

Study on Strategies for Dealing with New Words in Second Language Reading

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Abstract: In English reading comprehension, encountering new words is a common challenge for learners. Effective vocabulary acquisition strategies are essential for improving comprehension skills and enhancing reading fluency. This paper discusses various methods to deal with new words in reading comprehension, focusing on practical approaches that learners can apply during the reading process. The paper examines the theoretical basis of vocabulary learning and outlines specific techniques, such as contextual guessing, word mapping, and the use of dictionaries. It also highlights the importance of developing a personal vocabulary acquisition strategy and creating a positive reading environment. Finally, recommendations are made for teachers to help students improve their reading comprehension by efficiently dealing with new vocabulary.

Keywords: Reading Comprehension, New Words, Vocabulary Acquisition, Contextual Guessing.

1. Introduction

Reading comprehension is a critical skill in English language learning. However, many students often struggle with understanding texts because they encounter new words that hinder their ability to grasp the overall meaning. The challenge lies not only in the individual word but also in the difficulty of connecting these words to the broader context of the text. This issue raises an important question: How can learners effectively deal with new words while reading to enhance their comprehension?

In the process of reading, new vocabulary may be encountered in a variety of ways—whether in the form of unfamiliar technical terms, phrases, or words that are not part of the learner's current lexical knowledge. Therefore, understanding how to manage these new words is essential for improving reading comprehension. This paper aims to explore various strategies and approaches that help learners handle new vocabulary effectively, thus facilitating better understanding of the reading material.

2. Literature Review

Reading comprehension and vocabulary acquisition are deeply interconnected in language learning theory. According to Nation (2001), vocabulary knowledge is directly linked to the ability to comprehend a text. The more words a reader knows, the easier it is to understand a passage and to draw meaning from it [7]. However, many students, especially at the early stages of language learning, have limited vocabulary knowledge, which makes reading a challenging task.

There are several strategies for vocabulary acquisition that have been studied in the literature. One common approach is the use of contextual guessing, which involves using surrounding words and phrases to infer the meaning of unfamiliar words. This method is based on the hypothesis that readers can derive meaning through the context in which the word appears (Hirsh & Nation, 1992) [5]. In particular, clues from grammatical structures, collocations, and word morphology can aid in understanding new vocabulary without resorting to a dictionary.

Another widely discussed strategy is word mapping, where

learners connect new words to known words, mental images, or concepts. This approach is based on schema theory, which suggests that new information is better understood when it is linked to existing knowledge (Anderson, 1994) [1]. Word mapping has been shown to improve vocabulary retention and facilitate easier comprehension of new words in context.

In addition to these strategies, dictionary use has been a traditional method for dealing with unknown words. Studies have found that learners often rely on bilingual or monolingual dictionaries to look up new words, especially when contextual guessing does not provide sufficient understanding (Laufer, 2005) [6]. However, dictionary use can interrupt the reading flow, so it is suggested that learners use dictionaries selectively and only when absolutely necessary.

Moreover, reading fluency is another key factor in vocabulary acquisition. Fluency refers to the ability to read smoothly with understanding, and it is closely linked to vocabulary knowledge. According to Grabe (2009), fluency development allows learners to focus more on understanding the meaning of the text rather than constantly decoding words [4]. As such, learners with higher vocabulary knowledge are more likely to develop reading fluency, which in turn helps them manage new words more effectively.

Finally, teacher intervention and instructional strategies also play a critical role in helping students deal with new vocabulary. Teachers can help by providing pre-reading activities, such as introducing key vocabulary, discussing word meanings, and teaching strategies like contextual guessing. Effective teaching practices create a supportive environment where students feel more confident in managing unknown words and can practice using these strategies independently (Stoller & Grabe, 1993; Chung & Nation, 2006) [9] [2].

In summary, the literature on vocabulary acquisition and reading comprehension highlights the importance of effective strategies for dealing with new words. Contextual guessing, word mapping, and the use of dictionaries are all widely recognized as essential techniques for improving learners' ability to understand unfamiliar vocabulary in reading. Additionally, the role of reading fluency and teacher intervention is crucial in supporting learners' vocabulary development. These strategies not only help learners handle

new words more effectively but also contribute to the overall enhancement of reading comprehension.

Building on these theoretical foundations and existing research, the following section will discuss practical solutions and specific techniques that can be implemented in the classroom. These strategies, such as contextual guessing, word mapping, and dictionary use, will be explored in more detail, providing concrete ways to help learners improve their vocabulary acquisition and reading comprehension skills.

