

Context Clue Instructional Strategy: An Innovative Pedagogy For English Language Vocabulary Acquisition In Childhood Education

Magdalene Ogbemudia¹ & Victor Alasa^{2*}

¹Department of Early Childhood Care & Education, Federal College of Education (Technical), Omoku, Rivers State

²School of Education, Fiji National University, Fiji Islands (corresponding author: victor.alasa@fnu.ac.fj)

*Corresponding author: Dr. Victor Alasa (victor.alasa@fnu.ac.fj)

Abstracts

Vocabulary acquisition is the core component of language proficiency, and one element that links the skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing together. Lack of a rich vocabulary keeps many pupils from making academic progress and creates a limit in their communication ability. The quest for an innovative and effective vocabulary teaching method in foundation classes such as early childhood and primary schools have been an uttermost concern for literacy teachers, and English Language teachers in general. Therefore, this paper examined the effectiveness of an innovative instructional method of teaching vocabulary called context clue instructional strategy as a tool in the hands of literacy teachers in childhood education.

Keywords: Context Clue, English Language, Vocabulary, Childhood Education.

INTRODUCTION

Vocabulary is the basic foundation in any language. Communication breaks down when people do not use the right word. Speaking would be meaningless and perhaps impossible having only structure without vocabulary. That is the reason why vocabulary acquisition is one of the most essential components of any language class, especially in childhood education. Thus, English Language learners need a continuous knowledge of vocabulary in order to improve comprehension and production in the foreign language). In most of the African countries where English is the second language (L2), children in the public schools are exposed to learning through English, from the intermediate level of primary education. Nigeria particularly, emphasizes in the National Policy on Education (2004) the inculcation of permanent literacy and numeracy in primary school children.

Vocabulary is a medium which carries meaning; learning to understand word meaning and express oneself meaningfully is very necessary in learning languages. Therefore, vocabulary knowledge plays a very important role in the pupils overall academic success. It helps pupils to comprehend what they read. Pupils cannot understand what they read without understanding what most of the words in the sentence, paragraph or passage mean.

Hence, vocabulary knowledge provides the basis for success in reading. Vocabulary comprises all the words that are used in a language which have meanings and consist of some parts like verbs, idioms, pronunciation and so on. This is the reason why vocabulary of a language can be likened to the bricks of a high building. Though they are in small pieces of blocks, they are vital to their great structure. Therefore, the study of vocabulary is at the Centre while learning a new language. English being a second language,

learners need to learn vocabulary in a systematic way since English language has vast vocabulary and it is the richest language of the world (Schmitt, 2004).

One cannot learn a language without learning vocabulary. Therefore, the study of vocabulary has occupied the central place in teaching-learning activities. In like manner, Thornbury (2002) affirmed that, if we spend most of our time learning grammar, our English will not improve significantly. Significant improvement is rather attained if we learn more words and expressions. We can say very little with grammar but we can say almost everything with words. It seems impossible to overstate the power of words because words are bases of language. Thus, vocabulary is an important component for language use. Some researchers (Donohue, 2000; Sedita, 2005 and Letchumanan, and Tan, 2011) have found that there was a close relationship between English word knowledge and achievement in life. Success in learning and management was correlated with vocabulary scores. When the vocabulary knowledge is not enough, people have difficulty in expressing their thoughts and ideas and this usually results in physical aggressiveness. It can be said that low vocabulary is a kind of imperfection. Language attainment and communication skills are largely affected if students have inadequate vocabulary. Hence, pupils ought to be exposed to strategies that will develop vocabulary according to their age and proficiency level. This is because knowing, understanding, and using words, support language development. Over time research in language learning have focused on the importance of vocabulary development because delay in vocabulary acquisition may hamper pupils' language and communication skills. Components of language include sound, grammar and vocabulary but among these, vocabulary seems to be more influential in language learning.

Obviously, vocabulary is the building blocks of language which is important for both comprehension and fluency. This shows that vocabulary is essentially crucial in learning English language. For someone to use language in a desired way in the contemporary society he requires a large expands of vocabulary. People use language for communicating, conveying thoughts, and sharing beliefs so the size of vocabulary that will be suitable for a language user to use language successfully and without breakdown is of great importance.

