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Teaching vocabulary in Akita Prefectural University

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Introduction

Most of our students like communicative activities and they will engage in pair work and group work quite eagerly when requested. They are also delighted by intensive reading, extensive reading, and online exercises. We have seen that communicative tasks and other non-communicative activities synergize the students' vocabulary learning as they actually use the language in both. Speaking activities provide a meaningful context, such as sentences or dialogues, within which students can encounter new vocabulary. The familiar context makes it easier for them to remember new words (Craik & Tulving, 1975; Read, 2004). In this paper, we will highlight the term *meaningful context* and depict it as a spectrum. First, we will visualize both *context* and *meaning*. Then, we will discuss major activities that can be effective in teaching vocabulary in the content-based classrooms, and we will then illustrate the activities within the spectrum of *meaning* and *context*. Finally, we will explicitly explain how we teach vocabulary in our classes.

Illustrations of "Context" and "Meaning"

Research papers on vocabulary give several meanings for the word *context*. We say that a word is "in *context*" when that word is surrounded by other words, thus a word can be "in *context*" when it is in a single sentence as well as when it is in a longer text. In short sentences, the words that are before and after a new word give clues to the meaning of that word. If the context is large like a novel, you will encounter new words many times and have more chances to learn them. In experiments, researchers have used a single passage from a text (Herman et al.,1987). Other groups used an entire novel (Saragi et al., 1978) and a graded reader (Horst et al., 1998) and called them *contexts*. Learners can meet new words in context multiple times when they read a novel or a graded reader. Another group used a conjunction relationship (Clarke & Nation, 1980). Conjunction relationships are contexts that provide clues when guessing the meaning of words. For example, the adverb *furthermore* shows us that the relationship of the clauses or sentences that are combined by the word is inclusive. On the other hand, the adverb *instead* shows us that the relationship of the clauses or sentences is exclusive. The size of the context of the conjunction relationships range from a single sentence to several sentences.

In *Figure 1*, the horizontal axis represents context and the vertical axis represents meaning. This diagram visually shows how different vocabulary activities, even if they call themselves meaningful activities, use

contexts. The right end of the horizontal axis represents the widest context, and the left end of the axis represents the narrowest context. The highest end of the vertical axis represents the most important meaning of theword for the learner and the lowest end of the vertical axis represents the dictionary meaning.

"Meaning" has two different definitions in contemporary dictionaries. The first is something signified: meaning is the same as the dictionary definition in this case. The other sense is something significant for an individual. When we say that an activity is meaningful, that means the activity is related to the life of the learner and the words are important for him. In many second language acquisition experiments, the term meaning is used in the first sense. Especially when researchers investigate the skill of guessing meanings of words, they use the term *meaning* in its dictionary sense. However, meaning becomes personally significant when your students are interested in the content you use. When you tell your students that they will eventually use the words in their profession or business, at least some will try to learn them. We must find ways to touch an individual learner's most important values to motivate them to learn vocabulary more autonomously.

