

Effectiveness of Contextualized Micro-lessons in the Acquisition of College English Vocabulary

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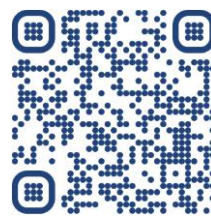
Keywords—College English, Contextualized teaching, Micro-lessons, Vocabulary learning.

Abstract

Traditional vocabulary teaching focuses on the pronunciation, form, and meaning of words, without taking into account the context of vocabulary learning. This approach tends to make the learning process monotonous and results in low student interest and efficiency. On the other hand, contextualized teaching and learning enables students to grasp the spelling, meaning, usage, and collocation of vocabulary within specific contexts. In this study, contextualized vocabulary micro-lessons have been applied in College English teaching to examine their effectiveness in enhancing vocabulary learning. The findings reveal that, following a semester of vocabulary micro-lesson learning, there has been some improvement in students' average vocabulary scores, with a 22% increase in the proportion of high-scoring students. Furthermore, results from a questionnaire survey indicate that 84% of students believe that contextualized vocabulary micro-lessons not only enhance their interest in vocabulary learning, but also improve the overall effectiveness of vocabulary acquisition.

1. Introduction

Vocabulary plays a crucial role in the process of learning a foreign language, and the teaching of vocabulary holds great significance in English education. As globalization continues to advance, the demands on English language skills for modern college students are becoming higher. Vocabulary serves as the base for effective communication in English, encompassing skills such as listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Enhancing English proficiency consequently depends on the acquisition and utilization of vocabulary.



Hence, vocabulary instruction has gained considerable recognition in recent times.

The traditional approach to teaching vocabulary focuses on the pronunciation, form, and meaning of words but lacks the contextual aspect of vocabulary learning. This traditional method often makes vocabulary learning dull and results in low student interest and efficiency. Previous studies indicate that teaching vocabulary in a contextualized manner has a positive impact on learning (Zhang

Xiuping, 2017). Such an approach not only stimulates learners' interest in vocabulary but also effectively helps them master and apply new words (Zhao Lan, 2017).

In today's digital age, where contemporary college students, known as "digital natives," have grown up in a rapidly advancing information technology environment, digital ubiquitous learning has become their primary means of acquiring knowledge. Micro-lessons have emerged as an important learning mode these students readily embrace. Unlike traditional classroom teaching, micro-lessons offer flexibility and convenience, as they are not limited by time or space. Students can learn independently, preview before class, and review after class using micro-lessons, as long as they have smart devices and access to wireless networks (Wang Lili, 2015). They can also revisit the content multiple times, breaking free from the limitations of one-time presentations by teachers.

By creating authentic vocabulary usage scenarios based on movie materials, this study combines contextualized teaching with micro-lessons to explore the effectiveness of contextualized micro-lessons in enhancing College English vocabulary learning.

2. Problems facing college students in English vocabulary learning and the coping strategy

2.1 Problems in English vocabulary learning among non-English majors

To understand the current challenges college students face in vocabulary learning, the authors conducted a questionnaire survey among non-English majors at their institution. A total of 31 valid responses were collected. The survey results indicate that non-English majors face the following four major problems in English vocabulary learning.

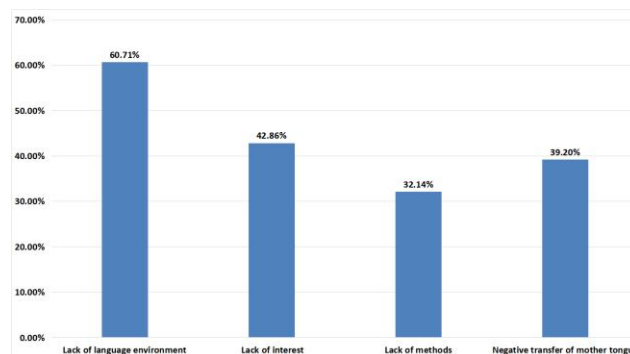


Fig. 1: Problems in English vocabulary learning among non-English majors

2.1.1 Lack of language environment

As illustrated in Fig. 1, 60% of the respondents complain about the lack of an environment conducive to vocabulary learning. This suggests that students lack the necessary context and real-life situations to effectively use English vocabulary. In the learning process, students tend to focus solely on word spelling and meaning while often neglecting the cultural knowledge embedded in words. This limited approach to English language learning only scratches the surface. Furthermore, after acquiring vocabulary, students frequently struggle to apply these words effectively in practical situations. The emphasis is usually placed on repetitive rote memorization and spelling, yielding less than satisfactory outcomes. In addition, students tend to overlook the significance of output, with a lack of strong desire and motivation to actively use English (Jia Shaodong, 2008).