In English, vocabulary size results in limiting the type of texts someone can read. In other words, there seems to be a close relationship between the number of words that one knows and how good one can be at different language skills. A large vocabulary is of course essential for mastering English, hence, one cannot speak, read or write a foreign language without knowing a lot of words. Thus, a solid foundation for the acquisition of vocabulary is laid in childhood education. Marsh and Lange (2000) and Swarts (2000) however, noted that learning through English may sometimes be a complex issue with non-native speakers, who are neither proficient nor versatile in the language. Thus, vocabulary knowledge is an essential element of communication competence and the level of word knowledge that a child acquires determines to a large extent his academic success. This makes it clear that, lack of vocabulary knowledge creates barriers that discourage pupils from learning a foreign language or make them feel insecure in learning language. This is because without the cornerstone of a well-functioning mental lexicon no pupil can possibly engage in meaningful active language learning.

IMPORTANCE OF VOCABULARY ACQUISITION IN CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

First, it contributes to comprehension of any written material with a proportion of 80 percent

because vocabulary knowledge makes it easier for the learners to infer the meanings of unfamiliar words. Second, it improves pupils' academic achievement because learners with large vocabulary will score higher in achievement test than learners with small vocabulary. Third, it enhances communications because having more vocabulary will help learners to speak, write intelligently and understand what is heard or written easily and deeply. Finally, it sharpens pupils thinking because vocabularies are tools for analyzing, inferring, evaluating, and reasoning either in written or oral work.

That is why Lin (2002) asserted that vocabulary knowledge should be the first when one wants to learn a foreign language. Thus, it is important for English language learners to have a wide range of English vocabulary in order to learn English language successfully either for academic purposes or for communication with others whose first or second language is English. In the same vein, possession of a rich vocabulary is essential for pupils' academic success. The lack of a rich vocabulary keeps many pupils from making academic progress. Johnson (2000) stated that words are the tools we use in thinking, expressing ideas, feelings, and to learn about the world. This is because words are the very foundation for learning. Hence, improving pupils' vocabulary knowledge should be our educational priority. Furthermore, pupils' word knowledge is strongly linked with academic accomplishment, because a rich vocabulary is essential for successful reading comprehension and the absence of a rich vocabulary is particularly noted in English as second language learners, which can greatly inhibit their academic achievement. In the words of Wallace (2008) the greatest challenge inhibiting the ability of English language learners to read and comprehend is the lack of sufficient vocabulary development. A lack of vocabulary knowledge would extend to an inability to comprehend reading (in any subject). Evidently Nation (2002) in his study showed that

95% of the words surrounding an unfamiliar word must be known in order for pupils to infer meaning of the unknown vocabulary, so even if pupils advance through the primary level of education, insufficient vocabulary knowledge can continue to plague them throughout their academic careers.

FORMS OF VOCABULARIES

Receptive vocabulary refers to words that learners can recognize and comprehend in the context of reading and listening materials. It constitutes words that we understand through reading and listening. This means that for a word to be receptively or passively known, it is necessary to establish what that word means. Meaning of a word can be derived accurately by figuring out its relationship with other concepts and its association with visual symbols. To know a word would therefore mean to understand the relationship between that word's concept and its phonetic expression in sound or visual expression in symbols or pictures forms.

Nation (2001) emphasized that receptive vocabulary is rooted in reading and listening skills which demands that words should be visualized using object (especially proper noun) in order to enhance associative knowledge and for easy recognition of such words. This will also enable the learners to recognize, read the words and listen to them when they are read or pronounced so as to have a good mastery of such words and their meaning. Thus, acquisition of receptive vocabulary by associating new words with pictures for easy recognition and learning is very necessary in foreign language class.

Moheseni-Far (2008) opined that the use of imagery as a means of providing a deeper mental processing via meaningful association of words in acquiring receptive vocabulary strengthens language learning. It is therefore expedient for learners to learn new vocabularies explicitly especially in second language class in order to

master word meaning, recognize and use them appropriately in meaningful context in sentences. Furthermore, they emphasized that if children read for an hour, they may learn only 3 to 4 words and that nearly half of such words learned from reading graded readers may be lost and thus, only a limited number of new vocabulary will be retained. This indicates that there is a strong connection between explicit vocabulary learning of receptive vocabulary and vocabulary achievement of learners.

