded as the embodiment of evil. Satan is called "dragon" in the Bible. When studying the chapter culture relics of Unit 1 of Compulsory 2, the teacher can ask the students to transfer the knowledge about Peter the Great from the history class or tell the students about the brief history of Popper House in a few minutes before class. Through this kind of explanation, students are no longer boring to memorize words, and they will be interested in learning in the cultural background, so learning words becomes a easy thing.

## 5. Conclusion

Under the background of the new curriculum reform, teachers need to change traditional teaching methods of

vocabulary teaching. Using context to teach vocabulary can not only overcome the disadvantages of inefficient memorization of words, improve students' ability to distinguish words, but also can enable them to master grammar flexibly in the process of learning words. What's more, Students can understand the cultural differences loaded by languages through context theory, improving cross-cultural awareness. Due to the small number of observed samples and the single research method, this study also has its limitations. The author's research can give some useful advice to English teachers and the future researchers.

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