2.1.2 Lack of interest in learning English words

For Chinese university students, the journey of acquiring proficiency in English typically begins during the later years of elementary school or junior high school and continues until their college years. The process itself is considerably lengthy, and students acknowledge the significance of expanding their vocabulary. However, a considerable number of students develop a strong dislike for English learning due to their utilitarian objective of passing the CET-4 or CET-6 exams. Specifically, the task of rote memorization of vocabulary is monotonous and lacks appeal, and the high rate of forgetting words only adds to the students' frustration. As time goes by, this ineffective approach hinders

the students' learning outcomes and diminishes their interest in vocabulary acquisition.

2.1.3 Lack of good English vocabulary learning methods

The learners' understanding of vocabulary usage in context is hindered by the isolated input, which can lead to a false sense of comprehension when reading, making it challenging to comprehend texts and obtain accurate information (Jia Shaodong, 2008). Many students still rely on memorization and recitation methods, neglecting the significance of accurate pronunciation and word class. They lack a comprehensive understanding of the functional aspects, concepts, connotations, collocations, and proper use of words. Consequently, they often find themselves in a cycle of memorizing and forgetting, without paying attention to repetition and reinforcement (Cai Xianglin, 2012).

2.1.4 Negative transfer of the mother tongue

Ethnic groups have diverse cultural traditions, and language serves as a channel for cultural expression. Vocabulary, as the fundamental component of language, also reflects the cultural traits of various ethnic groups. When it comes to learning new vocabulary, it is common for individuals to unintentionally introduce elements from their native language and culture. However, this tendency can hinder the proper comprehension and acquisition of foreign language vocabulary (Cai Xianglin, 2012).

2.2 Strategy for coping vocabulary learning problems

English language teaching should aim to create an immersive English environment for students, fostering authentic learning situations that enable them to construct their knowledge of the language in the target language (Zhang Qi, 2007). Contextualized micro-lessons based on English movies can be employed to address the above mentioned problems in vocabulary learning. By immersing students in the actual context of the movie, these micro-lessons provide a framework for vocabulary learning that brings words to life. Contextualized learning helps students feel more comfortable and proficient in the process of vocabulary acquisition. Additionally, utilizing English movies as teaching materials allows students to

become aware of the distinctions between English and Chinese vocabulary, avoiding negative influences from the Chinese language and facilitating smoother progress in English learning.

Overall, contextualized micro-lessons transform mundane and flat English knowledge into vivid and dynamic images, videos, and more. They enable students to comprehend and internalize English knowledge through visual, auditory, and sensory means, thereby increasing their interest in learning and sparking their enthusiasm for English learning (Liu Pei, 2019). By combining both visual and auditory elements, micro-lessons engage multiple senses in the process of learning and memory, fostering the development of students' thinking and imagination, ultimately enhancing the effectiveness and efficiency of their vocabulary acquisition.

3. Design of contextualized vocabulary micro-lessons

To test the effect of contextualized micro-lessons in English vocabulary learning, the authors made vocabulary micro-lesson videos and applied them to the instruction of College English Reading in the 2nd semester of the 2022-2023 academic year.

3.1 General planning of micro-lessons

The micro-lessons are tailored to the vocabulary of each unit in the textbook. Each micro-lesson focuses on the key words of a particular unit and includes two movie clips for every word. These clips are carefully selected to create an authentic learning environment and aid students in understanding the exact meaning and usage of each word. Sentence translation exercises are provided to actively engage students' thinking and reinforce the specific usage of the word. After completing the sentence translations, relevant additional knowledge about the word, such as commonly used collocations, synonyms, idioms, etc., is appropriately supplemented. This comprehensive design enables students to unconsciously acquire vocabulary while "watching movies," subtly embedding the vocabulary into their memory and forming an initial impression. Subsequently, classroom

learning strengthens and enhances this initial impression, ultimately improving their application skills.

In addition, contextualized micro-lessons are delivered entirely in English. This approach not only trains students' listening skills but also aims to prevent negative transfer from the native language, promoting the development of English thinking patterns and avoiding the mechanical memorization of Chinese meanings, which may result in the use of Chinglish.