3. Problem Solution

3.1. Contextual Guessing

One of the most effective strategies for dealing with new words in reading comprehension is contextual guessing. This method requires learners to infer the meaning of a word based on the surrounding text. Contextual clues can be divided into several categories:

First, learners can use synonyms and antonyms. Words that share similar meanings (synonyms) or opposite meanings (antonyms) can help the reader understand the meaning of an unknown word. For example, in the sentence, "The sun was setting and the temperature began to drop significantly, making the evening chillier," the word "chillier" can be understood as colder due to the contextual clue "temperature began to drop." This approach is supported by Hirsh and Nation (1992), who argue that learners can often infer meaning through the surrounding context without relying on dictionaries[5].

Second, learners can use examples and definitions. Sometimes, authors define or give examples of difficult words within the text. For instance, in a sentence like "The dog was lethargic, showing no interest in playing or even moving," the word "lethargic" can be understood through the example of the dog's behavior. This is consistent with the research of Grabe (2009), who highlighted how examples and definitions in context make it easier for learners to guess the meaning of new words[4].

Third, learners can use morphological clues. Understanding the root of the word, prefixes, and suffixes can provide valuable insights into its meaning. For example, "unhappy" can be inferred as the opposite of "happy" through the prefix "un-". Another example is "disloyal," where the prefix "dis-" suggests a negative meaning. This method aligns with the findings of Nation (2001), who pointed out that learners can often break down unfamiliar words into smaller, more familiar components to derive meaning[7].

For contextual guessing to be effective, learners must practice extracting meaning from different types of contextual clues. In addition, they need to develop awareness of different types of texts (e.g. narrative, informational, descriptive), as the clues provided in these texts may vary. According to Snow (2002), reading comprehension can be significantly improved when learners are trained to utilize various contextual clues effectively[8]. Encouraging learners to underline or highlight context clues while reading helps reinforce their attention to these elements. Teachers can also design exercises where students practice contextual guessing by replacing a new word in a sentence with a synonym or definition and then deducing the meaning from the context.

Learners should also be trained to avoid over-reliance on this strategy. Sometimes, even with good contextual clues, the meaning of a word may remain unclear, and a dictionary might be necessary. Therefore, learners must strike a balance

between using contextual clues and checking the word's meaning when needed.

3.2. Word Mapping

Another strategy that has proven effective in vocabulary acquisition is word mapping. This involves associating new words with familiar concepts, known words, or mental images. By linking unfamiliar vocabulary to known words, learners can create a mental "map" that makes it easier to remember and use the word in different contexts. For example, when learning the word "euphoria," a learner might connect it to words like "happiness" to form a deeper understanding of its meaning. The implementation of word mapping can be done through various techniques.

The first technique is concept mapping. Concept maps help learners organize and visualize relationships between words. For instance, a learner could create a map with the word "euphoria" in the center, branching out to related concepts such as "joy," "exhilaration," or "ecstasy." This visual representation of word connections aids in memory retention and encourages learners to relate the new word to existing knowledge. This approach aligns with Anderson's (1994) assertion that linking new vocabulary to existing knowledge helps in better retention and understanding[1].

Another technique is semantic mapping. In semantic mapping, learners draw connections between words with similar or opposite meanings. A word like "fascinating" can be linked to words like "engaging," "captivating," or "interesting." This not only helps learners understand the word but also expands their vocabulary by associating it with other words. According to Coxhead (2000), semantic mapping promotes deeper processing of words and enhances vocabulary retention[3].

The third technique is personal connections. Teachers can encourage students to relate new words to their personal experiences. For example, students can connect words to emotions, events, or situations they have encountered. This personal connection makes the word more memorable and easier to use in different contexts. This personal approach is supported by Grabe (2009), who argues that personal associations with words help learners internalize vocabulary more effectively[4].

The key to effective word mapping is ensuring that the new word is linked to multiple associations, such as synonyms, antonyms, related words, and personal experiences. Teachers can encourage students to keep vocabulary journals where they write down new words, definitions, and their related word maps. In these journals, students can track their progress and review the words periodically to reinforce learning.

3.3. Use of Dictionaries

Although contextual guessing and word mapping are powerful strategies, dictionary use remains an important tool for understanding new vocabulary. However, excessive reliance on dictionaries can slow down reading and hinder comprehension. Therefore, learners should be encouraged to use dictionaries selectively.

To maximize the benefits of dictionary use, learners should follow these guidelines:

First, learners should use a dictionary after attempting contextual guessing. Learners should first attempt to infer the meaning of a word using contextual clues before resorting to the dictionary. This encourages them to develop their skills in interpreting context and avoids the habit of constantly

interrupting reading flow. According to Laufer (2005), using a dictionary after attempting contextual guessing improves vocabulary retention and prevents over-reliance on external resources[6].