Productive Vocabulary on the other hand, refers to words that learners can recall and use appropriately in speaking and writing to express themselves and convey messages. In other words, they are words that pupils use to communicate through writing and speaking. It is important to note that for pupils to communicate effectively they must be able to flexibly use words that they can recognize and understand. Hence, productive vocabulary enhances learners' ability to use words meaningfully in expressing their thoughts and feeling through oral and written language. Son (2001) maintained that productive vocabulary enhances learners' use of verbal and visual information (pictorial information) which stimulates children in language learning and expressively visualizes word meaning to them. This makes the acquisition of productive vocabulary easy and permanent in children. The reason is that children learn, understand and remember best what they can see and touch.

Moreso, classroom exercises and other activities can promote active vocabulary learning especially if focused on word meaning, an element that image-based representation can assist in providing. Hence, productive vocabulary learning provides learner with massive input of new words by exposing them to challenging words in their linguistic resources through everyday use of language especially in second language learning. When learners

understood words that they hear or see, the result of that understanding will be that, they are able to use them correctly in speaking or in writing. This is because mere memorization of a word form in a given context without understanding the meaning cannot be called productive knowledge.

High frequency vocabulary consist of words that are used very often in normal language in all four skills (speaking, listening, reading and writing) which involved the full range of words used in different situations. They are bank of words a reader recognizes automatically, pronounce correctly and knows the meaning in context. In other words, they are common and frequent words that occur in everyday reading and writing. It is therefore not out of place to say that, high frequency vocabulary covers 85% of the vocabulary on any page of a book, no matter what it subject is. This makes it very important in language development.

Thus, learning this aspect of vocabulary helps in learning a foreign language and communicating with it successfully. Holden (2004) stated that some of these high frequency words such as 'the', 'is', 'to', 'come', 'are' do not follow commonly taught phonics rules and cannot be sounded out hence the only way a child can read and acquire these words is to recognize them by sight. This seems to be the reason why children are expected to be explicitly taught high frequency words. In fact, knowing these commonly used words by sight will make a child a fast and fluent reader and improves his vocabulary greatly. As a matter of fact, learners who have acquired high frequency vocabulary hardly pause to figure out the meaning or decode most of the words they read, or listen to.

Hence, they are liberated from struggling with the problem of figuring out meaning from text. Thus, good mastery of high frequency vocabulary by pupils enhances their sentence construction by making it more meaningful and understandable.

Johnson (2000) asserted that pupils' acquisition of high frequency vocabulary improves their spoken language, help them read text easily and comprehensively, which will also enable them to acquire more new words.

Academic vocabulary refers to content specific words used in different disciplines. It constitutes specific registers that students are expected to use in school subjects which invariably means that it involves the knowledge of specific words such as the basic terms used to communicate the tool and tasks across content areas (Pilgreen, 2007).

Academic vocabulary is very essential in the understanding of concepts in course content taught in schools, because it exposes pupils to word origins, gives multiple meanings of words and references to abstract concepts that relate and connect directly to the targeted content areas, thereby supporting or enhancing pupils' comprehension of instructional content.

In second language, learning it is quite necessary to develop academic vocabulary, especially where English as a foreign language is adopted as the language of instruction, which automatically becomes the strongest indicator of how well pupils will learn subject content once they come to school. Pupil's acquisition of academic vocabulary may account for over half of the impact of all factors that influence reading comprehension. Thus, improving their comprehension of the different subject areas and verbal interaction within and outside the school. Learners' acquisition of academic vocabulary in second language class prepares them for academic success by helping them to preview, build background knowledge, learn and practice vocabulary in subject area content. This is because the more the learners understand academic terms the easier for them to understand information that they may read or hear about the topics in their subject areas. They explained further that teaching specific terms (academic vocabulary) in a specific way is the strongest

action a teacher can take to ensure that children have the academic background knowledge they need to understand the content they will encounter in school. They also presented some academic vocabulary used in the field of statistics such as mean, media, mode, range and standard deviation hence if in language learning children understand the meaning of these words on the context in which they are used they will have a better understanding of the subject matter taught (Marzano and Pickering, 2005).