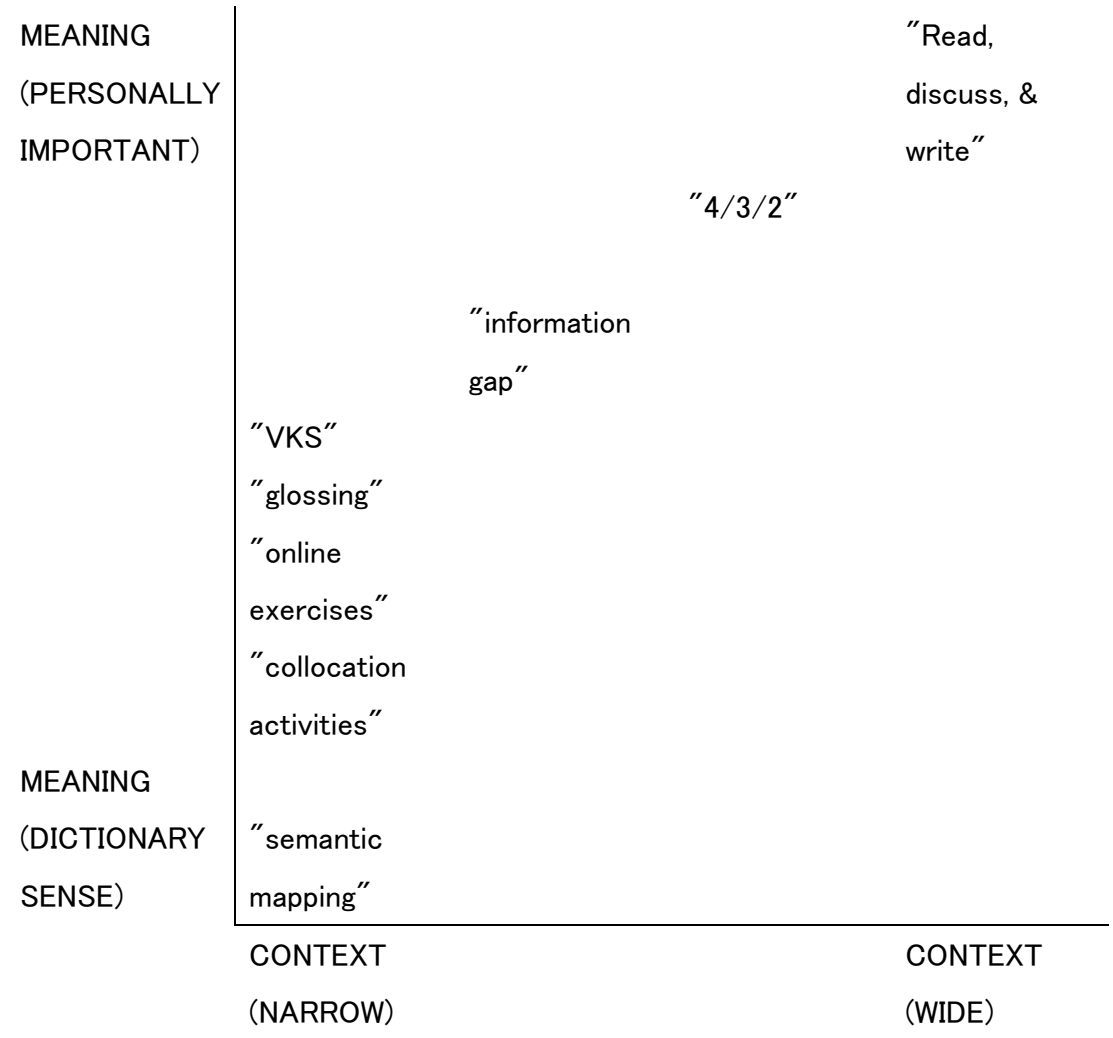

Figure 1 A Spectrum of Activities in Meaningful Context

Teaching Techniques and Major Activities

There are many techniques for teaching vocabulary in a CBI classroom. Making glossaries is one of them. If you would like your students to spend more time speaking then you will want to make a glossary of low-frequency words, because then your students won't waste time looking them up. On the other hand, if you make a glossary of high-frequency words, you can make it a list of target words for your students to learn (Nation & Newton, 1997). Making vocabulary exercises is another way. In our university, we are using software called *Hot Potatoes* to make online exercises such as crossword puzzles and gap-filling exercises.

What kind of activities can you name for learning vocabulary in a CBI classroom? Linked-skill activities are a series of activities that are used in content-based instruction. The "Read, discuss, and write" technique (Nation, 2008) is such an activity. First students read a text or different texts, then the students look up unfamiliar words and underline important words to prepare themselves for discussion. The students will discuss the topic using the notes they took. Students must produce a clear outcome from the discussion. For example, they might write a ranked list of items, choose a solution to a problem, list causes, or gather data to complete a table. Finally, students write a report on the results (Nation, 1989).

We also use many speaking activities that help students' vocabulary acquisition. These activities reinforce the memory with meaningful repetitions in oral activities. Our favorite speaking activity is the "4/3/2 technique" (Maurice, 1983; Nation, 1989). In this activity, a student tells the same story to three different classmates, at first for four minutes, then for three minutes, and finally for two minutes. This 4/3/2 technique is a fluency enhancing activity that strengthens students' use of vocabulary by giving them chances to retell the same story repeatedly. Information gap activities are another speaking task that develops vocabulary (Hall, 1992). The other major speaking activity we use is vocabulary knowledge scale (VKS) (Paribakht & Wesche, 1996; Brown, 2008). In VKS, we tell our students to make grids and write new words in the left column. Students are told to make four different columns. (A=I know this word and I can write a sentence with it. B= I know this word but I can't make a sentence with it. C= I have seen this word, but I don't know what it means. D= I have never seen this word.) Then they mark the column for each word by themselves. After marking, those who marked C or D will ask the classmates who marked A or B to teach them the meaning of the word.

We use a category of activities called richness activities when we use a textbook in our classroom. In richness activities, a word is associated with other words, and the associated words are typically words that precede or follow the target. Collocation activities and semantic mapping are major richness activities (Nation, 1997). In collocation activities, students match the words with other words, so that they might form a collocation. For example, the learners have two lists of items that they must match up. In semantic mapping, students draw a diagram of the relationships between words. We use this activity occasionally for activating schema or reviewing the lesson.

In the CALL Lab

The following section shows the creating process of the materials for the CALL Lab. For the past eleven years the CALL Lab has used the *English Firsthand* Series of

communicative textbooks for the entire first semester. Throughout that time period both the CALL Lab itself and the textbook series have continued to evolve. This year we revamped the supplementary exercises that we use in our MOODLE virtual Learning Environment. Over the last several years we have been investigating the efficacy of Content-Based Learning and finding that its proper use will facilitate the Second Language Acquisition process. *The English Firsthand Series*, being Elementary and Pre-Intermediate level, uses a topic and situational organization and thus there is no continuity between chapters. After reading Malcolm Gladwell's *The Tipping Points*, especially the section dealing with the superiority of a children's educational TV show called *Blues Clues*, which is a content-based mystery show, compared to the venerable, topic/situation-based *Sesame Street*, we decided to add a content-based, vocabulary-centered mystery story that would link all twelve units of *English Firsthand*.