3.2 Preparation of vocabulary micro-lessons

3.2.1 Vocabulary selection

The micro-lessons focus on the key vocabulary selected from the four textbooks of the College English Reading course, taking into account the needs of CET-4 and CET-6 exam takers. In English vocabulary, words often possess multiple meanings, and the same word can acquire different interpretations depending on the context it is used in. Determining the specific meaning of a word requires connecting it with its surrounding context. This adds to the challenge faced by students when trying to master vocabulary (Cai Xianglin, 2012). To address this issue and take into account the limited attention span of adults, each word selected for inclusion in the micro-lessons presents only one meaning and is accompanied by clarification of its part of speech and usage. Each micro-lesson comprises 8-10 words, striking a balance between presenting a reasonable amount of vocabulary and ensuring clarity and conciseness. The duration of each micro-lesson is approximately 5-10 minutes.

3.2.2 Selection of movie clips

The vocabulary micro-lesson videos take advantage of well-known movie and TV show plots to provide students with the contexts of word use. This approach fully immerses students in captivating and thrilling storylines, enabling them to memorize words more effectively. The videos cover various aspects of words, such as their meanings, usage, expressions, and usage habits. Carefully chosen movie clips are of a moderate length, convey clear meanings, and are easily comprehensible without any obscure vocabulary. The content within the movie clips is uplifting and positive, serving as a guiding light for the students.

3.2.3 Exercise design

To help students better understand the usage of words, Chinese-English sentence translation exercises are provided after explanation of each word. The chosen Chinese sentences are moderately difficult and have clear context. During the micro-lessons, students have approximately 5 seconds to think before the reference translation is given to help reinforce the word's usage.

4. Effectiveness of contextualized vocabulary micro-lessons in vocabulary acquisition

In the second semester of the 2021-2022 academic year, the authors implemented traditional teaching methods for two College English classes, consisting of a total of 63 students, as the control group. At the end of the semester, a vocabulary test worth 25 points was conducted. In the second semester of the 2022-2023 academic year, a one-semester experimental study was carried out on two new College English classes, which had a total of 68 students. In this experimental group, contextualized vocabulary micro-lessons were utilized. Following the completion of the experiment, the same vocabulary test was administered. The comparison of test results between the control group and the experimental group is provided below.

4.1 Test results

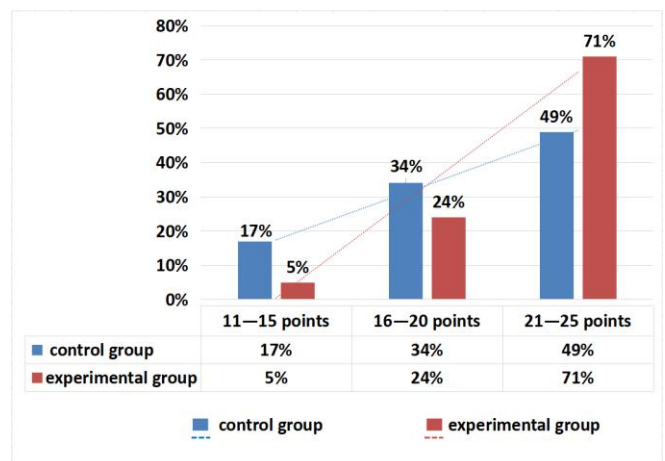


Fig. 2 Percentage of students in different score ranges

According to Fig. 2, there was a 12% decrease in the percentage of students in the

experimental group scoring between 11 and 15. Similarly, for the score range of 16-20, the percentage of students in the experimental group decreased by 10%. However, in the higher score range of 21-25, there was a significant increase of 22% in the percentage of students in the experimental group. These findings suggest a considerable enhancement in vocabulary scores. A preliminary analysis of the linear trend line indicates that the implementation of contextualized vocabulary micro-lessons has led to a noticeable improvement in vocabulary test results.

Table 1. Comparison of average score between pretest and posttest

Group	Student number	Average score	Students scoring above average	
			number	percentage
Control group	63	19.75	37	58%
Experimental group	68	21.28	48	71%

As shown in Table 1, students' average marks increased by 1.53 points after a semester of learning contextualized vocabulary micro-lessons, and the percentage of students scoring above average increased by 13%, a noticeable improvement in high score range.