INSTRUCTIONAL STRATEGY AND VOCABULARY ACQUISITION

Instructional strategy is considered as the overall plan for the orderly presentation of language learning materials to the pupils (Omojuwa, 2005). It is the techniques adopted by teachers in the course of teaching which is capable of influencing the pupils' academic performance in school. Bass (1999) considered instructional strategy as the teaching system adopted by teachers to teach a given task. It is expected that any strategy adopted by the teacher to teach the pupils vocabularies especially when learning English as a second language should have positive impact on the pupils' vocabulary achievement. Teachers have the duty to provide and present the language learning materials for the children to learn through appropriate techniques that will enhance effective learning in the children. Moreso, in any language class, learners are the focus because education is "child centred" therefore, all activities planned in the school necessarily must first take the child into consideration (Ed, 2009).

Instructional strategy is very essential in education delivery hence the kind of teaching strategies used in teaching students in language learning should be those that would equip them not only with knowledge impacted on them but also with relevant skills that could be applied in decoding the meaning of unfamiliar words from text which will enhance learners' vocabulary

acquisition (Udofot, 2000). Furthermore, he observed that instructional strategy which involves the pupils actively in the learning process and subject matter treated explicitly especially in terms of vocabulary learning which could be more beneficial than the conventional modes used by teachers. The routine teaching strategy used which is a teacher dominated classroom of “chalk and talk” method which has to do with the teacher talking to pupils and writing notes on the chalkboard without actively involving the children in the lesson does not lead to effective learning (Ekpo, Udosen and Afangideh, 2007). Thus, the effective teaching method is used when the pupils are actively involved in the vocabulary learning process and decoding word meaning based on the context on which it is used with little or no guidance from the teacher. Such experience would significantly influence pupils’ vocabulary acquisition.

In the same vein, instructional strategy plays a crucial role in language learning, comprehension of text and vocabulary achievement. This is because vocabulary knowledge makes it easier for the learner to infer the meaning of unfamiliar words in a text and have a good understanding of the text. Most children fail to read and understand because of the inability to decode the meaning of the unfamiliar words that constitute the reading text which is as a result of the instructional strategy employed by the teacher in teaching vocabulary. Poor instructional strategy can constitute a lot of problems for language learners. It should be remembered that the learners are being prepared to be efficient in decoding and understanding the meaning of new vocabularies so as to comprehend written materials across different disciplines. Thus, pupils cannot understand what they read without understanding what most of the words in the sentences mean. Hence, vocabulary knowledge is essential for success in language learning, reading and for making progress in academics in general (Hiebert and Kamil, 2005). It is unfortunate that most

teachers lack necessary training and interest required for successful vocabulary teaching.

CONTEXT CLUE INSTRUCTIONAL STRATEGY AND VOCABULARY ACQUISITION

Context clue instructional strategy involves the use of words, phrases, sentences, paragraphs, pictures and other text features that give clue to the meaning of unknown words. This is because the meaning of the unfamiliar word is sometimes stated in the sentence either before or after the unknown word (Spencer, and Guillaume, 2006). One way to support vocabulary development and help struggling readers is to build word identification and the development of figuring out word meanings through the use of context clues (Baumann, Ware, and Edward, 2007). They maintained that context clues can fully support a child’s understanding of an unknown word in a text. Allen (1998) stated that, “The heart of being able to construct meaning is the ability to recognize words automatically”. In order to develop the vocabulary of readers, they need to be able to decode the meaning of printed words with the aid of context clues (Lapp and Flood, 1997). Starting with using context clues for word meaning will be more beneficial to the pupils because once a child can decode easily, more attention can be paid to building meaning (Allen, 1998).

Rhoder and Huerster (2002) asserted that the ability to know, understand, produce, and use large number and variety of words is critical to reading and listening. Context clues could help support word meaning and word identification. Pupils must be able to use contextual analysis as a tool to decode words (Greenwood and Flanigan, 2007). Hence, pupils may become frustrated with reading if they do not have automatic and decoding skills (Allen, 1998). Context clues instructional strategy can help learners create an interaction with the text that could help support the decoding of unknown words. The act of

