

# Vocabulary Development: All Contexts Are Not Created Equal

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It is well accepted that the context that surrounds a word in text can give clues to the word's meaning. The process of getting word meaning from context has been explored recently by several investigators. This research has shed light on such aspects of context as to what degree context can be said to consist of text information versus a reader's prior knowledge, as well as the developmental differences in the use of context between adults and children (Anderson & Shifrin 1980).

However, this article focuses on the instructional aspect of context. Traditional vocabulary instruction is based on the assumption that word meaning is best taught through the presentation of a word in context rather than through definition-based instruction. A study by Gipe (1980), which compared a context method with three other methods of vocabulary instruction based on categorizing, word association, and dictionary definitions, has confirmed this assumption. Textbooks on teaching reading almost universally advise the development of vocabulary through the use of words in context. Basal readers, a major source for vocabulary development in the elementary school classroom, most often identify their vocabulary strand as employing a context method.

Although the context method for vocabulary development has had widespread acceptance and use, it is possible for the method to be interpreted too broadly. Although it may be true that the learning of new words is facilitated by some contexts, it is not true that every context is an appropriate or effective instructional means for vocabulary development. This

point is in agreement with Gipe's (1980) discussion of her findings.

It is important to distinguish two kinds of contexts. Pedagogical contexts are specifically designed for teaching designated unknown words. For example, with *commend* as the target word, consider the following sentence: All the students made very good grades on the tests, so their teacher commended them for doing so well. From this sentence a fairly good idea of the meaning of *commend* can be gained. The second kind of contexts are natural contexts. These are simply the multitude of contexts surrounding a designated unknown word that could be found in the universe of print. The author of a natural context does not intend to convey the meaning of a word.

#### Vocabulary instruction in basal readers

Since natural contexts are not meant to demonstrate the meanings of particular words, but rather to communicate ideas, it seems that such contexts will not necessarily provide appropriate cues to the meaning of a particular word. Yet natural contexts constitute most of the materials used for vocabulary development in basal readers. We recently completed an analysis of the comprehension instruction in two widely used basal reading series. Included was an extensive examination of the vocabulary instruction offered in the two programs. We found that the major means of vocabulary instruction is the reading selection. Children are expected to learn new words by inferring their meanings from the story context. And since, by the intermediate grades, reading selections are not designed around target words but are existing stories from which words are chosen for vocabulary development, students must infer word meanings from natural contexts.

#### A continuum of the effectiveness of natural contexts

In reviewing the story contexts of target words in the two programs, we

speculated that their effectiveness in elucidating word meaning would fall along a continuum. We identified four kinds of categories along the continuum and then conducted an informal test of examples from each category to explore the validity of our speculation. A description of our four categories of natural contexts follows, including an example of each that has been created to typify those found in the programs.

At one end of our continuum are misdirective contexts, those that seem to direct the student to an incorrect meaning for a target word. For example: Sandra had won the dance contest and the audience's cheers brought her to the stage for an encore. "Every step she takes is so perfect and graceful," Ginny said *grudgingly*, as she watched Sandra dance.

Here the context would likely lead a reader to ascribe a positive connotation to *grudgingly*. Ginny's comments might lead one to believe she liked or admired Sandra's dancing. We hasten to point out that contexts such as this are not in themselves wrong or a misuse of language. The words used communicate the ideas well if one knows the meanings of the words. However, the situations we are demonstrating represent initial encounters with these words for young students. Thus, incorrect conclusions about word meaning are likely to be drawn.

Next along the continuum of contexts are nondirective contexts, which seem to be of no assistance in directing the reader toward any particular meaning for a word. For example: Dan heard the door open and wondered who had arrived. He couldn't make out the voices. Then he recognized the *lumbering* footsteps on the stairs and knew it was Aunt Grace.

In this example, *lumbering* has any number of inferrable connotations: *light, lively, familiar, heavy* would all fit the context, for instance.

Further along the continuum we find general contexts, which seem to provide enough information for the reader to

place the word in a general category. For example: Joe and Stan arrived at the party at 7 o'clock. By 9:30 the evening seemed to drag for Stan. But Joe really seemed to be having a good time at the party. "I wish I could be as *gregarious* as he is," thought Stan.

In this example it is easy to infer that *gregarious* describes someone who enjoys parties. The passage provides clues to the meaning, although the specific characteristics of the word remain undefined.

Finally we reach directive contexts, which seem likely to lead the student to a specific, correct meaning for a word. For example: When the cat pounced on the dog, he leapt up, yelping, and knocked down a shelf of books. The animals ran past Wendy, tripping her. She cried out and fell to the floor. As the noise and confusion mounted, Mother hollered upstairs, "What's all that *commotion*?"

In this example the reader is led to the meaning of *commotion* through clues from the description of the scene and by a definitional phrase, "noise and confusion." Directive contexts are similar to pedagogical contexts, except that the author of a pedagogical context *intends* to convey the meaning of a specific word, whereas the author of a directive context does not.

#### Testing the continuum

To test the validity of our context categories, we selected two stories, one from each of the basal programs with which we worked (Clymer et al. 1976; Durr et al. 1976), and we categorized the contexts surrounding target words according to our scheme. We then blacked out all parts of the target words, except mor-

phemes that were common prefixes or suffixes (e.g., unpredictable/un—able, reflection/—tion). Subjects were instructed to read each story and to try to fill in the blanks with the missing words or reasonable synonyms.