The only slight problem was the fact that it was more efficient to re-use the key vocabulary words from the earlier iterations of the quizzes, thus the story had to be created rather like a jigsaw puzzle to fit the somewhat random words into a coherent story. Once the story was written, it was then easy to use the same text as the basis for a short intensive reading with multiple choice comprehension quizzes, a cloze reading quiz, and selected sentences for grammar quizzes involving putting the words into the correct order. The same vocabulary words were also used as a vocabulary quiz for matching images and the words, a Word Search exercise and a Crossword Puzzle. Thus the students were re-exposed to the same vocabulary words through a variety of contexts and modalities.

See the Appendix for an example of the text that accompanies one unit. The key vocabulary words have been underlined for easy identification, but they are not so marked in the actual reading activity. The mystery is a combination of two genres: Science Fiction and Film Noir-ish hard-boiled private detectives. The SF element provided the opportunity to employ technical vocabulary, like robots, that the students would need in their further studies, and a mystery would hopefully motivate the students to continue reading each episode to find out "who did it". The first twelve sections contain a complete mystery and the second 12-part story uses the same main characters, but in a different setting, both variations on the classic "Locked Room" mystery. The first utilizing a murder in an actual locked room with overtones of Dashiell Hammett's *Maltese Falcon*, and the second a variation on Agatha Christie's train mystery, *Murder on the Orient Express*. Each complete story ran to nearly 5,000 words, with eight key vocabulary words in each chapter.

Conclusion

We have described several major vocabulary activities that can be used as tools for stimulating students' interest. Our focus was on the explicit and intentional way of teaching vocabulary. In our university, we have used online vocabulary exercises and communicative activities for teaching vocabulary. Students usually benefit from participating in those activities. But some students do not show signs of interest in any English activities. If we can transform the activities into more meaningful contexts for individual students - in the sense that students find it personally valuable - then more students will be motivated to acquire the pertinent vocabulary. The recent addition of the connected narrative as mystery is our first attempt to

transform situational communicative activities to more Content-based ones. Our next plan is to focus on the storytelling aspects of classes that are already Content-based. Narrative provides students with a personally meaningful context within which they are more apt to talk or write about themselves. We reason that our students can better organize their thoughts through telling stories. With the recent introduction of the connected mystery stories to facilitate vocabulary building, we have already begun to insert this project of narrative and explicate storytelling into the curriculum. In future we shall investigate the influence of a metastory called "The Hero's Journey or the Monomyth", by the late Joseph Campbell, the man who created the field of comparative mythology. We plan to show how it relates to other forms of art, such as films and novels, and shall propose some possible ways for utilizing the pattern of the Hero's Journey in our classrooms. Finally, we will explain how we have employed such stories and what results we have achieved after using it.

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APPENDIX
PART 8

'Spam' Spade flew past the shiny, mirrored buildings downtown until he came to Green Street, and Gutman's Shopping Mall. The big

gimmick was that the mall looked like a fairytale castle with high towers. The architect's office was in the top of the center tower. The Robot flew easily in through the open balcony doors and landed on the edge of the carpeted reception room.

'Spam' swiveled his head and looked at the secretary. "I'm here to see Mr. Powell about the plans to Professor Tanuki's house. The police captain just called you."

The secretary had black hair worn in a pageboy. She was chewing gum and filing her long, painted fingernails. They were fake and 'Spam' noticed that one of them had recently been replaced. The name on her desk said "F. E. Perrine".

"What are you waiting for, an invitation? Go on in, Mr. Powell has been expecting you." she spoke with a high, baby doll voice.

The architect was a tall, thin man, with a pencil mustache. Mellow Jazz music by Miles Davis came from concealed speakers.

"Welcome, Detective Spade, I've been expecting you. Here are the plans." The thin man gestured to the rolled-up tube of papers on his desk. He was holding a thick glass of whiskey and soda in his hand and some of it spilled over the side.

The robot slide open a compartment in his stomach and put the rolled papers inside. Behind Powell's desk was a poster of the King of Comedy, Charlie Chaplin.

" One question, Mr. Powell, did you put a secret doorway into Professor Tanuki's office when you designed the house?"

"Ah, that would solve the mystery of how the murderer got in, wouldn't it?" The thin man took a large drink from his glass, and looked across the room at his 'Jimi Hendrix - King of Rock and Roll' poster. The room smelled of strong whiskey. "Sorry to disappoint you, gumshoe, but I didn't."

"In my case, that would be 'gum-wheel'" Sneered the robot. "What are you hiding from me, and why are you drinking so much?"

At that moment the door to the outer office opened and the secretary came in carrying a small, but obviously heavy, purse.

"If you won't be needing me anymore, I have a date to go clubbing with my little sister. See ya." F.E. Perrine, turned on her high heel and left.

'Spam' rolled close to the drunken architect. "And another thing, Mr. Powell. Why does your secretary carry a loaded gun in her purse?" It was too late, the thin man was snoring loudly, sound asleep.