comprehending a text is complex and depends on the vocabulary level used and the pupils' intellectual ability (Neufield, 2005). Greenwood and Flanigan (2007) emphasized that when choosing the method of instruction, it is necessary to consider the knowledge of pupils and the goal or purpose for teaching. Therefore, a choice should be made by the instructor whether to use context clues instructional strategy for word identification or word meaning based on the pupils or pupil's specific needs. Greenwood and Flanigan (2007) stated that children learn approximately 4,000 words in a school year, but that only 400 of them are learned through direct instruction. If, on average, 90% of the words are learned through repeated, meaningful encounters then this avenue of learning should be optimized. Likewise, Rhoder and Huerster (2002) opined that pupils might learn word meanings incidentally by using the surrounding context or by a word learning strategy that they have been taught explicitly. Using context clues instructional strategy to teach word meaning explicitly could help assist pupils to identify unknown words and their meaning in sentences or longer texts. Blachowicz (1993) posited that context clue instructional strategy significantly improves children to the meaning of unfamiliar words based on what they already know and within the context within which words are found or used. Thus, teaching children how to derive word meaning using context clue instructional strategy is very necessary (Goerss, 1999). In the same vein, Rhoder and Huerster (2002) stated that since context clue instructional strategy exposes the children to the background knowledge or information of the context on which words are used during vocabulary instruction it then makes it easier for the children to decode the meaning of the unfamiliar words which could be advantageous to pupils' vocabulary achievement. Cohen and Byrness (2007) affirmed that context clue strategy positively reinforces pupil vocabulary acquisition as it exposes them to

illustrations, picture phrases, sentences within the context in the word is used. It becomes imperative that it helps pupils to learn how to analyse unknown or unfamiliar words and extract their meanings based on the context in which they are used. Hence, Rhoder and Huerster (2002) suggested that teachers should assist the learning of new words when using context clues strategy through modeling and incorporate feedback and discussion to improve pupils' vocabulary learning.

Moreso, Pemberton (2003) asserted that children receive effective instruction on vocabulary with the aid of context clue instructional strategy which enable them to have a good mastery of word meaning as to develop a greater use of word learning strategies. Baumann, Edward and Ware (2007) supported that context clue is a strategy that can create optimal growth, enhance pupils' vocabulary acquisition by enabling them to decode the meaning of new words appropriately especially when it is well implemented.

In addition, Amer (2002) emphasized that context clue instructional strategy is advantageous in pupils' vocabulary acquisition as it exposes the children to the context on which the words or phrase appear which enables the pupil to grasp the full meaning of the phrase or words. This is because exposing the children to the context on which a word is used is an essential prerequisite for vocabulary teaching as it helps in both engaging the attention of the learners and naturally generating meaning on the target vocabulary. Therefore, Stahl and Kapinus (2001) stated that "Vocabulary knowledge is word knowledge; the knowledge of a word does not only imply a definition, but also implies how that word fits into the context on which it is used".

Similarly, charts, pictures and maps can be used to develop pupils understanding of a particular concept or word when using context clue instructional strategy which could positively influence pupils' vocabulary acquisition

(Greenwood and Flanigan, 2007). Hence, Goerss (1999) equipped that “Learners remember and understand better the material that has been presented by means of visual aids” This is because words work well with pictures, particularly nouns; which is also a good way to project words in foreign language classes.

Conclusion

The success of vocabulary teaching depends on the teacher and the innovative teaching methodology employed in the teaching-learning process. Hence, it will be most appropriate for the teachers of English Language vocabulary in early childhood and primary schools to adopt context clue instructional strategy in teaching vocabulary to facilitate pupils’ vocabulary acquisition.

Recommendations

1. State government should organize seminars, workshops and conferences to educate early childhood and primary school teachers on this innovative instructional strategy (context clue instructional strategy) suitable for improving pupils’ vocabulary acquisition.
2. Curriculum planners should be willing to incorporate context clue instructional strategy into early childhood and primary school English Language curriculums as innovative instructional strategy for teaching vocabulary, which will motivate the teachers to implement this strategy in the classroom.
3. Primary school teachers of vocabulary should use context clue instructional strategy in teaching vocabulary to enhance pupils’ vocabulary achievement since it involves the use of pictures which help to visualize the subject matter and enhance pupils understanding of the lesson.

4. Context clue instructional strategy should be incorporated into the curriculum of teacher training programmes especially in the programme of teachers undertaking training to teach in nursery and primary schools, which will enable them master this strategy and become competent teachers of vocabulary in future.

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