Second, learners should use appropriate types of dictionary. Depending on their proficiency level, learners can use different types of dictionaries. Bilingual dictionaries may be helpful for beginners, while monolingual dictionaries, which provide definitions in English, encourage learners to think in English and deepen their understanding of the word. Nation (2001) suggests that monolingual dictionaries are particularly beneficial for more advanced learners as they promote greater exposure to the target language[7].

Third, learners should limit interruptions from dictionary use. While dictionaries are useful, frequent use during reading disrupts the flow of comprehension. Teachers can encourage students to look up new words only when they encounter words that are crucial for understanding the main idea of the text. This approach is echoed in the work of Stoller and Grabe (1993), who recommend that learners use dictionaries judiciously to minimize disruptions[9].

In addition to traditional paper dictionaries, students can benefit from digital tools. Many online dictionaries and apps provide quick and easy access to definitions. Some tools even offer examples of word usage in sentences, helping learners understand how words function in context. Moreover, vocabulary apps often include spaced repetition algorithms that help learners review and retain vocabulary over time.

By teaching students to use dictionaries wisely and efficiently, they can continue building their vocabulary while minimizing disruptions to reading comprehension.

3.4. Developing Reading Fluency

Reading fluency is closely related to vocabulary acquisition. As learners read more frequently and encounter new vocabulary, their fluency improves, allowing them to process information more quickly. A fluent reader can focus more on understanding the meaning of the text and less on decoding individual words.

To develop fluency, learners should engage in extensive reading, where they read large volumes of text that are slightly beyond their current vocabulary knowledge. This type of reading promotes incidental vocabulary learning and encourages learners to encounter new words in varied contexts. The more learners read, the more familiar they become with words, leading to better retention and understanding. According to Grabe (2009), extensive reading has a profound impact on both vocabulary acquisition and reading comprehension[4].

Another method to improve reading fluency is repeated reading, which involves reading the same text multiple times. This practice allows learners to become more familiar with the words, structures, and vocabulary used in the text. Repeated reading has been shown to increase both reading speed and comprehension, particularly for struggling readers. As Chung and Nation (2006) note, repeated exposure to words in context supports long-term retention and fluency development[2].

Teachers can support fluency development by providing students with graded readers that are appropriate for their proficiency level. These readers offer structured, repetitive practice with new vocabulary, helping students gain confidence in their reading ability. Teachers can also incorporate activities such as timed reading exercises or

reading aloud to practice fluency.

3.5. Teacher Strategies and Instruction

Teachers play a crucial role in helping students develop effective strategies for dealing with new words. Some key approaches that teachers can use include:

First, design pre-reading activities dealing with new vocabulary. Before the reading begins, teachers can introduce key vocabulary to reduce the number of unknown words encountered during the reading process. Providing students with a glossary or a list of words to look out for in the text can ease their reading experience and reduce anxiety. This approach is supported by Stoller and Grabe (1993), who found that pre-reading vocabulary instruction helps learners approach texts with greater confidence[9].

Second, implement interactive activities. Encourage learners to work in pairs or small groups to discuss the meaning of new words based on context. Peer discussions allow learners to share insights and practice their vocabulary in a supportive environment. Teachers can guide discussions by asking students to explain words in their own words and using examples from the text. This aligns with the findings of Coxhead (2000), who emphasizes the importance of interactive learning in vocabulary acquisition[3].

Third, introduce vocabulary strategies. Teachers should explicitly teach students specific vocabulary strategies, such as contextual guessing, word mapping, and dictionary use. This helps learners become independent readers who can navigate unknown vocabulary without constant teacher intervention. Providing strategy instruction through explicit modeling, guided practice, and reflection helps students internalize these skills and apply them effectively in their own reading.

Teachers can also foster a positive reading environment that encourages students to take risks and experiment with new vocabulary. A classroom culture where mistakes are seen as learning opportunities promotes confidence and motivation. Moreover, incorporating a variety of genres and reading materials, such as fiction, non-fiction, and articles on students' interests, can expose them to diverse vocabulary and contexts.

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, dealing with new words in reading comprehension requires a combination of strategies, including contextual guessing, word mapping, dictionary use, and the development of reading fluency. By incorporating these methods, learners can improve their ability to comprehend texts and expand their vocabulary. Additionally, teachers play a vital role in guiding students and providing them with the tools they need to manage new words effectively.

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