Subjects were 13 adult volunteers employed at a university research center. We chose to use adult subjects because they would provide a rigorous test for our categories and because the target words were already part of their vocabulary repertoires. Thus, we were able to obtain clearer results since decoding would not be a possible confounding factor.

Table 1 shows the number of words in each context category and the proportion of words correctly identified by our subjects. The data clearly support the categorization system. The adults were able to supply approximately 11 out of 13 words we categorized as having directive contexts. Correct identification dropped sharply for the general context category, and it dropped even further for the nondirective category. Only one subject could identify any word in the misdirective category.

It must be noted that all the words blacked out from the stories were already in the vocabulary repertoires of our adult subjects. Thus we would expect children unfamiliar with these words to do even less well in identifying meaning. By extension, this demonstration suggests that it is precarious to believe that naturally occurring contexts are sufficient, or even generally helpful, in providing clues to promote initial acquisition of a word's meaning. The stories were written by professional authors who use "good" words to communi-

TABLE 1. Adults' Identification of Categorized Target Words

Category of Context	Misdirective	Nondirective	General	Directive
Number of words in each category	3	11	9	13
Proportion identified per subject (N = 13)	.03	.27	.49	.86

cate. The stories were not developed for teaching the meaning of words.

The point of our discussion has been that contexts occurring in text selections do not reliably assist readers in discovering the meanings of unknown words. However, even the appearance of each target word in a strong, directive context is far from sufficient to develop full knowledge of word meaning. An effective context method of vocabulary instruction must have other facets as well. In the next section we discuss vocabulary development strategies that appear in basal readers, in addition to story context.

#### *Beyond words in context*

Vocabulary development in basal readers typically consists of activities prior to, during, and after reading a selection. Before reading, experience with some of the new words to be encountered in the story may be provided. This usually consists of the presentation of a word in a context—a pedagogical context, constructed to demonstrate the word's meaning—and a discussion of the meaning of the word.

For vocabulary development during reading, a glossary is often provided at the back of the students' text so children can look up words whose meanings they are unsure of. However, the notion that children will build their vocabulary by looking up words from their reading has two major flaws. First, studies have shown that students have difficulty isolating words whose meanings they do not know (Anderson & Kulhavy 1972; Harris & Sipay 1975). That is, many children do not know that they don't know a word. Children may therefore be unlikely to recognize even the need to use a reference. Second, even if they identify an unknown word, it seems that only highly motivated students will choose to interrupt their reading to check on its meaning.

After a reading selection, exercises may be included that provide more practice

with the target words met during reading. These are usually independently completed exercises. Although vocabulary development may occur at several points in a directed reading lesson, not all reading programs use these opportunities to provide vocabulary development activities.

Let us consider for a moment the best case of vocabulary instruction that occurs in the two programs we examined. A new vocabulary word is presented in a sentence that elucidates the meaning of the new word; the word is encountered in the text selection, and the student looks it up in the glossary if he or she does not remember its meaning; the word appears a third time in an independently completed after-reading activity. Remember, this is the *best* instance of new word experience that we encountered in the two basal programs. It does not necessarily occur with any regularity.

At worst, a word appears solely in a selection, and the student skips over it because he or she either does not recognize it as an unknown word or does not want to be bothered with the disruptive glossary step.

Clearly, there is a big difference between these instances in the chances that a new word will be learned. However, even in the best case presented, it is likely that a new word has not had enough exposure for its meaning to be retained in memory, even a short time after instruction. This is particularly so since words introduced at the intermediate grades are not usually heard in everyday conversation and thus reinforced naturally. Such words need systematic reinforcement as part of instruction.

The reliance of basal reading programs on story context and the independent use of the glossary as the central methods of vocabulary development is at best appropriate for only the most motivated and competent readers. Children most in need of vocabulary development—that is, less skilled readers who are unlikely to add to

their vocabularies from outside sources—will receive little benefit from such indirect opportunities to gain information. The superiority of direct instruction for effective vocabulary development has been confirmed by investigators over a long span of time (Gray & Holmes 1938; Jenkins & Pany 1980; Lieberman 1967).

#### *The teacher's role*

What does the state of vocabulary instruction offered in basal readers mean to teachers who wish to enlarge their students' vocabularies rather than provide fleeting encounters with new words? First of all, let us state our conviction that it takes a good deal of effort for a word to become a readily accessible part of one's vocabulary repertoire. Thus we do not suggest that teachers try to include all the words introduced in the basal readers in their own vocabulary programs. If this were attempted, it would occupy the bulk of the classroom curriculum. The basal readers are a rich source of suitable vocabulary words from which a limited set of words might be selected for concentrated attention.

An introduction for new words could include the presentation of the words in a pedagogical context coupled with a discussion of the new word meanings. Children's work with the words should be as active as possible. Students should be given opportunities to manipulate the words in a wide variety of ways, such as creating original contexts for the words, participating in games that require quick associations between words and meanings, and exploring different nuances of a word's meaning through discussions. A mechanism for helping children keep track of the words they are learning, such as a notebook in which they record the words and definitions, is a valuable tool in a vocabulary program. If new words are to become a permanent part of the children's vocabularies, they must not be confined to class-

room practice. Children should be challenged to find the words they learn in contexts beyond the classroom and to use the words in their own conversation and writing.

The following recommendations embody the main points of our view of vocabulary instruction. First, contexts presented for the purpose of vocabulary development should be pedagogical contexts. Second, meaningful contexts are only one aspect of effective vocabulary instruction. A vocabulary program should incorporate repeated and varied encounters with the instructed words if it is to be successful in expanding children's vocabularies.

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