4.2 Students' feedback on the effect of vocabulary micro-lessons

Following the completion of the teaching experiment, the authors utilized a Likert scale questionnaire to appraise students' learning outcomes, experiences, and feedback concerning suggestions for the micro-lessons. A total of 68 valid questionnaires were gathered. The questionnaire encompassed inquiries on whether incorporating contextualized vocabulary micro-lessons fostered a greater interest in vocabulary acquisition, enhanced the efficiency of vocabulary learning, facilitated word retention compared to traditional instructional methods, met the students' vocabulary quantity requirements, whether there is a need to augment the difficulty of

words, and any additional suggestions for improving the micro-lessons.

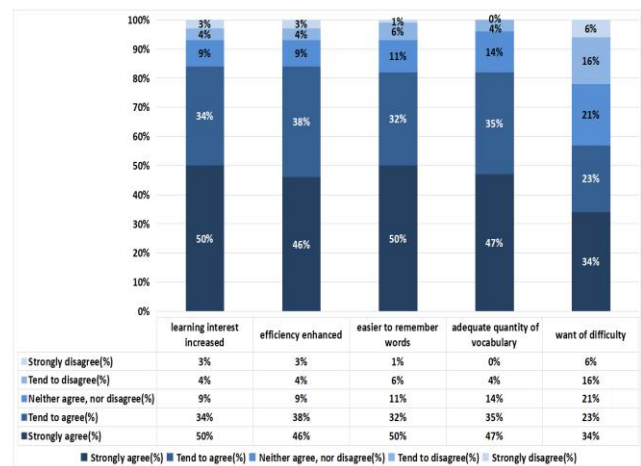


Fig. 3 Students' feedback on the effect of micro-lessons

The survey results indicated that 84% of students believed that the contextualized vocabulary micro-lessons improved their interest in vocabulary learning and enhanced vocabulary learning efficiency. Additionally, 82% of students claimed that the contextualized vocabulary micro-lessons made it easier to remember words compared to traditional vocabulary teaching methods. In terms of the quantity and difficulty of words, 82% of students found the amount of words offered in the micro-lessons appropriate for their learning needs, and 57% of students expressed a desire for an increased level of word difficulty.

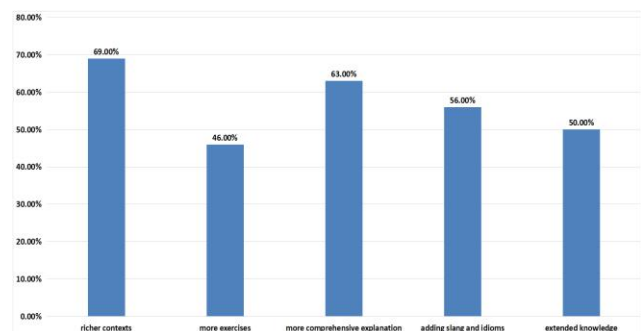


Fig. 4 Students' suggestions for improving the micro-lessons

As illustrated in Fig. 4, a majority of students (69%) expressed a desire for an increased presence of word contexts in the micro-lessons. This finding suggests that students believe that engaging and authentic contexts can greatly aid

them in their vocabulary learning. Additionally, it was noted that 63% of students wished for more detailed explanations about word usage. This emphasizes the significant value students place on understanding how words are used, as it greatly benefits them in their writing tasks. Furthermore, more than half of the students expressed a keen interest in the inclusion of idioms and cultural knowledge within the micro-lessons. This signifies their curiosity regarding the cultural connotations associated with words and their aspiration for a broader range of knowledge. Therefore, it is recommended that future micro-lesson development focus on enriching word contexts, providing thorough explanations of word usage, and integrating more idioms and cultural knowledge. That will effectively address students' needs and enhance their overall outcomes in vocabulary learning.

5. Conclusion

Vocabulary plays a central role in the English language and is a vital component of English acquisition. However, traditional methods of teaching vocabulary often overlook the significance of using vocabulary in context. This oversight leads to difficulties in engaging learners and allows interference from their first language. Consequently, the efficiency of vocabulary acquisition is frequently compromised. It is essential to recognize that vocabulary only gains meaning within specific linguistic contexts. Adopting a contextualized approach to teaching vocabulary, which incorporates multimodal explanations, provides students with visual, auditory, and other sensory stimuli. This teaching approach not only reduces the burden of memorizing vocabulary but also enhances learners' interest in learning. Additionally, it promotes better comprehension and application of vocabulary with the aid of contextual support. Ultimately, this approach improves the effectiveness and sustainability of English language learning.

6. Funding

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